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FOR MURDER!**

by **DAY KEENE**

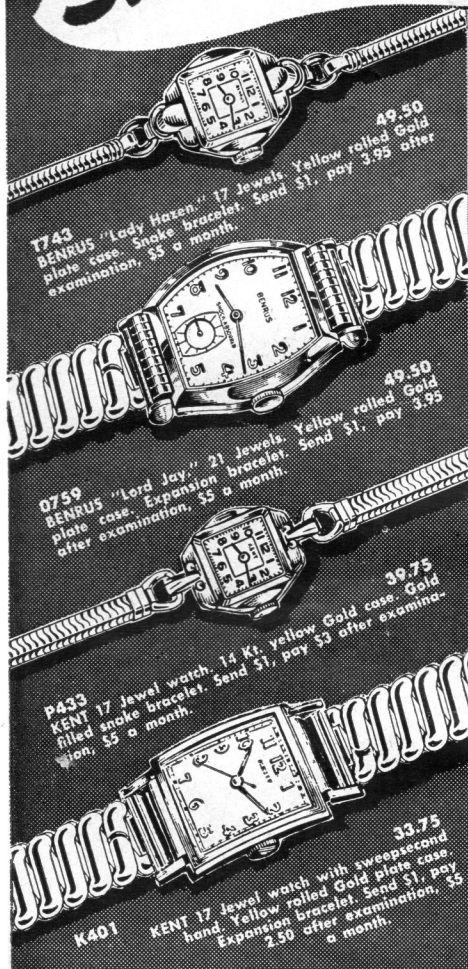
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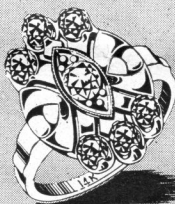
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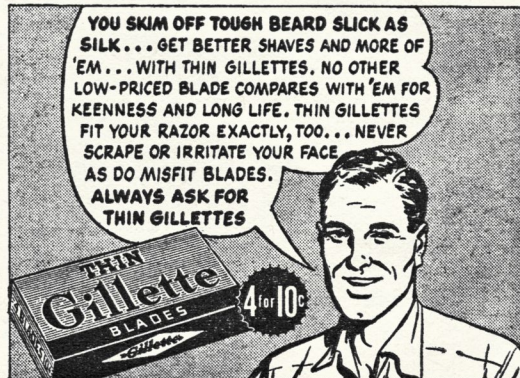
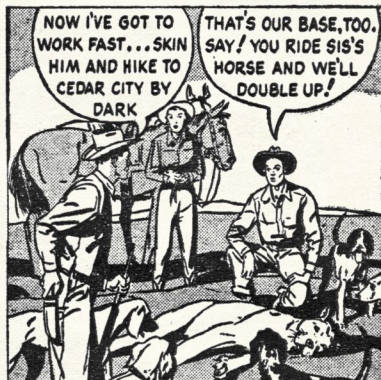
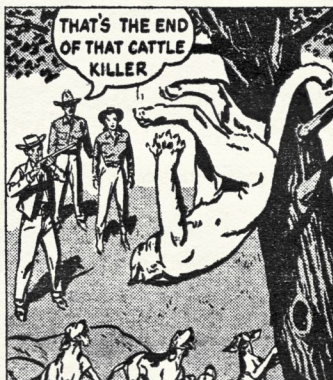
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LADY MEETS LION AND THEN...



SALLY BRETT AND HER BROTHER JOE, ARE JUST TURNING HOMEWARD AFTER A DAY-LONG RIDE IN STATE CANYON FOREST WHEN...



DETECTIVE

TALES

15
STORIES

25
CENTS

VOL. THIRTY-NINE

MAY, 1948

NUMBER TWO

Two Thrill-Packed Murder Novels

1. **MARRY THE SIXTH FOR MURDER!**.....*Day Keene* 8
—or for love, it was all one to me, as long as Hollywood star Steve Millet ended up—even though I shared his seat—in the gas chamber!
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—Tommy Case found out, along with one other discovery: For every murder there's a witness, and then—for every witness there has to be another murder!

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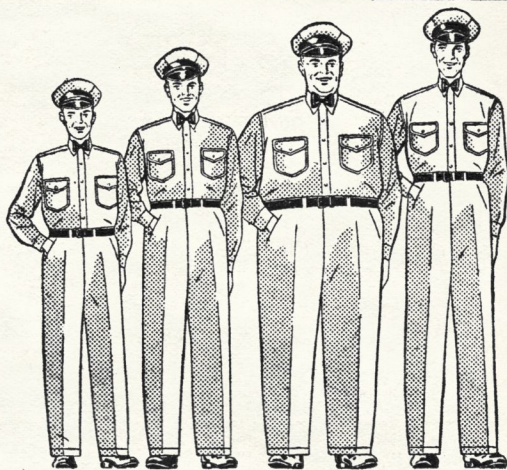
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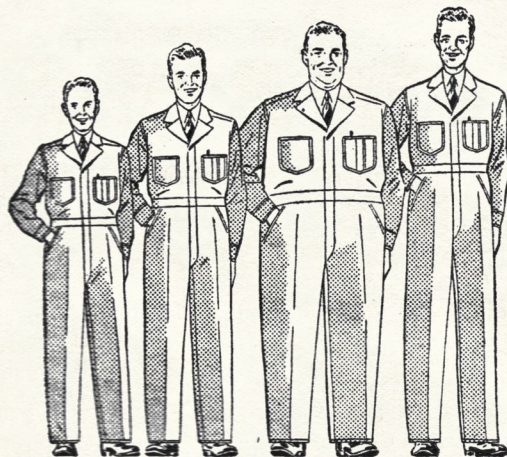


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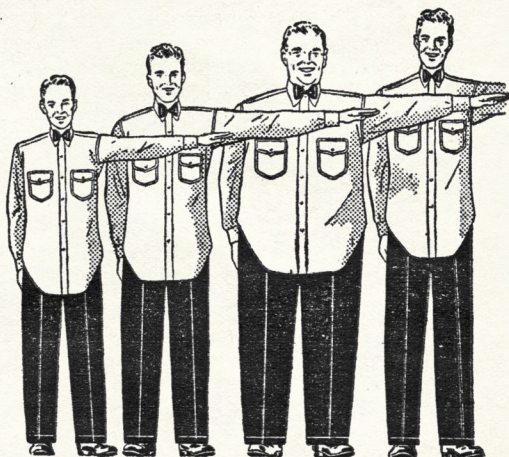


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WORLD'S LARGEST MANUFACTURER OF UNION-MADE WORK CLOTHES

GET A WHIFF OF DEATH!

By JAMES G. MacCORMACK

*Before a cop can catch the smell of death, Patrolman Stapleton knew
—he's got to have a nose for murder!*

THE MAN had a flat tire. He was in a farmhouse, trying to phone an all-night garage in Geneva, New York. But either the garage man was having a long, midnight chew-the-rag, or his phone was off the hook and he wasn't interested in car owners with flat tires. The operator in Geneva finally notified the police of the busy phone in the garage. A patrolman of the Geneva police was sent around to see what the trouble was. The policeman, Stapleton, took one look.

The trouble wasn't with the phone. It was with Sam Salone, the mechanic who was on all-night duty. Sam was dead. He had been shot three times in the back, and his last act in this world had been to lift the receiver from its hook.

Patrolman Stapleton knew Salone, happily married and the father of three children—a man without mortal enemies. The motive for the murder was not immediately apparent. The cash register was untouched. Nothing in the little room seemed amiss.

Above the odor of gas and oil, the patrolman smelled the sweetish odor of perfume. It disturbed him, but he wasn't able to place it.

Salone had been killed by bullets from a .22-caliber gun. The size of the gun plus the odor of perfume led Stapleton to think a woman committed the crime. A .22 revolver was tiny, easily handled and concealed in a purse. Had this dainty weapon in the hands of a spurned woman brought death to the happily married garageman? It didn't appear to fit into Salone's way of life.

Patrolman Stapleton was not only a man with a nose for murder, but a man with a nose for smells. The sweet odor hadn't lasted long in the office where murder had been done. It had been strong while it lasted but it had disappeared quickly.

Stapleton boned up on perfumes and found that women's perfumes were more delicate and lingered much longer than, say, men's hair tonics. Hair tonics gave off a strong initial odor which quickly faded.

Perfume expert Stapleton surmised that the killer had been freshly barbered just prior to the deed. And for the rest of the day he canvassed Geneva's tonsorial emporiums, smelling the hair tonics in each. He finally smelled the one that had been on the killer the previous night. Now all he had to do was find the man who had ordered that brand. The barber remembered. He didn't know the customer's name, but he was a tall, blond man. His hands, the barber recalled, were cut and chapped, as though he were a city man who had taken a job on a farm and his soft hands hadn't been able to take heavy toil.

On the outskirts of Geneva, a man answering the barber's description was found. He had blond, curly hair, and his name was Allan Reed. Stapleton presented his perfume evidence, and the thoroughly frightened Reed quickly confessed.

Robbery had been his motive. But he had lost his nerve, and when Salone had turned his back and walked to the phone, Reed had shot him. The gun he had received from a girl friend in New York City.

The bitter twist to Reed's crime lay in the fact that he passed time in a barber's chair before the killing, and spoiled his chances of success. He had planned the robbery for early evening, but found the garageman had been too busy. With nothing to do for a while, although he didn't need a haircut, Reed decided to get one, anyway. In doing so, he arranged the clue that sent him to Sing Sing for life.

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**U. S. Army and
U. S. Air Force**

The dead body of Laura Jean Jones, crushed under the wheels of Hollywood star Steve Millet's custom-built car, brought at least four factions into general agreement on the proposition that Millet be kept out of jail: Millet himself . . . Gambler Paul Glade, who'd never collect his money with Millet behind bars . . . Studio Exec Saul Bliss, trying to spray perfume over the stench of scandal . . . and me, who certainly didn't want Millet to go to jail—not when

I could put him in the gas chamber!

By
DAY KEENE

"You're playing out of your league, chum," Glade said. "Why don't you get wise and take the dough. Or else!"



Smashing Novel of Hollywood Homicide

CHAPTER ONE

Lost Corpse

THERE was nothing magnetic or romantic about the great lover's voice over the phone. His words were blurred with a trace of hysteria behind them as he said:

"I'm in a jam, a bad one, Slagle. Can you come right over? Please."

It was four o'clock in the morning. I started to hang up, and changed my mind. It was the "please" that stopped me. I



hadn't known the word was in Steve Millet's vocabulary. I did ask if he was certain the matter couldn't wait for a few hours.

"I'm positive," he told me. "I—I think I've killed someone. But I can't talk about it over the phone."

I asked where he was calling from. He said his San Francisco Valley ranch. I promised I would get there as soon as I could and cradled the phone. Sally woke up while I was dressing and wanted to know where I thought I was going at four o'clock in the morning with it still raining as it was. I told her Steve Millet had phoned and it would seem he was in another jam.

She said, "Nothing trivial, I hope," lifted her lips to be kissed, then buried her face back in the pillow.

I kissed her, found my trenchcoat in the closet and sloshed on out to the garage, sorry I hadn't worn boots. Both the patio and path were ankle deep in water. It had been, so the newspapers said, the driest February in Southern California in sixteen years. But March was making like a lion, a wet one. It had begun to rain about noon the day before and since then the precipitation had been practically continuous.

IT WASN'T too bad in the hills, but along the floor of the valley the roads were running rim deep with water. Overnight, the storm drains and arroyos had been transformed into swift-flowing rivers with all the power of flash-floods behind them.

Twice I almost smacked into stalled cars. Once I almost got smacked. I was glad to see Millet's gates. They were well lighted and stood wide open. I drove in through a double row of dripping eucalyptus and almost into the rear end of Millet's unlighted sixteen-cylinder, custom-built foreign sport job.

The car was in keeping with the ranch. Both had cost plenty. Millet had sunk most of the take of three of his best pictures into fifteen acres of the most fertile soil in the valley. Old age insurance he called it. But to the best of my knowledge, in the ten years he had owned the ranch all he had raised on it was hell.

A big, good-looking heel in his late

thirties, Millet was waiting for me on the loggia of the ranch house. He said, "Am I glad to see you!"

I looked past him at the lighted windows of the rumpus room. A typical between-pictures Millet hoe-down was in progress. From where I sat in the rain I could see a half-dozen feminine bit and extra players in various stages of acute alcoholism. I could also see Paul Glade, the gambler, two of his boys, and three other men I didn't know.

"Now, look," I told Millet. "If getting me out of bed at four o'clock on a morning like this is one of your drunken gags. . ."

He waded through the rain to poke his head in the window I'd rolled down. "It isn't. I swear it isn't, Johnny."

Before he could say any more a cute little red-haired trick who looked like a fugitive from a choir loft, but who was having trouble with the shoulder strap of a low-cut evening gown, staggered out onto the covered part of the loggia and wanted to know why Bunny—her name for him—was standing in the rain.

Millet said she should go back to the party like a good girl, mix him a drink and he would be with her in a few minutes. She staggered back into the rumpus room still having trouble with the strap.

Without getting out of my car I told Millet, "All right. Let's have it. What do you mean you *think* you've killed someone?"

The story, as he told it, wasn't pretty. It was typical Millet. Now don't get me wrong. There are a lot of nice lads in Hollywood. Nine out of ten of the big stars are ladies and gentlemen. They pay their taxes, marry, and live as normal a life as any of their fans. But Millet didn't belong in that category. He would have been a heel if he had been a plumber. And because he'd been born with a classic profile and an ability to read lines, he thought he owned Hollywood.

It seemed that his own party had begun boring him and the liquor supply to grow low. So he had gotten out his car and headed for a spot he knew of that sold stuff by the case after hours.

I asked, "Alone? That is, you were alone?"

He said he had been alone. He also had been driving too fast, as usual, when

he had seen the girl and her dog. That had been just this side of the storm drain on Sepulveda. He had attempted to brake the car, but it had skidded—as far as he knew directly into the girl and her dog. At least, he had heard a scream.

I asked, "You didn't stop to find out if you did hit her?"

He whined, "I didn't dare to stop, Johnny. I had two cases of whiskey in the car, liquor on my breath, and two 502's on my ticket."

502 is drunken driving in Los Angeles.

"Besides," Millet continued, "if I get in another jam the chances are that Consolidated won't renew my contract next month." He breathed good rye in my face. "What am I going to do? What do you advise me to do?"

I LIGHTED a cigarette while I thought it over. It was strictly business with me. Private eyes are a dime a dozen along the Sunset Strip and I couldn't keep meat on the table if it wasn't for the annual retainer Consolidated pays me to pry their bad girls and boys out of the minor jams that might affect their box-office value. But this wasn't a minor jam. By not stopping, Millet had aggravated a misdemeanor into a felony. And while the studio paid me to extend a helping hand, I knew what their reaction would be to this one.

"I'm afraid this is one you're going to have to face," I told Millet. I got out and looked at the grill of his car. There were no marks on the grill, but the right front fender was badly dented. He had hit something. "And the longer you put it off the worse it is going to be for you. Not even God's gift to women can get away with a hit-and-run charge."

He told me not to be sarcastic.

I said I wasn't being sarcastic, I was merely stating a fundamental fact. To be certain, however, I left him standing in the rain while I walked through the rumpus room into the living room to phone Saul Bliss, the head of Consolidated's legal staff. His reaction was what I expected.

"He'll have to face it, Johnny," Bliss told me. "We wouldn't crawl out on a limb like that for the biggest box-office draw we have, and we certainly won't do

it for a has-been." He added a note of caution. "But before you have him report it, I would make certain, if I were you, that he did hit someone."

I said I had already figured on doing that and hung up. Paul Glade, the gambler, nasty as he always is when he is drinking, left off pawing a little brunette to get to his feet and stop me as I walked back through the rumpus room. "So Steve whined to you, did he?" he asked. He tapped my chest with his finger. "Well, get this and get it straight, Johnny. Not you or all of Consolidated is going to keep me from collecting my dough."

I said he was talking Greek to me and pushed on past him to the door where the red-haired girl, a highball glass in one hand, was peering out into the rain. "Why doesn't Bunny come in out of the rain?" she demanded.

I told her it was beyond me unless it was that he didn't have sense enough, and rejoined Millet who had crawled into my car. "Bliss says no dice," I told him. "You'll get the usual legal representation, but the studio isn't sticking out its neck. Bliss suggested, however, and I concur, that we make certain you did hit someone before you report it in."

The thought seemed to cheer him slightly. "Maybe I just imagined the impact. Maybe I didn't hit anyone."

From the looks of his right front fender he was kidding himself. But it was no skin off my nose. "We'll use your car," I told him. "We'll drive back to the storm drain first, then down to the Valley Station."

I slid in back of the wheel of his car before he could. My annual retainer from the studio didn't obligate me to ride with a madman. It was a nice job to drive. And economical. I'll bet he got at least four blocks to the gallon. As I tooled it through the drive I asked him, "You owe Glade any money?"

"A few dollars," he said sourly. "What's the matter? Has the studio decided I can't gamble now?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him I had a fair idea the studio didn't much care what he did, which it wouldn't if it didn't intend to renew his contract. But he had enough grief for the moment so I let it go. "No. I just wondered," I

told him. "Glade braced me when I went in to phone and said something about you owing him some dough."

He repeated, "A few dollars."

It was raining, if possible, harder than ever. There was little traffic on the road. Dawn and a silver-winged transport plane came over the foothills back of Burbank just as we reached the storm drain. The road itself was passable, but the wash was a roaring river. I pulled over to one side, being careful to keep two wheels on the pavement. There were no cops and no police cars at the drain which could mean any one of three things:

The body hadn't been discovered.

It had been discovered and taken away.

Millet hadn't seriously injured the girl and she had walked away under her own power.

But what a girl and her dog would be doing walking down Sepulveda in the middle of a cloud burst was more than I could figure out. "This where it happened?" I asked him.

He said it was. I got out of the car and looked around. The rain had washed out any traces of his skid. I couldn't see any body, or any sign a body had been there. But, on the other hand, if he had hit her hard enough to hurl the body into the open drain it was possible that it wouldn't be found for days. I went back to the car and asked him how fast he had been going. He told me, "Maybe sixty-five. Possibly seventy."

A truck splashed by going the other way. It was growing lighter now. I walked back to the edge of the drain for one last look. It was then I saw the dog, a little black and white terrier, lying on the edge of the drain. It was dead. A cheap, braided, leather leash, the kind you can buy in the dime store, trailed from the collar on its neck out into the water.

I climbed back of the wheel again and turned the car around telling Millet as I did so, "If there was a girl with a dog, you hit her all right. The dog is still there on the bank. What kind of a dog was it you thought you saw?"

He said it was a little black and white dog and I increased the speed of the car. He wanted to know where we were going. I told him to the Valley Station to report an accident. Glum, he wanted to know if

there was any other way it could be handled and I told him that there wasn't. "Just don't blow your breath in the sergeant's face," I told him.

KINLEY was on the desk at the Valley Station. He didn't think much of Millet. He had dispatched too many squads out to his ranch to quell incipient riots. I will say this for Millet. Once he was in the station he didn't whine. He told a straight-from-the-shoulder story, much as he had told it to me, with the exception that he told Kinley that after feeling the impact he had stopped his car, gotten out in the rain and looked around but could see no trace of either the girl or the dog. So, not knowing just what to do, he had phoned me for advice. Together we had returned to the scene of the accident. I had discovered a black and white dog on the edge of the storm drain and here he was.

Kinley was stumped for a while just how to book him, the squad he sent out to the scene finding the dog but no body. He decided finally to make it reckless driving, figuring I suppose he could always slap a hit-and-run against Millet when the girl's body was discovered.

Instead of being grateful, Millet was cocky all the way back to the ranch, boasting how he had gotten out of that one, and how even when the girl's body was discovered they wouldn't be able to pin anything on him. "It was an accident, strictly an accident," he insisted. He crowed, "And Kinley never even smelled my breath."

Morning was full now. The rain had lessened somewhat and the side road leading to his ranch was heavy with the fragrance of orange blossoms. Somehow they made him think of the red-haired little chickadee who'd called him Bunny. As we pulled up in front of his loggia I asked him who she was.

He told me, "My fiancée."

So saying, he slipped a pint bottle from a side pocket of the car, tilted it to his lips, then sat holding it without offering me a drink. That was okay with me. I walked over to my own car, glancing into the rumpus room as I passed it. Glade and his boys were gone. So were the girls. At least none of them were in the rumpus

room. It looked like all rumpus rooms after a brawl, littered with empty bottles and glasses and cigarette butts. It looked like all rumpus rooms with one exception.

That was the red-haired girl. Curled up on a battered redwood chaise lounge next to the window, an empty highball glass still in her hand, the troublesome shoulder strap forgotten, one bare white shoulder exposed, asleep with a half smile on her lips, she was still waiting for Bunny. She was a pretty kid, and a nice one, not more than seventeen or eighteen. I had no way of knowing where she had come from but she didn't belong where she was.

Millet had followed me to the window. Tilting the bottle again, he leered in through the glass. "Nice, eh?"

"I hope you choke," I told him.

I did. I wanted no more of the affair. I wanted no more of Millet. But before the murder-go-round that followed was finally stopped and the D.A. handed the brass ring to the proper party, I was to get plenty of Millet, the red-haired little chick, and a gawky young Lochinvar named Arnst Gary who rode in from Wewoka, Oklahoma.

CHAPTER TWO

Cry Murder!

IT WAS one o'clock by the time I reached my office. It was still raining but not hard. I poured two ounces of prevention before opening my mail, and drank it looking out the window.

I had spent most of the morning at the studio with Bliss. He told me frankly that as far as they were concerned Millet was washed up. It had nothing to do with the accident the night before. What with a half-dozen of the younger lads coming up the way they had, Millet's popularity with the bobbysoxers had receded with his hairline. Consolidated did not intend to renew his contract. He was to be so informed within the month. For the sake of the good of the industry as a whole, however, the studio wanted the affair of the night before soft-pedaled as much as possible.

I was kicking Millet around in my mind and admiring the trim underpinning of a brunette in a red transparent raincoat

when Glade barged into the office accompanied by the pair of muscle-bound chimpanzees who bodyguarded him. "What did Millet want with you last night?" Glade began without preamble. "What were you doing at the ranch?"

I asked why he wanted to know and he said not to give him that stuff.

"Millet's in a jam of some kind," he accused.

I admitted that could be so, then asked him why, if he wanted information about Milley, he didn't go to the source.

He told me, "Because the damn fool took off for Los Vegas this morning with that little red-haired tramp he has been making a big play for."

When I asked him how he knew, he handed me a sheet of Millet's monogrammed stationery. Scrawled across it in Millet's writing was the message:

Cherry and I leaving for Los Vegas to be married. Keep the home fires burning. Back in two or three days—I think.
Millet

I handed it back to Glade saying I wasn't interested in Steve Millet's marital affairs. "No. Neither am I," he admitted candidly. "But I am interested in money. And what I want to be sure of is that Millet's contract with Consolidated is going to be renewed. Like the big, good-natured sap that I am, I let Steve get into me for almost fifty grand. And I want my money, see?"

"If anyone owed me fifty thousand dollars, I'd want it, too," I told him. In the light of the information that I had gotten from Bliss I could have added he was going to have a fat chance of collecting it. I asked instead why he had come to me.

He said, "Because you're Consolidated's trouble-shooter. Every time one of their bad boys or girls get their pinkies dirty they have instructions to phone you. And I want to know why Millet phoned you last night."

I looked from him to his apes and, being allergic to having my face punched in, decided I didn't want any trouble with them. So I told him the story as I had it.

Glade seemed relieved. "That's it? That's all there was to it? He run down some dame in the rain, a thing that could

happen easy to even a sober guy?"

I said that would seem to be it.

"Then I guess my dough's safe," he decided. "After all the other screwball stunts he's pulled the studio wouldn't refuse to renew his contract because of a little thing like that."

Glade turned on his heel and walked out, his apes lumbering after him. I poured another two ounces of prevention, glad I wasn't in Millet's shoes. Glade meant to collect his money. He would, one way or another.

There was nothing worth mentioning in the mail. I sorted the advertisements from the bills, then phoned the Valley Station. A crew had been searching the banks of the storm drain since morning but they hadn't found any body. They were beginning to think that Millet had imagined he'd hit someone. The lieutenant I talked to wanted to know if Millet had been drinking. I evaded the question by saying I hadn't been with him at the time, thanked him for his information, and hung up.

Then I did what I should have done in the first place. I called the Bureau of Missing Persons and asked for Flanery. "Yes. We had three calls last night," he told me. He listed them with their addresses. One was a Mrs. Grace, living in Alameda. One was a Bessie Small, with an address on Harvard Boulevard. The third was a Laura Jean Jones with a North Hollywood address. He had the description of each but none of them was listed as being accompanied by a small black and white terrier.

I called at the Grace home first. It turned out to be one of those things. Mrs. Grace answered the door in person, told me what she thought of the police and of any nitwitted husband who would call the Missing Person's Bureau merely because, unable to return home on account of the rain, she had stayed over night with a girl friend. It could be her story was true. All that mattered to me was the obvious fact that it hadn't been she whom Millet had catapulted into the storm drain.

Bessie Small was still missing. But she didn't own, and had never owned, a dog. In fact she disliked them intensely. And after talking to the slattern who said she was her mother it seemed at least

probable to me that the girl had merely tired of an unpleasant home and had struck out on her own.

That left me with Laura-Jean Jones. Flanery had given me a phone number with that one. I called but got no answer. On a hunch I drove out Sunset to Sepulveda and cut through the canyon to the storm drain.

A CITY squad car was parked on the far side with a bored driver at the wheel. "Yeah. The boys have been searching all day," he told me. "But the chances are if she did go into the storm drain they won't be able to find her until the water recedes." He repeated, "If she *did* go into the the drain. You never can tell what the movie folks will do for a little publicity."

He showed me an afternoon paper. There was a two-column cut of Millet and the little red-haired dame. Her name was Cherry Gamble, and while the story said she was an actress none of the pictures in which she had appeared was listed. It was more likely she was some little extra who had attracted Millet's eye and to whom he had promised stardom.

I felt sorry for her.

Ringling the cut of Millet and Cherry was a circle of pictures of his former wives, five to be exact.

The driver of the squad car told me, "Look at her. Then look at him." His neck muscles stood out like cords. "I tell you, mister, if a kid of mine ever married a heel like that I'd blister her backside until she couldn't stand the touch of scanties for a year."

I read on down the story. Out of courtesy to Consolidated's publicity department, and in return for a full-page ad puffing the studio's current feature picture, the accident angle of the yarn had been played down to a few sticks of type. Millet believed he had struck someone while driving in the rain that morning, it said, but the fact had not as yet been verified. He had, however, reported the accident and a charge of reckless driving had been filed against him.

No mention was made as to how the reporter had learned of Millet's latest marital venture. I made a mental note to inquire into the fact and, leaving my car

where it was, I walked on up the road to the nearest house. The lady who answered the bell said:

"Yes. As I told the other officer who inquired, I heard a scream about four o'clock this morning. In fact, I heard two screams, spaced perhaps thirty seconds apart."

That was interesting, if true. I asked her if she was positive that she had heard two screams. She said she was positive. She hadn't, however, seen anything or anyone. It had been raining too hard for her to see more than a few feet beyond her bedroom window.

I thanked her for the information and walked back to my car. If I remembered correctly, there was an all-night drive-in stand about a mile up the road.

I had remembered correctly. There were no car hops on duty who had been on duty the night before, I found out. And outside of my own bus and a couple of cars in back parked in an Employees Only zone, there was only one other car in the stand, a 1937 Studebaker. It was parked all by itself in a far corner.

I asked the counterman if it belonged to one of the help. He said it did not. "I don't know who it belongs to," he admitted. "It was there when I came on duty this morning. Why? You think we ought to call the cops about it? You think it's a stolen car?"

I went over and looked at it. It was a coupe in good condition. The driver's license and registration card weren't on the shaft of the wheel where they belonged, but the contents of the glove compartment obviously belonged to a woman. I found a discarded pancake compact, a box of loose powder, a pair of ladies' driving gloves about size five, some loose hairpins, an empty candy box and a pair of expensive harlequin sun glasses.

I called the Valley Station again from the wall phone inside the stand and asked for Lieutenant Green, the lad who had wanted to know if Millet had been drinking. "I think I've found something that might interest you," I told him. "I think I have found the missing girl's car at the drive-in stand a mile south of the drain." I gave him the make and license number of the car. "At least I think it's worth your while to check it. If Millet *did* hit

someone it stands to reason that she didn't drop out of the sky. She had to come from somewhere. But why was she walking her dog in the rain a mile from where she left her car is beyond me."

Green said the chances were it wasn't her car but he thanked me for my co-operation and said he would check on the car immediately. I bought a cheeseburger I didn't want, a cup of coffee I did, then got on my horse again.

THE ADDRESS on Saltillo proved to be an old-fashioned, square frame house set well back in a mass of rain-drenched shrubbery between two modern apartment houses. I parked my car at the curb and walked down a weed-grown path to a tired porch littered with yellowed shopping throw-aways and last years' campaign literature. The blinds were drawn. There was no name under the bell. The thin wail of a piccolo floating out of one of the open upper windows was the only sign the house wasn't unoccupied.

I rang the bell and nothing happened so I banged the door. The uninterrupted wail of the piccolo was the only answer. I tried again and a voice over my head informed me:

"You'll have to go around to the side door and pound real hard. The old man claims he isn't, but he's deaf. A nice-looking old man like him. He should wear a hearing aid."

I stepped off the porch to see who was talking. It was a good-looking, middle-aged woman leaning on the sill of one of the second-floor windows of the apartment house next door.

"That is," she added, "if you are looking for Mr. Jones."

I asked her if he had a daughter by the name of Laura Jean. She said he did. She started to say something more, changed her mind and closed the window. I walked around to the side door and banged it as hard as I could without cracking the panel. The piccolo stopped this time and a few moments later, still holding the piccolo in one hand, Jones opened the door in person.

"Come in, son. Come in," he boomed before I could say a word. "If you wish to see Thaddeus Jones, come in."

He sounded like Senator Claghorn, but

he seemed to mean it. A well-built old gentleman of perhaps sixty, he led the way into the shade-drawn living room. The inside of the house was a lot better than the outside. The furniture was old but in good taste. A film of dust covered it all.

Jones motioned me to a chair, then sat in one across from me, his head thrust slightly forward in the unconscious gesture of the slightly hard of hearing. "Yes? Yes?" he boomed.

I looked at him to see if he was kidding. He wasn't. It was just his way of speaking. I had seen his type before but only in motion pictures. He was one of the few men I have ever met who might be rightly termed a gentleman of the old school.

I said, "You reported your daughter Laura Jean missing last night."

"Oh. You're from the police," he said. "No. It wasn't last night," he corrected me. "It was this morning I became alarmed. You see, she didn't come home last night. Very unusual. Very. In fact it's never happened before. You have some news of her?"

I asked him what kind of a car she was driving. He thought a moment, told me, "I believe it was a Studebaker. Yes. I'm positive it was. She purchased it in Oklahoma City especially for the trip out here. But why do you inquire?"

I told him I had found a deserted 1937 Studebaker coupe at a drive-in stand on Sepulveda Boulevard and asked if he had known his daughter's destination when she had left home the evening before.

He said that he did not. "But you say the car is deserted?" He got up from his chair. "That means there has been an accident. Laura Jean is hurt?" His face was grey.

I said that was the fact I was trying to ascertain, then asked if his daughter had a dog.

"She has," he said promptly. "Snippy." He spread his palms. "A little black and white terrier about so large."

I gave it to him straight. "Then I am afraid there has been an accident. At least, one was reported about a mile from where your daughter's car was found." Without mentioning any names I described the storm drain and told him I

had found a black and white terrier on the bank of it.

He said, "My God!" and sat back in the chair, one hand clutching at his heart. Then, fumbling a pill box from his vest pocket, he asked if I would please get him a glass of water. When he had washed down the pill with a swallow of it, he explained. "My heart. Sorry." He straightened in the chair with an effort. "But what in the name of time was Laura Jean doing walking Snippy in the rain on a lonely boulevard at four o'clock in the morning?"

Thinking of the woman who claimed to have heard two screams thirty seconds apart, I admitted, "That is a point that puzzles me. You say you don't know where your daughter intended to go or whom she intended to meet last night?"

He shook his head. "I do not."

I tried another tack. "Los Angeles isn't your home? You and your daughter moved here recently?"

"Fairly recently," he said. "About eight months ago."

"Why? That is, why did you move to L.A.?"

He said, "Laura Jean believed she could get into pictures."

"But she had no success."

"No," he admitted. "She did not."

I asked if he had a picture of her and he pointed to a picture of a compact brunette on the radio. She wasn't bad looking, nor was she particularly pretty. I had a vague impression I had seen her in the flesh at one time or another.

"All right. Now tell me this," I said. "What part of the country did you come from? And what gave your daughter the impression she could break into the picture racket?"

He told me the family home was in Oklahoma, that he had a small ranch not far from Wewoka, a ranch that had been in his family since Oklahoma had been Indian territory. He sat staring at the picture. "As to why we came to Hollywood, I've often wondered. Laura Jean wasn't happy here. She cried a great deal of the time, undoubtedly because of her failure to engage in the picture business."

I said, "Undoubtedly." A faint picture was forming in my mind but it was too nebulous to come through.

The old gentleman got up from his chair again. "But why do we sit here? Surely there must be *something* we can do."

I told him everything was being done that could be done and gave him a faint bone of hope to chew on. "We don't *know* that anything has happened to your daughter. She may have parked her car and gone somewhere with a friend. She did have a friend, a boy friend, here in Hollywood?"

"Yes," Jones admitted. "She did. He called for her several times, A disagreeable chap named Black, much too old for her for one thing." He began to pace the floor. "No gentleman for another."

I asked him to describe Black. His description was as vague as the faint picture in my mind. In his middle or late thirties, tall, dark, a wisp of a mustache, flashily dressed—you could have swung a canary feather on the corner of Hollywood and Vine and knocked down two dozen men of that description.

I thanked him for his information, told him that the police would undoubtedly contact him later that evening and asked if I could borrow the framed picture of Laura Jean. He said I could not but found and gave me a snapshot of her that was a reasonable likeness.

I left him still clutching the piccolo in one hand, a nice, futile, worried old gentleman.

I should have called it a day. I didn't. I was poking my nose into something I wasn't being paid to investigate. But the matter of the divided screams bothered me.

If Steve Millet had been driving between sixty-five and seventy miles an hour when he had skidded into the girl it was only natural she should scream. But why had she screamed again—thirty seconds later? Thirty seconds is a long time. Tick them off on your own timepiece.

CHAPTER THREE

First Blood

NIGHT had fallen while I had been talking to the old man. I phoned Sally from the drug store on the next corner, told her I wouldn't be home for supper and to expect me when she saw

me. She wanted to know if I was still working on the Millet affair. I said I was and she asked:

"But you're all right, Johnny?"

I said I was.

"And you know that I love you, more than anything on earth?"

I said I was surer of that than I was of salvation, and I blew a kiss into the phone. I dialed Bliss at the studio, failed to get him, finally reached him at his home. He said he had been trying to reach me at the office for an hour. "The police have found the girl's body," he told me. "And they have tentatively indentified her by car keys found in the pocket of her jacket as a Laura Jean Jones of 41638 Saltillo Avenue, North Hollywood. You had better buzz over there, Johnny, and see how the family is fixed. This thing can develop into a nasty stink. The police have added a hit-and-run and leaving the scene of an accident to the reckless driving charge. There's a warrant out on both charges for Millet now."

I said I had already seen the family, that it consisted of a gentlemanly old father, and that while he didn't seem to be rolling in money, I doubted very greatly if he could be bought off, if that was what was in Bliss' mind.

He said he was just thinking of the good of the industry as a whole. I said, "Yeah," and hung up. I was up to here with the whole picture business. Millet was washed up. He was a has-been. The studio didn't intend to renew his contract. But to avoid the bad publicity his arrest and conviction on a manslaughter charge would bring they were now willing to lay plenty on the line to prove it had been two other guys in his car, that in reality Kilroy had been driving, and Millet had been home all the time drinking orange soda pop and reading *Mother Carey's Chickens*. The police would do their best but by the time the high-priced studio lawyers got through kicking the case around, Millet would get off with a slap on the wrist, be free to raise more hell, drink more whiskey, and marry more eighteen-year-old girls.

Out on the street again I considered going back and telling the old man that Laura Jean's body had been found. I did drive by the house but there was a

police cruiser parked in front so I knew that angle had been cared for.

I had bought a paper in the drug store. It had come off the press before the change of charges and the discovery of the body. It still headlined the great lover's romantic nuptials, and ranged around Millet's picture was the same circle of his former wives. The make-up man seemed to get a bang out of printing them.

I stopped at the Hitching Post and read the latest details over a double rye. The lucky bride, so the paper stated, had played several parts in pictures, which was a nice way of saying she walked on in a couple of mob scenes. Of more interest to me was the fact that her real name was Bessie Charles, that she came from Wewoka, Oklahoma, and that she had met Steve Millet in the same town two years before when he had been on location for Consolidated's masterpiece, *Indian Territory*.

I had forgotten he had starred in the picture. I bought another drink, then called Bliss again. "Before you can tell me I'm fired, I quit," I informed him. "This time I think I have Steve where I want him. And I'm going to nail his hide on a fence."

"Now look, Johnny," he protested. "Don't you do anything crazy. I'll have you blackballed out of every studio in Hollywood. You'll never make another dime in Southern California."

He was still sputtering when I hung up.

I paid for my drink, walked back to my car and froze as the muzzle of a gun dug into my spine. "Easy does it, Slagle," one of Glade's chimpanzees warned me. "You ain't got no cause to be sore and nothing ain't going to happen to you. All Paul wants is a little talk."

"Then why the gun invitation?" I asked him.

"Just so you won't refuse."

I got into my own car as directed and drove on out the Valley to Glade's Club, a low-slung grey convertible loafing along behind us. The club was back in the hills, just over the L.A. line. It cost Glade plenty to build it. It also brought him in plenty of money.

THE BAR was red leather and chrome. It was too early for the booths to be occupied, but a director and producer I

knew were sopping it up at the bar. Both invited me to have a drink. I looked at the chimpanzee behind me and told them, "Later. Wait for me. I'm going to have a little talk with Paul."

Out of their hearing the chimp said, "Wise guy."

"Insurance," I corrected him. "It's a very nice thing to have. You ought to get yourself some."

Glade was waiting in his office. He got right down to business. "Cut it out, Johnny," he told me. "I know you have a grudge against Steve. I know you have been waiting a long time for a chance to pay him off. But take my advice, Johnny, and cut it out, understand?"

I asked what his interest in Millet was.

He told me, "Fifty grand. And if the studio doesn't renew his contract I haven't a chance of collecting. Does that make it clear?"

"No," I admitted frankly, "it doesn't. In the first place Millet's contract *isn't* going to be renewed. And if you have nosed around as much as I think you have this afternoon you know that. What's more, you haven't a snowball's chance in hell of stopping this thing. If you're thinking the same thing I am, so are the police. It would seem the lady in the white house near the storm drain talked to some officer before she talked to me."

Glade knew what I was talking about, but his reaction wasn't what I had expected. He seemed relieved. "Oh. I see." He took a packet of bills from his desk drawer and laid it on the blotter. "Look. Let's stop beating around the bush, Johnny. How would you and Sally like to climb into your car and spend three or four months in, well, lets say, Ensenada?"

"Starting when?" I asked him.

He pushed the packet across the desk. "Starting right now. There's ten thousand dollars for expenses."

I was tempted. Then I thought of the little red-haired chick and told him, "Sorry."

The thing was bigger than I had expected. I thought I had most of it now. But for the life of me I couldn't figure how Glade hoped to cash in.

He nodded to one of his chimps. I sidestepped but not quite fast enough. The

barrel of his gun damn near tore off my ear. Through a fog of pain I heard the other chimp say, "He told a couple of guys at the bar to wait for him. He said he was going to have a talk with you."

"Well, he's having it," Glade said coldly. He nodded again and the second blow caught me fair. The last I heard was Glade saying, "Send Mabel and Gwen out to keep the two chumps company. In a half-hour they'll forget that they ever saw Slagle."

THE ROOM was small and plainly furnished, obviously a sleeping room for one of the help. As soon as I could stand on my feet I tried the window. It was barred. The door wasn't any more use to me. It was both solid and locked. There was a wash bowl in one corner. I cleaned the blood off my face and out of my hair as best I could, then sat back on the bed.

I doubted if Glade intended to kill me or have me killed. He didn't like to play that rough. He was merely stalling for time, and my nosing around the way I had and putting two and two together was interfering with the horse he had backed between the shafts of Steve Millet's apple cart.

It had looked pretty simple to me after talking to Thaddeus Jones, figuring out the screams, and reading the night paper. Now I wasn't so certain. Glade was a heel but he wasn't petty. He didn't do anything for peanuts. There had to be money, big money, in this thing somewhere.

More, some time during the afternoon, he *had* to have talked to Millet, long distance to Los Vegas, most likely. On leaving the Hitching Post I had put the evening paper in my pocket. It was still there. I unfolded it, found the light switch and read the story again.

It would seem that even two years ago, when Bessie Charles had only been sixteen, Millet had recognized she had talent. He had suggested she come to Hollywood. Twelve months before, she had followed his advice. A casting director had changed her name to Cherry Gamble. She had been assigned no roles to date, outside of a couple of walk-ons, but had been content to study under Steve Millet's tutelage. Undoubtedly, as the bride of the great

lover, he would insist she be featured in his next starring picture.

That was written by a man. I turned to a sob sister's account of the same affair. She called Cherry a Cinderella girl and stressed the fact she had been working in a five-and-ten-cent store when Millet had first been attracted by her beauty. In neither story could I find what had to be behind the whole affair—money, lots of it.

I sat listening to the music of the band. It came to me thin and faint, which meant the walls of the room were for all practical purposes sound-proofed. Yelling for non-existent help wouldn't get me a thing but a sore throat and maybe another beating.

I found a cigarette and lit it. It tasted good.

It was still smoking when a key turned in the lock, the door opened, and one of Glade's two chimps came in. "Paul was worried about you," he admitted. "He don't want to hurt you, see. Why don't you play ball, take the dough and go south for a while, Slagle?"

I asked him if Paul had told him to tell me that. He said he had. "If it was me," he added, "I'd just konk you on the head, dig you a hole somewhere and let it go at that."

"That would solve about everything with the exception of the woman who heard the screams," I admitted. "What time does the plane of the happy bridal pair land?"

Caught off his mental balance he said, "Midnight," then crossed the room to the bed and cuffed me. "Wise guy, huh? You had to establish the fact Paul talked on the phone to Millet."

I rolled back as if to avoid the blow, doubled my knees up to my middle and gave him both feet in the stomach. His eyes agonized, he doubled up, his head hitting the side rail of the bed as he fell. To make certain he was comfortable I slipped his gun from his holster and smacked him as hard as he'd smacked me. Then, stuffing the gun in my belt, I locked the door behind me, dropped the key in my pocket, and walked down a short flight of stairs to a small false balcony that overlooked the main dining room of the club.

By the size of the crowd it was late. I saw perhaps two dozen people I knew,

including Glade, immaculate in white tie and tails. He was standing beside the table of Glenda Glory, the movie columnist, laughing heartily at something she had said. Some call her the Sacred Cow of Hollywood. Myself, I think she's a pretty good scout. But that could be because of the break that she gave me and Sally. She could have made a Roman holiday of the affair but instead she allowed it to die a natural death. Glenda likes to be kowtowed to. Sure. What woman doesn't?

At the foot of the stairs I paused to allow a party of good-time Charlies, steered by a pair of Glades' pretty shills, to pass me and enter the gambling rooms. Then I headed straight for Glenda's table.

Glade opened and closed his mouth twice but didn't say anything. Glenda said, "Hello, Johnny. I see Millet has done it again."

I said, "So it would seem."

Glenda continued, "At least he had something to offer the others, but not this poor foolish child." Her shrewd eyes narrowed. "Anything new on that accident, Johnny?"

I looked at Glade as I told her. "Nothing that I know of so far. But there may be developments by morning. I am almost certain there will be. I'll give you a buzz the minute that anything breaks."

She said, "You're a good boy, Johnny."

Glade didn't seem to think so. His eyes stabbing holes in my back, I walked through the bar and out into the parking lot. The attendant hadn't been warned not to let me have my car. I suppose they hadn't thought it would be necessary.

I tipped him a buck and left fast but not so fast I didn't see a car swing out into the road a scant thirty seconds behind me. Glade had managed to instruct his boys to gather me in again. I tore down the winding road too fast, then, reaching the floor of the valley, pulled off to one side, killed my lights and tugged the chimp's belt from my gun.

There were three lads in the pursuing car. They rounded the last bend and skidded to a stop thirty feet beyond me as they realized my tail lights had disappeared.

Resting the gun on the ledge of the

door I put a slug into both of their back tires. Then, still without lights, I meshed my boat into gear and pulled around them with my foot pushing the peddle to the floor. By the time they woke up there was nothing they could do about it. At least they did nothing at the time.

I wanted to go to the Valley Station. I wanted to talk to Lieutenant Green before he served his warrants on Millet. If what I now believed to be true was fact, the police were still muddling along in the dark. Glade had been faster on the mental trigger than they.

He knew the set-up for what it was—murder. And unless Millet had confided in him, which wasn't likely, there was only one way he could have learned. After talking to me in my office and learning about the so-called accident, Glade had smelled both a rat and profit and had driven to the scene. It must have been Glade or one of his boys to whom the woman of whom I had inquired had told of the divided scream.

Only one angle still bothered me. That was motive. There had to be money, a lot of money in the set-up somewhere. In the hope of discovering who had it before Millet's return with his bride I turned off onto a muddy side street and drove to his ranch instead of to the station.

It was a mistake on my part. It caused me to foul up the case. And it damn near made Sally a widow.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lochinvar

IT HAD rained on and off all day. Now it was coming down in earnest. The sodden ground refused to absorb any more water and the low-lying fields on both sides of the road were shallow lakes. More, a high wind was blowing, and here and there a tall palm or eucalyptus had given up the struggle and was tilted precariously over the side road leading to the ranch. Millet's drive was even worse. Not far in from the gate a fallen eucalyptus completely blocked the drive.

I left my car and slogged the rest of the way on foot. There were no lights in the main house, but from the feminine squeals issuing from the garage apartment of Uan, Millet's house boy, I judged that

Uan was entertaining. Like master, like man.

I opened the front door with a key on my ring that I had been saving for some time. I was wet to the skin. My shoes were so sodden with water I made squashing sounds as I walked across Millet's big oriental rug to his desk. It was stuffed with bills but there were no letters or papers in it that were of any interest to me.

I tried the desk in his bedroom next. It was quite a room, wainscotted with mirrors and equipped with a specially built bed as large as the average bedroom. There were several letters to "Bunny" signed "Lovekin" in the desk but they all had L.A. postmarks and there was no mention of Wewoka or Laura Jean Jones in any of them. I tried a chest of drawers and a dresser with even less results. The hell of it was I didn't know what I was looking for.

I looked at my watch. It was a few minutes after nine. If the information I had tricked from Glade's chimp was correct I had three hours before Millet and his bride returned from Las Vegas. I doubted if Glade would reason that I would go to the ranch. It was as good a place to be out of the rain as any.

I found a phone in a concealed wall panel and tried to call Lieutenant Green but I could tell the line was dead as soon as I lifted the receiver. The line, as I recalled, paralleled the drive and the uprooted eucalyptus had undoubtedly taken it out.

I would have to drive to the station. Squooshing back down the corridor I pored myself a drink at the rumpus room bar and put a half-dollar on the wood where it couldn't be missed. I wasn't

taking any favors from Steve Millet, not even a drink. I drank, looking in the back bar mirror and thinking of the description of Black that old Thaddeus Jones had given me.

The description fitted me as well as it did anyone else. I am the same age as Millet, too old to marry a bobbysoxer. I am also tall, dark, with a thin mustache. I have never claimed to be a gentleman. And while I don't drape the body in clothes as loud as some, mine aren't exactly Amish.

Thinking of clothes made me realize mine were wet and uncomfortable. I added another half-dollar to the one I had laid on the bar and, peeling off my coat and trenchcoat, hung them in front of the big electric heater in the wall. They were so wet they steamed. I bought a third drink and drank it, toasting my legs and back and having a hell of a swell time thinking about how much I hated Millet.

The three drinks and drying the surface of my clothes took maybe half an hour. I was just reaching for my coat to go out and get wet again when the pounding on the front door began. Tugging the hood's gun from my belt I walked to the window in my shirt sleeves.

In the light over the door I could see a husky youth using a fist as big as a ham to beat on the paneling. He was wearing frontier model dungarees with their cuffs and his feet stuffed into expensive-looking, high-heeled boots slightly run over on the outside corners of the heels. A worn, black leather windbreaker protected his upper body from the rain dripping off the peaked brim of a battered ten-gallon hat. Where his chin should be, there was chin and plenty of it. Who-

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ever he was and whatever he wanted of Millet, he wasn't a Vine Street cowboy. He was the real McCoy.

I considered letting him knock until he gave up and went away. I was to wish I had. Instead, I went on into the front room, opened the door and asked him what he wanted.

He took one look at me and said, "Where is she?"

"Where is who?" I asked him.

He sneered, "A comedian, eh?" and using the ham with which he had been beating on the door he tried to punch my head off my shoulders, using my jaw as a point of contact.

If I hadn't rolled with the punch he might have done it. As it was, it rocked me so hard I forgot I had a gun in my hand until it was too late to use it. He wasn't missing a trick, though. He slashed my wrist with the heel of his hand and the gun fell to the carpet.

"Where is she?" he repeated. He spoke, without raising his voice, in an urgent drawl. "No wonder she hasn't been writing to me lately. No wonder she said she might never come back to Wewoka. Well, she's going to! Understand?"

I thought I was beginning to. "Now, wait. You have me all wrong," I told the youngster. "I'm not Millet. My name is Slagle. And I don't like Millet any better than you seem to."

NOT QUITE sold on me as yet, he picked the gun from the floor, his eyes never leaving my face. "If you're lying to me, if you are Millet, I'm going to beat your face in, mister," he informed me. "Bessie and I have been sweethearts since we were shirt-tail young uns, and no pitcher actor, great lover or not, is going to take her away from me!"

I said, "You are referring to Bessie Slater, the late Cherry Gamble, now Mrs. Steve Millet."

He decided to believe I wasn't Millet. "They aren't married yet, are they, mister? Bessie couldn't marry such a man. She isn't married to him, is she?"

I closed the front door, took him by the elbow and leading him into the rumpus room bought him a drink. "Now start at the beginning," I told him. "Just who are you and where did you come from."

He said his name was Arnst Gary and he had just gotten off the Oklahoma City-Los Angeles plane. According to his story, he had been in Wewoka that morning seeing about some fittings for a well he was wildcatting on his ranch, when the editor of the local paper who knew and liked him had called him in and showed him an A.P. dispatch right off the tape. Gary told me, "They wanted more information about Bessie. And it said she was going to be Steve Millet's sixth wife. That's all I needed to read. I got a plane as soon as I could and here I am." He went back into his theme song. "Where is she?"

I fished the paper from the pocket of my coat and handed it to him. He glanced at the picture of Cherry, skimmed through the article. Then, laying it down on the bar, he asked me, "Is there a regular airline to this Las Vegas or will I have to charter a plane?"

I said there was a regular flight to Las Vegas but according to information that I had, Millet and his bride were returning to Los Angeles by midnight.

He said, "Good. I came out here to kill him and his own house is as good a place as any."

I said that was pretty strong talk.

"I love Bessie," he said quietly. "And if I thought she would be happy with such a man, I wouldn't be here. But he won't make her happy." The big youth tapped the pictured circle of Millet's former wives. "His past record speaks for itself. He studded all over Oklahoma while he was making that picture down there two years ago." He seemed trying to convince himself. "Bessie doesn't really love him. She's just got stardust in her eyes."

For as young a lad as he was he made a lot of sense. I asked if he knew Thaddeus Jones.

"He's Bessie's uncle," he said. "Laura Jean got the Hollywood bug about the same time that Bessie did and she and her father are out here somewhere."

"And he, Jones, is worth a lot of money?"

Gary shook his head. "No. The old man is too danged stubborn. What with the few cattle that he runs and a piece or two of town property that he rents he has just about enough to keep himself and

Laura Jean." He added, "Not that he couldn't be worth a lot of money."

Before he could explain, the door of the rumpus room opened and Uan, backed by two uniformed Valley patrolmen that I didn't know, walked into the room. Both of the patrolmen had their guns drawn.

"See?" Uan-hissed at the cops. "No friends of Mr. Millet. Just break in and drink his whiskey."

"I didn't break in," I told the cops. "And Uan knows who I am."

"Never see you before," the Filipino lied.

"So you didn't break in," one of the cops said to me. "Okay. Then how did you get in?"

I was damned if I was going to explain about the key. Besides, I wanted to see Lieutenant Green. "Okay. So I broke in," I agreed with him. "Take it easy," I cautioned Gary. "There is no use talking to these lame-brains. I could show them my credentials, but I don't intend to. I'll do my talking at the station."

He said, "To hell with that stuff. I didn't fly out here to get into any little trouble." Before either cop realized what he was about he had a long-barreled Colt pistol in his hand. "Now we're all even," he told them. He backed toward the rumpus room door, opened it with his left hand and, backing out into the rain, slammed it shut behind him.

Neither cop was a fool. They had no intention of playing hide-and-seek in the rain with a gun that size. One of them frisked me while the other one said sourly, "If the house boy hadn't been on the job you and your partner would probably have made a killing." He glanced at the furnishings of the room and I knew what he was thinking. His whole place hadn't cost him as much. "Come on. Get your coat on. We'll let you tell it to the lieutenant."

GREEN was friendly but cagey. He knew I didn't like Millet and he knew why. He listened to my story, drumming on his desk top with his fingers. "That's quite a yarn, Slagle," he said quietly. "Maybe you ought to be writing for the studios instead of keeping an eye on their bad boys and girls."

From the way he said it I knew he had been 'seen.' Nothing crooked. No outright graft, understand. But with all their power and money the studios are able to smooth the path for an ambitious man and sprinkle tacks in the road of anyone who doesn't see quite eye to eye with them.

He glanced at a notation on his pad. "Oh, by the way. I see you aren't working for Consolidated any more. In that case just what were you doing in Millet's rumpus room?"

I told the truth, "Buying a drink before I came over to see you."

"And your partner?"

I said he was no partner of mine.

Green smiled thinly. "No. That's right. The big punk with the old-fashioned dog leg just flew in from Oklahoma to talk to Millet about a dame, a mere thousand odd miles since morning."

"Planes now fly from L.A. to New York in less than seven hours," I reminded him.

He said, "Not commercial planes," got up from his desk and reached his slicker off its hook. "Let's go talk to the woman who heard the screams."

It was still raining, buckets. In the car I asked Green if he had as yet identified Laura Jean's boy friend, Mr. Black.

"No," he admitted. "Not yet. But from the old man's description you could be the lad. And hating Millet like you do I wouldn't put it past you to try to frame him for murder, Johnny."

There it was, cold turkey.

I said, "You're crazy. In the first place I never knew Laura Jean Jones existed until I called Flanery this morning and later talked to her father."

Green said, "But you knew right where her car was parked."

I pointed out it stood to reason she had to reach the scene of her death by some means of locomotion other than foot power. Then I said sourly, "Sure. Knowing exactly what hour Millet was going to run out of liquor this morning I tricked Laura Jean out to the drive-in stand, then walked her and her dog a mile through the rain, timing it exactly so we would reach the storm drain at the moment Millet did. Then I pushed her in front of his car, drove thirty-two miles home and crawled into bed to wait for his call."

Green was fair about it. "Putting it that way, it doesn't make sense. Besides, the old man would have recognized you and said so. But the drivel you have been telling me doesn't make sense, either. As I see it, it's a straight manslaughter rap with no special onus on anyone's shoulders." His ambition showed in the dark. "I don't like Millet much better than you do. But the girl had no business walking down the road at three o'clock in the morning. She must have been out of her mind. And while I'm not excusing Millet, understand, visibility being what it is in a rain storm, what happened could have happened to anyone."

I made him sore by asking, "What are you bucking for, captain's bars? You should have made a better deal. I know of an inspector who remembers Bliss and Consolidated every night in his prayers."

He said sourly, "Go to hell. Remember, I can still slap a breaking-and-entering charge against you and it might just be I will."

I said just as sourly, "I've been charged with worse."

Despite the fact it was almost twelve o'clock, the house nearest to the storm drain was brightly lighted. The driver of our car turned up the lane, cascading a solid sheet of water over a flowering wild crab tree.

A thin-faced man in shirt sleeves with bright red knitted suspenders dangling in loops around his thighs answered Green's rap on the door. Behind him I could see the woman to whom I had spoken. Her face was flushed and, despite the hour and the fact she was wearing a bathrobe over a long silk nightgown, she was clutching a pouch-type leather purse tightly to her breast.

"My name is Green, Lieutenant Green, of the Valley Station," Green introduced himself. "And while I'm sorry to bother you this time of night, information has just come to me that you folks possess some information that might be valuable to our investigation of the accident that occurred down the road a little ways in the early hours of yesterday morning."

The thin-faced lad hitched his suspenders over his shoulders, a blank look on his face. "What accident?" he demanded. "Was there an accident down by the storm

drain? Was that what the police car was doing down there all day?"

Green looked at me. I looked at the woman. "Remember me?" I asked her. "Remember the man you told you heard two screams spaced about thirty seconds apart?"

Her pouch purse still clutched to her breast, she shook her head. "I never saw you before," she lied. "And I know nothing about any screams. We went to bed early last night and I didn't wake up until eight o'clock this morning." She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue and appealed to her husband. "Isn't that right, John?"

He said flatly, "Yeah."

There was nothing I could do about it. Green apologized for disturbing them. Back in the car he said, "Wise guy."

"Yeah," I said. "A wise guy. Wise enough to know that if you had looked in that dame's purse you would probably have found the ten grand Glade tried to bribe me with."

CHAPTER FIVE

Midnight

DESPITE the rain there was a good crowd at the airport to watch the great lover and his bride come in, most of them photogs and reporters and the working stiffs who dig up the dirt and chit-chat that the Louella Parsons, Hedda Hoppers, and Glenda Glorys publish in their columns. The studio had seen to that. Even though they intended to give Millet the air they meant to wring the last possible drop of publicity from his name and marital peccadillos.

From where I stood under the dripping eaves of a private hangar I could see Bliss talking earnestly to Lieutenant Green. From time to time Green shook his head stubbornly. Whatever it was Bliss was trying to sell him, undoubtedly about holding back the hit-and-run and suspicion of manslaughter warrants until morning, Green wasn't having any.

He wasn't too bad a Joe. He had proved that by releasing me on our return to the station. Uan hadn't been there to sign a complaint and Green said he was damned if he would. He was ambitious. Most

good cops are. But he wasn't exactly a fool and the act of the couple who lived out by the storm drain hadn't been too convincing.

From where I stood it looked to me as if the whole affair was beginning to give Green indigestion. He was willing to play ball with Bliss. But bribery was still out. Green didn't want any dirt on his hands that a bar of soap wouldn't remove.

The big chartered plane bounced lightly, then taxied up the strip while the crowd surged past the barrier. I searched it for Arnst Gary. But if the young Lochinvar who had sworn he intended to kill Millet was part of the welcoming committee he had ditched his black leather windbreaker and his ten-gallon Stetson.

I did see Glade and the hood I had slugged at the club and made certain they didn't see me. I knew too much to suit them, that is, if I was right in my assumption that Glade had stepped over the border this time. He had dirt on his hands that wouldn't wash off.

The bride was the first to appear. Smiling over a sheath of roses with stems almost as long as she was, she popped out of the door of the plane to be greeted by a fusillade of flash bulbs. Millet stepped out on the ramp behind her, a prop smile on his face. He was a handsome devil but his fingers trembled slightly as he lighted a cigarette and stared through the match flare at Glade. Then he saw Lieutenant Green and a scowl wiped the smile from his face.

I left the shelter of the hangar and walked slowly toward the crowd, half expecting to hear a shot any minute as the kid from Oklahoma made good his threat to kill Millet. But either I had misjudged his chin or something had detained him. Holding Cherry by one elbow, Millet walked down the ramp and was swallowed by the crowd.

When I reached it the camera men were concentrating on Cherry, giving her instructions about smiling, raising her skirt, etc.

It was cheese-cake in the rain, but it was good. They didn't need to tell her to smile. The kid was having the time of her life. Cinderella had made good. A kid from Wewoka, Oklahoma, had married the great lover. Lovekin had her Bunny.

I skirted the crowd to the edge of the shelter where Millet was arguing with Lieutenant Green. "This is a hell of a note," he was swearing. "A fine way for you to treat my bride. My God, man! We've just been married! Can't your warrants wait until morning?"

Green said, "No," but added that Millet could be admitted to bail on either warrant, and Bliss, somewhat unwillingly, agreed to accompany them to the Valley Station and post bond on both the manslaughter and hit-and-run charges. So saying, he immediately went into conference with Benny Thomas, the studio's public relations man, and Benny began to circulate among the working stiffs, spreading largess here and there as an inducement for them to play up the romantic angle and tone down the other.

Beaming again, Millet slipped his hand under his bride's elbow and escorted her to Bliss' car. She was wearing a red, transparent raincoat with a hood. She looked like Little Red Riding Hood. The big bad wolf had her and she was very pleased about it. I doubted that she knew her cousin was dead.

I wanted a word, in fact several words, with Millet, but there was no use in my going to the station. I drove directly to the ranch, parked my car in someone's drive a quarter of a mile away and waded the rest of the distance on foot. Uan somehow had routed out a crew of men and cleared the drive. Every room in the house was lighted for the reception of its sixth bride. I wondered if Millet would carry her over the threshold.

On the chance that Glade might have detailed some of his boys to watch the house I kept well back in the trees. It still was raining but it didn't matter. I was as wet as I could be.

IT WASN'T more than forty minutes before Millet and his party arrived. It included the bride, Millet, Paul Glade, and his two chimpanzees. All went directly to the rumpus room after being welcomed by Uan. Cherry was no longer smiling. Her eyes were round and sad. Somewhere along the line she had learned that Laura Jean was dead.

Keeping well in the shadows, I moved up to the wall of the rumpus room and

stood by an open window, listening.

"Don't take it so hard, kid," Millet was telling his bride. "I couldn't help it. Even Lieutenant Green admits that. It is just one of those things."

The kid was pretty but not so dumb. She wanted to know, "But what was Laura Jean doing walking down the middle of Sepulveda Boulevard with Snippy at three o'clock in the morning?"

Millet said, "There you have me."

Glade added, "She was probably meeting some guy. Maybe this guy named Black her father says she was playing around with."

I could see as well as hear. As Glade spoke the name Black he looked at Millet and the actor winced.

"Undoubtedly," he agreed. He filled a water tumbler half full of whiskey and handed it to Cherry. "Now you drink this like a good girl and go on into our room and get ready for bed. I'll be with you in just a minute."

Blushing, she protested she couldn't drink so much whiskey but he insisted and she did as she was told. "Poor Laura Jean," she told Glade in parting. "She would have been so proud to know I'm married to Steve."

Millet patted a convenient curve. "Yeah. Sure. Now you run along. I'll be with you as soon as I have a few words with Mr. Glade about a business matter."

She started out the door, then turned back saying, "I wonder—"

"What?" Millet asked her.

She said, "If I shouldn't have told the police that Mr. Black wasn't the real name of Laura Jean's boy friend."

Millet's face turned ashen.

"What was his name?" Glade asked.

Her eyes wide, Cherry admitted, "I don't know. She told me he was an actor, an important one. But just like Steve made me promise never to tell anyone we were engaged, he made Laura Jean promise not to tell even me who he really was until they were married."

Looking at the fingernails of his right hand, Glade said, "The fool! The damn fool! No, I don't think it will be necessary for you to tell the cops."

Millet filled the water tumbler with whiskey, drank half of it, then forced the rest on the girl. "Come on. Drink up,"

he said crisply. "A loving cup to a long and happy married life. Let the dead bury the dead."

She protested, "Steve," but drank it. "Poor Uncle Thaddeus," she added. "He's going to feel just terrible about this." She hiccuped. "And so do I. Poor Laura Jean."

Millet closed the door behind her, walked back to the bar and half filled the tumbler this time.

"Getting stinko isn't going to do you a bit of good," Glade warned him. "You've got to act, and act fast." Millet fingered the four half-dollars that I had laid on the bar and Glade continued, "Of course, if you don't care if Mr. Black goes to the chair, that, I suppose, is Mr. Black's own funeral." His face darkened "And mine." Glade crossed to Millet in three strides and grasped him by the coat front. "Now listen to me, you punk. In trying to collect the dough you owe me I've laid myself wide open to an accessory after the fact charge. And you're going to get me out of it. See? That's why I got you back here from Las Vegas. As I see it, there is only one thing that can trip you up. So listen. Here's what you're going to do."

I listened, all ears. But instead of giving Millet his instructions, Glade said, annoyed, "Close that damn window, will you, Tommy? There's a draft on the back of my neck."

Tommy closed the window. The ranch house was well built. The window casings fitted snugly. Glade continued to talk but I couldn't hear a word he was saying. I sloshed around to the rear of the house in the hope of finding an open window. The one I found was lighted and in Millet's bedroom. Cherry had slipped out of her clothes and into a sheer black nightgown. She had a pretty little body. She reminded me of Sally, as Sally had looked some ten years before. As I watched her she tried to renew her lipstick in the wall of mirrors. She was having trouble in focusing her eyes. And now that she was alone she didn't look too happy. Now that she had what she wanted, I knew what she was thinking. She was wondering if she wanted what she had.

I heard a car pull away from the front of the house and started to move on only

to feel the cold, wet muzzle of a gun nuzzling into the slight hollow under my left ear.

"So you lied to me, did you?" the kid from Oklahoma hissed hoarsely. "You want Bessie for yourself. Well, neither of you are going to have her, understand? I've been waiting here in the rain for three hours to kill Millet. And I'm going to kill him just as soon as he walks in that door."

IN EVERY ointment there is usually one fly. Arnst Gary was the fly in mine. I hissed back, "Don't be a fool! You'd only go to the chair if you did. This thing is big. It's murder. Put that gun away and let me handle this."

He wanted to know what I was going to do.

I said I didn't know. I didn't. But I did know one thing. I had to get this yokel out of my hair before I could do anything. Backing from the window I turned and faced him. "Okay. If you're going to shoot Millet, let me out of here," I said.

His lips tightened. "No. You'd warn him."

I glanced sideways into the room. Cherry was turning down the covers of her bridal bed and for some reason twin tears were trickling down her cheeks. "All right. Shoot him then," I whispered. "I don't like him any better than you do. Shoot him. There he is."

Gary turned his head sideways sharply, leaving his chin exposed. I put all that I had in the blow. It caught him flush on the chin. He grunted and collapsed in my arms just as Millet did enter the room. I took the gun from the youth's fingers, lowered him to the ground, and watched Millet.

He had a bottle and two glasses in his hands. He set the glasses and bottle on one of the tables by the bed, took off his coat and slipped the knot in his tie. I didn't get the move. I had expected something else.

"Well, here we are," he leered at Cherry.

Love making. Romance. The answer to a young girl's prayer. Two glasses, a bottle of whiskey, and "Well, here we are." And he got five thousand a week

as the dream lover of millions of women.

Cherry sat on the edge of the bed, her hands folded in her lap. "Yes. Here we are," she said, sniffing.

He poured two shots in the glasses and wanted to know what she was bawling about. She told him, "Laura Jean. Oh, I do so wish it hadn't had to happen."

"So do I," he said sincerely.

He insisted she drink the whiskey. She did and he poured her another and another. It was obvious by then what he was about. He was trying to make her pass out.

Between drinks he petted her automatically and kissed her several times. But his mind wasn't on his business. On top of what she'd had in the rumpus room, the third drink did the trick. Her heavy lids drooped shut. She looked like a sleeping doll. He slipped her legs under the covers and pulled the sheet up to her chin.

Then he got heavily to his feet, retied his tie and put his coat back on. It was fairly clever at that. He was free now to go about his business. If the case ever reached a jury there weren't twelve men out of twelve thousand who would ever believe, after one look at Cherry, that any man *could* leave her on his wedding night. For her part, if she awakened in two or three hours, to find Millet beside her, she would never know he'd been gone. He had an almost perfect alibi for the next few hours.

The youth on the ground began to groan as he came to. I clamped a palm over his mouth, my eyes never leaving Millet. He took a pair of gloves from one of the dresser drawers and put them on. Then, reaching into his side coat pocket, he pulled out and examined a cheap nicked revolver of the mail-order type. Satisfied it was fully loaded, he dropped it back into his pocket and, walking as if he were wearing a pair of divers' leaded shoes, turned out the light and left the bedroom.

I started around the house and the punk on the ground recovered full consciousness—violently. Cursing me hoarsely he wrapped his arms around my legs and tried to pull me to the ground on top of him. I told him not to be a damn fool, that Millet had gone and I had to follow

him. The youth continued to try to wrestle me down. I could have slugged him with the barrel of his own gun. I didn't. As badly as I wanted to follow Millet I also wanted some information. I wanted the youth to explain what he had meant by his remark:

"No. The old man is too danged stubborn. What with the few cattle he runs and a piece or two of town property that he rents he has just about enough to keep himself and Laura Jean. Not that he couldn't be worth a lot of money."

"Stop it, you fool!" I swore. "I'm on your side."

He wouldn't believe me until I had kicked him half unconscious. Then I hauled him to his feet and shining my flashlight in the window of the bedroom showed him that Cherry, or Bessie as he called her, was both alone and asleep.

Still dubious of my purpose he stumbled after me around to the front of the house. Millet's big car was still parked under the car port, but the black Ford coupe that had been standing next to it was gone and a pair of taillights were fading rapidly down the drive.

It would have taken too long to walk to my own car. I used Millet's imported job. I thought I knew where he was headed and, if possible, I wanted to get there before he did.

I prodded the kid from Oklahoma into the car with his own gun then handed it back to him as I tooled the big car out of the port and headed it down the drive. "Now start talking," I ordered him. "What did you mean by saying old Thaddeus Jones *could* be worth a lot of money."

SALTILLO was hushed with the drugged sleep of early morning. There was no black Ford parked in front of 41638. I drove Millet's car around the block and parked it on the next street. Then, Gary at my heels, I cut through someone's yard to come at the place from the rear.

There was a dim light on the second floor in one of the front windows. I tried both doors. They were locked. A kitchen window, however, was open. I cut the screen with my knife and instructed the kid from Oklahoma to wait back of a clump of bushes from which he could see

the side door. "As soon as anyone comes," I told him, "make like a whippoorwill."

He said whippoorwills were a woods bird and never frequented crowded cities.

I said that Millet wouldn't know that and crawled in through the window almost knocking over a pile of dirty dishes the old man had stacked in the sink. The body as far as I knew was still down at the morgue but there was a feeling of death in the house.

I slipped off my shoes and tiptoed up the stairs to the second floor. Then, remembering something I had forgotten, I tiptoed back and cracked open the side door to make things convenient for Millet.

Up on the second floor again, I tiptoed down the hall and looked in the front room. Jones was sitting in an easy chair staring off into space and rocking forward and back on the base of his spine the way some people do when their grief seems more than they can bear. From time to time he picked a framed picture from the table and stared at it instead of into space. It was the framed picture of his daughter.

I turned to find a room in which I could hide, reached for my gun—and changed my mind. The cheap little nickel-plated revolver leveled on my middle, Steve Millet was regarding me with alcoholic gravity.

"Wise guy," he said. "You thought you were going to burn me, didn't you, Johnny? You hated me badly enough to throw up your contract with Consolidated to try and get me. Well, you're not going to. I'm going to do what I came to do, then I'm going to let you have it, too."

I asked, stupidly, "How did you get in?"

He said, "Through the front door. I was standing out in front, you sap, when I saw my car drive by. Lucky I took the key from Laura Jean's purse. I had a hunch that I might need it."

I said, "You'll never be able to explain my body."

He had a cigarette in his lips. Twin spirals of smoke curled out his nostrils. His smile was thin. "Why should I attempt to explain it? I'm home in bed with my bride, remember? I married my sixth wife this morning." He motioned with his gun. "All right. Into the room with the old man. I want to get this over with."

Jones evidently hadn't heard us in the hall but he got to his feet as I backed in, directed by the gun in Millet's hand.

"Black. Mr. Black," he greeted Millet.

"Hi-ya," Millet said coldly.

Jones looked from him to me, then back at the gun in Millet's hand. "What does this mean?" he boomed. "Why are you pointing that gun at this policeman?" Anger darkened his face. "And what did you do to Laura Jean? Why did you leave her at that lonely spot? What was she doing walking in the rain at three o'clock in the morning?" He added, "Laura Jean is dead, you know."

"Yes," Millet said. "I know."

"You should know," I needed. "You killed her."

I doubt if the old man heard me but he read my lips. "He killed Laura Jean? Mr. Black killed Laura Jean? The police told me she'd been run down by some actor by the name of Millet."

"He is Millet," I told him.

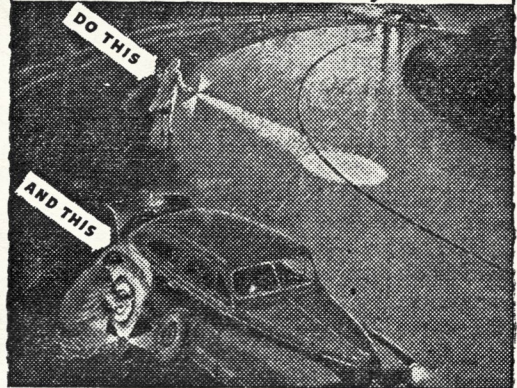
"Millet? Black is Millet?" Jones puzzled.

Steve wasn't happy about what he had to do. I asked if I could smoke a cigarette. He said I could and I whistled the first few bars of *Over There* as I fished the pack from my pocket. He wanted to know what the idea was. "I'm making like a whippoorwill," I told him. I lighted the cigarette. "How are you going to do it, Steve? Shoot me first, then shoot the old man and put the fatal gun in his hand? That was the payoff in your picture *Crime on Tuesday*. Remember? That was the one in which Sally starred with you. And remember what happened to the villain? They waltzed him up to San Quentin and scorched the seat of his pants."

MURDER wasn't Millet's forte. Blood flooding his jowls, he scowled at me. "Shut up. You're damn right I'm going to shoot you and I'm going to shoot you first."

"You waited too long," the kid from Oklahoma said from the hallway behind him. He nudged the base of Millet's spine with the muzzle of his dog leg. "Drop that gun, or don't. I'd just as soon you didn't. I flew over a thousand miles to kill you and I'd hate to spend all that

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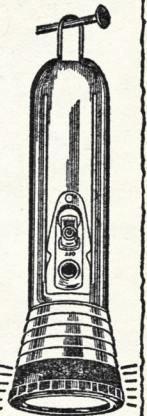
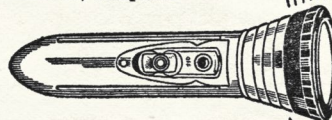
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money for nothing. Make up your mind."

"Arnst!" old man Jones gasped. "Arnst Gary! What are you doing here?"

Gary told him, "I came to take Bessie home where she and Laura Jean might better both have stayed." He repeated, "Drop that gun!"

His face a fish-belly white, the gun fell from Millet's nerveless fingers. Looking over his shoulder he asked Gary, "Who are you?"

"The man that Bessie should have married," the kid from Oklahoma told him. "The man she would have married if you hadn't turned her head with a lot of nonsense."

He started to say more when a window shot open next door and some woman began to scream: "Help! Police! Murder! Five men have just sneaked into Mr. Jones' house. Someone with a phone call the police! There is something terribly wrong next door!"

Gary and I made two. Millet made it three. His face apoplectic with anger, Paul Glade, followed by the chimp I had slugged out at his club, pounded up the stairs to complete the total. Both of them had guns in their hands. "You damn fool," he swore at Millet. "I was afraid something like this would happen. That's why I followed you. Shoot him! Shoot him, you fool, and let's get out of here!"

He dug his gun into Gary's back as he spoke.

"Pick it up," he continued to Millet. "Pick up your gun and shoot the old man. We'll take these other two with us when we leave."

Like Millet, murder wasn't his forte. Glade was a gambler. Before he knew what had happened the kid from Oklahoma spun on his heel, depressed the barrel of Glade's gun with his left hand and slapped him hard with the barrel of the gun in his right. Glade went down like a sack of wet markers.

At the same time I swung on the chimp. I hit him so hard the back of his head left a mark on the plaster but not before he had burned one into my shoulder. Then I turned back to Millet. With the panic of a frightened sheep he was dodging wild blows of the piccolo, forgetting he had a gun in his hand. The great romantic lover. I twisted the gun from his fingers and then

stepped in to keep old Thaddeus Jones from clubbing him to death. The old man didn't know the whole score but he was nobody's fool. He wanted to kill Millet. He would have if I hadn't stopped him.

"Let the law do it," I told him.

Then everything grew hazy. I heard Gary say, "You're shot!" and the next thing I knew a police surgeon was bandaging my wound and Green was pacing around my prone body like Leo the M.G.M. lion.

"Can he talk?" he demanded of the surgeon.

I told him, "Fluently," sat up, and drank the beaker of whiskey that Jones squatted down on his haunches to offer me.

"Then talk!" Green demanded. "What the hell is this all about?"

I told him, "Murder."

Blood still trickling from a nasty cut on his forehead, Glade said, "The man is mad. Out of the kindness of my heart and in deepest sympathy for his grief I accompanied Mr. Millet here to see if Mr. Jones needed financial assistance. Having accidentally brought about the death of Mr. Jones' daughter, Steve naturally feels responsible."

"That's quick thinking, Paul," I admitted. "But you're bailing a sinking ship." Millet was trembling as if he had the ague. "Black and Millet are one and the same," I told Lieutenant Green. "And the reason he came here tonight was to kill the girl's father so he couldn't identify him."

Green mulled that over. "Then the girl's death—"

"Wasn't accidental," I told him. "He met her at that drive-in stand where you found her car, drove her to the storm drain, killed her deliberately, and threw her body into the water. You see there were *two* screams. One when she realized what he intended to do. The second when he did it."

Millet buried his face in his hands and moaned, "Oh, God!"

Green looked at Glade. "And Paul?"

"Paul merely smelled money and climbed on the gravy train," I told him. "As much as I hate to admit it, all that you have on him is an accessory after the fact charge." I watched Millet shake and enjoyed it. "But with Steve now it's

something different. You can book him for murder in the first degree."

Green puzzled, "But with everything to live for, why should he get himself into a mess like this?"

I said, "That's just the point. He didn't have everything to live for, at least those things, namely money, that are important to him. He's known he's been slipping for some time. He knew Consolidated didn't intend to renew his contract. He owed Paul fifty thousand dollars." I scowled at Millet. "But being a far-sighted heel he anticipated this two years ago and bent a bow, a bow with two strings to it. One named Laura Jean, the other her cousin, Bessie." I asked Thaddeus Jones. "How large a ranch have you?"

He said, "Not large. About five hundred acres."

"And there are oil wells on it?"

"No, sir," he boomed proudly, "there are not. I wouldn't have one of the stinking things on my place. I am a rancher, sir, as my father and his father were before me."

I winked at the kid from Oklahoma. "But there are oil wells around your ranch?"

Jones admitted indignantly, "They practically encircle me."

I addressed Arnst Gary. "You're from the same town, son. Tell Lieutenant Green what you told me driving over here."

The youth bent the brim of his Stetson into a sharper peak. "Well, it's common knowledge back home," he told Green, "that one of the biggest pools of oil in the state is under the Jones acreage." He grinned. "But no one had ever been able to talk reason to the old man, not even his own daughter. He says he has ample to live on and he intends to live and die a rancher."

I asked, "But the acreage is valuable, isn't it?"

"It is."

"And if wells were sunk on it, they might bring in how much a day?"

He shook his head. "There is no telling that. But even if oil dropped back to a dollar a barrel I'd say up to two thousand dollars a day clear profit."

"Okay. There it is," I told Green.

"I still don't get it," he admitted. "How did Millet hope to profit?"

THE REST was guess-work on my part, but when Millet did break down and confess I wasn't too far from fact. I said he had probably hoped to marry Laura Jean but she couldn't make up her mind whether he wanted her or the fortune that would eventually come to her. Meanwhile he was also making love to Cherry as a second string to his bow. As the daughter of Jones' sister and the only other blood relation, she was next in line to inherit.

"Say, that's right," Gary said. "I never thought of that."

I don't believe he had. I continued by saying that pressed for money Millet had undoubtedly demanded that Laura Jean come to some decision. Whether her answer was no or whether she somehow found out he was trying to ride two horses was something Millet would have to tell us. Whatever it was, he knew the game was up if she talked to her cousin. So he made the early morning tryst with her, deliberately killed her, threw her body in the drain, and then drove home and phoned me.

But to make certain that Cherry didn't back out when she learned what happened, he married her before she knew. Green knew almost as much about the rest of it as I did. Worrying about his fifty grand, Glade had gone to the scene of the murder and learned as I had learned about the screams. Scenting big money in blackmail if nothing else he had contacted Millet in Las Vegas by phone and demanded to be cut in on whatever was cooking.

The police surgeon broke in then to say, "You've talked enough."

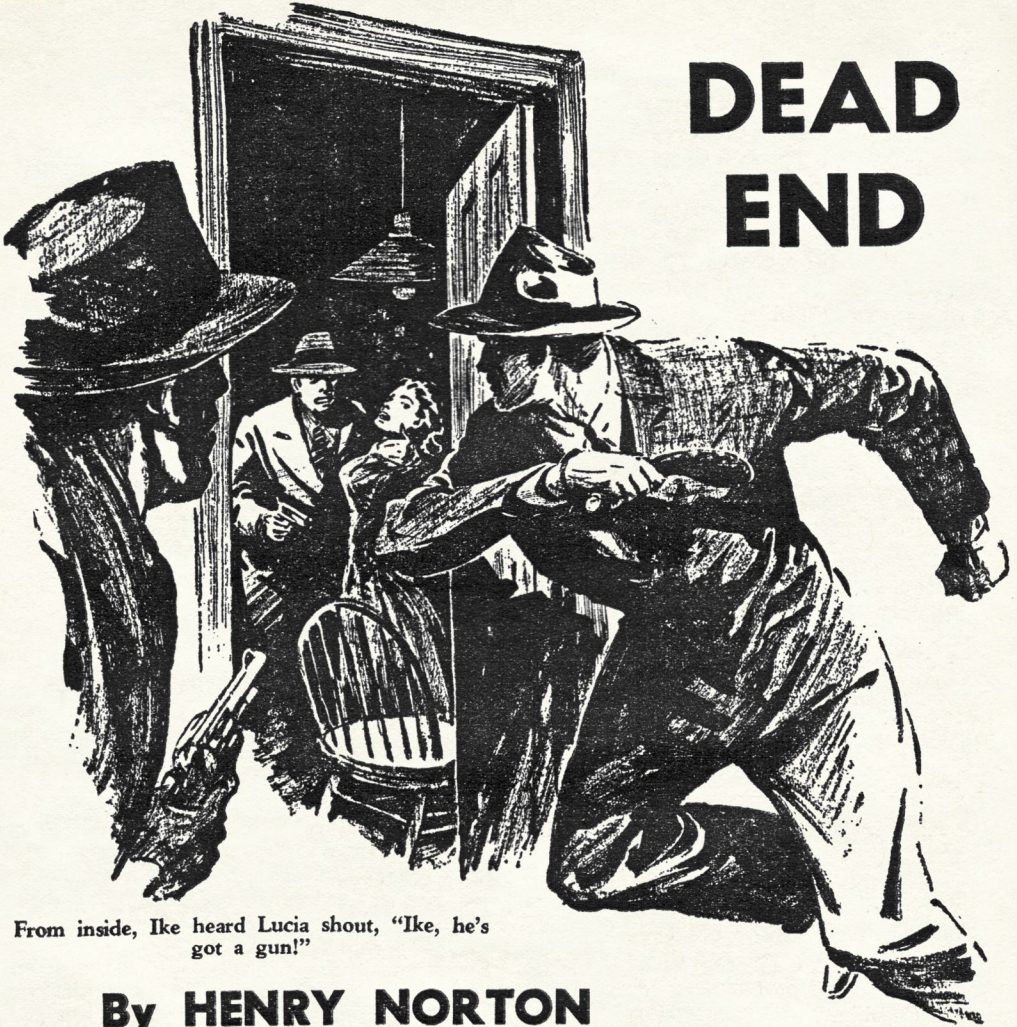
And that was okay with me. I had said all that I needed to say. Green asked me to keep myself on tap and left with his three prisoners. I had another shot with the old man; then I asked the kid from Oklahoma if he would drive me back in Millet's car to where I was parked.

He said he would, and did.

The rain had stopped. As far as I could see the Valley was a carpet of green and blossoms. As I transferred to my own car he cleared his throat and said, "I don't aim to thank you for what you've done for me. I don't know rightly how I could. But, well, seeing as you seem to know a

(Continued on page 126)

DEAD END



From inside, Ike heard Lucia shout, "Ike, he's got a gun!"

By HENRY NORTON

That crazy Lucia! "Fascist!" she spat at Detective Ike Carberry, while she mothered that no-good Rocky Milano. . . . And if it weren't for her, Ike Carberry wouldn't be doing what he was doing now: Crawling up a dead-end alley . . . waiting for Rocky's bullets to mark finis to the career of the biggest, stupidest numbskull of a cop ever to fall in love!

SO NOW it was up an alley. An alley was a hell of a place to go for work.

People got hurt in alleys.

Ike Carberry thought of all the alleys he'd gone up and found no great liking in his mind for any of them. One in Salerno he remembered, and was aware of the sliver of proud flesh on his forearm. And one in Cassino, where nothing had happened—nothing unless you counted seeing the man in front of you fall, and bending down to speak a name to what had suddenly become a headless corpse.

And one in Rome, when all the danger was supposed to be past and an ugly, bare-

toothed kid had come at him with the kind of knife you meet only in dreams. If you have to kill that kind to save your own life, you do it, because that's what it says on the order. But it's better to land a small roundhouse punch eventually and turn the kid over to the CID. Which had happened.

And now an alley in this great American city. How will you have your American alleys, Ike? he asked himself. Well done, please. Well done, and rare—damned rare!

Joe Seaton said, "We can high-low him."

Joe said it with a notable lack of enthusiasm. He was offering to take a slug in the right shoulder, or maybe in the face, in order to dispose of the small, shifty character who was waiting up that alley somewhere with a gun. Now Joe didn't want a bullet in the shoulder. But bullets were an occupational hazard when you were a detective, working on anything like the business of picking up the noted Rocky Milano.

Ike considered. High-low would be a comforting way to do it. Joe could go into the doorway high, exposing only a wedge of his right shoulder, while Ike came in low with as little target area showing as possible. Chances were Rocky would get a shot at one of them, but the other would get Rocky. And that would be an end to him. Because it wouldn't be a wing shot. It would be for keeps. It would be for always.

"No," Ike said finally. "They said bring him in. They got no use for a corpse. So you keep this alley mouth zeroed in, and I'll go get him."

Joe looked relieved, but he said, "You ain't gettin' paid to trade shots with nobody."

"I know," Ike said.

No, he thought, and he wasn't getting paid to duck beer bottles, either. That Lucia! Beautiful, but getting crazier than a barn owl. So what if she did grow up in the same neighborhood with Rocky Milano? Did she have to appoint herself a one-woman protection squad for every wrong-headed brat in town? Did she have to holler "Fascist!" at Ike every time Rocky got in wrong with the law and Ike had to pick him up?

THE THING was a year old now. When Ike came back from being an M.P. in the Army, he figured the detective bureau had about as much to offer him as any other job. Since then he had progressed to the position of detective second grade, which was one step from the bottom and a great many from the top, but was nevertheless a step in the right direction. On the credit side of a detective's career he had to offer a set of outsize muscles, a head that could do a little better than just follow orders and a complete education—courtesy Uncle Sugar—in the art of tearing a man apart bare-handed.

But even a detective second class has an evening off now and again, and Ike had picked up the habit of dropping in to Poppa Mastrelango's little bistro for a glass or two of beer. The crowd that gathered there was pretty much the same night after night, and some of the conversation was out of this world. The two Joes busily drinking up a G.I. loan that was supposed to put them into the machinist business; the writer who lived on the third floor of Poppa's building and alternated between buying drinks for everybody in the house and a charge account this long. Most of the customers were okay, and Lucia queened over the whole crowd, keeping them in line, buying a drink for somebody now and then when Poppa's back was turned.

Most of them were okay, but the location being what it was, there were a few less harmless characters, and that included Rocky Milano. Rocky was a fair target for hatred, slim and quick as a snake, and about as deadly. He'd been well on his way to being a criminal even before Ike went away to save the world. Now there weren't many blanks on his card at headquarters. There was only one conviction against him—for stealing a car when he was sixteen years old—but he'd been picked up and questioned a number of times lately.

Funny about that. Rocky always took it as a personal triumph when the department had to release him for lack of evidence. If he could have seen the way that card was filling out—similar cases and habit patterns settling down into strong lines that would trip him up inevitably some day, he might not have felt so vic-

torious about it. He was riding for a fall—the cops knew that, if he didn't, and every move he made took him just a little closer to it.

Women—how crazy can they get? Lucia would be fine, laughing and joking with Ike like he was making a little time with her for a change, and then Rocky'd poke his narrow face into the picture. Right away she'd drop Ike and start fussing around Rocky's table, giving him the breaks. Rocky claimed the police were persecuting him, holding that one boyhood slip against him. And that was the story Lucia bought.

"Is he the only boy that ever borrowed a car for a joyride when he was young?" she'd holler. "You did as bad yourself! And now you pick on him!"

"Nobody's picking on him."

"Holding that car against him!"

"Nobody cares about the car."

No use trying to tell her that was all washed up. Sure, plenty kids got into trouble that way, but they got over it. There aren't enough cops in the world to keep an eye on all the kids that made one slip, and in nine cases out of ten it wouldn't be necessary, anyway.

But when a kid goes from that to carrying packages for some of the rougher element, when he dresses too well and spends too much money without having a job, when the guys he runs with have a record as long as your arm—it's a different story. But you couldn't convince Lucia! That one wouldn't listen when she was mad. Maybe she'd weigh a hundred pounds with a pocket full of rocks. Little—and so was the A-bomb!

"They gave him a black eye!" she said.

"Yeah," Ike said. "That was a mistake."

It was, too—Rocky's mistake. The lieutenant wanted him brought in for questioning on that warehouse job where the night watchman got his feet burned with matches so he'd tell the combination to the fur vault. Rocky Milano hadn't wanted to come downtown, and making a run for it he'd bumped Tom Turner right in the eye with his fist. That had made a good boy out of him for a while, but it was the same old story in the end, lack of evidence, and then Rocky had made quite a squawk.

Ike hadn't blamed Tom for the slugging. Tom had a family and Rocky had a gun—he'd taken to packing one recently, with a permit from some crooked sheriff upstate—and Tom wasn't hired to take chances. Nobody blamed Tom. But Lucia blamed Ike, like he was chief or something.

That Lucia! She could be sweet as seven pounds of sugar—go to the ball game on Sunday afternoon and yell and have a wonderful time—but let that slick-haired Rocky come around and all her thinking got twisted.

"You don't fool me any," she'd say. "Being an M.P. just made you brutal! You got into the habit of shoving people around. That's why you got it in for Rocky!"

And Rocky Milano would be sitting at one of the back tables, taking it all in with a smirk on his face, remembering to look abused when Lucia glanced in his direction, feeding the fire every chance he got with some phony get-off about Cossacks and Gestapos and power-drunk minions of the law. Maybe he had an angle, Ike had figured, or maybe he just liked to make trouble. Just the old needle.

WELL, all that was water over the dam now, and it looked like Rocky'd had an angle, all right. Just half an hour ago there'd been an armed holdup in the cigar stand at Second and LaGuardia. It'd been a bad business all around. The cigar man had worked hard for his dough, so instead of being smart and letting the holdup man clean the till, he'd stepped on one of those new rigs that squirts tear gas across the counter. He'd got himself killed for that; the gunman had shot him twice in the chest, grabbed some money and run. No one knew exactly how much money, but it couldn't have been more than fifteen bucks.

Petty larceny, that was all, but a man was dead. The newsboy on the corner said it looked like Rocky, and the car looked like Rocky's car. The cops placed Rocky pretty close to the place at the right time, and that was enough to go on.

There'd been a small, dark girl in the car.

Ike looked at the alley mouth, and his jaw muscles tightened. This one's for

you, boy. Not for the sergeant, who likes tear gas, or for Joe with his high-low games. Not for the wrecking squad, who know only that Rocky Milano went to earth there with a dame, and that they've got a murder rap on him now. But you know who that dame is, or you're afraid you do. So it's up the alley, boy, and alone, but you won't be lonesome. A couple of people you know are up there waiting for you!

The alley lay cluttered before them under the lights of the squad car they'd wheeled into its mouth. Garbage cans were tinsel bright on the near side, and they threw long man-size shadows on the other. All four doors in the alley opened wrong—when did an alley door ever open right?—and behind one of them were Lucia and Rocky Milano. That stack of cardboard cartons now—that'd hide a man, but Rocky wouldn't have guts enough to play it from there. Give him a door. Give him a quarter-inch of wood, and he felt safe as Fort Knox. Even guys who made their living at the point of a gun couldn't get used to the idea that a bullet goes through a half-inch of wood like it was wet newspaper.

At the end of the alley was a high brick wall that made the place a deadend. So one thing was for sure. Rocky was still in here some place. So was the woman who'd been seen to jump from the car with him and run for the alley entrance. A short girl, shorter even than Rocky.

"Cut those car lights," Ike said.

Joe slid in gingerly behind the wheel and shoved in the light switch. Solid blackness jumped the length of the block, smothering the sight of the garbage cans and the piled-up boxes and the wrong-way doors. Moving softly, close to the near wall, Ike went into the alley.

His gun was a snub-nosed .38, and he left it in the holster in his back pocket. That was only a split second slower than having it in his hand, and he told himself it might be a good idea to have one hand free. His left hand carried a spring-handled sap; that'd be enough armament in any close situation. Besides, he wasn't supposed to shoot Rocky Milano. He was supposed to bring him downtown.

Baloney, some deeper part of his mind said sourly. It's because of Lucia. You

don't want her to get hurt in any shooting. She ran into the alley, didn't she? Then let her take her chance along with him, if that's what she wants. Since when had she given Ike Carberry any breaks? "Fascist!" she says. Okay, why play clay pigeon for a babe like that?

But he did not draw the gun, not even as he eased up to the first door and kicked it open. Light spilled into the alley, and a startled Swede dishwasher dropped a handful of plates.

"Anybody come through here?" Ike demanded.

The old man shook his head, his eyes wide and afraid at the sight of the black-jack in Ike's hand. Ike waved it gently and said, "Police business, mac."

The dishwasher came to the door and Ike said, "Where do the rest of these doors go, now? The next one?"

"Back of Yake's Pool Room," the man said promptly. "Den two odders, I tink dey used to be cribs. Yust little apartments. Maybe dey still cribs."

Ike pulled the door shut quietly and moved on into the darkness. Jake's Pool Room didn't offer much place for a wanted killer to hide—it'd probably be one of the last two doors. Little hole-ups, with a single door and a single room. Maybe they were still cribs, but more likely one of them was the place Rocky Milano ran to when the going got tough. Only this time he'd taken Ike Carberry's girl along—Lucia, the one who'd sat beside Ike last Sunday and yelled herself silly when the home team won. Ike's mouth tightened, and the sap made a tiny singing noise in the air.

Jake's Pool Room, just to miss no bets. There was a snooker table within ten feet of the door, and a guy trying to sing *Ciri Biri Bin* and play the six ball in the corner at the same time. He missed, as why wouldn't he? Ike closed the door without being seen and moved down toward the last two doors.

THIS WAS purifying a city. This was the way you did it for the Army. A section at a time, and an alley at a time, and a building at a time, and a door at a time—that was the way it was in a war. And this was kind of a war, too—not against pool-hall proprietors who served

an occasional illegal drink to their customers, but against guys like Rocky Milano.

It wasn't any holy war, any more than the big one'd been. Maybe there were guys like Nathan Hale who regretted having but one life to give to their country. The guys I met would've regretted having to give even one, Ike thought idly. It got to be a simple job of knocking the other guy off before he knocked you off. No junk about democracy or one world—just a matter of getting the other side out before they batted in any runs.

And police work was the same. You grinned at the little bookie on the corner and did nothing. So maybe he took a few bets. Somebody else would if he didn't, and at least he paid his losses. So Mrs. Finnerty's kid was too young to be driving a truck—they needed the dough, didn't they? Pick him up, and put the old lady on relief? Nuts to that!

But this, when a gun-happy brat starts shooting up the town so he can pick up a few bucks walk-around money—well, then something was to be done. Pick him up and take him down and get him put away, where the rot that was in him wouldn't spread to others. What was prison but an isolation ward, so the incurably diseased couldn't keep spreading their poison to people like—well, like Lucia? Maybe this time it was too late to help, but it had to be done, and there was no righteousness in it—only a smoldering anger that for fifteen lousy bucks a man was dead and a girl in danger and there were two doors yet to go.

It was a little tough to figure. Lucia wasn't the kind you could talk into things. At least, Ike thought wryly, I had no luck at it. So how is she up this alley with Milano? Maybe it's a sucker bet. Maybe she just went for a ride with him, and he pulled the job just to get some change for the date, without her knowing what he was doing. Well, it's a nice thought, anyway.

The doors were smaller, the two that were left. He sidled up to the first one and slammed his heel onto the lock. The door went inward with the dry moan of unused hinges, and a little sifting of dust tickled Ike's nose and made him want to sneeze.

"Go ahead and sneeze," he told him-

self. "They aren't here. Nobody's here. This one's for free."

So there was one more door—the last door in a blind alley, and that was it. One more door, and there wasn't any more. That was the business. That had to be it, and what happened from here on in was going to be anything but fun, no matter how it turned out.

He proceeded with neither undue haste nor delay to the final door in the alley. He could not take the chance of trying it to see if it were unlocked and thus warning Rocky. As he had in the other case, he set himself and smashed the lock with his heel, then stepped quickly aside. The door crashed open on a dark interior. There was the faint smell of cigarette smoke. There was no sound from within.

"Come out with your hands up, Rocky," he said.

Lucia's voice said, "Oh, Ike, I'm—"

There was the sound of a slap, and silence.

"Don't make it any worse for yourself," Ike warned.

That was strictly for laughs. How could Rocky make it any worse for himself? There was murder against him now. How often can you electrocute a man for murder? Rocky Milano had had it, the instant he squeezed off on that cigar man. He might just as well have turned the gun around and shot himself through the heart at the same time, for any practical purpose. But since he hadn't, since he'd elected to make a run for it and take Lucia along as a sort of hostage—then there was but one thing to do, and that was to take him with as little trouble as might be. Take him alive, if possible, so that the slow and relentless process of arrest and trial and sentence and execution could do its job of warning to anybody else who might like to try murder. But take him—that was first.

That was the immediate problem, and it didn't look easy. Rocky was going to wait for him to come in, and so was Lucia. There had been a flooding instant of relief when Lucia spoke, for it made it look like she was not a willing part of Rocky's plan. But an instant's reflection told him that his relief was premature, and could be dead wrong. Sure, maybe she was scared now—maybe she was even glad

Ike had come—but how had it started out? Had she gone along with Rocky, knowing he had a stickup in mind? If so, she was in it right up to her cute little neck. The church may encourage last minute repentance, but the law gives it somewhat less credit.

IKE STOOD a moment, savoring the fine-drawn silence. It was a little like the quiet that preludes a bombardment. Once broken, things would move irresistibly to their thundering climax, and there would be no way to stop them.

He fumbled carefully in his pocket and pulled out his wallet. He sailed it in through the door.

But he heard it strike almost instantly, before it had had time to reach the back of the room. He heard the girl's quick gasp, and even as he cursed the luck of his aim that had made the wallet hit her, he heard the sound of a blow.

"Ike, he's got a gun!"

The blow was repeated, and Ike Carberry went through the door in a crouching dive toward the sound. Rocky's gun went off, thunderous in the little room, as Ike's shoulder struck a soft body. Ike's outflung hand touched the falling flutter of a silk dress. The gun roared again, and something like a fist sledged him in his forearm.

He had the gun flash to guide him now, and he pivoted stiffly and threw himself forward with the blackjack flailing. Once it connected and Rocky grunted in pain.

It was no more than a match. Despite Ike's greater strength, the wound in his right arm played him false, and twice

Rocky broke free to smash at him. Then there was a faraway roar as the squad car screamed down the alley. Light grew within the tiny room, and over Rocky's shoulder Ike saw Lucia poised, with a chair above her head.

The chair crashed down, and lights like a pinball board exploded in Ike's sight as Rocky ducked and the full blow took Carberry on the side of the head. Then Joe Seaton was through the door with his gun in front of him. He swung once at Rocky and held the muzzle on Lucia.

"She was trying to help, Joe," Ike said.

He shook his head, then found the light bulb and bent stiffly to find his wallet. While Joe Seaton dragged Rocky to the squad car, Lucia leaned against the wall.

"Talk about brutal!" he said.

She glared at him. "You know perfectly well I just talked that way to make you jealous, so you—and you did knock me down when you came in here. Why didn't you shoot him?"

"What! And be a Fascist?"

Her eyes blazed and her mouth opened, then closed weakly as she saw the blood that dripped from Ike's hand. Her eyes went to the bullet tear in his coat.

"Oh, darling!" she said softly.

Sternly, Ike said, "It's a good thing you used my name before you swung that chair, baby, or I'd throw you in the cooler so quick it'd made your heels crack!"

With a carefully averted grin, he let her put an arm around him and assist him to the car, leaning no more of his weight on her slim body than was necessary for effect. Every underdog has his day!

That Lucia!

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All movement or thought had ended for me, and I sat there with a big picture of an electric chair in my mind.

Tony Rocco was dead, with my bullet in his throat. . . . Which meant that now, in addition to every kill-crazy hood in town, there'd be a new army after me—a thousand ambitious cops, who'd love to use my corpse as a stepping-stone to promotion and pay!

Thrilling Crime Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

One Dead Cop



●
By
FRANK
WARD
●

RAIN, cold as a dead man's sweat, drummed steadily on the Burbank top and worked its way through the worn canvas into my lap. I fumbled a sodden cigarette from the pack on the leather upholstery, touched it to the dash lighter and blew bitter-tasting smoke down my nostrils as I watched the last of the cars slide through the iron cemetery gates and start on the long empty trip back to town.

Then there was nothing but the rain on the fresh new earth and the steady drip of it on the floorboards of the Dodge and the pain in the back of my neck. I got out, slamming the door hard, and flicked the cigarette in a sparking arch along the gravel drive and slogged toward the girl standing by the grave. When I put my hand on her arm she flinched away as if a jarring memory had touched her. I said gruffly, "Call it quits, Nell. There's nothing for you out here. There's nothing to wait for now."

She could have been a statue, for all the reply I got—or expected. She stood stiff and straight with the rain smearing her face, giving her a blurred look.

"He was a good cop," I said, lying in my teeth. "An honest one. That's the right thing to say, isn't it? He was a good cop and the only mistake he made was walking into a dark alley one night last week and stumbling across a cheap two-bit hood who gunned him down. He ate his piece of lead and then he took out his own gun and shot his man dead. Now Steve's just a gold star on a plaque in city hall. Ask Slack. Ask any cop. He'll tell you the same thing. Any cop takes that risk, any time, anywhere. Any cop's wife knows that. Now, for God's sake, will you stop trying to follow him into that grave and let me take you home?"

She shook her head numbly. Her eyes were slate grey and hard, fixed on the gleaming new headstone that read, "Detective-Sergeant Stephen Cornish. Died

in the performance of his duty." There were a few dates that meant nothing now. Vital statistics in a place that was dedicated to vital statistics. A stray coil of smoky black hair uncurled slowly and trailed across her face. Under my hand her arm was as stiff as a pine plank.

A car swung through the cemetery gates, cutting its motor, and drifted along the curving drive toward us. It came to a stop near my Dodge, long police radio antennas swaying like buggy whips over the windshield and rear fender. Homicide Lieutenant Slack got out from under the wheel, a tall heroic figure of a man with a fierce, bitter face that might have been lifted from a Roman coin.

He came along the drive toward us, moving lightly on the toes of his smudged black shoes. He was wearing a shiny black slicker that stretched tight across his thick chest, and a black snapbrim hat jerked low over his brooding black eyes. He needed a shave badly, but his crisp grey hair was cropped short at the nape of his neck. A long, thin cigar was tucked motionless between his lips, as if it had grown there undisturbed.

I sighed and left Nell standing there and walked over to him.

He said heavily, "Roll your freight out of here, Dana. This isn't any of your business."

I could feel the hair along my collar twitching. He pushed past me, cop-like, as if there wasn't enough room to take a side-step, and put his hand on Nell's shoulder. His thick brutal mouth moved soothingly. Suddenly her body slackened and she leaned her weight into him and put her face against his slickered chest and began to cry.

There was nothing there for me, nothing I could do now that I hadn't tried to do before. I looked into Slack's eyes and they snapped back at me challengingly over the girl's head. I thought I saw pain etched in his face, or some emotion I couldn't understand. I couldn't picture Slack being in love with anything besides his gun and his badge and the department he worked for. I let my shoulders slacken and went back to my car and drove it away from there. In the rear-view mirror I could see them standing beside the grave. Then they dropped from sight and there

was only the winding black road and the sour taste of my own unpleasant thoughts.

HOFFMEYER had tucked his small delicate frame into the swivel chair behind his desk and was gazing vacantly at a fingerprint chart on the far wall above a filing cabinet when I came through the door marked "Homicide" and walked across the office toward him. The room was lifeless and empty and heavy with the sharp odor of disinfectant and the rank smell of cigarette butts tossed into ashtrays and allowed to smolder.

I sat down across the desk from him and put a cigarette in my mouth and fussed around getting out my lighter. His gaze dropped from the wall chart to my face. He had sad, wise old eyes and jack-rabbit brown hair well salted with grey to match the drooping old-world mustache under his sharp little nose. He nodded to me and reached for a curved, smoke-mellowed meerschaum pipe, tucked it under his handlebars and made whistling noises through the stem. "You don't come around for a long time, Luke. You been pretty busy, maybe."

"Maybe," I said. I blew smoke down at the new desk blotter. It bounced off, forming a roiling cloud that hung between us, blue-grey in the yellow light from the desk lamp.

Hoffmeyer chuckled softly, but his eyes were still and cold. "Still the same old Luke, eh? Just like when you worked with us." He paused. "You been to the funeral, I guess. He was a good friend of yours, eh?"

"I knew him a long time."

"That isn't quite the same thing."

I let that float by. I said, "I was there. It was pretty good, as funerals go. The commissioner was there with a wreath and a short resounding speech, as was the mayor. Also with wreath and speech. Steve's widow was there, too. She didn't have much to say."

"No," Hoffmeyer said in his soft, thickly accented voice. "She is a nice girl, Nell. You know her very long, Luke?"

"I had a pretty steady job carrying her books, before Steve came along." I shrugged. "I knew them both pretty well. She didn't have much of a life."

Hoffmeyer frowned, opened his lap

drawer and began rubbing a shred of tobacco between his palms, not looking at it. "Steve was a pretty good man," he began thoughtfully.

I got a sneer together and threw it at him. "The hell he was," I said softly. "He was a cheap punk who started lifting apples off fruitstands his first night out on a beat. He bought his promotion with dirt money he picked off Tony Rocco's desk, and he was riding in Tony's bandwagon when he was sucker enough to go after a noise in a dark alley with his gun on his hip. He double-crossed Nell with every cheap little piece he could get his hands on, and he was playing a wide loop for Rocco's wife. Don't sit there and try to tell *me* he was a good boy."

Hoffmeyer sat quite still, watching his match burn down toward his fingers. Then he sighed, deeply, as if something inside was hurting him, and moved his shoulders. The match died and glowed for a second before sending up a curl of smoke.

"Let's stop kidding each other, if we are," I suggested. "As it stands now, Steve heard someone prowling a dark one-way alley, perked up his ears and trotted gaily to his death. He was shot three times with a .38. When he was found he had his gun in his hand, fired four times, and the kid was lying near a pile of ashcans about twenty feet farther down the alley with four or five in his chest and belly. I'd like a look at the gun that killed Steve, Hoff. I'd like a look at the gun he was carrying when it happened to him."

Hoffmeyer flushed. "I can't do that, Luke. It wouldn't be right."

"Which means Slack said no, eh?"

"Maybe. What makes this any business of yours, Luke?"

"Fifteen bucks a day and a hunch. Big deal. Enough business like this and someday I can retire and raise boll weevils." I leaned forward over his desk. "Listen to me, Hoff. You know as well as I do that kid never shot Steve. I checked him all the way back to the Middle West. No criminal record anywhere, except one or two vagrancy raps that don't count.

"He's got kin in this town. Two days ago they came down to see me. Nice old Polish folks, not much cash but a lot of faith in their boy. They told me he'd

always been a good kid, didn't know the front sight on a gun from a hunk of plutonium."

"You expected them to say something else, perhaps? As for the gun, he could learn fast. If he had a reason to."

"And what reason would he have? You could have covered the slugs in Steve's gut with a hat, and that's damn nice shooting at twenty feet in the dark. I checked even further. A yard bull I talked to said he pulled the kid off a freight from Omaha the night Steve got it. He went over him, found about forty cents and some other junk—but no rod. He would have remembered a gun."

HOFFMEYER made an irritated motion with one hand. "He could have stolen it here, Luke."

"Any stolen guns reported in the last week?"

Hoffmeyer raised one eyebrow and stared at me. "A rifle," he said, without expression.

"Yah," I sneered. "So where did the kid get the gun? He didn't have one, and that's a fact. It was given to him after he lay down and died from all the lead in him. The party who shot Steve either killed the kid deliberately and framed him into position, or the kid walked into the alley looking for a place to roost for the night and found himself in the middle of a shooting."

"Then the whole thing was smoothed over. As slick and neat and phony as they come, Hoffmeyer, but it's sticking and it'll go right on sticking, in the papers, in the reports. And all because someone got sick of Steve and wrote him off the books."

Hoffmeyer sat very still, tapping the stem of his pipe against his teeth. His face was placid. Finally he said, "Steve was too smart for his own good, Luke. He was everything you called him. A department isn't proud of that kind of a cop."

"And this way he goes to glory with the flags up front and a posthumous citation in his lap, eh? No dirt, no smearing."

Hoffmeyer shrugged his frail shoulders and reached into the still-open drawer and tossed a ring of keys on his desk.

"It makes it a little easier for Nell, too," he said softly. "You got to remember that, Luke."

I picked up the keys, glanced at his wooden face, walked around his chair and down a short corridor to another door and keyed it open. The smell of musty paper and printer's ink leaked out at me as I went in. Dusty green filing cabinets with clean splotches where elbows had leaned, stretched the length of the room, forming a solid inner wall, shoulder high. I went along the rows until I came to the C's, unlocked the cabinet with the master key and rummaged through bulky folders and envelopes until I came to a section tagged, "Cornish, Stephen Arthur, Detective Sergeant."

The folder and the large oil-stained manilla envelope that had once held the murder gun were as empty as Hoffmeyer's weary old face. There was nothing there but the bulge where the paper had swollen to accommodate the gun.

For a long time I stood beside the open drawer tapping the folder against the edge of the cabinet. Someone had been there before me, as someone usually is. Someone wanted Detective Steve Cornish removed from record until all that remained of him was a bright spot on the department's record and a hero's grave in a cemetery. He was gone, the gun that had killed him was gone, and there was nothing in that musty room to prove that the slugs they'd taken out of the kid's chest hadn't come from Steve's service revolver. A wave had come in to obliterate the footprints in the sand, and I wondered if perhaps the wave hadn't been smoking a long thin cigar.

When I went back out into the main office, Hoffmeyer's chair was empty. A plainclothes cop I had never seen before was standing by the water cooler, staring down into his paper cup with a sour expression on his face as if he had expected to find the cooler filled with rye whiskey. He gave me a suspicious glower, and I tossed the file keys on Hoffmeyer's desk and walked out and along the corridor past a fat cop nursing his bunions in a chair beside a spittoon, and down a flight of rusted and scraped iron stairs and across the lobby and out into the grey and fading afternoon.

CHAPTER TWO

Room 319

A MAN in an apartment across the hall from mine was raising hell with his wife when I got off the elevator on the fifth floor and stuck my key in the lock. They were still throwing verbal crockery when I closed the door on them and reached for the light switch.

The room was dreary with a touch of chill and that faded look rooms have on rainy days. I closeted my hat and coat and went out into the kitchen to feed the cat and pour myself a drink. I stood by the kitchen window, the glass in my hand, burning up inside from the futility of fighting a system that was rigged from top to bottom. I was sick of the whole thing, sick of cops with systems and side-lines, fed up with cops like Steve who weren't worth the Brasso it took to polish their badges, tired of bucking big, tough, proud cops like Slack, who would sell their own mothers down the river to keep the department's slate clean. It wouldn't matter to him that two lonely old people were left with nothing but an accusation that their son was a petty sneak thief and a cop-killer to boot.

Shadows moved against yellowed blinds across the airshaft from my window. Mike came out from under the refrigerator and stuck his nose in the cream and sneezed loudly, then began to purr.

I sauntered back into the living room and snapped on the radio to get some noise moving through the place besides the sound of my own breathing and the muted yipping of the couple across the hall. After a while a door slammed and another husband was on his way to the Y.M.C.A., or wherever it is that husbands go when their wives throw them out for the night. Then there was more quiet and dinner music, soft and low from the radio with the background sounds of glassware and cutlery, warm and friendly as a candle on a Christmas tree. I felt lonelier than an igloo without an Eskimo.

The door buzzer rang. I stopped feeling sorry for myself, left my bourbon on an end table and walked out into the entrance hall and opened the door.

Two men stood facing me. The taller

one was wearing a rain-spotted brown topcoat with grease stains down the front and a brown felt hat with a frilly brim, like the pants on an upper-class lamb chop. He was long and lean with homicidal eyes and a vacuous face and a loose-lipped mouth that would drool when he slept, if he ever did. His skin was olive-yellow and glistening in the light.

The other was short and hard and compact in a dark blue, belted trenchcoat. A snapbrim of matching hue was cocked forward over his left eye.

The tall one said, "Mind if we step in, mac? We got business with you."

I stood there, making up my mind.

"Show him, Perce," the tall one in brown said. His accent was Spanish or Mex. The small lad dipped one gloved hand into the pocket of his belted coat and flipped out a black leather shield case and pushed a badge at me. That made a difference. They rode me back into the living room, the tall Spaniard kicking the door shut with his heel. He sauntered around with his hands in his pockets, looking the place over. He found the bourbon, sniffed it, made a face. When

he put the glass down it was empty. He smacked his thin lips and stood rocking on his heels, staring at me.

"Okay," he said, "you might as well sit down."

Perce nudged me with a stiff forefinger, as if he hoped I'd fall over in a dead faint. "You heard him, shamus. Down."

"What squad you boys from?" I asked suddenly.

Perce grinned. I turned on my heel and started toward the phone in the bedroom. Something metallic clicked behind me. When I looked over my shoulder Perce was holding a cocked gun in his hand, a Stevens single-shot .22 with the barrel sawed off at two inches and eight more inches of black Maxim silencer mounted on the cropped muzzle. It would make a little more noise than a popgun, but not enough to matter. The Spaniard was watching us, grinning flatly.

"The hell," I said softly.

The Spaniard chuckled. "You can't fool him," he said to Perce in a voice that purred and whispered like steel on satin. "He's a smart one. He knows all the answers."

NOW the girls ask BOB for dates

WE JUST COOKED UP A SURPRISE PARTY FOR PEG TONIGHT! BOB, CAN YOU TAKE ME ?

SURE, GIVE ME A SEC TO GET READY!

WISH JOAN ASKED ME, BOB. YOU ALWAYS WERE LUCKY.

WHY DON'T YOU CHANGE YOUR LUCK THE WAY I DID ?

I ALWAYS USE **LIFEBUOY**—THE ONLY SOAP ESPECIALLY MADE TO STOP B.O.—CONTAINS AN EXCLUSIVE PURIFYING INGREDIENT. LIFEBUOY EVERY DAY SURE KEEPS B.O. AWAY !

THIS SURPRISE PARTY WAS FUN, BOB—THANKS FOR TAKING ME.

THANKS FOR ASKING ME, JOAN... AND THANKS TO LIFEBUOY!

MY DAILY LIFEBUOY BATH IS THE ONE BEST WAY TO GET LASTING ALL-OVER PROTECTION AGAINST B.O. USE LIFEBUOY FOR A WEEK AND YOU'LL USE IT FOR LIFE!

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I SAT DOWN slowly. The Spaniard clamped strong white teeth around a murderous looking Mex stogie, spat the end on the rug and sniffed his way around looking for a match. When he had the cigar going he slid easily into a chair and sighed.

"We won't kid around with you, Dana. We'll make it brief. Lay off the Cornish slay. As far as anyone knows, he was knocked off by a kid scrounging around for lunch money. The kid had a gun; the gun went off; Cornish went to the morgue."

I put a cigarette in my mouth and almost got my face shot off reaching for my lighter. Perce bounced out of his chair, twitching the Stevens warily, prancing a little. The Spaniard snorted, "Sit down, you mental lightweight. He'll play it reasonable. Dana's a smart cookie, aren't you, pal."

"Smart as a whip," I said. "And just to prove how damn unreasonable smart I am, get this. The cops are sitting on this because they don't want their lovely records smeared. They won't budge unless someone makes 'em. That's one-half of it. In my book, that still leaves plenty of room for a murderer, some guy who was waiting down that alley for Steve to stroll in, maybe on appointment, so he could get killed. And I do mean Tony Rocco."

The Spaniard looked bored. He said, "Lay off it, boy. Wrap it up and tuck it away with your memories. What the hell do you get for your trouble anyway? Ten-fifteen bucks a day, maybe not that. You figure that much change is worth what could happen to you if you didn't play ball?"

"Yeah?" I said, grinning flatly. "And just what could happen?"

That was a mistake. He moved, almost lazily, without apparent effort, but as fast as a bluefin in deep water. His fist caught me flush in the mouth and I went over backward with the chair, scrabbling wildly for balance and not finding it.

"Get up," he purred.

I got up swinging. His foot landed in my belly. Perce gave his hat a tug and chortled. I rolled over on my back, retching. The Spaniard's face swam hazily above me through waves of pain that were like heat radiation. If he kicked me again,

I didn't feel it. I couldn't feel anything.

"Lay off, shamus," he whispered in his gentle deadly voice. "You haven't got the class to bat in our league. Keep your nose clean or we'll tear your head off."

They left on that friendly note, slamming the door behind them. I got up on my hands and knees and pawed weakly at the air and made bitter sounds in my throat. In the bedroom the phone jarred the air suddenly. I let it ring. It could have been a quiz show offering me two new Buicks, a washing machine with platinum rollers and a nice little cottage in the country with hot and cold running champagne, and I still couldn't have made the long trip into the other room. I got as far as the edge of the studio couch and propped my aching face against one cushion and let my stomach go its own lonely way.

By the time I was on my feet and breathing again the phone was at it once more. I swore and went into the darkened bedroom, lurching like a lush on his tenth bottle of home brew, and fumbled the receiver off its hook.

A voice, a woman's voice, husky and low and vaguely familiar, whispered, "Luke Dana?"

"Yeah."

There was a pause, a dull flat emptiness at the other end of the line, an emptiness waiting to be filled by a human voice. Then she said, "I know who killed Steve Cornish, Dana. And why. Would you be interested in that?"

The room felt suddenly cold and lonely. I remembered the Spaniard's warning, and my knuckles popped from holding the phone so tightly.

"Go ahead," I said hoarsely.

"Not now and not here. Go to room 319 at the Metropolitan Hotel. In half an hour. I'll wait."

"Hold it, sister. How do I know this in on the level?"

"Why not take a chance?" she suggested softly. "I'll be in 319. Waiting for you."

The line clicked, went dead for an instant, and then began to hum.

* * *

I stood before a dark-stained wooden door, number 319, on the third floor of

the Metropolitan Hotel, feeling like a clay pigeon. I didn't like the setup. Too many people were taking a deep and homicidal interest in my way of life. Sweat ran down my arm and made the butt of the .38 Special Police Positive in my trench-coat pocket slippery. To my left the corridor stretched dark and empty, without life or sound. There was a strong smell of cheap whiskey and disinfectant in the air.

I knocked again, holding my breath, listening. No sound. No scurry of feet or creaking of bedsprings. I leaned my weight into the door, felt it give and creak against its brittle lock. It snapped suddenly and a piece of metal fell inside the room and tinkled on the floor. The key had fallen out, and the lock opened now.

I went in, into darkness and the smell of used air and soiled linen, into the smell of cheap hotel and unwashed occupants. There was a strange odor, sharp and bitter, like iodoform or maybe iodine, in the place.

The sagging bed was empty but had been slept in. No one sat in the lopsided armchair by the grimy window overlooking the iron lattice of the fire escape. There was no one here.

I swore bitterly under my breath and backed away from the bed, fumbling with one hand for the edge of the door. I had my fingers on wood when I heard the floor move behind me. Nothing definite, just the creak of a loose board, the sensation that someone else in the darkened room was using the same unclean air. I had about seven seconds, figured in passage of time, before it happened. You can do a lot in seven seconds. You can die, be born, light a cigarette, shoot a man, do a lot of little unimportant things and perhaps one big thing that really matters. Or get hit over the head with a black-jack and go down beside a strange bed, retching out your lungs and screaming for air and not making a sound. A foot smashed into my aching ribs and I went over with a smothered groan. For a moment I could see the vague outline of a man, blurred by darkness, indistinguishable, and hear the labored gasping sound of breathing. Then the whipping motion of an arm brought all movement or thought to an end.

CHAPTER THREE

Johnny-on-the-Spot

OFF IN THE distance I could hear a guy beating a drum as if he liked his work. After a time the drummer came closer until he was in the same room with me, and then he seemed to be in my head, but always he had his tom-tom and how that boy loved to pound those traps.

Through the roar I could smell something acrid, something very familiar. The light was on in the room. I saw blood under my face and rolled away from it like a cat stepping on a snake. Someone was pounding lustily on the closed locked door, putting his muscle into it. I came up on my hands and knees, gasping for breath and half fell over my own feet.

The pattern was familiar. I got up and started walking around like an angel treading on a cloud, light and footloose with no place to go, and floated into the footrest of the bed.

And then I saw what the bed held and the clouds fell away from under me and I turned my head and got as sick as I could get in one lifetime.

A man's shoulder hit the door with a solid jar that cracked the cheap paneling and a man's heavy voice snarled out in a tone that grows on men who wear badges and carry the law in their hip pockets with their blackjacks. I glared wildly at the man on the bed. He was wearing a once well-tailored tux, but now the bottom of his stiff white shirt had come undone and jutted up into the air like the headboard on a grave. There was blood on the shirt, old blood, dried blood. Just under his jaw was a powder-burned black hole, and beside him on the bed lay my stag-handled Colt .38. I clenched my teeth and laid my hand on his chest and felt the crude bandaging under the shirt and I knew why the bullet hole in his throat hadn't bled. Someone who hadn't liked Tony Rocco very well had walked in and used my gun on him, but Tony hadn't minded. Tony had already been dead.

I caught up the .38 and started running toward the window where the iron railing of the fire ladder glistened wetly. Behind me a panel in the door split and a gun bellowed loud and thundering in the

confines of the room. A slug whispered past my ear and broke the glass a split second before my shoulder hit it.

A voice yelled, "Halt, you!" and the gun blasted out at me again. But by that time I was out on the platform and sliding and skidding down the slippery iron ladder into the alley below.

* * *

The bar was one of those run-down, flyspecked joints tucked away off the main drags, but it felt like home to me then. I came out of the hole in the wall they called a washroom, wiping the back of my neck with a handkerchief, and crawled into a back booth and poured some of their rotgut down my throat.

The bartender came over. "That must have been quite a fight, pally."

"Yeah," I growled. "Bourbon. Just as nature grew it."

He shrugged and limped away.

The bourbon lifted the back of my head where the sap had connected, but it set me up like a steel brace. I had another and got my brain and a cigarette working for me.

I was sitting there, brooding over my past life and wondering what lay ahead, when the cop came into the joint and paused by the door, looking around. He was a big, scarred, brush-cut lad in a green suit that bulged over his right hip, and he had a note book jutting from his side pocket and a stained green hat set squarely on top of his head.

He prowled the length of the bar, running the flat of his huge hand along the smooth wood, not seeming to be hunting for anything in particular. He ordered rye and coke, turned with the glass tilted negligently in his hand, and began looking the place over like a sad, wistful wolfhound. Fly cop on a routine prowl of the dives, by the look of him. His flat, hard eyes checked off the luses in the place, sorting them out, thinking about them, tossing them away until he reached my booth. His gaze moved on, hit the back wall, bounced, came back to rest on me.

Grunting, he pushed himself away from the bar and slouched over. I could have shot the buttons off his vest for all he seemed to care. He sat down and breathed Sen-Sen and catarrh at me.

"Hi," he said. He had a face that had stopped a lot of fists in its time. I ducked my chin at him and pointed my .38 at his belly under the table, wondering if I'd pull the trigger if he started reaching for anything more lethal than a match.

He sucked noisily at his drink, put the glass down on the table and smashed it viciously against the wall with the back of his hand. It shattered noisily and whatever chatter there was going on in the place stopped and people began to drift, quiet as cloud-shadow on snow, toward the door. The bartender took one hesitant step, then turned away and busied himself at the far end of the counter.

"Neat," I said approvingly. "Nice show. What do I do now, go around with a hat?"

"You're Dana," he said, as if he had a script in his pocket and knew every line of it. "You check in. About six tall, grey eyes, black hair, wide mouth, no scars. Hat, suit, coat."

I LICKED the sweat off my lips. "I've got a gun under the table, junior. Loaded with full-range wadcutters that will tear your belly out and smear it all over this booth. I'm in a lousy mood. My head feels like hell and I'm a sick man from being kicked in the belly. Blow your little whistle and so help me Hannah I'll put a cylinder-full in you."

That had him worried. That tore the bottom right out of his world. He sighed and shook his head wearily.

"Look," he growled. "You can go climb up your thumb for all I care, Dana. If I wanted you I'd have you. I don't fall over when anyone pushes me. All I got to say I'll say, then you can sit here until the dump falls in around you for all I care. If homicide wants you they can come and get you."

"That's mighty big of you, Curly. How much does this cost me?"

"Watch that stuff, bud. A couple of boys want to talk with you. Nice and gentle."

"I'll bet they do. About what?"

"They said they don't want no trouble with you unless they got to have it. They said they told you once before tonight to lay off the Cornish caper. Let it lay. So you gotta get smart and start snoopin'

around for no good reason at all except maybe a little dough you could pick up a lot easier. What's it get you? A rap on Rocco's killing."

"A rap that's so damn weak it stinks," I said.

"Nothing's weak unless the boys downtown want it to be," he said, grinning. "Rocco had friends down there. They could do you a lot of good, a lot of harm. Depends on you. Am I getting this across to you?"

I chewed the end of my tongue and stared at him. "You got it across. What else?"

"That's all. Everyone's trying to be nice to you, pally. Why not count your blessings?" He gave his hat a tug and stared at me. "What do I tell 'em?"

"Where are they?"

"Across the street in a green sedan. Just walk out and wave your left arm and you can do anything you damn well please."

"And if I don't?"

He grinned viciously. "We got places downtown the commish never heard of, chum. And never will hear of."

"Okay," I said, "I'll tell the boys myself." I drew up my knee until it touched the underside of the table and practically kicked his vest buttons through the partition behind him. The air gushed out of him in one agonizing spasm and his face became mottled. He tried to get up, pawed the table, slapped one hand for his gun. I whipped the .38 out from under the table and laid it hard and heavy along his jaw. He made moaning noises and fell forward and smacked his chin into the broken glass. I hit him again, behind the right ear, not too hard. He stopped moaning. Blood pooled out from under his face and for a moment I thought he'd cut his throat on the jagged shards of glass. I hoped he had.

I got up, stiff-legged. I knew the Rocco kill wouldn't stick if I had enough time to hit a good lawyer and could get medical evidence to prove Rocco had been dead before he was shot. It would falter badly if I could get down to a lab and have a paraffin test taken of my hands to prove I hadn't fired a gun in twenty-four hours. All I had to do was walk out and manage to stay in one piece until I was out of the

district. That was all—just stay alive.

The washroom window was small and barred and there was no other way out than through the front door. I looked at the barkeep. He was watching me from the corner of one eye and pretending he had grown into the floor. I was still holding the Colt in my hand.

Keeping out of line with the door I edged along the bar and let the revolver rest on its edge, pointing at nothing in particular.

"You're closing up now," I said, jiggling the .38. "Lock up. Turn out the lights."

"But—"

"Now," I said, almost gently.

He grinned a shaky little grin and almost tore the cord out of its socket turning off the bar light. Then he hotfooted it around the end of the bar, keeping his eyes away from the cop in the back booth, and skittered past me to the door and shot the bolt and then reached up and snapped off the main light. We had darkness. I could hear his breathing, harsh and unsteady, and I couldn't blame him.

ACROSS the street two car doors slammed almost simultaneously. The Spaniard and his lap dog coming to tally the score. I found a nickel in my pocket, edged back to the phone and dialed a number. I could hear leather heels moving slowly, cautiously, on the paving outside. I looked at my watch. Half an hour past midnight, and the ghouls were right on time.

The footsteps stopped. One of them would be circling into the alley behind the joint, hoping to nail me from the back. I jiggled the phone hook. A long shadow materialized abruptly across the oblong of streetlight that came in through the top of the front door, where the waist-high blinds ended.

A man's voice said crisply in my ear, "Police headquarters, Sergeant Muloney talking."

I said hoarsely, "Give me Slack at Homicide."

There was a pause, and through the pause the sound of a window going up in the washroom. Then silence, except for the stertorous wheezing of the unconscious cop. I wondered what would have

happened if I had walked out and waved my left arm. I had a pretty good idea.

Slack's voice pounded through the silence with a suddenness that made me jump. He growled, "Slack here. Who's calling?"

"Dana. You want a lead on the Rocco killing, Slack?"

"What do you know about that?"

"I was there," I said crisply, "when he got it. Right now I can't explain. Get on your horse and meet me at the Old Vienna, and come with your siren going, pal. I got trouble."

"Five minutes," he said, and hung up sharply.

I rubbed my forehead on my coat sleeve and let the receiver drop to the end of its cord. The shadow at the front door moved again, just a few inches, and I shot at it from the hip and missed him by a good foot. Glass rained down. A man swore viciously and a gun blossomed twice in reply. The barkeep let out a strangled grunt and sat down on the floor with his arms wrapped across his belly.

The Spaniard had guts, and he had maybe four shells if he was packing a revolver, or five or six if his gun was an automatic. He took a chance. He hit the door where the glass was missing, holding his gun out in front of him and coming at me in a crouch. He had the light behind him. I shot him twice through the body and once through the head and he tripped over the bottom part of the door and threw his gun the length of the room and sprawled there, half inside, half out, with his legs dangling in the street. His hat rolled off and made a neat circle on its brim and came to rest under a table.

I stood there, shaking, waiting for him to move, wanting to pump some more lead into him just to make sure. Instead, I catfooted down the bar, slid to one knee, tilted his lolling head back and looked at him. I wished I hadn't. I wiped his blood off my hand on his coat, where another stain wouldn't matter now and got to my feet as the car across the road roared into life and almost stripped its gears getting away from the curb. The little guy in the dark trenchcoat was gone before I could throw a slug after him. I watched him go; then I went back to the barkeep, switched on the overhead light and pulled

his arms slowly away from his belly.

There wasn't a mark on him. I slapped his face hard, got his eyes open for him, poured a slug of his own whiskey down his throat.

"Listen to me," I snarled, "and get this straight. There's a cop on his way. Big guy, black eyes. Slack's his name. Tell him I just recalled something. Tell him to pick me up at Tony Rocco's apartment as soon as he can. Got that? Tony Rocco."

He nodded dumbly. His eyes caught sight of the Spaniard and he leaned over sideways and ruined a square yard of sawdust. The sight of him made me want to be sick, too. I put my gun in my pocket and went over to the booth where the cop was still sitting hunched over with his head on the table. I slid my hand under his coat in back and pulled out his gun and dumped the shells out and reloaded my own piece. He didn't move. He never would, now. There were two jagged rips in the thin partition where the Spaniard's slugs had gone through, and there would be two corresponding holes in the big guy's back. I picked up his hat off the table, set it on top of his head, went out the front door into my car and drove away.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Self-Made Widow

FOR A WIDOW, Ave Rocco was wearing about as much feeling as you could park on the head of a pin. She opened the door at my ring, looked me over coolly, taking in my puffed mouth and red eyes.

I leaned my weight into the door, grinning a painful grin that was as shallow as coffee in a saucer, and said, "Hi-ya, Ava. Long time no see. Mind if I come in and share your burden with you?"

She was worth grinning at. She was wearing a black silk Chinese gown with golden dragons on it. The dragons had rubies for eyes and their mouths were open. I couldn't blame them. She was small, trimly put together, smooth and soft on the surface and as hard as the rock they break at Sing Sing under that quiet, self-possessed exterior. Finally she shrugged, said, "Sure, Dana. Come in."

I closed the door behind me and followed her into a dimly lighted living room. She paused beside a pine-paneled bar.

"Still drinking bourbon?"

"Doubles, usually," I said. I tossed my hat at a stuffed chair and slid down gradually on the studio couch until the back of my neck was propped against a cushion. She poured out my drink, tinkled glass against decanter for herself and sat down in a chair opposite me, curling her legs up under her and staring at me thoughtfully, as if she were disinfecting the place and I was in a crack she couldn't quite reach with the spray gun.

"This could be a very touching moment," I said. "Old, old friend consoles wife on death of husband routine. You want me to say I'm sorry he's dead?"

"Why bother? Neither of us gave a damn about him, one way or the other. What do you want, Luke?"

"Is it that hard to guess? Beautiful woman, good liquor, pleasant setting."

Her lips curled just a little. "You've still got a cop's mind, Luke. If you think that now Tony's gone I'm holding open house, get over it. Or do you still carry your night stick?"

I grinned at her, shrugged, stood up and wandered around the room, touching smooth, expensive objects, breathing in the scent of sandalwood. I stopped behind her chair and put my hands on the back of her neck. They must have been cold, because she shivered abruptly, then became very still, unmoving, waiting.

"You're a cute trick," I whispered into her soft black hair. "I bet Tony had a hell of a time with you. I'll bet you got awfully bored cooped up in this ritzy rabbit-warren with a crude little jerk like Tony to play with. Especially when a great big exciting guy like Steve Cornish was around on Tony's payroll. That must have been fun."

Her pulse under my thumb took a sudden jump, then settled back to wait for the next shock. I had a sudden vicious desire to let my fingers crawl around her smooth white throat and squeeze until the pulse was quiet and still. I took my hands away from her, shoved them into my coat pocket where they'd be as safe as boy scouts on a route march.

She turned her head lazily and smiled up at me, a mocking glint in her eyes. "Do I ask what that's supposed to mean, Luke, or do I just take it for granted your mind never grew big enough to climb out of the gutter?"

It was going to be a nice party. I could see that. I went back to my drink and chewed on a piece of it. "We're all alone," I pointed out. "Nobody here unless you've got a corpse in the hall closet. You're right about my cop's mind. Things an ordinary guy wouldn't think about a girl with your looks keep cropping up in my mind. No matter how much I look at you all I can see is a beautiful doll with the heart of a vulture. All I get out of it is sick to my stomach. I sit here drinking your liquor and breathing your air and taking up your time, and all the while I keep wondering if they'll throw the book at you or let you off easy with, say, about twenty years."

She regarded me almost coyly over the rim of her glass. Her face was bland, innocent. She put ice down my spine.

"You think I give a damn about Steve Cornish?" I growled. "You think I've been spending my lonely evenings getting shot at, punched in the teeth, kicked in the belly and sapped over the head because I thought good old Stevie didn't rate the deal he got, even if it was off the bottom of the deck? Like hell, angel! But I do a job, and I do it for anyone who's got the dough or who does me a favor or who makes me feel like a human being, and once I get it started I can't stop it. Not for you, not for anyone. That's one reason why I'm going to put you away for that phone call you handed me tonight, and for Tony's corpse."

She made a brushing motion with one hand, set her glass down and leaned back and yawned in my face.

"You sound so noble, saying that, Luke. You simply slay me, darling."

I GOT up fast, shaking a little, and kicked the cocktail table out of the way and caught her wrists in my hands and pulled her up close against me.

"Listen," I said harshly into her ear, "you pulled that stuff on Tony for God knows how long before you shipped him out to be killed. You wound Stevie boy

with his laughing blue eyes and his big bright badge right around your little finger, and that must have been an easy trick to pull on a dame-happy guy like he was. You sent Tony out to get killed, and when the wrong guy got it you laughed your delicate little laugh and poured another drink and said, 'So long, lover,' and began figuring ways to wrap a coffin around Tony. How'd you do it, kitten? Pump a slug in his chest when he was holding you close? Follow him down to that alley where he was playing his first-night performance of the cheated husband wreaking vengeance?" She gasped and tried to use her knee on me and I tightened my grasp until my fingers hurt. She screamed sharply and went limp and the sudden pull of weight threw me off balance and we did a duet together across the parquet floor, like a pair of drunken ballroom dancers. Then I wrapped one hand around her throat and held her steady and put my good left hand into her face and she collapsed across me.

Sweat was running down my back. I pushed her to one side and clutched the edge of the bar, hauling myself to my feet. Then I poured a long hefty slug of the first thing that came to hand and took it down fast.

I sat down on the edge of the couch and propped my mouth open with a cigarette and blew smoke at her until she sat up and looked around her. She put one hand up to her jaw and let out a little bleat that was more fury than pain and stared at me unbelievably. She was still as beautiful as any madonna I had ever seen, but the name she called me had no place in any church.

"That's great," I snarled. "That puts us both on the same level. Now you'll talk to me or I'll break you up in small pieces and shove you through the letter box in your own front door.

"You sent me over to the Metropolitan Hotel last night. You knew Tony was there, lying on that lousy bed with his life bubbling out through that hole in his lungs. He was so crazy by that time he didn't know who the hell I was. All he knew was he'd been triple-crossed three ways to hell and back, and he took a swing at me and the effort finished him off. You were there, all right. You'd have to see

him dead. That's the way you tick. You came into the room and turned on the light and saw Tony lying on the bed with the gun I'd pulled from my pocket on the floor and you did the obvious thing. Point and pull, and the gun went off and Tony had another hole in him, one that didn't matter. Then you bolted the door to make it look good for the cops you were going to phone, and went out the window and down the fire escape, and I'll give you cell bars to coffee rings you'll have rust and muck from that fire escape on your clothes somewhere."

She bared her teeth, breathing hard. Her face was narrow and brittle now, and her eyes were deep pouches in her face.

"I didn't place you in it then. I knew the voice on the phone; I'd heard it before, but it stayed just out of reach until about an hour ago. Then I remembered."

She licked her lips and her eyes became small and cunning for just a moment before widening, then filling with tears. She brushed her hair away from her face, crawled over to me and caught my knees with her two hands. She laid her head on my lap and cried discreetly and without making too much fuss about it. She had to hold onto whatever beauty she still had left, just in case I fell over backward swallowing the act.

"Don't feed me that," I said roughly. "Don't give me the old Steve Cornish play. I wouldn't look well in a dark alley, sweetheart."

"I didn't kill him," she moaned, her voice muffled. "I loved him. Tony did it. That's why I killed him. I hated him so much. . . ." She hesitated. I didn't say anything. She went on, "Please, Luke, don't hurt me. Tony found out Steve was coming up here to see me. He planned it all. Steve was worried sick because he said someone on the force knew about him and had threatened to expose him unless he quit the force and left town. He said if Tony would play ball he could get this man down to some place where they could get rid of him quick, before he had a chance to make trouble."

"And Tony fell for that?"

She nodded her head, then lifted her gaze slowly until she was looking into my eyes. I grinned down at her coldly. "Step it up, honey. Maybe you can convince

me before a cop named Slack gets here. He doesn't convince easy. So hurry along."

She bit her lower lip. "I was afraid Tony was agreeing with Steve so he could get him off alone somewhere and kill him. That's the truth, Luke. Steve was going to tell this cop he had a hot lead—I don't know what about—but good enough to get him into the waterfront district. Then Tony would be waiting at the end of this alley and when the cop came in, Tony would kill him and they'd dump his body in the river."

"Horse flies," I said sarcastically. "Tony hasn't pulled a trigger on his own for ten years now. Let's try it again."

"I can prove it!" she bleated at me. She was scared now. The veneer was off and we weren't playing it by the rules.

"The cop was a big man. Tall, heavy, brutal-looking. Listen, here's what happened. I swear to God." She backed away from me, still on her hands and knees. "They went into the alley. Steve and the big man. There was shooting. Steve ran back a little way with his hands over his chest and then he fell down and didn't move. I saw the big man jump into a doorway and then I couldn't see what happened any more because they were too far away from the light. There was more shooting. Someone—I couldn't see very well—a boy, I think, ran out of the doorway and Tony shot at him. I don't know. It was all mixed up. I was afraid. Tony bent over the boy and did something with his gun—I think he left it there. Then he came up the alley and kicked Steve. . . and that was when I shot him." She took a deep breath and fumbled with the front of the dressing gown where a dragon had given away under the strain.

IT TIED in. I shuffled Slack into the pack and riffled the cards and he came out as the big cop, the one who ducked into the alley doorway. That would be Slack. Covering up for his partner, no matter how lousy and cheap he might be, sticking his neck and thirty years of police work on the block so Steve could be sent away with a nice label on him, lifting the gun from the file so no one could ever check the slugs and let Nell know what a cheap fourflusher she had married.

I had to admire the guy. For the first time in ten years I liked some part of him. I got up and walked over and poured another drink.

"Go on," I growled low in my throat. "Get your stuff packed. I'll give you fifteen minutes, Ava. That's all the time you have left. You're getting out of this town and you're never coming back. I'll book you reservations on the Pan-American. With the equipment you've got you'll go well in Rio. If you ever come back here I'll kill you with my own hands."

She tossed me one frightened glance and ran into her bedroom and I could hear the sounds of packing and scurrying. She had sicced the Spaniard on me and he was dead. She had touched Steve and Tony Rocco and they were gone. Little Perce was somewhere out in the night. And I was standing there waiting for her. I picked up the phone and dialed the airport and made reservations on a plane leaving for Florida in an hour's time.

I walked around the room twice, chewing a cigarette. She made up for all the girls I had known or ever would know. She made me feel dirty and scabrous and unclean. I put another drink on top of the feeling to quench it and the liquor turned sour and bitter in my stomach. I wiped one hand across my face wearily and thought about Slack and the dead boy whose parents were waiting for me to phone them, somewhere out across the city, and about Nell.

Ava came out of the bedroom with a light fiber suitcase in her hand and as I started toward her she wheeled quickly and I saw the smile and the gun and they were both equally deadly. She was going, and I was going with her, but our destinations weren't going to be the same. There was no chance for me then, nothing at all I could do.

She backed away from me until her back was against the front door and then she lifted the gun and aimed it deliberately at me until I thought I could see the gleaming nose of the copper-jacketed slug in the chamber.

"Thanks for everything, Luke," she said, still smiling. "And so long, sucker!"

I moved then in a long fast lunge toward her, toward the gun, because it

(Continued on page 127)

Heroics Are for Heroes

By
DON JAMES



The man's eyes narrowed
and he glanced at Sally.
"Get out!" he said.

SARTOZIAN gave me the fifteen thousand dollars in thousand-dollar bills. They were new and crisp and flat. They made my battered wallet look shabby as I put them in it.

He opened a bottom drawer of his desk and brought out a bottle of Scotch and two shot glasses. He asked me if I wanted a chaser and I shook my head. He didn't want one, either. The Scotch was smoky and mellow. I hadn't tasted any like it since before the war. I drank it slowly,

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*Why shouldn't I feel good,
with \$15,000 in my pockets,
a girl, a car and a business? But
what I really needed was a bullet-
proof skin and a good, safe hide-
out from Sartoian, who'd never
learned how to play for fun. . . .*

and sat back and looked at him. He was small, dark, quick. His black hair was oily and had a slight wave. His eyes were dark mahogany. His teeth were enameled chalk with a pencil line of a mustache over them. His skin was dusky. He might have been forty; he might have been fifty. He probably paid two hundred for his suits, and could afford all he wanted. He bought and changed his women the same way he did his suits. He was quite a boy.

"All right?" he asked. He was talking about the money.

"I nodded. "Square on the nose."

"I like to see a guy who needs it, win it."

It was a back-handed slap at my shabby wallet and my forty-dollar suit. I didn't mind and I didn't believe him. If his joint was going to lose fifteen grand, he'd rather see a guy with dough take it, because the guy would come back and they'd pick up the fifteen grand and plenty more eventually. With me, all they could hope to get would be the fifteen grand. The hundred bucks I had to start with didn't count.

He stood and put out his hand.

"Come again, Mr.—" with raised eyebrows he questioned me for the name I'd already given him.

"Karney. Hal Karney. Private detective."

The mahogany eyes became ebony and his smile went cold.

"Here on business?" he asked.

"No. I had a hundred bucks and needed a thousand. I took a long chance and it paid off."

"I see."

He took me to the door and we went out. The tables were busy. He had a nice place that drew class trade. They'd let me in because I'd been there with Mike Bowers and even gamblers have a great respect for Mike's newspaper column.

I still had two chips. I cashed them for small denominations at the window and gave the thin, frozen-faced man at the crap table twenty bucks. He smiled indifferently.

Sartozian was busy with customers at the bar when I went out.

It was one of those Chamber of Commerce California nights: balmy, moon-lit, filled with the smell of flowers, eucalyptus, and the night itself. I gave the doorman

a buck and walked to my coupe in the parking lot.

I unlocked it and got in quick and snapped the lock. I got out an automatic from the glove compartment and put it on the seat beside me. I sat down hard on the seat so that I could feel the wallet pressing me. Then I lit a cigarette, stepped on the starter, and drove out fast.

For a mile I watched the rear-view mirror. No car followed me and I turned on the radio and rolled down the window. I began to grin and after a while I got out the wallet and looked inside. The thousand-dollar bills still were there.

I laughed because I felt so damned good.

THE COURT apartment matched the forty-dollar suit. The roof was so thin the early morning sun already was heating through it.

Picking up the last suitcase, I looked the place over to see if I'd forgotten anything and went out to the car to store the bag with the others in the back compartment.

Sally Arno came out of her apartment wearing shorts and halter. She stared at me and looked suddenly frightened.

"Hal! You're moving!"

She was the only regret. They could have L.A. and Hollywood and high fog and hot days and rain in the winter. They could have them any time. It was swell for some people and it was poison for me. They could have all of it, but Sally was something else.

When a guy has managed to reach thirty-six without a wife, he hesitates to take one. By that time his habits are fairly well set and he's even beginning to shy away from any innovations in his life, unless they come from necessity. By that time he's learned that, in his case, marriage may not be a necessity.

The trouble was that I was afraid I was in love with her and half of my leaving was running away from her. The other half was common sense. If I wanted to eat, a change was in order.

I looked at her and thought how I had to stoop a bit to kiss her because I'm over six feet tall. I thought about the feel of her lips and the way the sun made copper of her hair and the times we'd had to-

gether. It made me more than a little sad.

"I was going to go in and say good-bye to you," I told her.

"Good-bye? That's awfully final, Hal."

Now fright was in her voice, too.

"I'm moving to San Francisco."

"Oh."

"Ronnie Tait is starting an agency there. He's given me a chance to buy in. A thousand bucks. We're starting in a small way. I got the money last night. I won fifteen grand at Tony Sartozian's place."

Her eyes got big and she just stood there staring at me. I kept reminding myself that I had never told her exactly how I was about her. It had always been the next-door-neighbor stuff—a few dates, a little necking, getting dinners together, lending each other five or ten in the bad spots. A girl working once in a while as an extra and a private dick with too few jobs. I'd better leave it that way.

She said, "Take me with you."

"What?"

"Take me with you." She must have seen what was in my eyes because she frowned. "Not *that*. I mean, take me with you in the business. I was a stenographer once. You and your friend will need one. I'll work for you. I'll get out of here, too."

"But how about the studios? I thought you wanted—"

She shook her head and her expression was almost defiant.

"I've quit kidding myself," she said. "It's not for me. I'll settle for a steady job and regular eating."

It was coming too fast for me.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not sure if Ronnie would—"

She smiled and took my hand and pulled me toward her apartment.

"Help me pack!" she said.

I helped her pack.

IT WAS almost noon before we got away. We left a trunkful of her stuff with the manager of the court. She'd send for it later.

The manager was lanky and lean and sixty. His wife was short and chunky. They had owned a wheat ranch in North Dakota and now they were settled down in California for the rest of their lives.

The old man was secretly sure we were going off to live in sin and his wife was equally sure that we were eloping and might even be already married. We let them guess and I gave them Ronnie's address in San Francisco for our mail.

Then I drove to the bank with the fifteen grand and made arrangements for an account in their San Francisco branch. I didn't want to carry that much dough.

It was a wonderful day. We stopped at Ventura for beer and sandwiches. We felt like two kids on the day school is out. She wore slacks and propped one foot against the battered dashboard and let wind stream through her hair. We laughed at everything and we sang. We sang the old favorites and the hit tunes and even *Onward Christian Soldiers*.

On the other side of Santa Barbara the grey sedan came up fast and then just stayed about a hundred yards behind us. The traffic was fairly heavy.

I stopped singing and Sally saw me frown.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"That sedan in back of us. They were coming fast until they got here. Plenty of chances to pass since, but they don't."

She glanced back. "There are three men in it. Two in the front and one in the back."

"I don't like it."

The chill of danger was spreading through me. I stepped on the gas. The grey sedan picked up speed. I slowed. It slowed.

The traffic was thinning. A mile ahead was a truck. I'd feel better if I got in front of it and stayed there. I hit the gas.

The grey sedan shot forward. It was new and fast and was beside us before I reached sixty. A man wearing a grey hat waved me to the shoulder of the road. He waved with a gun.

I made a quick reach for the glove compartment and the man shook his head. The sedan slowed. It would be like shooting ducks from where he sat. I forgot the glove compartment, slowed down and stopped. The sedan stopped behind us and two men got out. The driver stayed at the wheel.

The man with the grey hat smiled at me and leaned over the open window a

little so that the gun was inside, jammed into my ribs.

"Sartozian wants to see you," he said. He looked at Sally. "Who's the dame?"

"I don't know what this is about, but leave her out of it. She's my secretary."

He grinned. "They got all kinds of names for them now."

"Did you ever get smashed in the teeth?"

"Not by a guy at the other end of my persuader. Tell the girl to get out of the car and ride with us. Drive until you find a place to park the car well off the highway. We're all going back."

"You can go to hell."

His eyes narrowed and the smile was gone. He glanced at Sally. "Out," he said.

She got out of the car. I saw the tight line of fright around her mouth.

The second man was at her side of the car. He had a gun out, low so passing cars couldn't see it. He waited until Grey Hat took Sally's place beside me in the car, then he took her back to the sedan.

"Okay," Grey Hat said. "Find a parking place."

Sally and I went back to L.A. in the back seat of the sedan with two men watching us and no conversation. I held Sally's hand all the way. It was all the reassurance I could give her. I didn't have any myself.

IT WAS the same office where Sartozian had paid me the fifteen grand. He looked the same except that he wore slacks and a sport jacket. Sally and I sat on a leather couch across the room from him and Grey Hat leaned against the door.

"Where is Philler?" Sartozian asked.

I stared into his mahogany eyes. "I don't know Philler."

"Don't play dumb. You're in a tough spot."

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

Sartozian sighed as if he were bored and got up from behind the desk. He walked around it and sat on one corner. He took a cool, appreciative look at Sally and lit a cigarette.

"I want two things," he said. "The fifteen grand I paid you last night, and Philler."

He made me sore. I didn't know what he was talking about and I'd won the fifteen grand the hard way. I didn't like the way he looked at Sally, either.

"You're talking straight from the puzzle-book," I snapped. "You've been shoving us around and your boys have been free and easy with the guns. You're playing tough about something, and I don't know what. But if it's accent on rough stuff, maybe I can play too."

Sartozian threw a quick glance at Grey Hat by the door and I heard Grey Hat straighten up and saw the movement of his hand toward a heavy-looking pocket.

"Okay," Sartozian nodded. "We'll put it on the table. We caught up with Philler last night. One of the boys from Chicago was in and recognized him. We know all about him now."

"I don't know anything about him."

Sartozian ignored me. "He pulled it in Miami, New York and Chi before the boys got wise. He used another name back there. We've been losing heavy sugar at his table, but we couldn't spot anything. We run a straight house and depend upon percentages. Sometimes they run against a house man for a stretch. It's to be expected."

"If you're talking about the guy at the table where I won the fifteen grand, I never saw him before."

"We usually watch the customers for a switch in dice," Sartozian continued. "Not the dealer. When the boys from Chi spotted Philler last night, we sent a man in for a sudden relief and put new dice on the table before he could do anything about it. The ones we picked up had two as neatly loaded as we've ever seen. Philler saw the boys from Chi, too. When we looked for him, he was gone."

"Where do I belong in the picture?"

Sartozian smiled a little. "You could tell us, but I'll tell you, instead. You worked with Philler. He slipped you the loaded dice at the table. You make a quick take and split with him afterwards. You'd have got away, too, if your landlord hadn't mentioned Frisco and we got your car license number."

I took a deep breath and shook my head. "You're wrong. I don't know Philler. I won that dough with house craps."

"I want fifteen grand and Philler," he said.

"You want someone besides Philler. The guy who was supposed to have worked with him last night. Those craps I used may or may not have been loaded. Probably not. I was just hot. Philler was set up for a take with someone else. Not me."

"Are you going to produce?"

"I don't know Philler and you can go to hell for the dough. It's mine. All of it. Not half."

Sartozian looked at Grey Hat who opened the door and nodded and two men came in. They came over to me and grabbed my arms and jerked me to my feet. Grey Hat hit me in the mouth.

Sally screamed and threw herself at one of them, tearing at his hands. He slapped her and she fell back.

Sartozian said, "Cut it out. Leave the girl alone." He went over to her and held her with one arm. She struggled and then was quiet. Sartozian had a way of holding a woman.

"Talk," he said to me.

I relaxed a little. "This won't buy you anything," I said. Blood oozed over my lips. "I don't know Philler or his racket." Grey Hat pulled a fist back and I kicked up with a foot. He doubled and howled in pain. The two boys went to work.

HEROICS are for heroes. I'm just an ordinary guy. I have my limitations. When I came out of it I was on the floor and Sally was kneeling beside me talking in a pleading voice, and I felt as if I'd been run through a meat grinder. I'd had enough. Guys have been beaten to death. There are easier ways to die.

I opened my eyes and looked up at the tears on Sally's cheeks. The fact that she wept over me meant something new and special that had nothing to do with Sartozian or fifteen grand or a guy named Philler. I just wished I could get up and walk out with Sally and to hell with everything else right then.

"Hal . . . Hal . . ." she moaned. "Please, Hal—"

The words didn't mean anything. It was how she said them. The "please" was just to please be alive for her. It was in her voice, her eyes.

I tried to get up and couldn't. I wasn't that much of a hero. I was a beaten-up, hurt man with the fighting guts knocked out of me for the moment.

"Where's the dough?" Sartozian said.

I told him.

"All of it?"

I nodded.

"Lamming out on Philler?" He smiled. "Write out a check for it."

I nodded again. I was finished.

They helped me get up and watched me write the check.

"The bank will cash it, if you've got it there," he said. "I do business with them." He gave the check to Grey Hat. "If you hurry, you can make it," he said.

Grey Hat went out with the check. His two helpers sat on the leather couch. One of them sucked at a skinned knuckle.

"How about a drink?" I asked Sartozian.

He got drinks for all of us. He acted as if we'd just completed a pleasant business deal. Sally used a handkerchief on her eyes and hovered over me like a mother over a sick baby. I smiled for her and it ripped my lips with pain, but I saw courage return to her eyes.

"Now," Sartozian said, "where's Philler?"

I drank my whiskey and felt it take hold. Then I answered.

"I don't know."

"Okay. I'm going to let the boys work again until you talk."

His voice was deadly pleasant. I sat there, a battered mass of pain, with teeth loose in my mouth, with phlegm and blood clogging my throat and nose, with my tongue cut and bleeding and still smarting from the whiskey. I didn't have strength to get up alone.

Sally left me and faced Sartozian.

"If you let them touch him again, I'll kill you!" she said. Her voice was low and vibrant. She meant it.

Sartozian liked it. "I'll buy," he said, his voice suddenly husky. "A girl who hates like that can love like that. Fight *this*, baby."

He kissed her hard with her arms pinioned at her sides and her head bent back until the cords of her throat were vividly tense.

She struck at him when he released her.

He stepped out of the way and laughed quietly. I tried to get up and blood pounded in my ears and was fresh again in my mouth.

The two men were at my side. I was down in the chair, hard and solidly, so that it jarred pain through my body. Sally was back with me.

"It's all right, Hal," she said viciously. "I can wash my mouth."

Sartozian wiped her lipstick away with a linen handkerchief.

"Where's Philler?" he asked me.

"I tell you I don't know! I wasn't in it."

The man who had been sucking his knuckle tried to look bright.

"Boss, maybe the dame knows," he said.

Sartozian looked at him and then at Sally, and all the things I could see in the way he looked at her made me sick again.

"That's an idea," he said thoughtfully.

"Leave her out of this," I said.

"You can buy her out of this by producing Philler."

It was closing in on me every moment. Sartozian wanted Philler. He was going to get him in one way or the other, and as far as he was concerned, I was the "one way or the other."

If he wouldn't believe that I didn't know Philler, a lot of things were going to happen to Sally and me before he was convinced. Producing Philler was the only way out. I didn't know him, but there was a chance that I could find him. Finding people is part of a private dick's profession.

"Let her go and I'll find Philler for you," I told him.

"That's better," he said. "But we'll play it my way. Find Philler for me and then I'll let the girl leave. She won't mind staying here voluntarily because she wouldn't want anything to happen to you if you don't produce him."

Sally put her hand on my shoulder. "Don't, Hal. He wouldn't—"

"Let me handle it, Sally. It'll be all right."

"It's a deal?" Sartozian asked.

"It's a deal. Where does Philler live?"

The amused smile came again. "Still making with the innocence? You know where he lives. Thorton Hotel. But

there's no use going there. I've already sent a man. Philler wasn't there."

Standing up was a major job and it took a minute before my legs stopped trembling.

"It's a deal," I said again. "If anything happens to Sally before I come back, you'll have to kill me if you want to live."

"Just bring Philler. You were in the largest take—the fifteen grand—last night, but there's another fifty that you didn't take. I want Philler for that, and to even a score."

"I can leave now?"

"Any time."

It wasn't easy to leave Sally, and her lips on my battered mouth didn't help.

THE CLERK in the small hotel looked at my swollen lips and told me that Philler had checked out.

"Did he leave a forwarding address?"

The clerk just looked at me. He was middle-aged, short and too neatly groomed. I showed him my badge.

He said, "Private detective?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry I can't help you."

"Would five bucks help?"

He smiled a trifle then. "No. He didn't leave an address."

"Were you on duty when he left?"

"No. It was very early this morning."

"What taxi outfit do you usually call?"

He started to shake his head again and I got out a five-dollar bill and put it on the counter.

"What taxi company did you say?" I asked.

He told me. I thanked him and went out.

Ten dollars and two hours later I was talking to a sleepy taxi driver in the living room of his two-room apartment while his wife rattled dishes out of sight in their kitchen.

"Your dispatcher says you picked up a fare at the Thorton early this morning," I said. I described Philler. "Remember him?"

The taxi driver pulled a package of cigarettes from a shirt pocket and lit one. "Dispatcher send you here?" he asked.

To save time I got out ten dollars.

"That's different," he said. "Yeah. I remember him."

"Where did you take him?"

"A motel over near Alhambra." He gave me the name. I gave him the ten dollars.

Outside, I used a taxi from his company to take me to the motel. It was late afternoon and still hot. A young man wearing a ruptured duck sat behind a desk in the manager's office. He gave me a grin and put down a bottle of coke.

"Hot," he said.

I agreed with him and asked if Philler was registered there. The badge helped a little.

"Number seven," he nodded. "With Scanow."

"Scanow?"

"Man who's been here several weeks."

"Is Philler in?"

"I think so. The blinds are down. Scanow usually sleeps most of the day. Guess he has a night job."

It wouldn't have cost me anything, but I liked his smile five bucks' worth. He thanked me and offered to take me to number seven. I said I'd find it.

No one answered my knock. I tried the door. It was unlocked.

With the shades drawn it was dusky inside and it took a few seconds to see much. Then I saw plenty.

One man was flat on the floor with arms outstretched and a dark stain by his head. The other was on the bed, face up. The hole in his forehead was neatly centered. Someone had done an efficient job of murdering Philler.

Carefully I circled to a window and raised the blind. I went back and shut the door and took another look at the place. Suitcases had been opened and their contents dumped. Two wallets were open on the floor. The cabin had been thoroughly searched.

It was unpleasant, but I knelt so that I could see part of the face of the man on the floor. I didn't recognize Scanow.

I used a handkerchief in handling the wallets. One belonged to Scanow. There was nothing of interest in it. Philler's had little more. There was no money in either of them.

Scanow's clothing was in a small closet. The pockets were empty. Philler's clothes were dumped beside the suitcases. I drew a blank with them, too.

Very carefully I went over the place again. From what I could find, the cops were going to have an unsolved crime on their hands.

I lit a cigarette. The smoke was hot on my raw lips, but smoking helps me think, and there was plenty to think about.

If I told Sartozian that Philler was dead, he'd assume that I'd bumped him for the other fifty grand. I could fit Scanow into the picture, too. He was the stooge working with Philler. And a third person had known about the dough and bumped them both for it. It was too pat to be any other way.

Figuring those angles didn't help me any. Sartozian would want his fifty grand. If I didn't go back, Sally would be in a spot no girl should ever be in. If I did, I faced Sartozian and I also faced a possibility that the trail might lead the cops to his door and he'd tell what he thought was the truth to clear himself. That meant I'd be knocking at the door of the state's gas chamber.

I finished my cigarette and went out. In the office the young guy was working on another bottle of coke.

"Find him?" he grinned.

"Guess they're asleep." I went to the coke stand and helped myself. "Some information would earn you twenty bucks."

"I can use it."

"Did you ever see Philler here before?"

The kid nodded. "I didn't see him come in last night—I was off duty—but he's been here enough to see Scanow for me to know the name."

"Anyone else here to see Scanow?"

He finished his coke. "You're a cop?" he asked.

"You saw the badge."

"Well, maybe there's something else. I was working nights about two weeks ago. One morning Scanow came in about three o'clock. Right afterwards a guy came in and asked about Scanow?"

"Asked what?"

"His name, how long he'd been here, if Philler ever came to see him. He gave me five bucks for the answers."

"Can you describe him?"

"Not too well. Average size and average looks. About forty."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah. He looked at his watch and

made a phone call as if he was late. The phone's right here and I heard it. It was some dame. He said, 'This is Sam, baby. I'll be late.' She said something, and then he said, 'Okay. Call me at my apartment and I'll come after you when you're ready. Thorndyke 3-3377.' "

"Sure of the number?"

"I remember because they made a full house. Threes and sevens are my lucky numbers. The exchange is the same as my girl's."

"In Hollywood?"

He nodded.

"Anything else?"

"That's it," he said.

"You've earned your twenty bucks," I told him.

Getting the listing for the number took some telephoning and work with friends. The number was listed to Samuel Lacey. The name didn't mean anything to me. I called the number. No answer.

I used the phone again and called the cops. I told a desk sergeant where he could find two dead men and hung up. When I turned the kid was staring, startled, at me.

"Tell the cops that Hal Karney, a private cop, found them. I'll check with them later. I've got something I've got to do first."

He still stared at me with incredulous eyes as I walked out.

IT'S NOT difficult to get a gun if you know the ropes. I had one in my pocket when I walked into Sartozian's place.

The cocktail lounge was open, but no one looked at me as I went through. I knocked at Sartozian's door and Grey Hat opened it. Then the gun prodded him in the ribs and he backed up fast. I closed the door after us.

Sartozian was there and Sally was standing near a window. She looked happy to see me. Sartozian saw the gun and one hand crept toward a buzzer on his desk. I shook my head. The hand drew back.

"I found Philler," I said.

"Then why the gunplay?" Sartozian said quietly.

"Philler's dead. A guy named Scanow's dead with him."

A puzzled look came into Sartozian's eyes. His smile was thin.

"You must like the girl," he said. "Enough to come after her with a gun. You wants lots. The other fifty grand and the girl."

"I didn't get the other fifty grand, but I want the girl. Then I'm going to the cops with the whole setup. If I don't, you'll give them too many ideas."

"Probably," he said thinly. "I don't mind your bumping your pals, but the fifty grand belongs to me."



Sultry, newly widowed Paula Vale was obviously red-hot TNT—but Detective-Sergeant Hibbard wanted a chance to prove that . . .

DICKS DIE HARD

You'll want to read this thrill-a-minute detective-action novel by Frederick C. Davis.

It's in the May issue

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Plus exciting novelettes and shorts by Robert Martin, H. H. Stinson, Richard Dermody and others.

**DIME
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE**
COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

"I'll tell you one thing that I'm going to tell the cops. Maybe it will mean something to you."

"What?"

"I think there was a third man all right. I think he bumped them for the dough. He followed Scanow home. He was wise to the game they were playing here and put the heat on them for a split to keep him from tipping you. Then, when you got wise, he bumped them and got the dough."

"It's an angle," Sartozian admitted.

"Do you know a guy named Sam Lacey, Thorndyke 3-3377? He's the guy who followed Scanow home one night a couple of weeks ago."

Suddenly it was very quiet in the room. I sensed the way Sally shrank back against the wall. I was glad she was out of range if I had to shoot at either of the men.

Sartozian took a deep, sighing breath and sat very straight in his chair. Then he looked at Grey Hat.

"Sam," he said, "I've wondered about you lately. For one of my housemen on salary, you've been flashing big dough. I've been getting rumors."

It stopped me for a second. Grey Hat was Sam Lacey. The rest of it was true, too. I'd hit dead on center. It was all in Lacey's eyes and the tenseness that was through him.

I added it up. "So you bumped them when you thought Sartozian might find them and learn that you'd been high-pressuring them for a cut after you'd discovered their game," I said flatly. "You were afraid of Sartozian. You had to silence them. And you got their share of the take, too."

I shouldn't have looked at him. I forgot to watch Sartozian. He must have reached the buzzer because I heard Sally gasp, but I was afraid to take my eyes from Lacey.

That was one mistake. The second was to stand too close to the door. It opened behind me and caught me full in the back. I sprawled forward off balance.

"Down, Sally!" I screamed. "The floor!" I saw her go down.

Shots shattered the room with noise and abruptly it was quiet again. I caught

my balance and whirled with the gun ready.

I faced three men. I could shoot any one of them. That would leave two to get me. I lowered my gun and looked at Sartozian.

He was looking at the floor where Lacey nursed a wound in his right shoulder. His gun was a yard away from him. Sartozian had put his own gun on the desk. I hadn't seen him get it, but I knew that he had used it and that Lacey had tried to get him. The desk top was gouged with fresh bullet scars.

Sartozian looked up and saw the men facing me.

"Okay," he said softly. "He's all right." He motioned toward Lacey. "See how much dough he's carrying."

One of the men stooped over Lacey who tried to push away. The man clamped him to the floor by the bleeding shoulder and reached into Lacey's pockets. A couple of minutes later he dumped currency upon Sartozian's desk.

Sartozian counted the money. "Forty-seven grand," he said. "That's fair enough." He picked up a telephone and dialed. Into the mouthpiece he identified himself and said, "I've got a killer here for you. He's been shot, so you'll need an ambulance."

Sally was in the circle of my arm as we watched Sartozian cradle the telephone. He looked at us for a moment and smiled again.

"Sorry," he said. "I made a mistake about you."

Thoughtfully he counted out fifteen thousand dollars from the currency on the desk. He smiled again and added another five hundred and then took a one-dollar bill from his wallet and put it on top of the pile. He shuffled them into a neat stack and handed it all to me.

"Your fifteen grand, and five hundred for the trouble I've caused you," he said.

"And the one buck?" I asked.

"That kiss," he said. "The one she said she'd wash away. One buck should buy the mouthwash!"

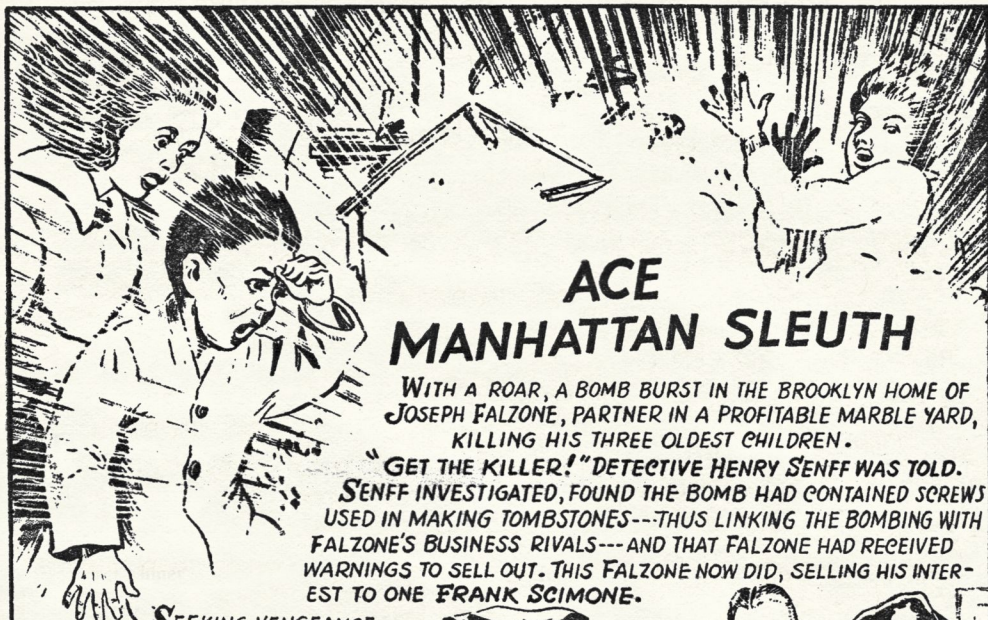
Sally still has that bottle of mouthwash around our San Francisco home. She has a red ribbon tied to it. Women keep the *darnedest* souvenirs!



DET. HENRY SENFF

Master MANHUNTERS

by Ben Nelson
& Stookie Allen



ACE MANHATTAN SLEUTH

WITH A ROAR, A BOMB BURST IN THE BROOKLYN HOME OF JOSEPH FALZONE, PARTNER IN A PROFITABLE MARBLE YARD, KILLING HIS THREE OLDEST CHILDREN.

"GET THE KILLER!" DETECTIVE HENRY SENFF WAS TOLD. SENFF INVESTIGATED, FOUND THE BOMB HAD CONTAINED SCREWS USED IN MAKING TOMBSTONES---THUS LINKING THE BOMBING WITH FALZONE'S BUSINESS RIVALS---AND THAT FALZONE HAD RECEIVED WARNINGS TO SELL OUT. THIS FALZONE NOW DID, SELLING HIS INTEREST TO ONE FRANK SCIMONE.

SEEKING VENGEANCE, FALZONE AGREED TO WORK WITH SENFF, AND UNDER THE DETECTIVE'S INSTRUCTIONS, BECAME FRIENDLY WITH SCIMONE. FALZONE TOLD SCIMONE THAT HE SUSPECTED A CHAUFFEUR OF HAVING THROWN THE BOMB, AND THE TWO PLOTTED TO KILL THE MAN. AT THIS POINT, SENFF ARRESTED BOTH, PUT THEM IN ADJOINING ROOMS, AND GAVE FALZONE A FAKE BEATING-UP.



WHEN SCIMONE WAS BROUGHT IN FALZONE PLEADED, "TELL THEM I DIDN'T DO IT! TELL THEM IT WAS THE CHAUFFEUR!" SCIMONE TOOK ONE LOOK AT THE 'BLOODY' FALZONE AND STAMMERED, "YEAH, IT WAS THE CHAUFFEUR."

SENFF BROUGHT IN THE CHAUFFEUR--AND HIS TWO-YEAR MANHUNT WAS OVER. THE ANGRY CHAUFFEUR TALKED, AND A JURY CONVICTED SCIMONE OF HAVING ENGINEERED THE PLOT TO FRIGHTEN FALZONE INTO SELLING OUT. HE GOT 20 YEARS, AND THE CHAUFFEUR WAS PAROLED.

My wife didn't let up on me a second that night. I argued with her, but she didn't care—she wanted that coat!

By
**ROBERT
ZACKS**



*Smiley Jackson, slick fur dealer,
could undercut every competitor,
and—without selling a coat off his
rack—make a fortune doing it!*

THE COAT OFF MY BACK

I WAS walking along Broadway with my pal Steve Gibbons, who is a plainclothes man on the pickpocket squad, and we were arguing about whose job was tougher—his, or mine as an investigator for the Better Business Bureau—when Steve stopped suddenly.

"Well, well," he said thoughtfully, "if it isn't Smiley Jackson."

I followed his gaze to a sleek chromium and glass storefront before which was lounging a debonnaire gentleman with a toothpick in his mouth and an expensive blue tweed suit on his back.

Steve ambled over and I stood nearby where I could listen without seeming to be with Steve.

"Well, Smiley," said Steve amiably, "not only are you out of jail, but you are prosperous. How are those nimble fingers these days?"

Smiley took the toothpick out of his mouth and his smile got a little stiff.

"The joints of my fingers are stiff from lack of exercise, you'll be pleased to know," he answered smoothly. "I'm a legitimate businessman now. I own this store."

Steve looked at the new store in astonishment. It was an expensive fur shop with beautiful dummies in the window display.

"What's the graft this time," Steve growled suspiciously. "Stolen furs? A fence?"

"I can show you invoices," said Smiley coldly. "I can prove purchases enough to cover stock. Now go away and quit bothering me before I call a cop."

Steve's lips twitched. But he nodded calmly and walked away without a word. I joined him next block, out of Smiley's sight.

"This is your department," Steve said to me. "Don't tell me that guy's turned honest. Where did he get enough money for a fur business?"

"It could be," I said. "There's a nice profit in furs. He could start small and build up. He could open on credit."

"Something funny about it," muttered Steve. "Still, his ownership might be legitimate. After all, I haven't seen him in six years. Plenty could have happened."

"Of course he could be lying," I said.

"Do me a favor," said Steve. "You Better Business Bureau guys know all the business angles. Check that guy will you?"

"Well," I said, "we don't usually look into anything without a complaint from the public. We're only an advisory agency to keep the merchandising industry clear of dirty business tactics."

"I know that," said Steve. "But this

is your type problem. At least look the guy over. If I look him over he'll start hollering about persecution and not letting an ex-crook go straight."

"Tell you what I'll do," I said. "My wife loves to try on fur coats. I'll take her down tonight."

"Okay," said Steve. "I'm sure there's an angle to that guy."

THAT EVENING I took my wife down to try on the fur coats. First we stared at the coats in the windows. My wife looked impressed.

"My," she said, "they're lovely."

First thing we knew, this fellow Smiley was at our elbows talking fast and smoothly. In no time at all he had us in the store, wrapping my wife in furs. She looked marvelous in them.

"This mink is wonderful," said my wife, stroking it longingly.

"That's not mink," said Smiley, grinning broadly. "That's muskrat dyed to look like mink. A very fine job. We specialize in fine imitations. Why I could sell most customers that for mink and they'd never know the difference."

"Good heavens!" said my wife. "I should say so! You must charge plenty for such a fine imitation."

"That we do," admitted Smiley, cheerfully. "Six hundred, including tax."

My wife gasped. "But that's not much at all considering what a fine job it is."

"What do you mean, not much?" I growled, getting alarmed. "That's a lot of dollars."

"Darling," pleaded my wife, and I got a chill up my spine. "I want this coat."

"You've got a coat," I growled, cursing Steve and his ideas.

"An old, raggy, worn-out horrible skunk," she wailed, and it sounded like she was calling me one. "You owe me a Christmas gift, anyway. Please, darling."

I swallowed hard. "I haven't got the money on me now. Suppose we think about it and maybe come back later."

"But, darling," wailed my wife. "If you were only a woman you'd know what a buy this is; it's a real bargain. . . ."

"You could put a deposit on it," said Smiley, cautiously. He didn't want to outrage the husband with too much aggres-

siveness but he wanted to clinch the sale.

"If she hasn't cooled off by tomorrow," I told him, looking sullenly at my wife. "We'll come in and buy it."

My wife kissed me enthusiastically and we went out with Smiley grinning at our backs. He knew and I knew and my wife knew that we'd be back. I was pretty sore. I don't mind getting my wife a coat, but I like to enjoy doing it. I like it to be my generous idea. I didn't like me going in to get the goods on a guy and ending up out six hundred dollars.

My wife didn't let up on me a second. I argued with her, pointed out the fellow's record. She didn't care—she wanted that coat.

We went back the next night and I had the money on me. When we got into the store, Smiley was in the back and a girl told us to wait. She seemed to be a stock clerk or something. While I glumly waited, my wife looked around. I heard her gasp. I went over to where she was examining a leopard coat. It had a sign on it: \$500—Imitation Leopard.

"What's the matter?" I said, hoping she wanted the leopard, it being a hundred dollars cheaper.

My wife took another long look at the coat. "This," she said in a firm tone, "is not imitation. It's the real thing."

I grunted. "The guy that imitated that leopard would be glad to hear you say that."

"That," snapped my wife, "is real leopard. I may not be a furrier, but that's real leopard."

At first I thought they might be stolen furs. Then I realized it was ridiculous; there'd be no reason to sell them as imitations. Then I looked up at the electric fixtures to see if there was the special lighting crooks often use to sell stuff with poor dye jobs or off-color merchandise. There was nothing wrong with the lighting. Then I got an idea.

SMILEY came out and greeted us smilingly. I sourly paid him the six hundred and got a receipt. Then Smiley said, "Well, put on the coat and we'll measure you for alterations."

"No alterations necessary," I said calmly. "The coat fits like a glove."

"Oh, no," said my wife. "The sleeves. . . ." She stopped as she caught my look. "Yes," she said. "Like a glove."

A faint frown crossed Smiley's face. He shrugged and said, "Well, that's up to you. I'll pack it for you." He reached for the coat. I stopped him.

"She'll wear it out," I said. "Now. Pack the cloth coat if you like."

Smiley's face twitched. He stared at me. "I really think it needs alterations," he said excitedly. "I . . ." Then he stopped. He saw I had figured out the game. When the coat came back from alterations or when he took it in back and packed it, he substituted the same model, same size, but a poor, damaged imitation. My wife was right. The coats were genuine, not imitations. And the price paid was a bargain for an honest-to-goodness fur coat and robbery for the imitation you'd end up with. And you couldn't prove a thing. He told you you were buying an imitation and you ended up with an imitation.

"The sale is canceled," said Smiley, with an entirely different kind of smile on his face, a cornered-rat smile-snarl. "I'll give you your money back."

I waved the receipt at him. "The sale is made. Our minds have met," I said cheerfully, using the legal jargon. "I have given consideration and you have accepted it."

"I'll call a cop," snapped Smiley.

"Don't bother," I said. "I'll call one for you. Steve Gibbons." Smiley paled. "Maybe," I mused, "Steve will be another customer. His wife might like that nice imitation leopard in the corner."

"Okay," said Smiley, no longer smiling. "You've got your coat. Beat it."

We went out with a nice mink coat at six hundred dollars and I felt very good. I knew Smiley would be transferring operations to another city and my report would follow him to every Better Business Bureau to keep him moving. And as for my wife. . . .

"Oh, darling, you're so smart," she said.

"I'm going to call Steve," I said. But it took a little while before I could take my eyes off her. She sure looked good.

ODDITIES IN CRIME

By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON



← Detroit's Federal Judge Frank A. Picard came across with one of the most unusual sentences dished out in a court of law. Before him, accused of embezzling, came Arthur Alfred Craig, head of the analysis department of the Commonwealth Bank and a trusted employee for 15 years. Craig confessed, said he was paid only \$250 a month salary, frequently worked overtime.

Judge Picard suspended sentence. "If they expect you to wear a white shirt to work, they should pay a white-shirt salary," he told Craig.

In Spalding County, Georgia, a gang of moonshiners trained a pet crow to watch out for "revenooers." After several attempted raids had failed, authorities set themselves to watch the crow. When the bird finally slept after putting in a lot of extra duty, they closed in—successfully. Blackie, the crow, was taken into protective custody. Some friends of the gang, officials thought, might take a sudden yen for eating crow!



← Rumanian police uncovered a brand new angle to the marriage-for-money racket with the arrest of one Victor Bucur. A likable young man, a good mixer, Bucur piled up an impressive list of weddings under several aliases. He made an excellent impression on all his brides, never seeming to care whether they had a nest egg or not. Unnoticed, of course, was the one condition he made—that they should all have friends who were well-heeled. He would then arrange a gay wedding, invite a lot of people—rob everybody in sight and vanish. His trail stretched the length and breadth of the land.

Suicide is murder, though they'll have a time convicting you in a mortal court, and if you've got a touchy conscience, you should lay off it. Also, if you've got a touchy conscience, you should fill out your income tax report correctly. Fail in one and see what happens. Jules Bourcier of Troisvilles, France, sat down to figure out his income for purposes of taxation. He put in several weeks at it, decided it was no use—and hanged himself!





CHAPTER ONE

A Guest in the House

WHEN ANITA heard me unlock the door, she came out to the foyer. I took her in my arms.

"Not here, darling," she whispered, nodding toward the living room. "Look."

*Novelette of Terror
and Suspense*

SILENT AS A SHIV

By BRUNO FISCHER



Anita whimpered as Hale drew the knife out of his belt.

Anita was the only one who could testify against big-shot gangster Al Dime. . . . Which made it simple arithmetic for that tough character:

One witness + one bullet = zero testimony!

Through the arched doorway I saw a pair of legs extending indolently from my favorite armchair. The radio blared louder than either of us ever turned it on.

"Hell with the flatfoot," I said. My mouth reached for hers.

Anita slipped out of my embrace. "The roast is in the oven," she said and hurried into the kitchen.

As I hung up my coat, I was pretty much fed up with the cop who had moved into our little three-room apartment with us.

Not that George Schroeder wasn't a pretty good guy. He was soft-spoken and witty and intelligent for a cop. Pleasant company for a couple of hours or even a day, but I wanted again to be able to kiss my wife without locking ourselves into our bedroom, or spend an evening in our living room without him forming a third, or go anywhere without his company.

There was something else. I hadn't thought much about it until last night at a poker game. The fellows had kidded me about the detective in my house.

"That's the way it goes," Bert McKay had said with a mock sigh. "The husband is slaving all day in his office, while the wife is kept company by a handsome detective. Don't you envy him, Joel?"

"You're not funny," I had said.

The fellows had laughed. They had discussed in detail how they'd like to trade jobs with a detective whose sole job was to stick as closely as possible to a pretty woman. I had tried to grin during the kidding, but I'd been bothered.

I was bothered now as I turned from the closet. It was a small thing, so much smaller than the reason for the detective being here, but there it was. That cop who lived with us was too handsome. I lit a cigarette and went into the living room.

The man lounging in the armchair wasn't George Schroeder. He wasn't anybody I'd ever seen before.

He was big all over, especially in the shoulders and the midriff, and he had a florid, heavily jowled face. A black cigar was stuck between fleshy lips. Schroeder had looked as if he could be anything, but this lad might as well have worn a sign announcing he was a cop.

He grinned at me without getting to his

feet. "Guess you're Gibbons, the husband. I'm Charlie Hale, out of the D.A.'s office."

"What happened to Schroeder?" I asked.

"He was pulled off this afternoon. After all, a nursemaid job like this gets a guy down. I got here not more than five minutes before you did."

In that time he had made himself right at home. He had taken possession of the only comfortable chair in the apartment and had turned on the radio to a kid's bang-bang program. At the moment there was a lot of yelping and shooting coming over the air.

"Why would a detective listen to those programs?" I said. "Doesn't he get enough of it on his job?"

Charlie Hale grinned some more. "The fact is, Mr. Gibbons, those programs are about all the excitement we get."

I HADN'T anything else to say to him, so I went into the kitchen. Anita was bending over the oven and basting a roast. She was wearing a cute white apron over a blue dress, and she looked so trim and sweet that my fingers tingled. But these days I hadn't much chance to neck with my wife.

She looked up at me. "How do you like our new detective?"

"Do I have to like him?" I said.

"Of course he's not as nice as George," she said, "but then even George got on our nerves."

She called Schroeder by his first name. So what? I did too. After all, for two weeks he'd been practically one of the family. Maybe I'd been somewhat jealous of him, but I wasn't happy about him being replaced by that ape in the living room.

I watched her pour gravy over the roast. "Do we have to feed the cops roast beef?" I said bitterly. "Nothing but the best for them."

Anita pushed the roast back into the oven and straightened up. She was suddenly pale.

"Do you think I like it any better than you do?" she said. "You at least are at the office all day, but I can't go out for a loaf of bread or visit a friend without a detective tagging along like a dog. Every minute I'm in the house I've got to be

careful of what I'm wearing and remember to close doors. And on top of that, I'm always frightened. Sometimes I can hardly keep from screaming."

"I'm sorry, baby," I said.

She pressed fists against her cheeks. "This afternoon I couldn't stand it any more. I went to District Attorney Rosenberg and demanded that he take George Schroeder out of the house."

I said, "Anita, I'm not sure—"

"No, you're not sure!" she cut me off shrilly. "You go around making nasty cracks about a detective living with us, but you're not sure that he ought to go. Well, this afternoon I was sure. I told the district attorney that I want a home of my own again. He said he knew how I felt, but it was only ten days more till the trial. I said I couldn't stand it ten minutes more. He said he was sorry, but he couldn't afford to lose his key witness. He didn't care about me as a human being, only as a witness. I said I'd make life miserable for any detective who stayed in the house, even one as nice as George Schroeder."

"You know, he could keep you in jail as a material witness, the way he wanted to at first."

Her eyes blazed. "Would you want me in jail?"

"Don't be silly, baby. But I want you safe."

"Yes," she said more quietly. "I realized later I'd been foolish. After I argued with Mr. Rosenberg a long time, he looked at me rather sadly and said he'd take George Schroeder off. Going home alone, I became terribly frightened, and when I was in the apartment I was panicky. It wasn't so pleasant having the privacy again, because privacy meant that there was nobody to protect me. I almost died when a few minutes ago the bell rang and I opened the door and saw a strange man. Then I could have kissed him when he told me that Mr. Rosenberg had changed his mind and that he was a detective and had come to take George Schroeder's place."

I put an arm about her. "You poor kid."

For a moment she sagged against me; then she lifted her head in a smile that struggled to be brave. "Set the table, darling. I'm practically ready to serve."

I set the dinette table.

OUR NEW boarder wasn't the kind who talked during dinner. He was too busy eating. A two-rib roast had always lasted us two days, but now Charlie Hale gobbled up slices almost as fast as I could carve them. I was lucky to get any for myself.

He had removed his jacket to give his arms more freedom to shovel the food into his mouth. The strap of his shoulderholster was tight across his deep chest, and the stock of the gun under his armpit looked like a small cannon.

"Isn't your gun a .45?" I asked him.

He answered through a mouthful of potatoes. "It sure is."

"Schroeder carried a .38 automatic," I said. "It was my impression that all city detectives are issued identical guns."

He stopped moving his jaws for a long moment. "I like to carry heavy iron," he said. "When they're hit with this gun, they stay hit."

Anita served her incomparable apple pie and he dug in heartily.

"Fact is," he said, "there's a chance I'll need all the fire power I can carry. Al Dime has some pretty tough babies, and the way I hear it he's desperate."

Anita winced.

I said, "We know all about it, so let's talk about something else."

"Sure," Hale agreed. "I know how the little woman feels. But the thing is, I don't know all about it. I'd been on another assignment when late this afternoon the D. A. handed me this nursemaid job. Of course, I read something in the papers."

"That's all there is," I said.

"Everybody knows who Al Dime is," he went on placidly as he worked on his second slice of pie. "He's a big operator of half a dozen rackets in town. We been trying to get him for years, but he was too smart. Then a couple of weeks ago he pulled a boner. Instead of sending one of his gorillas to do a job for him, he did it himself."

"The way I understand it," I said, "it was a personal matter. Mike Wilcox was a big shot in Al Dime's organization, and he was plotting to get rid of Dime and take over."

Hale nodded. "Guess even a rat like Dime has his pride. That was something he had to do himself, between him and Wilcox. So he waited in front of Wilcox's apartment house on Perry Lane, and when Wilcox came out he filled him with lead. How come, Mrs. Gibbons, you were on that street at one o'clock in the morning?"

So there we were talking about it again. We always were. Even though Anita didn't like to remember, people can't keep themselves from telling about the most exciting things that happened to them.

She said, "I was visiting my sister who lives in the same apartment house as Wilcox. I was coming out of the building when I saw him shot. The murderer was in the shadows at the side of the building. He was moving away, not hurrying, just walking briskly to the corner. For a moment I stood there petrified, then I screamed. He turned his head. I saw his face distinctly."

"That's a mighty dark street," Hale pointed out.

"He was directly under the one street lamp on the block when he turned," Anita said. "I'll never forget that face. The shaggy eyebrows, the nose somewhat twisted to the right, the sleek mustache over the thin mouth, the scar on his chin. When he saw me stare at him, he raised his gun and pointed it at me." She shuddered, remembering. "Nothing happened. The police told me the next day that he had emptied his gun into Wilcox. Otherwise—"

Hale nodded heavily. "What does an extra killing mean to a mug like Al Dime? And next day you picked him out of the line-up. You're a brave little woman, Mrs. Gibbons. Most people would just keep their mouths shut."

"Sometimes I wish she had," I said.

"Sure, I know how you feel," he told me sympathetically. "Your missus is the one witness that pins the killing on Al Dime. She'll send him to the electric chair, but he has boys on the outside who'll do a job for him to save him." He grinned at Anita. "With you dead, the D. A. will have no case."

Anita stared down into her coffee cup.

"Drop it," I snapped. "There are other things to talk about, if we have to talk."

"Relax." Hale tapped his gun. "I'm going to have an awful lot to say about anybody coming near you, Mrs. Gibbons."

He helped himself to a third slice of pie, then stood up and patted his well-filled stomach. "Where's your phone, in the foyer? I have to report to headquarters."

"Schroeder never did," I said. "They know you're here."

"Sure, but I have to tell them everything was okay when I got here."

"Shouldn't you have done that as soon as you arrived?"

"It slipped my mind," he said negligently and wandered out of the room.

CHAPTER TWO

The Call

ANITA and I washed the dishes. When Schroeder was here, he used to help, but after Hale finished the phone call he sprawled himself out in the living room and listened to the radio.

"Do you know he dyes his hair?" Anita said as she stacked a couple of dishes in the drainer.

"Who does?"

"That detective—Hale. I noticed some blond hair at the nape of his neck."

I gathered up a handful of silverware to dry. "Probably has grey hair."

"He's rather young to have grey hair. No more than thirty, I should judge. And that hair at the back of his neck is blond, actually straw-colored."

"A man has as much right to dye his hair as a woman."

"But men seldom do," she persisted, "and he doesn't look like a man who takes pride in his appearance."

"Well, it's his business," I said. "How about a movie tonight? I don't look forward to spending an evening at home with that flatfoot."

Anita said that she'd been anxious to see the picture at the Palace.

When we told Hale where we were going, he wasn't enthusiastic. "I saw that picture last night. Pretty crummy."

I said testily, "You don't have to enjoy it. This is supposed to be your job."

"Sure," he agreed. "But I'm telling you it's a crummy picture. You won't

like it. Besides, it's dangerous for your missus to be walking in the street. Maybe Al Dime's boys will go by in a car and spray her with tommy-gun slugs."

"What are you here for if not to see that they don't?"

He tossed me his ugly-faced grin. "Sure, I'll do the best I can, but I figured I ought to warn you."

Just then the phone rang. I went out to the foyer to answer it.

"Joel Gibbons?" a strange voice said. "This is Henry Andrew of Andrew Lighting Equipment. You may have heard of my store."

"On Third Avenue, isn't it?" I said. "I pass your place often, but I've never been inside."

"You've been highly recommended to me as an accountant. I'm in the market for one. I require several days a month."

"I've a full-time job, Mr. Andrew."

"I'm aware of that. But I've heard that you take small accounts on your own, evenings and weekends. I'm in my store now, going over my books. They're in terrible shape. Are you free this evening to give me a hand and discuss a permanent arrangement?"

I hesitated. I could use the money, and this account would mean a nice piece of change every month. I told him I'd be in his store in half an hour.

Hale was listening to still another radio mystery program. I'd never known there were so many on the air. He looked up when I passed through the living room.

"You'll be glad to hear the movie is off," I told him. "I have to go out."

"With the missus?"

"No. She'll stay home."

"Swell. Means I can take it easy." Yawning, he slouched lower in the chair.

Anita was in the bedroom, changing her dress. I told her about the phone call from Henry Andrew.

She frowned into the dresser mirror. "But Bert McKay has the Andrew account."

Bert McKay was one of my close friends, a free-lance accountant.

"You sure?" I said.

"I'm positive. Only the other day Flossie told me that she gets all her electrical equipment wholesale because Bert has that account. I suppose they don't care for

Bert. But still, it does seem strange."

I didn't like it. "I can't take an account away from Bert. I better give him a ring."

I went out to the foyer and dialed Bert McKay's number. He was surprised by what I told him. He was giving Andrew three days a month, and as far as he knew he was still working for him.

By that time Anita had joined me in the foyer. She was staring at me as I hung up.

"What's the matter, darling?"

"Probably nothing," I muttered. But I was feeling jumpy inside as I picked up the telephone directory.

I called Andrew Lighting Equipment. There was no answer, although he had told me he was in his store. I looked in the directory again and called Andrew's home number. Henry Andrew was in. He said that he had never heard of me and was perfectly satisfied with Herbert McKay, his present accountant.

"I can't understand it," Anita said as I hung up.

I looked at my hand still closed over the handset. It was shaking a little.

"Anything wrong, Mrs. Gibbons?" Hale asked. His hulking form filled the living room doorway.

I told him about it. I said, "That was a stunt to get me out of the house."

Anita uttered a choked sound.

"What for?" Hale said cheerfully. "I'd be here anyway with Mrs. Gibbons. Now if it was to get her out of the house by herself, that would make sense. Or get me out of the house. But you're out of the house all day anyway. Besides, nobody's got anything against you."

There was no getting around his logic.

Anita brightened up considerably. "Somebody must have played a joke on you, darling. I'm glad you can take me to the movies after all."

Hale sighed. He returned to the living room to get in as much as possible of the radio program before we dragged him out.

IT WAS only three blocks along a lively street to the Palace Theater, but these days I was always jittery when I was out of the apartment with Anita. Every doorway could contain a lurking killer; every passing car could have a gun barrel stick-

ing through an open window; every strange man and woman who came near her could have a concealed knife.

But Anita, walking between Hale and me, seemed more or less at ease. She was more reasonable than I. Schroeder had convinced her that it was extremely difficult to kill anybody under police protection.

"What about presidents and other political big-shots who were assassinated in spite of heavy guard?" I had argued.

Schroeder had replied, "By fanatics who knew they would almost certainly be caught, but were willing to give their lives in order to kill somebody. We're not dealing with fanatics. Al Dime can order a killing from jail, but not if the killer has hardly a chance to get away with it. Do you think I'd let her leave the apartment if I thought there was any danger? There's none, as long as a guard is always close."

Even so, I didn't take a real breath until we were in the theater. And then I kept looking around to see if the people behind us appeared particularly menacing. As for Charlie Hale, he dozed through most of the picture. We had to wake him when we were ready to leave.

It was close to midnight and the street was more or less empty. When we were back in the apartment, I felt as if we had successfully come through an ordeal. It was always like that since the night Wilcox was murdered. I wasn't proud of myself because my nerves were so much worse than my wife's.

Anita made up the studio couch in the living room for Hale. As she was spreading out the sheet, she suddenly straightened up and frowned at him.

"I don't remember you bringing a bag," she said. "You'll certainly need a lot of things if you have to stay for a while."

Hale was applying a match to the stub of his cigar. He flicked the match out before replying. "I didn't have time to go home and pack a bag. I'll get it tomorrow."

"I'd let you have a pair of my pajamas," I said, "but you'd never fit in them."

"I've slept in my underwear before." Hale yawned expansively and removed his jacket. Then he started to untie his shoes.

Anita and I went into our bedroom.

"I don't like him," she said when at last we had a measure of privacy. She was pulling her dress over her head and spoke through it.

"He wasn't sent here to be a companion," I said.

"Well, George Schroeder was charming." Dressing took her an eternity, but now she was out of her clothes while I was still in my shirt. "I suppose Mr. Rosenberg got the impression I was complaining about George as a person. That's why he sent another detective."

I watched her hunt in a drawer for a nightgown. She was very lovely. And she was sorry that Schroeder was gone. Nuts!

"Damn it!" I said. "Why did you have to see Dime shoot Wilcox?"

That wasn't a question that could be answered. Anita got into bed and stared up at the ceiling while I climbed into my pajamas.

"He makes me feel uneasy," she said reflectively. "I don't know why. Maybe I was spoiled by as nice a detective as George."

George again! Angrily I told myself to cut out getting ideas, but I couldn't seem to help it.

"I would feel a lot uneasier if Hale hadn't gone with us to the movies," I said. "Or if he and his gun weren't in the apartment this minute."

"Of course," she agreed.

I put out the light and got into bed.

I had never been more wide awake. I lay beside Anita and thought of Hale's oversized gun and his dyed hair and the phone call which was supposed to have been from Andrew but wasn't.

Suddenly I said, "Did Hale show you his credentials?"

"His what?" Anita muttered drowsily. "His credentials proving he's a detective. His badge and papers."

"He showed me a badge. Why ask?" She sounded more asleep than awake.

"Just curious," I said.

She snuggled up to me and in another moment was asleep.

I lay thinking that anybody could get hold of a badge, and that it wouldn't matter what kind of a badge if it was flashed at her. And something else occurred to

me. Hale had made a phone call shortly before I received that call which might have been intended to get me out of the apartment. He was reporting to headquarters, Hale had said, that he had found everything all right on his arrival. But he hadn't made that call until well over an hour after he had got here.

What if he wasn't a detective?

Sweat ran under my pajamas. My breathing was loud and harsh in my ears.

There was an easy way to make sure. Phone the police and ask them if they had sent a detective named Charlie Hale who looked like the man in the living room.

I put on the bedside lamp and slipped out of bed. Softly, I turned the door-knob. Softly, I opened door.

Charlie Hale stood in the foyer.

CHAPTER THREE

The Broken Alarm

HE WAS still fully dressed except for his jacket and his shoes. The gun under his armpit looked enormous. The ragged stub of his dead cigar was clamped between fleshy lips. He grinned.

"Anything wrong, Mr. Gibbons?"

"No," I said. "Of course not."

In my pajamas I crossed the foyer to the bathroom. I closed and locked the door, and stood against it as if I'd just run a great distance.

It didn't mean anything, I told myself. His job was to be alert to any sound.

And then I thought of Anita alone in the bedroom and Hale out there and I having myself locked in here. I tore open the door.

Hale was no longer in the foyer, but he was sitting on a chair just inside the living room, reading a newspaper by the light of a standing lamp. From there he could see everything in the foyer, including the phone. He raised his head.

"Aren't you going to bed?" I said because I felt I had to say something.

"Not sleepy yet. I had a nap during that crummy picture. Good-night, Mr. Gibbons."

It sounded reasonable. But it didn't have to be true.

"Good-night," I said.

I locked the bedroom door. Then I

stood there waiting, listening. Behind me I heard Anita's regular breathing.

After a long while something creaked on the other side of the door. Like a heavy body rising from a chair. Then there was a click. Like a light being snapped off. Then silence.

I forced myself to wait ten minutes by the clock on the dresser before I slowly opened the door. I could see directly across the foyer into the living room. It was completely dark.

A good sign. It meant that he was all right if he went to sleep. But I had to make sure. There was too much at stake not to be positive. I would dial the operator so there would be only one click and in a whisper ask for the police.

Five barefooted steps took me across to the phone. When I raised the handset to my ear, there was no hum. I dialed the operator and there was still nothing. The phone was dead.

The only light came from the open bedroom door, but it was enough to show me the phone cord. I followed it all the way to the box. The cord hadn't been pulled out or cut.

Maybe the phone was merely out of order. But that would be too great a coincidence. More likely he had killed the mechanism in the box.

I stood there shaking violently with the handset still in my hand.

The door out of the apartment was only a few feet away. I could slip out and ask one of my neighbors to let me use their phone, or better yet come back with me so that I could get Anita out of here. But that would take time. If Hale wasn't a detective, he would be awake, and he would hear me leave. And then he would be alone with Anita, which would be what he wanted.

Wait a minute. I was going at this all wrong. The important thing was not for me to get out of the apartment, but for Anita.

I would slip back into the bedroom and tell Anita and we would both dress silently. Then what? He'd certainly be watching the foyer. Most likely he was watching me this minute from the dark living room. All we would accomplish would be to force him to act quickly.

If I had a weapon, I might be able to

hold him off—or at least keep him occupied long enough for Anita to get through the door and out into the hall.

A weapon like the carving knife in the kitchen.

One of the reasons we liked this apartment was that all the rooms were off the foyer. The advantage of that now was that I could go into the kitchen without passing through the living room. I turned to the closed kitchen door.

Light hit me when I opened it. And there in the kitchen was Charlie Hale.

He was moving away from me on stocking feet. But he heard the door open and he whirled. The gun came out of his holster so quickly that it seemed to jump into his hand.

I didn't stir.

"Sorry, Mr. Gibbons," he said. "A guard's got to move first and think after." He grinned down at his gun, but he didn't put it up. He held it casually along his thigh.

The knife rack was beside the stove. I could see the handle of smaller knives protruding from it, but not the black bone handle of the carving knife.

He turned his head to follow the direction of my eyes. I looked away.

"I came to get a drink of water," I said.

"Can't sleep, eh?"

"I'm restless tonight."

"Funny thing," he said. "So am I."

He slid his gun into the holster then, but that didn't mean anything. He could get it out in a flash.

There wasn't anything for me to do but go to the sink and run water into a glass. As I stood there drinking, I told myself that the knife wasn't in the rack because it was in a drawer. Then I remembered that I had carved the roast beef with it and that when I dried the cutlery I had stuck it into the rack.

I knew why he had come into the kitchen.

I TOOK only a few sips of water. My throat was too constricted. There wasn't anything I could do then and there, and I couldn't see what I could do later. Even if he weren't so much bigger and stronger than I, he had a gun and probably the carving knife.

I put down the glass. "Well, good-night," I said.

"Good-night, Mr. Gibbons."

He opened the door for me. Very polite of him, but I was sure that the real reason was that he could stand there and watch me return to my room.

Back in the bedroom, I locked the door and stood listening through the panel. I heard nothing but my own heart thumping.

It was ridiculous, being trapped in a building containing fifty families. But what could I do? Start screaming? It would take time for somebody to hear me because almost everybody would be asleep at that hour. It would take time to locate where the screams came from and then break into the apartment. Long before that he would have silenced me forever, and Anita too.

"Darling, what are you doing there?"

Anita's voice in that breathless silence made me jump. I turned to the bed. The dim bedside lamp was still on and I could see her looking at me.

"I—I went for a drink of water," I said.

"Why are you standing there? Come to bed."

There was no point in telling her. I would only put her into a frenzy without solving anything. I got into bed to keep her from asking more questions.

Within a minute she was asleep.

Bitterly I told myself that the district attorney was a fool for having let Anita persuade him to leave her unprotected.

Wait a minute!

Would the district attorney and the police be as stupid as that, knowing that Al Dime had an organization of killers on the outside? Even if they didn't care about Anita as a person, they certainly needed her as a witness. Wasn't it likely that they had moved the police protection no farther than down to the street?

We lived on the sixth floor. Shouting out of the window would warn Hale, but I could throw a note down tied to something valuable. Say to Anita's gold jewel case. Even if there was no cop down there, anybody else coming along would pick it up.

I had one leg out of bed when the door-knob turned.

I didn't hear it, but I had left the bedside lamp on and I saw the knob twist silently one way and then the other. I watched it in awful fascination.

Then the doorknob was still, and that roused me from my lethargy of terror. Almost no time left. The door was flimsy enough for him to crash open with his powerful shoulders.

I sprang out of bed, and at the same instant I heard something metallic fall. The doorkey was on the floor. He must have pushed it out with a thin instrument, which could only mean that he had cleared the lock for a skeleton key.

No time to write notes. Time only to yell out of the window in the hope that help would come soon enough to at least save Anita, if not me.

The window was open only a couple of inches at the top. The lower half stuck as I tried to raise it. I cursed and heaved and the window came up. And behind me the door opened.

He came in slowly, quietly, with his hands empty. Then he saw me standing at the window, gazing at him over my shoulder.

"What are you doing there, Mr. Gibbons?" he said softly.

I turned to him. A cold breeze whipped through the window and hit my back, chilling the sweat under my pajamas. Without much hurry, Hale took his gun out of the holster.

If I yelled, it would take a cop a minute or two to come up here from the street. Hale needed only a second or two to shoot twice and then be on his way out.

"So you caught on?" he was saying. "I figured you did, the way you kept popping out of your room and then locked the door."

I found my voice, though it didn't sound like mine. I said, "You were waiting for both of us to fall asleep."

He took a couple of more steps into the room. His eyes never left me.

"What is it?" Anita said. "Has anything happened?"

She was sitting up in bed, holding the blanket to her throat as if this were a time for modesty. She stared at his gun.

I turned my eyes back to Hale, and now I saw the bone handle of the carving knife sticking out of his belt.

That was what he would use. A silent weapon. No outcry. No rousing of neighbors.

"Can't either of you speak?" Anita demanded. "Why have you your gun out?"

Maybe police protection had been withdrawn no farther than the hall outside the apartment? My frantic mind pounced on that thought, clung to it. But even if that were true, what could I do? He preferred to use the knife, but he would use the gun if I opened my mouth to scream. One bullet for me and one for Anita, and the rest for whomever tried to block his escape.

Anita started to whimper. She had got the picture at last. She huddled on the bed, and the sounds she uttered were those of a hurt kitten.

Hale was pulling the knife out with his free hand.

If I had something to throw at him, to distract him for at least a moment after I screamed. There was nothing close enough except the alarm clock on the bedside table.

The alarm clock!

There had always been something wrong with it. Whenever you pulled out the alarm button, it rang, no matter where the hand was set. I had only to move my fingers to touch it. I pulled out the alarm button.

Hale had started to move again, gun in one hand, knife in the other, watching us both, not rushing it, anxious to use the knife rather than the gun. The abrupt ringing of the alarm clock jerked his wide shoulders erect.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"The doorbell," I said.

He didn't bite, of course. His eyes found the clock.

"Shut that damn thing off!"

I obeyed. The ringing stopped. I took a deep breath and pulled the knob out again.

"I said shut it off!"

"It seems to be broken," I told him.

His gun came up then. There was going to be no more nonsense. Two shots and over. Anita was screaming now, and his gun slowly moved to point at her. She was the logical one to silence first. My hand gripped the alarm clock and I had it up. I hurled it at him just as his finger

was tightening on the trigger. His gun crashed, but the clock had thrown him off and the shot went wild. Then there was another shot. But, incredibly, Hale was tottering. A third shot sounded, and he dropped to the floor.

Detective George Schroeder stood in the bedroom doorway. The alarm continued to ring.

IN THE MORNING George Schroeder returned and sent away the uniformed cop who had spent the remainder of the night with us.

"It's nip and tuck whether he'll live," Schroeder said, settling himself in my favorite armchair. He was slender and boyishly handsome and looked soft. But last night he had shot down a tough killer.

"You mean Charlie Hale?" Anita asked.

"That's the name Beef Jackson gave himself for this job. He's one of Al Dime's tougher lads. Dime's organization must have a wire into the D. A.'s office or police headquarters because they learned pretty quickly that the D. A. had pulled me out of the house. So Jackson called himself Charlie Hale and said he was a detective sent to take my place."

"And here he was making us feel safe," I said bitterly, "while he was planning to murder us."

"Just one of you at first," Schroeder told me. "He had no reason to want you dead, and two murders are more dangerous than one. He played it smart. No taking a shot at Mrs. Gibbons in the apartment or in the street and then making a run for it. Do it nice and clean and then simply walk away."

I nodded. "That's why he dyed his hair. After it was over, he'd wash the dye off, and he'd be a blond while the police were looking for a black-haired man."

Schroeder smiled. There was a dimple in his cheek. "Lots of things went wrong for him. You returned home from work only a few minutes after he got there. He arranged with the boys outside to get you out of the house with a phony phone call, but when that didn't work he saw that he would have to kill both of you. But why right away when one of you might yell and make it difficult? It was safest to

wait till both of you were asleep and then slit each of your throats in turn, neatly and without fuss, and simply walk out of the apartment."

Anita drew tighter about her body the nightgown she was wearing under her robe. It was warm in the apartment, but she seemed cold.

"Of course the D. A. had no intention of removing protection," he went on. "He posted a man downstairs and another in the hall. It takes more manpower, but it's just as effective."

"Is it?" I said. "They let a stranger come in here. They couldn't know he wasn't a killer."

Schroeder scratched his nose angrily. "He must have managed to slip in while the boys were changing shifts. When they saw him come out with you two on friendly terms and go with you to the movies, they figured he was a friend who'd arrived earlier in the day. Jackson banked on that. Why not? And even if they caught on, what crime had he committed—yet? At midnight I relieved the man in the hall. He told me you had company. I began to wonder why your visitor didn't come out, but that seemed none of my business. Then I heard an alarm clock ring. They sound mighty loud late at night."

"I didn't think it would mean anything," I said, "but it was about all I could do."

"It meant plenty to me when I made sure the ringing came from your apartment. Why would an alarm clock ring when you had company? All right, a mistake, but then why should it go off and then on again? Anyway, it needed investigation. I still had the key you'd let me have to your apartment, so I used it."

There was a silence. Then Anita asked him if he'd had breakfast. He said he had, but could use another cup of coffee.

It was ten o'clock. There was no reason why I shouldn't go to work that day.

While I was putting on my coat in the foyer, I heard them laughing in the kitchen. Our handsome, charming cop was back in the house while I spent my days at the office.

On the way out of the apartment, I restrained myself from kicking his damned bag.

THE END

SETUP IN 819

By JOHN CORBETT

There'd be a pink slip in his house-dick's pay envelope any day now, old Jim Tobin knew. . . . So there wasn't much time for him to cash in on the smartest little stunt ever pulled by a broken-down, lame-brained flatfoot!

Keeler cried, "Grab him! Arrest him! Hold them until I call the police!"



HIS NAME was Jim Tobin. He was a hotel detective by profession. He had been one for thirty years. Flatfooted, overweight, given to shiny blue serge suits, toothpicks and sucking on dead cigars, he was typical of all of the cartoon caricatures of his tribe.

No one, except perhaps some social

security clerk, know how old he was. But he was getting old. For some years his motions had slowed. He no longer prowled the carpeted halls of the Regis with alacrity, an acute ear and an observing eye. Except for an occasional tour to keep up appearances he was content to ensconce himself in a well-worn leather chair in the lobby.

He had seen them come. He had seen them go. He had asked them to leave. He had thrown them out. He could spot a grifter or a pair of cheaters by the way they walked up to the desk. He had learned the truth of the Biblical admonition that a soft answer turneth away wrath. A softly spoken warning did the same and saved wear and tear on his feet and his emotions.

He had gotten along fine with Trevis, who had managed the Regis for twenty-eight of the thirty years he had been its house detective. But Keeler, the new manager, was another matter. A prissy old maid in pants with a wisp of a mustache that he mistakenly thought made him look like Ronald Coleman, Keeler feared the Morals Squad as he feared eternity.

As Tobin grew older he grew less critical and omnipresent. Live and let live became his motto. If a couple looked young and happy and in love, who was he to set himself up as a judge? Love had entered his life, too, many years before, thought no disinterested bystander, judging by his cigar-ash smeared exterior, could ever have been persuaded that anything more romantic than peeking through a keyhole had ever entered his life.

THEY DIDN'T know about Martha. He had come to New York years before to make good for her but somehow had never gotten around to it. The arrival of her daughter in New York, married to a nice young punk of a shipping clerk who should have been back of a plow on a red clay Georgia farm, had brought it all back again. Martha was a widow now, they told him. He liked the young couple. The young couple liked him. He was invited to their tiny Flatbush flat practically every Sunday. The girl assured him her mother often spoke of him. Enthroned in his leather chair, Tobin

thought of her more and more often. If only he could get his hands on a stake perhaps Martha would still have him.

But his prospects were as remote as ever. If he picked a winner at Belmont a dog fell down at Santa Anita or a jockey at Washington Park used his whip to nose out the longshot with ten of Tobin's dollars on his nose. His assets after thirty years in the city were the shiny blue serge suit that he was wearing, a pocketful of cigars, and a job of somewhat shaky tenure.

It was the baby that crystalized matters. Sally May told him about it one Sunday in late November with a cold Northeastern whistling in through the Narrows.

"If only it could be born back in Georgia," she daydreamed. "If only we could go home and get a piece of ground with a livable shack on it, Chuck could make a livin' fo' the three of us, I know."

Chuck spread his big hands but said nothing. Georgia was as remote as the moon. By the time taxes and social security had been deducted from his weekly paycheck and he had paid the rent and given Sally May grocery money, there was only the treadmill left.

Tobin wanted to know what a farm in Georgia could be purchased for.

Chuck told him glumly. "Anywhere up to five hundred thousand dollars. Maybe a million. But we could get the kind of place we'd need for maybe three or four thousand."

"With air and light and a yard fo' the baby to play in," Sally May added.

Tobin didn't sleep well that night. His hall bedroom hemmed him in. He remembered the space he had known as a boy. It would be nice to live on a farm again. If only he had the money he could buy a farm for Sally May and Chuck, perhaps even return to Georgia with them and make up with Martha. He grew even more daring. Perhaps *they* could buy a farm. Three thousand dollars wasn't much. Many a two-horse parley had paid more.

He went to work at four o'clock that afternoon with a sour taste in his mouth and a brain-child clamoring for expression. The ponies would never buy the farm. He knew that from bitter experience. But he had worked for the Regis

Hotel for thirty years and while it was all still very tentative the man in the loan office company had told him that if the hotel would co-sign his note he was certain a farm loan could be arranged. He had even worked out a schedule.

If Tobin would pay ten dollars a week out of the sixty-five he made, the loan, even without any help from Sally May and Chuck, could be paid off within seven years. He would be much older when it was paid. But he was an old man now. He had followed will-of-the-wisps long enough. It was time that he made good on his promise to Martha.

A thin forefinger fondling his wisp of a mustache, Keeler stared at him, incredulous. "The hotel co-sign a note with you for three thousand dollars? Are you out of your mind, Tobin? You're lucky you have a job."

The way he said it, Tobin doubted he would have a job for long. Keeler had been laying for him ever since he had taken over the management of the Regis. He had been a fool even to speak to him. He hadn't helped Sally May or Martha and he had given Keeler the axe he needed. At the next board of director's meeting he could almost hear Keeler simper:

"Now, about Tobin. You gentlemen may remember I've spoken about him before. I know he has been with the hotel for years, but we can't allow sentiment to interfere with business. And Tobin is growing old and slipshod. His eyesight isn't as good as it used to be and the first think we know we're going to have either a scandal in the hotel and be spread all over the front pages of the paper, or some wronged husband or wife is going to sue us for plenty."

That would be all it would take. He would either be patted out with a gold watch and a month's pay or offered a job in the package room at half the pay, with no responsibility. The fact that he had watched over the morals of the Regis without either serious scandal or suit for thirty years would count for little. That was a part of his job. As proof that his mind was slipping, Keeler would quote his request the hotel co-sign a three-thousand-dollar note.

Keeler's lips were thin. "And speak-

of a job, you'd better get back on yours."

Harry, the bell-captain, saw Tobin slink out of the office and wanted to know if the old man was on a rampage.

"Yeah, sorta," Tobin admitted warily.

Both his head and his feet ached. He wanted a drink. He wished he knew how the second at *Hialeah* had turned out. Both Georgia and Martha seemed very far away. He had never done anything really bad or vicious in his life. But the fact remained that he was a failure. Starting next week, or perhaps the week after that, he would be one of the shabby, futile, old men with whom the city was filled, shuffling from one poorly paid job to another.

He said aloud, "I'll be damned if I will!"

Harry wanted to know what he'd said and Tobin repeated it. "That's what I thought you said," the bell captain admitted.

IT WAS four nights later when it happened. Tobin was working on borrowed time. He knew it. One of the girls in the office had tipped him off. The board had met that afternoon. There would be a pink slip in his envelope on Monday. Tuesday the Regis would have a new house detective. Pleased by his petty triumph, Keeler swelled up like a bantam cock every time that he passed him.

Slumped in his chair in the lobby shortly before nine o'clock, the hour of Keeler's departure, Tobin watched the young couple emerge from the revolving door without much interest. They came and they went. But the boy and girl should have gone to a cheaper hotel. In the overstuffed elegance of the Regis they stuck out like two sore thumbs.

It was funny, Tobin thought, how the procedure never varied. The girl, a slim, pretty young thing in a cheap coat with an even cheaper fur collar, remained near the elevator bank pretending a nonchalance she was far from feeling as she mounted guard over a paper suitcase, undoubtedly stuffed with phone books.

The boy advanced boldly to the desk and registered for a double room with bath, payed for it in advance and, stopping at the bell captain's counter, asked that a bottle of rye, some ginger ale and some ice

please be sent up to the room right away.

Harry said, "Yes, sir," winking at Tobin.

But he had already lost all interest in the couple and was scanning a racing form. Not so Keeler. His thin lips pursed, the manager looked at the ascending elevator dial, then crossed the lobby to where Tobin was sitting and tapped him on the shoulder. "You saw that couple?"

Tobin looked up from his search for a sure thing. "Yeah. I saw 'em."

The distaste on Keeler's face grew. He was aching to tell Tobin he was finished but didn't quite have the nerve. For all of his fifty-odd years the oversized house detective was still a powerful man. "Well," he temporized finally. "You have eyes the same as I have. And we're not running that kind of a hotel."

Grumbling, Tobin walked with him to the desk and examined the registration card. Mr. and Mrs. C. White, it said, Room 819.

"At least it's a change from Smith or Brown," the desk clerk offered.

The bell boy who had carried the paper suitcase joined the group at the room desk, grinning. "He give me a buck," he reported to the bell captain. "And I bet I get another when I take up the rye and setups."

Keeler said primly, "You are serving nothing to that room."

He looked meaningfully at Tobin. Sighing, the house detective shuffled across the lobby and disappeared into one of the ornate elevators. He was back in five minutes to report. "It's okay. They're married."

He would have returned to his chair, but Keeler stopped him. "How do you know they are married. Don't tell me they told you so."

"Why, yes," Tobin admitted. "The boy told me that this is their wedding anniversary. They wanted to celebrate it in a swell hotel. That's why they picked the Regis."

"He told you," Keeler said. The dapper little manager colored to the point of apoplexy. "This is their wedding anniversary so they bought a paper suitcase and checked in at the Regis. And you've been a hotel detective for thirty years."

Tobin shifted his weight from one ach-

ing foot to the other. "But maybe they're telling the truth. It sounds like the McCoy to me."

"The McCoy!" Keeler exploded. He lost all sense of proportion. "If you only knew how glad I'll be when Monday comes! Can't you get it through your thick head the Regis doesn't want their kind of trade?" Indicating Tobin was to accompany him he strode across the lobby. "And what's more, I'll tell them so."

White opened the door in his shirt sleeves. The girl, still fully dressed, was sitting on the edge of the bed. White looked, puzzled, from Tobin to Keeler and wanted to know what was wrong.

"You," Keeler said crisply. "Get that little tramp out of my hotel in five minutes or I'll call the Morals Squad."

"Now wait just a minute," the big youth protested. "I explained to the house detective here how this is our anniversary and—"

Livid with anger, Keeler repeated. "Get that little tramp—"

And that was as far as he got. White slapped him across the lips and almost off his feet. "Don't you talk that way about my wife!"

Tobin stood by, seemingly not quite knowing what to do with his hands until Keeler shrilled, "Grab him. Arrest him. Hold them until I call the police."

"That," Tobin asked, "is an order?"

Keeler said it was. But grabbing and arresting the big youth was quite another matter. He objected strenuously. Then the girl got up for the bed and joined the melee. By the time the police arrived, her dress was shredded, both Tobin and the big youth had black eyes, and Keeler was wringing his hands in the hall.

"You are charging them with what?" the city detective asked him.

"Disorderly conduct, false registry, and assault and battery," Keeler told him. He fingered the livid scratches on his cheek. "And watch out for that little tramp. She's a hell cat if I ever saw one!"

IT WAS only the second or third time in the thirty years he worked for the hotel that Tobin had ever seen the board of directors assembled outside of the regular monthly board meetings.

He sat slumped, bear-like, as usual, the

dead stump of a cigar working in his jowls. But Keeler sat white and tense on the very edge of his chair as the lawyer's voice droned on. He was one of the best in the city.

"... and so," he reported to the assembled directors, "in view of the fact, or I should say facts, that Mr. and Mrs. White are married—White is really their name—and it was their first wedding anniversary as White distinctly told both Tobin and Keeler, complicated by the fact that Mrs. White is with child and could probably sue for a hundred thousand dollars, and get it, I think we are getting off very lightly at eighteen thousand dollars and I have given their lawyer a check for that amount in return for a complete waiver of all action against the hotel."

Keeler buried his head in his hands.

"You fool! You utter fool!" one of the directors told him.

Tobin had heard what he wanted to hear. He might be fired but Keeler would be pounding the pavement close behind him. "So, we made a bad mistake," he said as he got to his feet. "But I told Mr. Keeler they were married and the desk clerk and Harry the bell captain can both bear me out."

There was a general clearing of throats. Then the same director who had called Keeler a fool mumbled that while it was unfortunate as far as Tobin was concerned he *had* been a party to the threatened suit and, under the circumstances, it might be best if he and the Regis parted company.

"Okay. If that's the way you want it," Tobin said.

He left the hotel without regret or self-recrimination. In the small Flatbush flat

he found Sally May and Chuck already packed and waiting for him. There was a thick sheaf of green backs on the table facing the noisy air well.

Still slightly awed by the sight of so much money, the youth divided the sheaf of bills into two parts. "Six went to the lawyer," he told Tobin. "That leaves six for you and six for me and Sally May."

Sally May was equally awed. "All fo' checkin' in a hotel and tellin' the truth about us bein' man and wife."

"It was the way you checked in," Tobin grinned. "I can buy a good farm in Georgia for six thousand?"

"A good one," the youth assured him.

Tobin fingered the bills, listening to the varied domestic noises in the airwell, savoring the smell of cooking meat. There was a honking of horns and a grind of traffic on the street below. The wind whipping in the window was heavy with spent monoxide. He wondered if he would like the country after all these years in New York. As he remembered it, vaguely, it was a vast expanse with little in it but cows. There probably wouldn't even be a bookie within fifty miles. It never paid for a man to act too hastily.

"I tell you what," he told Chuck, re-stacking the bills on one pile. "You buy a *hell* of a good farm and we'll be partners in it. I'll be the silent partner."

Sally May looked disappointed. "Then you aren't comin' home with us?"

"Well," Tobin temporized, "I'll tell you. I have a few things I should attend to first. But you tell Martha that I'll be along very shortly."

"When?" Sally May wanted to know.

"As soon as I hit a long shot," Tobin promised.

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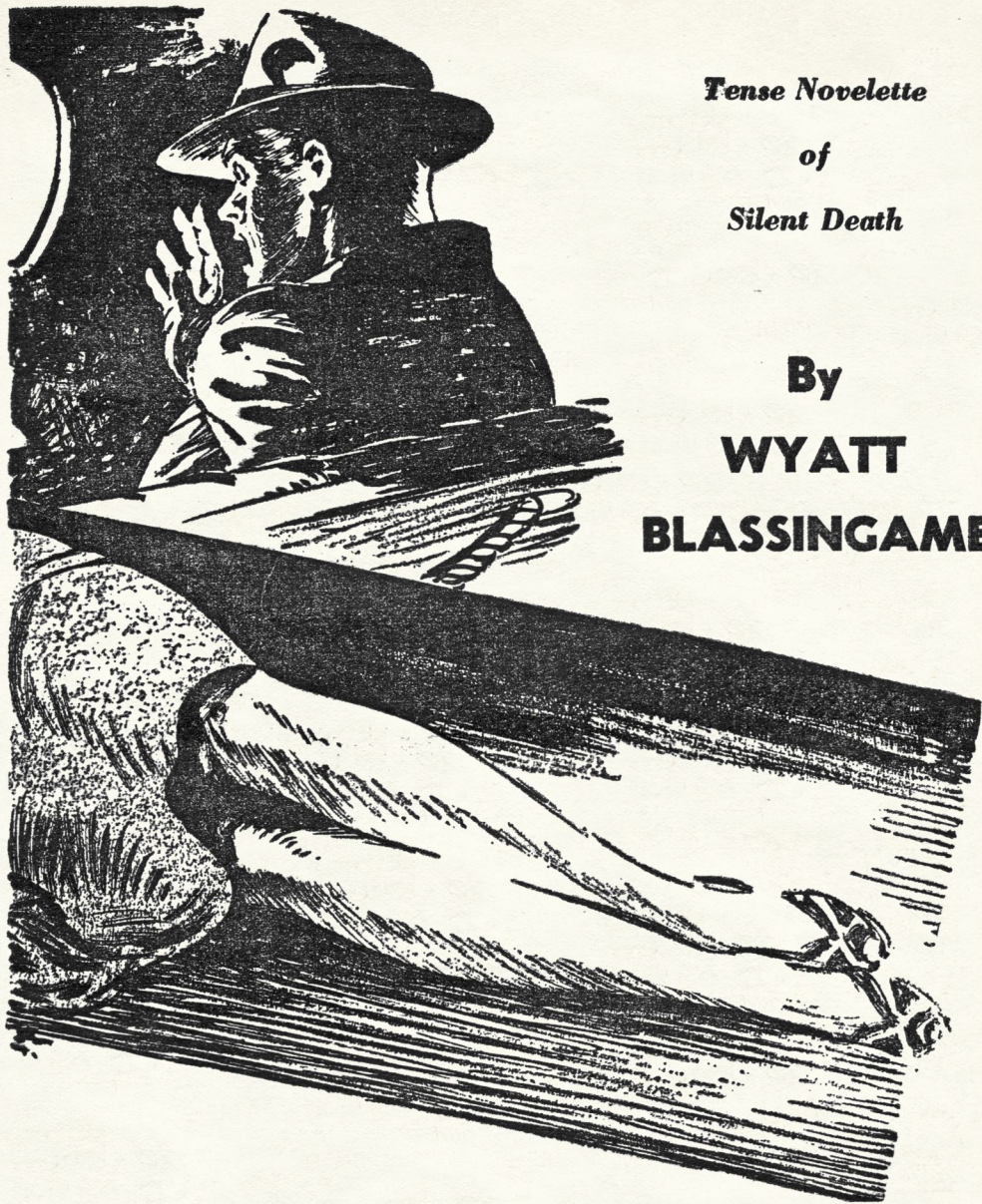
ME—TARGET FOR TONIGHT!



Beside her body was the hammer with which she had been killed. It was a hammer which I kept in my car, and my initials were carved on the handle.

Scared? How would you feel if someone had made five tries at killing you, by (1) Asphyxiation; (2) Running you down; (3) Shooting; (4) Planting a rattler in your car; and (5) Framing you into murder...? The last try made me laugh, though. For how can you frame a dead man?





Tense Novelette

of

Silent Death

By

WYATT

BLASSINGAME

CHAPTER ONE

Who Wants Me Dead?

EVERY now and then you hear somebody say, "I think I'm going crazy." Then they laugh as if it was funny. That's because they don't really think they are going crazy, and you're not supposed to think so, either. Because if you do think maybe—just maybe—you are going crazy, it's not funny. And if you think that either you are going nuts

or else somebody is trying to kill you—then it's enough to drive you nuts. I know.

The first time was the incident of the gas.

It was a Saturday afternoon in early November, just about six months after I came to Tonekka, Florida. A man named Tennessee Sargent—a tall, stooped, white-

haired man—was building some bookcases in my garage apartment. The lumber he had was greener than a professional Irishman, as all lumber seems to be these days, but even so this Mr. Sargent could do things with it. He had a way of handling his tools as if he were making love to them.

When he was through he apologized for the price he charged. "The lumber ain't worth it," he said plaintively. "But it's what they charge me. Everything is so high these days."

I said amen to that. And because he had charged me less than I expected to pay I asked him to have a drink with me. He didn't look like a drinking man, but a gleam came to his eyes when I mentioned the word. "I don't mind if I do," he said.

I was mixing the drinks when there was a knock on the door. It was Ellen Rogers, looking like a brunette cherub, like the fairest flower of the Old South, and with a voice that sounded the same way—not this "honey chile" stuff but the real thing, soft and sweet and innocent sounding. She said, "For God's sake, Tommy, hurry up with that drink. I'm parched."

I said, "Ellen, this is Mr. Sargent. Miss Ellen Rogers."

They spoke, like people vaguely acquainted, the way everybody is in a small town, even though not socially familiar. Mr. Sargent finished his drink and when I started to make him another he said, "I'll just take it straight, if you don't mind."

I DIDN'T mind. Ellen said she had dropped by to see if I would drive her to Sarasota to a movie she wanted to see. We all had another drink. Mr. Sargent pattered around the bookcases as though he didn't want to leave them—only it wasn't the bookcases but the liquor, I figured. So we had another drink and that killed the bottle, which hadn't been full to start. Mr. Sargent looked at it regretfully and left.

I kissed Ellen. I said, "I thought he was never going to leave."

"Is that Julia Sargent's father?"

"I don't know. Who's Julia?"

"If you don't know," Ellen said, "I'm not the one to tell you."

"All I know is I asked Earl to name a good carpenter and he named Mr. Sargent; I asked Mr. Sargent if he would build a couple of bookcases and he did. Should I have asked about Julia?"

"Sweet boy," Ellen said. "Maybe you're innocent, maybe just ignorant. But now look under that sink and get out another bottle so I can have one more drink before I go home."

I got out a bottle and we had one more. It was almost dark when we went out to her car. "You'll be over about eight?" Ellen asked.

"Sure." I kissed her again and watched her drive off. I felt warm and mellow and that the world was doing all right by Thomas J. Doubleday this November evening.

"Mr. Doubleday."

I jumped. Behind me stood Mr. Charles Allen, my landlord, a tall, thin man with a sourly holy look like the cartoon of Prohibition. He seemed as happy as a man who has spent his life denying himself things and has found out that all the sinners are going to the same heaven with him.

"Wasn't that a—er—lady leaving your apartment, Mr. Doubleday?"

He knew damn well it was, probably having been peering out of his window all the time.

I said, "You're right, Mr. Allen. It was a lady."

"Mr. Doubleday, when I leased you that apartment I made certain requests that in regard to—"

"It was Miss Ellen Rogers," I said. "You are not casting aspersions on her character, I hope."

Ellen's father owned the First National Bank and a good hunk of Tonekka County, including mortgages on some of Mr. Allen's property—and Mr. Allen valued a dollar only slightly more than his own life. He hemmed and said of course he did not think Miss Rogers' action could be off-color. "But there are some people, Mr. Doubleday, who might think so."

I patted him on the shoulder. "Only a man with evil in his own soul, Mr. Allen," I said, and blew a long whiskey breath in his face. Then I went back to my rooms, leaving him rocking on his heels and mut-

tering something about the curse of drink and Sodom and Gomorrah.

It thundered as I was going up the steps; there was a cool breeze and I thought maybe we were going to get a rain squall. Then I went inside. The liquor was buzzing slightly in my head. I figured I had plenty of time for a nap and I kicked off my shoes and lay down across the bed.

I woke up with my head feeling as though it were bouncing gently off the ceiling. I felt sick—real sick—like the grandfather of all hangovers. I thought I'd go back to sleep and I thought I'd better head for the bath and I thought maybe I'd light a cigarette; maybe smoking would help.

The cigarettes were on the table by the bed, matches with them. I got as far as picking up a match. Why I didn't strike it I don't know; maybe the Lord was saving me to kill another day. About this time I noticed the windows were all down and I felt sick for air. I started for the window and it seemed to swing away from me, to go round in a circle. I reached for it and fell and when I got up I was at the door. I got the door open and fell out and down the steps.

It was later, when I was feeling better, that I went back inside and found the gas hot water heater was turned on but not lit. And all the windows were down.

I couldn't figure it out. I could remember the thunder and thinking it was going to rain, but I couldn't remember pulling down the windows. I had planned to take a bath before dressing to go with Ellen, but I didn't remember going near the hot water heater. Still, it didn't occur to me that somebody had tried to kill me. I decided I had just been drunker than I realized, and forgot it.

Then a week later somebody took a shot at me.

THIS TIME I was out bird hunting with Earl Braden, my cousin, and a man named Harper McFarland. I had separated from them in some palmetto thickets, and all at once something whispered past my ear, about half an inch past it. I'd heard that sound when I was in the Marines, and if you've heard it

you don't forget it. Then came the crack, light that of a light-caliber rifle.

Well, neither Earl nor Harper had a rifle; we were all using shotguns naturally. I figured it must be somebody else taking an out-of-season shot at a deer. But we didn't see anybody else, and I just put it down as one of those accidents.

Two nights later somebody almost ran over me with an automobile. I was walking home from Ellen's home—my super deluxe convertible, model 1938, was in the shop for repairs—and as I stepped off the curb, this other car came at me out of the dark as if it had been waiting, without lights. I set a new world record for jumping backward; the car's fender just touched me and I picked up a few bruises and skinned places from rolling along the sidewalk. The car didn't stop.

Well, three things like that in less than two weeks makes even a stupid man begin to wonder. I wondered, but it didn't get me anywhere. I am not a character beloved by one and all; on the other hand, I didn't know why anybody should want to kill me. I wasn't that valuable to anybody. So I wondered if I was imagining all this. I wondered if I was going just slightly nuts.

But that's not the kind of thinking a man finds pleasant. I decided the whole thing was a freak series of accidents.

Then came the affair of the rattlesnake.

I am a horticulturist, and around Tonkka, which is in the cattle section of the state, a good part of my time has been spent in trying to develop a grass that will grow on these sandy prairies. This day I had been out with Harper McFarland, taking soil samples from some land which he wanted to develop. We had been in a jeep, going cross-country, and about dark we got back to his house. I put the jars of dirt in my car.

"Come on in," Harper said. "We'll have a drink."

"Thanks, but I'm in a hurry."

"I know," he said. "You've got a date with Ellen. That's what I want to talk to you about."

I didn't feel any urge to talk to him about it, but I didn't want to run away from the discussion either. I went in his ranch house with him, going in the kitchen from the rear. He had a barrel

on a shelf and he drew off a couple of straight drinks, big ones.

We drank. "Corn," I said.

"Made here on the place," Harper said. "Taxes are too damn high on the legal stuff." He drew off a couple of more drinks. "Price of legal liquor's got unfair. When I think a thing has got unfair, out of reason, I do something about it."

"Not bad liquor," I said.

Harper said, "Before you came to Tonikka I figured I was just about engaged to Ellen."

"Yes?"

"Yeah." He leaned against the kitchen wall. He was a tall man, lean, and brown from being in the sun so much. He had a long jaw and dark eyes and sun-bleached hair. He said, "You planning to marry Ellen?"

It was something I had thought more about unconsciously than consciously. I was in love with her, but I sort of shied away from the thought of marriage. Most young men do, up to a certain point. I still enjoyed the liberty of living alone.

I said, "I don't think it's any of your business."

"Maybe." He drew off a couple of more drinks. "Maybe I want to make it my business." He handed me a glass and leaned back against the wall again, looking at me. "Maybe I don't think you're fair competition. For one thing, you're too damn pretty."

I STARTED getting mad. My looks have always got me in more trouble than any other one thing. I'm small and some people figure they can push a little man around. Then, my hair is blond and curly and I have one of these pink and white complexions, like a baby Santa Claus. When I was a little boy people teased me about my looks, and it was the one teasing I couldn't take. At twelve I asked my father for boxing lessons instead of a bicycle for Christmas. I answered the ads in the magazines about how to grow big and strong and how to learn judo. I learned to take care of myself fairly well. Training with the Marine Raiders didn't hurt; it even taught me a little about keeping my temper.

I said, "You want me to change my looks—or do you want to do it?"

"I've been considering it."

"Any time."

"Maybe you're just a passing fancy with her," Harper said, as though he were thinking out loud.

I took the last drink of corn. The stuff must have run about one hundred and twenty proof. I said, "Unless you want to do more talk, I'll be getting on to my date now."

Harper McFarland seemed to make up his mind about something. He shrugged. "All right," he said. "Good-night."

I went out to where my car was parked. It was between daylight and dark with sunset still showing in the west and night sailing down across the prairie to the east. I got in my car, switched on the dashlight and reached over to open the glove compartment.

I can't remember now whether I did open it or whether it was already open. But reaching for it was instinctive, because I have a habit of tossing my car keys in that compartment whenever I park. So now I reached to get them. And in the pale, green light of the dashboard I saw the rattlesnake. He was crawling out of the glove compartment, and he kept coming. He kept getting bigger. It was like one of these magic chemicals that children play with; you strike a match to it and it swells up bigger and bigger, coil growing on coil, until it's fifty times its original size. My hand was reaching out toward it and I couldn't move. I sat there, frozen, while this snake got bigger than a python, bigger than a firehose. Through the green dashlight it grew, sliding down, the head reaching up again making a giant U, reaching out for my hand.

The tail of the snake slid out of the glove compartment; its body hit the car floor with a thump. And I moved. I think I went straight up for ten or twelve feet, then did a slow roll, a sharp turn to the left, and came down running. I went through a hibiscus bush, through a hedge of Australian pine, and tore the back door off Harper McFarland's house as I went in.

He was standing in the kitchen just as I had left him, the glass still in his hand. "Snake!" I yelled. "Snake!" and grabbed up a chair.

"What?"

"You put it there, damn you!" I'd have brained him then, but I was watching the door for the snake.

"On three drinks," Harper said. "I thought you could handle it."

"I'm not seeing snakes. I mean, I did see—" I began to get a little control of myself, although snakes are the one thing that terrify me beyond reason. "It was in the car," I said. "A rattlesnake."

"Well, let's take a look." He got a lantern and a shotgun and we went outside. The dashlight of the car was burning. The glove compartment was open. But there wasn't any sign of a snake.

"It—it's got away," I said.

Harper held the lantern up where it shone in my face. After a while he said, "Maybe I better drive you home."

"I saw it. It was real. I'm not drunk."

"How big was it?"

"About—" I started to say thirty feet, and I knew no rattlesnake got that big. It had looked that big just because I was terrified. I had a phobia about snakes. "It doesn't matter," I said. "It's gone now."

Harper just stood there with the lantern raised, looking into my face. After a while he shook his head.

CHAPTER TWO

One Corpse Too Many

THE NEXT day I went to talk to my cousin Earl Braden because I had to talk to somebody. I hadn't slept. Small noises made the sides of my stomach clap together as if they were playing the chorus for *Deep in the Heart of Texas*. My brain kept running back and forth between two conclusions like a squirrel in a cage:

(1) Somebody had turned on the gas and closed the windows of my apartment while I was asleep, had shot at me, tried to run over me with a car, and finally put that snake in my automobile. Somebody was trying to murder me, or

(2) I had pulled down my own windows and turned on my own gas, trying to kill myself; or I had imagined it, imagined the snake and the car and the shot. In short, simple words, I was going crazy.

That's what I said to Earl Braden.

"Either somebody is trying to murder me or I am going nuts."

Earl leaned back in his chair. He put a cigar in his mouth and rolled it, bit the end off. "You better start at the beginning," he said.

So I started at the first and he sat there, smoking his cigar, listening. He was a big, ruddy-faced man in his early forties. He had come to Tonekka just out of law school and had married a wealthy girl. He had expanded his law, got into politics, real estate and several other rackets, making a lot of money. When I had finished he said, "Let's start with the theory that you know what has happened to you."

"You mean," I said, "that I'm not crazy. And that somebody is trying to murder me."

"It could be coincidence. It could be accidents."

"It could be. But by now I don't believe it."

"Who would want to kill you?"

"I haven't got any idea."

"Who'd get your money if you died?"

I gave a hollow laugh. "What money? I went three thousand bucks in debt to set up an office and laboratory, as you know. I'm making enough to meet the payments on it, but no more. And the laboratory isn't worth the three thousand it cost. Aside from the two to three hundred a month that I make I haven't got a dime."

"Insurance?"

"I kept my government policy which would pay off at the handsome sum of fifty dollars a month. That fifty would go to the university to help some poor devil take agriculture. Then I have a one-thousand-dollar policy, which would go to you, as my only relative, to get me buried."

"Not worth killing you for," he said, grinning. "I'm your only relative?"

"Except for an old uncle somewhere out west. Every now and then I get a letter from him asking for money to get him out of jail."

"Uncle Billy," Earl said. "I get periodic requests from him, too. But he's harmless." He thought a while, then asked, "You heard from him recently?"

"I don't know. About a month ago

there was a postal card from Denver. It wasn't signed but it looked like his handwriting."

"What did it say?"

"'Wahoo!' Just the one word in big letters and an exclamation point."

"I expect that was him," Earl said. "Either crazy or drunk, and probably both. But he's harmless, and two thousand miles away." He took the cigar out of his mouth. "So that leaves me the only person who would get any money out of your death."

"And that wouldn't cover my debts."

He looked straight at me then. He drank a lot and the lids under his eyes were slightly swollen and red, but his eyes were shrewd. He said, "What about this Rogers girl you're courting?"

"What do you mean?"

"Her father is worth a half-million dollars, and she's an only child."

"I'm not married to her."

"Are you going to?"

"I don't know. I don't know if she'd marry me. And I'm not marrying anybody until I'm out of debt and making my way."

"Does she know that?"

"We've never talked about it."

"Well, you might think about it. Right now she seems to be the only possible motive somebody might have for wanting you out of the way."

Now that's a pleasant thought. You are in love with a nice, sweet girl—and because of her somebody is trying to exterminate you.

I sat in my apartment that night and thought about it, and it didn't make sense. Harper McFarland was the only person who might be so violently opposed to my marriage, and I had always rather liked Harper. It was hard to conceive of him trying to kill me.

But if not Harper, who else? There wasn't anybody else—and there was everybody. It might be a madman I didn't even know who had taken some fancied grudge against me. That sort of thing happens; you can read about it in the papers, and the more I thought about it the more I decided that the person trying to kill me was motivated by insanity. With the insane, anything is possible.

So I sat there, feeling like a rat in a

trap, just waiting for whomever had set the trap to come and finish me off. I didn't know which way to turn, what to do. I began to walk back and forth across the room. I felt I had to do something or go crazy—if I wasn't already crazy—and I didn't know what to do.

But I had to do something. I stopped my walking. "I'm going out and see Harper," I said. I didn't know what I was going to say or do, but I figured I couldn't be any worse off than I was.

As I decided that, somebody knocked on the door.

I WAS a long time in answering. I don't know what I expected. Finally I said, "Come in."

It was Ellen. She wore a plaid shirt and a grey-blue sweater which apparently had been knitted onto her. I looked at her and thought that if I were killed because of her it would at least be worth it. She said, "I've been talking with your cousin, Earl Braden."

"Yes?"

"He's crazy." She came and stood close in front of me. There were shadows in her eyes and her mouth trembled a little.

"What do you mean?"

"He seemed to think that—these things which have happened to you—that somebody is trying to kill you."

"That's what we both think."

"But why? Why should anybody want to kill you?"

We were back to that same old question which I couldn't answer. We talked about it, and talking to Ellen the thing seemed more and more absurd. "Earl kept asking me about my friends," Ellen said. "As though I might have something to do with it."

I didn't say anything. She said, "I've known Harper McFarland all my life. The idea of him planning a murder of this kind is ridiculous."

"Yes," I said.

"If Harper wanted to kill you he'd just come over here and do it."

"Then at least we'd know who it was," I said. "It wouldn't help me much, but it should be a great satisfaction to other people."

Ellen came over and stood back of my chair. She reached around and put both

hands over my eyes and forehead. "You've been worrying too much, Tommy. There's nothing to worry about. I feel sure of that. The things that have happened are just a strange series of accidents."

"I hope," I said.

She said, "Let's go out and have a couple of beers and you'll feel better."

We went to a jook called the Rendezvous and I kept remembering Alan Seegar's poem, "I Have a Rendezvous with Death." This failed to make me feel a great deal better. But it was obvious that Ellen didn't believe the things which had happened to be any more than accidents; she laughed and joked, trying to convince me I was exaggerating the whole affair. And gradually I began to believe she was right. They *could* have been accidents. And the beer began to cheer me up after a while. So I was feeling pretty good by eleven o'clock when the girl came in and stopped at the door, looking around.

I was facing the door and noticed her right away. There would have been something wrong with me if I hadn't. She was dressed, like Ellen, in skirt and sweater, and to the masculine eye it seemed impossible that clothes could be so much alike and so different. Ellen looked sweet and feminine and expensive. The girl at the door looked gaudy, sensual and cheap. Her skirt was too tight across her hips; her sweater had a V-shaped neckline and the bottom of the V didn't quite get there in time. Her hair was bright red and so were her lips and cheeks.

"Boy!" I said. "Spectacular!"

"Where?" Ellen asked.

The girl at the door saw me. She smiled and came straight across the room to our table. She didn't seem to notice Ellen. She said, "Tommy, I've got to talk to you."

"What?" I said. "You mean me?"

"Don't be like that, Tommy." Her face clouded as though she were about to cry. "I didn't want to follow you here, Tommy. But I had to find you. You won't come and see me any more, and you weren't at home. And I've got to talk to you!"

I glanced at Ellen; her face looked as though she had suddenly gone to the

South Pole with Admiral Byrd. I looked back to the red-haired girl. "My name is Doubleday," I said. "I think you've got the wrong person."

She began to cry. Everybody in the place was looking at us now. "You can't treat me this way, Tommy! You're the one who got me like this! Now you've got to help me!"

Ellen said, "I think I'm in the way here. Good-night."

I caught her by the wrist. "Wait! It's some kind of gag! I don't know—"

"Turn loose my wrist," Ellen said.

The red-haired girl said, "I don't want to cause you trouble, Tommy. I'll go to your apartment and wait for you."

She went out. Ellen was jerking, trying to get away and I was holding her. "I never saw her before. I don't know—"

"Let go!" Ellen said. She jerked free and ran out. I headed after her. As I got to the door a man about six-feet-four came from behind the bar and got me by the shoulder. He said, "Two dollars and a quarter you owe, Pretty Boy."

I could see Ellen getting in her car and I didn't have time to argue with the guy. Besides, I was too mad to think. It was just reaction and I reached up and took his wrist in both hands and ducked and heaved. The old judo.

He went up in the air. He went half-way over me and then his legs locked around my waist and we went out the door together and down the steps.

When things quit going around we were sitting on the ground together. Ellen was gone. The red-haired girl was gone. The bartender was rubbing his wrist and looking at me. He said, "Was you with the Raiders, bud?"

"I wish I still was."

"Shake," he said. "Come on back and have a drink on the house."

"I don't feel like drinking."

"Yeah," he said. "I could see you got troubles. That Sargent gal is poison."

"Who?" I said. "What did you say her name was?"

"Don't try to kid me, bud. I'm on your side."

"I don't know her name," I said. "I swear."

"Well, I'll be damned. Folks usually do know her name first. Julia Sargent. Her

old man is a carpenter. A nice old man too. But that babe. . . ."

IT WAS a long walk back to my place, but I was glad to walk because I wanted a chance to think. Julia Sargent had said she would go to my apartment and wait for me. Maybe she would be there, and maybe she wouldn't. I didn't really expect her, but I wanted a chance to figure on it anyway.

Why had she come to me in a public bar and pulled that act? I had never seen her before in my life. That was not because I am opposed to pretty young ladies with pleasure-bent morals, but just a matter of luck. I hadn't lived in Tonekka long, and I just hadn't met her.

Had somebody who wanted to louse me up with Ellen sent her? If so, was it the same person who had tried to kill me? I began to feel sure it was, and when I felt sure of that I began to run. I wanted to get back to my apartment, on the chance that she was there. If she wasn't there, and I didn't think she would be, I was going to get my car and go looking for her. Because finally I had something to work on. I knew her name and I was going to find her.

I quit running a half-block from my apartment so as to catch my breath. I turned into the drive that led past Mr. Charles Allen's house and back to the garage and my rooms. There was a light on in my apartment, but I had left it burning when Ellen and I went out. Mr. Allen's house was dark, the bottom of the garage dark. There was a moon but it was almost down.

Something moved at the bottom of the steps going up to my place. I could see only a shadow, darkness against the dim white of the building. I started running and the thing swung around at the sound of my steps.

It was Mr. Charles Allen. He was wearing dark trousers and a dark shirt without a collar. He jumped backward as I ran up, but the garage blocked him. "Er . . ." he said. "Good-evening, Mr. Doubleday."

"You were up to my apartment?"

"Er . . . no. No. I—er—came to the garage to—er—get some tools."

"You don't have any."

"I couldn't find them in the dark. That

is, I decided I wouldn't use them tonight."

He was trying to edge past me, a tall, gaunt man who had the smell of sour holiness and hoarded money upon him. He was a great reformer in Tonekka, leading every war against liquor and gambling and vice. But I knew that he owned a lot of real estate and a loan company in the colored section of the town and that out of these people he squeezed every cent the law allowed, and more besides.

"It looked as if you were coming down the steps," I said.

"Oh, no. I—er—just stepped up on the bottom one for a moment. Wanted to see if there was a breeze." He went on past me, sliding rather than walking, it seemed, and was gone into darkness.

I went up the steps and stopped at the landing. But the shades on both door and windows were down and I couldn't see inside. If that was what Mr. Allen had been doing, playing Peeping Tom, he hadn't got far. I'd long ago learned to keep those shades down.

But the door was unlocked. In small towns you don't bother to lock doors very often. So now I pushed my door open and went in. I didn't expect anybody to be there.

But Julia Sargent was there, though she wasn't waiting for me. She wasn't waiting for anybody. She lay on the floor beside the bed with her head in the circle of light beneath the floorlamp.

Beside her was the hammer with which she had been killed. It was a hammer which I kept in my car, and my initials were carved on the handle.

SOMETIMES things get too much for a guy, and by now they had got too much for me. I was past the thinking stage and I did one of those foolish things that you do without thinking: I picked up the hammer and I sat down. I didn't feel capable of standing up any longer. I sat there and I looked at the hammer, and then I looked at the body. I didn't want to look at the body, and I couldn't keep from it. My eyes were jerking and I tried to keep looking the other way, but I couldn't help it. She lay on her back with her red hair under her head and the blood in her hair. Her eyes were open and her dress had pulled up over her knees, but she

didn't look sexy any more. She just looked dead.

After a while I got up. I took the hammer with me without quite knowing why. I went out, closing the door carefully behind me, and went down the steps and got in my car. I drove to Earl Braden's house.

There were no lights but the second time I rang the bell a light came on. A moment later I saw Earl crossing the living room, pulling a robe over his pajamas. He opened the door and I said, "Come on! Come on! I got to have help!"

"What?" Earl said. He rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes, blinking. He didn't seem pleased to see me. "Are you drunk, Tom?"

"I'm in trouble."

Mrs. Braden was coming across the living room now, her robe flapping around her. Her hair was not done up, so that the streaks of grey in it showed more plainly than usual. She was a mousy, rather homely woman that somehow made you feel sorry for her. "Who is it, Earl?"

"Tom. Tom Doubleday."

She blinked at me. "Oh, hello, Tommy. Isn't it late to be calling?"

"It's business," I said. I couldn't think. I used the oldest gag in the world. "I've got a friend who's in trouble. He needs a lawyer right away. I told him I'd get Earl."

"Not at this time of the night," Mary Braden said. It was a kind of whine, a pleading.

"It's important. Real important."

The sleep had gone out of Earl's eyes now. He had been drinking and they were red-veined but shrewd and alert. "I'll be with you in a minute," he said and went back to the bedroom.

"I might as well have married a doctor," Mary Braden said. She sounded unhappy.

"I'm sorry," I said, and I put my heart in those words. I was a hell of a lot sorer than she knew.

Earl was back in three minutes wearing trousers and shirt and a leather jacket. We went out and got in my car and I started driving. "All right," Earl said. "What trouble have you got into?"

"Do you know Julia Sargent?"

"Sure," he said. "Everybody in Tonckka does."

"Did know her. She's dead, in my apartment." He swung around to stare at me. His left hand was on the seat between us, touching the hammer I'd put there. "That hammer you're holding," I said. "Somebody killed her with that."

He had good control. He took his hand off the hammer the way you back away from a vicious dog, slow, and wondering if it's going to jump at you. "Start at the first," he said then. "Tell me about it. And tell me the truth, if I'm going to help. I may forget the truth before this comes up in court, but I've got to know it now."

It didn't take very long to tell. When I was through Earl said, "That's the truth? All of it?"

"All of it."

"People at the Rendezvous heard what she said to you?"

"Everybody there."

"And after you left there you didn't see anybody until you got to your place and found the girl?"

"Mr. Charles Allen." I had forgotten about him. Now I told Earl about our meeting. He sat slouched down for a while, thinking. At last he glanced up, noticing for the first time where we were. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know," I said. "Just driving around."

"Let's go back to your apartment."

THAT WASN'T what I wanted. What I wanted was for the apartment with what was in it and the ground it was built on to vanish in a puff of smoke; in Mexico they have volcanos pop out of the earth and swallow whatever is sitting on them. Why not Florida?

But the building was still there when we got back. The light burned behind the curtained windows. I parked in the driveway and let Earl go up the steps first, as though having him look first would change it in some way and make it better.

He opened the door and went in. I followed, trying to look everywhere except that place where the body lay. But my eyes were jerking and I couldn't hold them. They came down across wall and floorlamp and bed, down to the floor.

I felt as though somebody had hit me in the stomach. I felt as though my eyes

were going to pop out and I had to reach up with one hand and push them back.

"Where is she?" Earl asked.

All I could do was point to the place on the floor where the body had been. Because it wasn't there any more. It was gone. And in its place was a ten-gallon hat with the tallest crown and the widest brim and the gaudiest colors I had ever seen.

Earl picked up the hat. He turned it around and around, holding it carefully between the tips of his fingers. Finally he raised it and sat it on his head.

It fitted him about like an apple. Despite the monstrous crown and brim it was a child-size hat. "A specially made job," Earl said. "It must have cost a hundred dollars if it cost a dime. Who do you know wears a hat like that?"

I didn't know anybody. This was the cattle section of Florida and lots of people wore big-brimmed hats. Harper McFarland wore them. But this one would never have fitted him, and if it had he couldn't have afforded a hundred dollars for a hat.

And then Earl said, "Have you heard any more from Uncle Billy?"

For a moment the question didn't make sense. My brain was too fouled up to be jumping from subject to subject like that. "Who?" I said. "What?"

"Uncle Billy. That crazy uncle of ours."

"No. Not since that postcard. What difference does it make?"

"I'm not sure. But I had a card this afternoon. Sent from a sanitorium in Denver. The old man must have gone completely crazy."

"But what—"

Earl threw the hat on the sofa. "Come on!" he said. "I hope I'm wrong. But if I'm right we've got to move fast." He grabbed me by the arm and we went out of the door on the run.

CHAPTER THREE

Heir to Murder

THE MOON was down now, the night black. We half fell down the steps, running, stumbling without seeing. My car was parked in the drive and we piled in it and I backed out. "To my place!" Earl said. "Fast. I've got to get my car."

I swung to head that way, going already as fast as the car would go in low gear. And at that instant another car coming down the street toward me swung directly in front of me, blocking the street. It stopped squarely in the glare of my headlights.

It was the damndest piece of transportation I ever saw. It was longer than a fire engine and a considerably brighter red. Horns stuck out from it like quills from a porcupine. As it turned I could see the driver for just an instant, a huge, apelike man. Then it had stopped and the door on the side toward me opened and another man got out. He was about five feet two inches tall, bald headed, and he wore a suit that was not only loud—it had convulsions.

But what I noticed most was the pistol in the little man's hand. It was so big it almost dragged the ground. Holding it in front of him he headed toward us.

"For God's sake!" Earl cried. "Get going!"

There is one thing about a small car: it doesn't take so much space to turn it around. I bent mine in the middle. I went up on a curb and through Mr. Charles Allen's lawn and I think I jumped the neighbor's fence. Then we were going down a side street without lights.

"Who—who . . .?"

"You sound like an owl," Earl said. But his voice wasn't too steady.

"Well, who was that?"

"You've never seen him before?"

"No."

"Neither have I. But I got ideas."

"Who do you think it was?"

We were at his house by then. "Stop here," Earl said. Then, "Do you know where Julia Sargent lives?"

"How would I know?"

He gave me the address. "I want you to go there and talk to her father."

"Me?"

"He knows she's no good," Earl said. "And you don't need to tell him about what happened to her. Just tell him about what she did at the Rendezvous. Ask him if he has any idea who might have sent her there."

"I—"

"Be diplomatic," Earl said. "Mr. Sargent knows the truth about his daughter,

but he doesn't like to use the short words for it. He's a nice old man himself."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll meet you back at your place in an hour." That's all he said. He left me and went along a dark driveway toward his own garage. I drove slowly off toward the address of Julia Sargent's father—but I didn't feel at all happy about it.

It was a small frame building in a poor part of the town. There were vacant lots to right and left, and dark holes in the dark night. All the other houses in the section were unlighted, but a light burned in this one even though it was after one A.M. by the time I got there.

The door was ajar and I could see into the small, cheaply furnished living room. I could see Mr. Tennessee Sargent sitting in a straight chair before the table. His arms hung limply at his sides, his head was back, his mouth was open, and his eyes were closed. On the table in front of him was an empty glass and a whiskey bottle, the bottle about three-quarters empty.

He might have been dead the way he sat there, but I figured he was just passed out. I remembered the way he'd taken the drinks at my place after building the book-cases and how he had seemed a little happier with each drink. Maybe this would be the best time to talk to him, I thought, and knocked on the door.

He didn't move, so I knocked again, louder. He still didn't move.

There was a screen door and I pulled it open and went inside. I was beginning to shake. The lump had moved out of my chest into my throat and I had trouble with my voice. "Mr. Sargent," I said. "Mr. Sargent. Please, Mr. Sargent!"

HE DIDN'T move. I went over and raised one hand and put it cautiously on his forehead. He felt warm, but I thought maybe that was because I was so cold. I put my head down to his face and listened. He was breathing. He was just passed out after all.

I felt almost disappointed. "Wake up!" I yelled and started to shake him.

He tilted sideways. He fell out of the chair like a rag doll and rolled over on his back and lay there. His eyes were still closed and his mouth was still open.

I was leaning over him when I heard

the steps on the front porch. It was too late for me to run. I just quit breathing and waited.

It was Earl, the collar of his leather jacket turned up around his neck. He looked at me and he looked at Mr. Tennessee Sargent and at the liquor bottle on the table. "He's really out," Earl said.

"He is," I said.

"Anybody else here?"

"I don't think so."

He went past me into the back of the house. I heard him go from one room to the other. Then he came back. "All clear," he said, and took a handkerchief out of his pocket. Using that he picked up the liquor bottle and carried it into the kitchen and emptied it down the sink. Then he brought the bottle back and put it empty on the table.

"Why'd you do that?" I asked.

"It had knockout drops in it. I wouldn't want the cops to get ahold of it."

"Knockout drops?" I said. "How could you tell that?"

"I put 'em in it. Earlier tonight, before I gave it to Julia to give to the old man."

"But—" I said. "But—" My throat had closed up. I was staring at Earl and the most curious thing had occurred to me. It popped into my mind before the reason for it was clear: Earl was wearing the same jacket he had worn hunting the day somebody shot at me.

Now Earl reached under his jacket and pulled out a pistol. "They are not very accurate at long range, are they, Tom?"

"No," I said. "No. . . ."

"That's a bad habit you have of repeating yourself," Earl said. The red veins in his eyes showed more than I'd ever noticed them before. He said, "I've got myself in a tough spot lately, Tom. I've been playing the market. And I've got involved in local real estate that's not turning out the way it should. Politics has cost a lot. It's going to take money to pull me through."

"I wish I could lend it to you," I said. "I'd like to be able to give it to you. I'd love to give it to you. Only—" I was looking at the gun and my voice went up in a squeak—"I don't have it," I said.

"I know," Earl said. "And this way you aren't going to inherit it." He started to raise the gun.

"Inherit what?" I said. "I don't—That is, I haven't—"

"Uncle Billy. The old fool seems to have hit it rich out west. And because you used to lend him money, and I wouldn't, he's going to leave it all to you. All that he doesn't spend first, and the doctors don't give him too long.

"You had a letter from him," Earl said. "I happened to be at your place when it came. I read it, thinking it was just another request for a loan. But when I saw what it was, I decided that under the circumstances you should be the leading character in a fatal accident."

Then it all tied up, too tight. And I stood there looking at Earl and at the gun, the muzzle of which had got as big as a water barrel. I thought I was about to fall in it.

And then I heard myself talking. It just shows you how strong the instinct of self-preservation is. "You can't shoot me," I said, "unless you shoot Mr. Sargent too. Because he's awake. He's been awake all the time."

Earl didn't believe me, but he looked. I made a swing at the empty liquor bottle on the table and knocked it straight at Earl. He ducked and his first shot missed me and I threw the table at him and the second shot missed. When he fired the third time I was already out of the living room, half across the kitchen, heading for the back door.

The back door opened. The little man in the gaudy suit stood there, pointing his cannon at me. "Whoa!" he said.

I was going too fast to whoa. I went head-on into the edge of the half-open door and bounced off that into the wall, ricocheted over two chairs and a table and wound up under the sink.

"The eight ball in the corner pocket," the little man said. "Come out, bud. With yore hands up."

I couldn't come out with my hands up; it was all I could do to crawl. Somebody was shouting in the front room but it didn't make sense. The little man said, "Okay, bud. What's yore name?"

"Tom Doubleday," I said. "But I don't think it matters any more."

He jumped at me. I thought he was going to slug me but he just grabbed me

around the neck. "You don't know me," he yelled. "But I'm yore uncle. William Harrison Doubleday, King of the West! Rolling in gold dust and drunker than forty thousand dollars!" With this he let go of me, reached in his hip pocket and pulled out a bottle of liquor. "Have a drink," he shouted.

I needed a drink. I was taking it when a man not much smaller than Gargantua showed up in the living room doorway. He blinked and swayed a little. He said, "The fellow what was doing the shooting is in here, Mr. Doubleday. I had to bop him one."

"Ha!" said my Uncle William. He pointed with pride toward the giant in the doorway. "I found Maxwell running a taxi in El Paso and hired him to drive that contraption I got outside. Biggest damn automobile west of the Mississippi and takes a big driver." He passed the bottle over to Maxwell. "Have a swig."

THAT'S the story. I was explaining it to Ellen. "What I want to know about," Ellen said, "is that girl. What—"

"Uncle Billy found her in my apartment. It seems that he was slightly under the influence of alcohol at the time—"

"And still is," Ellen said.

"And so was Maxwell. Seeing the body, they figured, naturally, that I must be in trouble and that the way to help me was get rid of the body. So they did. The purse was with the body and that's how they found the address and came out to Mr. Sargent's."

"I don't care how they got to Mr. Sargent's," Ellen said. "I want to know—"

"I'm as innocent as a morning in May," I said. "It was Earl had—er—got the young lady in difficulty. Then he must have promised her money to help him. He talked her into that stunt at the Rendezvous. He planned for me to be found dead at Mr. Sargent's house, and Mr. Sargent drunk, and with a motive for murder. That would settle the whole thing neatly. He'd be rid of the girl and me, and everything would be covered up."

Ellen said, "I still—"

"I never saw her before in my life."

"Not even on a dark night?"

"No," I said. "I never have any luck."

THE END

MEET THE CORPSE

It took a lot of courage for Jimmy to confess to a murder he hadn't committed, didn't know who had . . . and especially—when he hadn't even had the pleasure of being introduced to the corpse!

I TOOK another drink of the rye and then carefully measured what was left in the bottle. There was only about an inch and it had been two-thirds full when I started. There was another full pint on the dresser but that was only for stage setting. It would be dumped down the drain before I left. In fact, I decided, I might as well dump it now. I got up to



I was down on my knees, and miles and miles away I could hear Irene screaming.

**By JACK
BRADLEY**

go over to the dresser and suddenly staggered halfway across the room.

"Better slow down, baby," I told myself. "The next few hours are going to be bad enough without a hangover."

Then I thought maybe it was better this way. The original idea had been to get just enough of a breath to make the cops think I was blind drunk, but it's pretty hard to fool those guys. Maybe I could put it over better if I really was drunk. No matter how much I took, I could depend on myself to think straight and talk straight. Alcohol doesn't go to my brain, it only goes to my legs. Some guys are like that.

So I killed off the rest of the pint and then went over to the dresser and opened the full bottle: I spilled a little of it down the front of my vest, sprinkled a little more on the club chair, and then dumped the rest of it down the drain. I was ready to go out now.

Suddenly I saw her picture on top of the radio and I picked it up and looked at it as though I'd never seen it before. She had told me that the picture was an old one and, when I thought of the hard-eyed little tramp dressed in a near-shabby street suit who had come into Benton's Bar & Grill six months ago, and asked for a job as a waitress, I could believe her.

The girl in this picture had a tender, heart-shaped little face framed in a cloud of inky black hair. Even in the photo you could see the laughing recklessness of her eyes. The deep bosom and soft, smooth shoulders rose up from a frilly evening gown, and suddenly I thought about all the times I'd held her in my arms and felt those shoulders under my hands and right there was where I wished I'd had one more drink before I dumped that pint.

"You've got yourself into one hell of a mess, Irene," I whispered to the photo, "and I still don't know why I'm sticking my neck out to get you out of it."

But that was a lie and I knew it was. I was sticking my neck out because, in less than six months, this girl had come to mean more to me than anything else in the whole world. Because there was a three-room apartment over on Maple Road that we had furnished together, putting in some of her things and some of mine, and because we would have moved

into that apartment in another month. But most of all I was sticking my neck out because of that look of crazy panic on her face when she had burst into my room at one o'clock last night, babbling almost incoherently.

"I didn't do it, Jimmy! I didn't do it! And there's nobody in the world who'll believe me, unless it's you!"

I put her picture back on the radio and went out, leaving the door unlocked behind me and the whiskey bottles on the floor. Down on the street, I saw little Benny cruising by in his cab and hailed him. He pulled up beside me and his nose crinkled as he caught the sharp smell of the whiskey on me.

"Take me down to the station house, Benny," I said thickly. "Want see Lieutenant Wilson 'bout little matter."

His chubby little face screwed up hesitatingly. "Look, Jimmy, you better not go down there now, the shape you're in. You got a load on whether you know it or not."

"I know it, Benny, but that's all right. I know what I'm doing."

He shrugged his shoulders and sent the cab away from the curb with a jerk that sent me lurching against the cushions. On the way to the station house we passed Benton's Bar & Grill and I felt a thrill of pride as I looked at it. It was a neighborhood bar of the better class, and I had come there two years before as the chef. In those two years I had not only tripled Benton's food business, but I had really made a place for myself in the community. The businessmen in there had accepted me as their friend. I wondered what they'd be saying about me tomorrow. . . .

WHEN I reached the station house, a uniformed patrolman took me to Lieutenant Wilson's office without argument, although he looked at me sharply. Wilson was alone in his office and he offered no greeting as I half fell into a chair beside his desk. Sitting here at his desk in the station house, he looked altogether different from the big, genial man I'd fed so often at Benton's.

"Heard one of our citizens was killed last night, Lieutenant," I mumbled. "A rat by the name of Carl Martin."

"That's right. Who told you?" His

voice stung like the touch of dry ice.

"Nobody told me. I know it because I killed him myself."

"I see. What did you do with the knife after you killed him."

I was so drunk that I almost fell for that oldie. Then I remembered and thanked my stars I had calmed Irene down enough to get her to tell me a few details before she left my room.

"Wasn't a knife," I said triumphantly. "Was a gun."

"Your gun, Jimmy?"

"Sure."

"Okay. Let's hear how it happened."

"Well. I've been keeping company with Irene, the waitress down at Benton's, for the last six months. In fact, we—well, I guess we'd have been married in another month or so."

"Yeah, I know all about that apartment you furnished. Cops have a way of knowing about things like that. Go on."

"Everything was going along fine and then, a few weeks ago, I found out that she'd been going on dates with Carl Martin. And it burned me up. You know the kind of reputation that rat's got, Lieutenant. He's a boozier and a woman-chaser, and there's not a decent family in the neighborhood that would have him in their home."

"Last night I saw them going out and I'd had a few drinks. I went home, got my gun and followed them to his apartment. When I went in, they were both standing up, close together. I knocked her cold and shot him. Then I went back home and started drinking. I meant to let her take the rap for it, but when I got to thinking it over, I just couldn't do that—not even to her. So I came down here to get it off my chest. And—that's about all, I guess."

Wilson shook his head slowly and pressed a button. "Cripes! A guy must think an awful lot of a girl to take a murder rap for her!"

I saw a blue uniform loom up beside me and heard Wilson say, "Go across the street and get a couple of containers of black coffee, Grogan." The uniform went away and then Wilson was talking to me again.

"Now, if you'll stop lying to me for a few minutes, I'll tell you what really hap-

pened there. You should be interested.

"Joe Grogan, that cop that was just in here, was walking his beat past Carl Martin's apartment house last night when Martin and this girl drove up. Grogan hates Martin's intestines, so when Martin stopped right in front of a No Parking sign, that was all Grogan needed. He sailed right in after them to give Martin a ticket.

"He stopped a minute or two to get Martin's license number and then, just as he stepped into the lobby, this girl, Irene, ran out, white as a sheet. Grogan figured that Martin must have made a pass at her, so he didn't try to stop the girl. The big ox has a one-track mind, and all he could think about was that lousy ticket.

"When he got up to Carl Martin's apartment he found the door open and, when he looked in, there was Martin, stretched out on the floor, holding his chest, with the blood pouring through his fingers. There were two bullet holes in his chest and a .38 on the floor beside him. It may or may not be your gun—we'll check that, of course. A pillow case had been wrapped around the gun to deaden the sound of the shots. Martin died before he could say a word.

"Naturally, the first thing we thought about was that the girl would come to you. And, as you damn well know, that *was* the first thing she did. Trouble was that we got to your place about five minutes after she'd left. But as for you, you were never near Carl Martin's apartment last night, and we know it."

"You can prove it, too, I suppose?" I sneered.

"Jimmy, we *have* proved it already," he said wearily. "We checked over the whole neighborhood, and we know every move you made last night. You went out about ten o'clock and had four or five drinks in that Crescent Bar over on Maple Road. A cab driver saw you come home a few minutes before midnight and your own landlord saw you going in to take a shower at twelve-thirty. Carl Martin died at exactly twelve forty-five and you couldn't possibly have been anywhere near the place.

"We've had a tail on you every minute since we found out she'd been at your place, Jimmy," he went on kindly. "Why,

one of our men was even watching you through your window when you poured that whiskey down the sink. The only reason we didn't pick you up was that we hoped you might lead us to her. Now I guess that's out, so I guess the next best thing is for you to tell me everything she said and did when she came to your place last night. And don't leave anything out."

I KNEW now that I had failed and I felt sick. The whiskey was rolling around in my stomach and the room was a blur. I saw that blue uniform loom up beside me again, and then Wilson was shoving out a container of black coffee to me. The stuff burned my stomach like fire but I felt my head clearing. Then I began to talk. Slowly. I knew now that it was the best way to help her.

"She was just about hysterical when she first came into my room. She kept saying over and over that she hadn't done it. Finally, I got her quieted down enough to tell me what had happened.

"She had gone with Martin to his apartment because she wanted to have a talk with him. She wouldn't tell me what it was she wanted to talk about. All she told me was that they had just gone in and neither of them had had time to take off their coats. They were standing up, facing each other, and suddenly she saw Martin's face twist in fright.

"He sort of put out his hand, like he was pushing something away from him, and started to say something. Then she heard two shots. She started to turn around and something hit her on the jaw. I saw the lump there, Lieutenant. She thinks she must have been unconscious for only a couple of minutes, because when she came to Carl Martin was lying there, like you say Grogan saw him, with the blood streaming through his fingers. She saw a gun lying beside him and then she got up and ran out of the place.

"I wanted to get dressed and take her some place but she kept saying over and over that she'd have to start running again, and she wouldn't let me come with her. So I gave her what money I had on me—forty dollars or so—and then she kissed me, just once, and ran out of the place. I sat there thinking for a while and then I decided to put on that act I just

gave you. And I'm damned sorry it didn't work, Lieutenant!"

"You shouldn't be, Jimmy. You can help her a lot more by working with us than against us. I don't suppose you'd tell me where you think she'd be most likely to go?"

"I wouldn't if I knew," I admitted promptly. "But it just happens that I haven't any more idea than you have."

"Was that really your gun, Jimmy? And remember we'll check on that, later."

"I never owned a gun in my life."

"Mmm, I believe that. Temporarily, of course. By the way, was she sent to Benton's through an agency?"

"No. She just walked in one day and asked old man Benton for a job. Business had picked up enough that we needed another waitress, so Benton put her on."

"Just how much do you know about her past, Jimmy?"

"Lieutenant, I don't know one damn thing," I burst out. "And that's the truth, whether you believe it or not. I liked the girl from the start and when I got to talking to her about how I wanted to open a small restaurant of my own in a few years more, she seemed interested.

"After a while, we started going out on dates and then I asked her to marry me. She told me that there had been some trouble in her past and that she had to straighten that out first, but I kept on and finally she gave in with the understanding that this trouble had to be taken care of first and that I wasn't to ask any questions about it. I took her up on that and we started furnishing an apartment. But I haven't the faintest idea what this trouble in her past was."

Lieutenant Wilson sighed, reached into his pocket for cigarettes and handed me one. "I know what it was, Jimmy. I spent a lot of time looking at pictures this morning, and I can tell you why she wanted to get a place in Benton's. But it's not going to make you feel any better if I tell you, Jimmy."

"Let's have it," I said. I lit the cigarette and waited.

"Your girl friend's real name is Irene Simmons," he began slowly. "Just before the war broke out she was working as cashier for the Patterson Construction Corporation, one of the five or six biggest

outfits of their kind in New York City.

"A few days before Pearl Harbor, the firm had an eighteen-thousand-dollar payroll in the office for a big construction job they were starting. And somebody walked out of the office with the whole payroll. Just picked it up and walked out. Irene Simmons was arrested for the job and, for a few hours, it looked as though there was no doubt about her guilt. Then she got the break of her life.

"As soon as the investigation started, it was learned that practically everybody in the office could and did walk in and out of the cashier's cage, whenever they felt like it. Not only that, but the whole eighteen grand had been lying there in an unlocked cash drawer, like a pile of coal, all morning. There was one guard in the office and sometimes he checked outgoing parcels and sometimes he didn't—depending on how ambitious he felt.

"Well, when all this came out, the bonding company started raising holy hell and threatening to protest the claim. The upshot of it was that the charges against Irene Simmons were dropped and Ed Patterson, the head of the company, made good the robbery out of his own pocket. Of course, he could afford to do a thing like that—he's worth over a million in real estate—but I think his real reason was to prevent a business scandal over his carelessness.

"Anyway, the charges probably never could have been proved against the Simmons girl. Too many people were in and out of that cashier's cage that morning. So she got out but the publicity ruined her chances of ever working in another office and she knew it. She dropped out of sight and nobody ever heard of her again until Carl Martin got his last night."

"Was Carl Martin one of the employees who was in and out of her cage that day?"

"He was, and he got one of the worst grillings of any of them because he'd gone out on one or two dates with Irene. He came to see her when she was locked up, brought her a change of clothes and then, when he heard she was released, he rushed right over to her place to see her. We know this because the bonding company had a tail on them both, of course. For that matter, everybody in the office was tailed for quite a while.

"Anyway, the girl was gone before he got to her place and, so far as we know, Martin never saw her again, until she came to Benton's."

"And the payroll was never found?" I asked.

Wilson shook his head. "It's the damndest thing I ever saw. Eighteen grand vanished into thin air. The bonding company dicks went over the girl's room with a fine-tooth comb and they did the same thing for Carl Martin's place. They kept a tail on Martin for months and they followed the girl for weeks. She was working in factories and hash houses. She must have found out she was being tailed, though, because she slipped away from the bonding company dick and she's never been located since, until she came to Benton's. The whole case is a lulu, all right."

"That must have been the reason she came to Benton's, Lieutenant," I said excitedly. "Can't you see it? She must have been dodging around on hash-slinging jobs and factory work all these years, trying to avoid being recognized by anyone. She must have just about gone nuts, knowing all the time that she was innocent. When she couldn't take it any more, she came back to New York, found that Carl Martin hung out in Benton's and got a job there. Going out with Martin was her one last, desperate effort to break a frame."

"Could be," Wilson agreed. "But don't you see, Jimmy, that that only fastens this kill a little tighter on her? Look. Say that she *didn't* take that payroll and that she thought Martin had. Okay. She couldn't have had any real proof or she'd certainly have given it when she was arrested. So, having nothing but suspicions, she comes back here and starts playing around with Martin, hoping to pin it on him. He laughs at her and she thinks about all the years she's had to duck around the country on account of him. So—she blows her top and lets him have it. And that's just exactly the way it's going to sound to a judge and jury, Jimmy."

I PUSHED back my chair and stood up. All at once, I felt like a guy ninety years old. "I guess so," I agreed, "but it's not the way it sounds to me. And now, I'd like to go over and pack her things for storage, if you don't mind."

He looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, as if a new idea had struck him. "Why, yes. Yes, I guess that would be all right, Jimmy."

Irene's room was in a big frame house over on Maple Road, and her landlady, a plump, motherly woman, told me to go on up. "Isn't it dreadful?" she whispered. "There's been police coming and going all morning. There's one of them up there in her room now, prowling around through the poor girl's things. It makes me heart-sick."

I patted her arm and went on upstairs. As I stepped into her room, a tall, grey-haired man with a paunch looked up from a dresser drawer he was going through. When I saw his thick hands pawing through a stack of her delicate underthings, I felt a hot flash of resentment at this last indignity. Then I remembered that he was only doing his duty.

"I'm Jimmy Boyle, the girl's fiance," I said. "Lieutenant Wilson said it would be all right for me to come over and pack her things for storage."

"If the lieutenant said it's all right, then it's all right with me," he said heartily. "I'm Bill Johnson, detective second grade. Is this all the stuff she's got?"

"All except a few things over at our apartment. You see, we were furnishing an apartment, getting ready to marry next month, and we put some of her things and some of mine into the place."

"I see. Well, listen, I got the car right downstairs. We'll hop over there and pick up her things before you begin packing. I'm all finished here, anyway."

I tried to protest but it was no use, and a few minutes later we were entering the apartment. I started taking her possessions and piling them in the middle of the room. There were not very many. A few pictures, a set of twin statuettes—they were busts of Julius Caesar and I damn near choked as I suddenly remembered how I had kidded her about them—some books, table doilies and odds and ends.

Suddenly I stopped short. I had heard a slight noise from the next room.

"What's the matter, Jimmy?" the big man asked.

"Thought I heard something," I told him. I tiptoed over to the connecting doorway and peered in.

And then the whole apartment exploded in a blazing pinwheel of lights and I went down on my knees. Miles and miles away, I heard a woman scream and I tried to stand up. Then there was another crash and the lights went out. . . .

WHEN I opened my eyes again, I couldn't see anything but a blur of lights. Then my vision steadied. I was lying on the floor. A few feet away from me, I saw Irene, unconscious, a thin trickle of blood running down her forehead. I turned my head weakly.

Bill Johnson was bent over the pile of Irene's possessions, picking up her books one by one, opening them and then flinging them angrily aside. The big man was panting and cursing furiously as he hunted through them.

Suddenly he stopped short. He snatched up one of Irene's Julius Caesar statuettes, went over to the radiator and broke it gently on the metal. He stared angrily at the broken pieces for a moment, then came back for the other one. I drew one foot up cautiously. He'd have to pass me on his way back to the radiator.

I still don't know how I did it. I was as weak as a cup of lunch room coffee, but somehow I grabbed his ankle as he passed. The statuette rolled across the floor as he crashed down and then I was hanging grimly onto him and yelling, "Police!" at the top of my lungs.

It never occurred to me—until long afterward—that the police would have Irene's place staked out just in case she came back, and that, of course, they would have tailed us. I was just yelling because it was the only thing I could do.

The big man jerked one foot free, kicked down viciously with it. Then I heard a crash as the door went down, and suddenly the room was full of men. Grogan was helping me to my feet and I saw another cop lifting Irene. Lieutenant Wilson came forward leisurely and stood before me.

"The statuette!" I gasped weakly. "Break it. That's what he was going to do."

The lieutenant picked up the statuette. "Oh, we'll break it, all right, but there's no hurry. Patterson's not in a hurry, are you, Ed?"

"Patterson?" I said dazedly. "He told me he was Bill Johnson, detective second grade."

Wilson grinned at me as Grogan began sponging away the blood from my head. "Did he tell you that? Then we'll have to slap a charge of impersonating an officer on him—just as soon as the judge gets through sentencing him for the murder of Carl Martin. Because he's really Ed Patterson, your girl's former boss."

Suddenly he snapped around to the big man, sitting in one of my chairs, his handcuffed wrists on his lap. "All right, Patterson. Do you want to talk now and get it over with or do you want to have a bad session down at the station house?"

"I'm not saying anything," Patterson growled sullenly. "You still haven't got anything on me except a case of simple assault on these two."

"Then I guess we'd better break this statuette," Wilson said. Big Ed Patterson strained forward in his seat and the sweat began rolling down his forehead as Wilson started tapping the statuette against the radiator. Suddenly it split in half and something rolled out onto the floor. It was a small, black cylinder and, as Wilson picked it up, Patterson slumped down in the chair like a pricked balloon.

"A dictaphone record!" Wilson exclaimed softly. "Now I'm beginning to see daylight. You, yourself, took that payroll and Carl Martin was blackmailing you."

"The only thing I can't see is why. You're a millionaire; you made good the loss of the payroll. Even if they'd caught you, they couldn't have done very much. So, *why?*"

"Because the war came a week later than I had expected it," the big man said dully. "I had every last nickel I owned tied up in real estate options and if I couldn't raise some money at once, I was going to be wiped out."

"I took the payroll and Carl Martin saw me take it. I saw the rat grinning at me and knew he was wise. So, I went into his office and offered him a thousand dollars if he'd keep his mouth shut. He took the offer."

"Martin had been dictating a letter when I came in and we were both so excited that neither of us noticed that the dicta-

phone was still running. When he finally noticed it, he played the record back for me and then slipped it into his pocket."

"A few days later war broke out and, overnight, my real estate almost doubled in value. I was on top again. I made good the payroll loss and thought that the matter was over. When Carl Martin came to me for money, I told him to go to hell."

"Then he pointed out that if I was exposed I would not only be ruined socially but in business, as well."

"So I paid. And I've kept on paying. Yesterday, he put the screws on a little too heavy and I saw that I'd always be paying—more and more. I slipped into his apartment through a window and let him have it as soon as he came in. Is that all?"

"All except one thing," I cut in. "How did Irene get hold of this record?"

"Oh, that," Lieutenant Wilson remarked. "I can tell you that, Jimmy. She got hold of it—unknowingly—when Carl Martin brought her a change of clothes, the time she was locked up. Martin knew that her room had already been thoroughly searched, just as his had been, but he also knew that Ed Patterson would search his rooms again and again, looking for that record. So, while he was in her room getting the change of clothes, he knocked out the bottom of the statuette—knowing those things are always hollow—slipped the record inside and sealed it again."

Grogan and the others went out with Patterson and Wilson turned to Irene. "Just one thing I can't figure out, Miss. How did you ever think of coming to a vacant apartment to hide?"

She looked at him wonderingly. "Why, the landlord gave us two sets of keys when we rented the place, of course. And there wasn't any other place I *could* go."

Lieutenant Wilson clapped his hand to his face like a man who'd bitten down on a lemon. "And I never once thought of that! I—"

She was coming toward me then, her eyes like the eyes of the girl in that photo and I never did hear the rest of what the lieutenant said. I think it was something about his trying his hand on a lost dog case that had just been reported, but I don't know. All I heard was the door closing behind him as he went out.

HYMIE AND THE DOUBLE-DOME



"Ha!" says the cop. "I suppose it is a big joke that you kidnap Professor Janness!"

By
PARKER BONNER

NO, MAMIE. Absolutely not. This is one correspondence course you do not catch me sticking my nose into and having happen to me what I see happens to this joe this afternoon.

I admit that a hackie has got to know something about psychology to keep in business, but a lot of knowledge about what makes everybody tick is a very dangerous thing to have on you.

I meet one of these guys today, and I

Mamie, it is bad enough that Wire-Away Wilkes, the toughest hood in New York, has put the snatch on me.... But when this other character, the

one out of Freud that I am trying to protect, makes things worse by trying to double-talk your little Hymie into the kind of cement suit that is fashionable only at the bottom of the East River—Mamie, I know it is time to melt my hackie badge into slugs for the telephone booth!

see he is so scrambled up in other people's brains he has not got room for any left of his own. He is a big-shot, Mamie. He don't read these courses; he writes them. He's got all the answers. And he don't know where he lives.

I am stopped by the library, catching my breath, when he comes out with his nose in this book and walks up against the hack and stops. He does not look up out of the book. He does not reach for the door. He does not give me any signal, so I think he does not want a cab and I am losing interest when this other joe rubs him aside and opens the door and starts in.

Then this bookworm leans forward and steps inside and pops on the seat. He fishes in a pocket and gets out a coin and hands it out the door and almost gets his fingers pinched off when the other guy slams the door shut in a way which shows that he is irked quite some.

The one inside mumbles "Downtown," and one customer is the same as another to me, so off we shove. We do not seem to be in a hurry, so I take it easy and keep waiting for him to come to the end of his chapter and tell me where we are going, but he does not, and even I am a little surprised when I see we are up against the Staten Island Ferry, which is about as far downtown as I can go without a boat.

I turn around then and look at this joe. He is about as tall as they come, even in custom-built sizes, and he has a long thin nose with a hump in the middle and a long thin mouth without any lips you could notice. He has black hair and his skin is white, and he has got eyelashes like a chorus doll.

He has got hands like skeletons, and one of them is holding the book and the book does not quite cover it. A big book, Mamie. The other hand is pointing out the lines to himself while he reads.

I do not like to surprise this kind of a joe suddenly, but he is long gone from this world and I do not know how long it will take him to read this book before he comes to.

"Mister," I tell him, keeping my voice very quiet, "we are downtown."

FOR a couple of minutes I think he doesn't hear me, and I am about to take stronger measures when he hoists up

his head quick and peers out of the window. I see his eyes then, and they are black, too, and round and sharp. Like a bird's, Mamie. They don't tell you nothing.

He has this look around, and then he goes back in the book. "Too far," he says. "Uptown."

I have the urge to ask him where uptown, but, like you say, I gotta have some psychology to deal with the public, so I keep my lid down and start up the island again. This joe, I tell myself, is some kind of a bug, and the Village is the place he belongs, so I pull by that way. But I am to Gramercy Park and he has still not made a peep, and this time I holler back at him.

"What was that address, Doc?" I say, trying to make it sound friendly.

This voice of his is hollow, like shouting down a manhole, and it comes out without any help from his mouth that I can see. "Home," he says, like one word is all he can spare at a time.

By this time I am getting tired of playing games, and I tell him, "Which home, Doc? Yours or mine?"

He comes out of the book then with a snort, and looks at me like I had just torn out a page. Then he snaps a couple of quick glances around the hack.

"Why," he says, "you're not Jarvis. Where is Jarvis? Where is my car?"

"You didn't have them with you when you climbed in my hack," I tell him. "And maybe it is Bellevue I should be hauling you to."

"No." He takes it straight deadpan. "Bellevue tomorrow. Today I stay at home. But what did you do with Jarvis?"

I give a sigh, and it is like I am talking to one of the kids, Mamie. "Mister," I say, "I am sitting peaceably in front of the library when you come out and hijack my cab from under another customer, and I have since been riding you up and down Manhattan like you tell me to do. I do not know any Jarvis."

He gives me a long stare, the kind where I think in a minute he will look to see if I washed behind my ears, and then he grunts as if he is very pleased with what he sees.

"Paraphrenia," he says very pleasantly, but I shake my head.

"No friend of mine, mister. I tell you

I do not know the jerk. Now look, am I going to set you out on the curb right here, or are you gonna act like you're normal and give me your address?"

I have stopped the hack, Mamie, and I am turned around looking at this zombie, but even without seeing it I recognize what is suddenly shoved up between my shoulders, and it is a gun.

Who has got hold of it I cannot tell until this frog voice behind me says to put up my hands and get out slow which I do, and then I am facing a pavement cop. He is looking very surprised and uncertain, but there is nothing uncertain about the rod he keeps nicely centered on me.

"You must be nuts," he greets me. "What made you think you could get away with it?"

Well, Mamie, I have learned not to be hasty when dealing with these characters, so I take it easy and only say, "The nut is in my back seat, Lieutenant, and if you will convince him to tell me where he lives I will get out of your red zone and your hair."

"Ha!" says the cop. "Funny man, huh? Now tell me it is a big joke that you kidnap Professor Janness."

"Ha, yourself!" I tell him. "The joke is on you, as I do not know this Professor Janness at all except I read in the paper he is a big-shot doctor that is going to tell the court tomorrow if Loco Lewis is loco or not when he bumps Silent Simmy for trying to turn stoolie. Him, personally, I do not make."

"Not funny," says the cop, "when I can see the professor in the back of your heap and he looks like you have shot him full of hop."

WHAT HAPPENS next, Mamie, you will hardly believe. My customer is sticking his head out of the hack and blinking at this John Law, and now he gives a little laugh. "Thank you for the rescue, Officer," he says. "I really don't have time to be kidnaped at the moment."

And from there on I am sold out. The upshot of it is that the cop and the professor take me down to headquarters and are all set to tie a baggage check around my neck for hijacking the lunk. I scream for Captain Scott, who is busy with a large homicide order, but he sends over the

word that I am not responsible for anything I do and he is, and to turn me loose; he will blow it down later.

So out we walk, my professor with his nose back in the book, the flatfoot, looking like his Christmas balloon has just busted in his face, and me. I climb in my hack, and the next thing, the professor is climbing in the back seat again.

Does it do me any good to yell? It does not. The professor tells me it is a public conveyance and I have got to haul him, and the cop puts his lip in my face and tells me the professor better show up where he wants to go, or else.

"Take me to the library," says the professor. "That must be where I left Jarvis and the car."

"And call me up when you get there," says the cop.

At the library, Mamie, I pull up alongside where I was before, and sure enough there is a long black job with two drivers hanging on its fenders, only it was not there before and of that I am sure.

The professor starts to get out, and I am giving a sigh of relief when he stops halfway. "Pest!" he says, like he is swearing. "I haven't time for these practical jokes. Where is Jarvis? That is my car, but—"

Mamie, how dumb can you get? Only now do I begin to see that something is really not kosher, and by this time it is too late. These two joes dressed up like drivers are not any such thing, as I clearly see on second look. And to prove it, they are surrounding me and the professor and they are showing us the snoots of a pair of .45's very carefully so they do not distract the passerbys.

"Sorry," says the one who has a mouth full of gold teeth. "Jarvis got took suddenly sick and I am substituting for him. Get in."

The other one has got a drop on me, and he swings up alongside. He watches the professor climb in the hearse, and then he tells me to get going.

He is a sour-pussed hood that does not look like he likes his job, and he gives me a fish eye as we head downtown again. I do not feel like cheering him up any.

"Look," I tell him, "I do not mean to criticize, but this is a beaut of a bloomer you are pulling, as the professor is already reported and on record for being kid-

naped. If you are smart, you and I will go some place else away from him and get separated before somebody in blue lays a finger on us."

He only gives me this fish eye again. "Your mistake, bub," he tells me. "The mumbo artist ain't kidnaped, only called in on a conference."

This, I tell myself, is not going to impress any cops that I ever see, and with my neck already stuck out I do not enjoy the parade we make through town. I have got butterflies but good by the time we hit this cold-water walk-up on Sixteenth Street they take us to.

When I pull in at the curb my hood takes a long look at me and then shakes his head. "If I leave you go, you will yammer at the cops for sure, the nervous way you are. You better come up with me."

So I go up. I do not know what is there for the professor, but I know where I will get it if he does not show up some place and I am still around. I am tied onto the guy for better or worse, Mamie, just like with you.

IT IS A single room on the front and clear up that they prod us into, and it is not empty. There is a davenport that looks like the big snowstorm hit it, and there is Wire-Away Wilkes filling it up and smiling like his long shot just paid off two to one. He is that big bookie that Loco Lewis is said to be the hot rod for.

"Come in, boys," he says with syrup poured on. "Come in. I trust you have had a happy day?"

The hood behind me gives a low growl. "Quit grousing," he says. "Everything got all scrambled up. We just found your brain trust ten minutes ago."

Wire-Away's eyes widen up as big as shoe buttons and he looks very sympathetic. "So you got in a beef? And every cop in Manhattan knows who you are and where you brought Professor Janness? And now you are ready for graduation. Tony, I had more faith in you."

Tony growls again. "Nobody knows nothing but this hackie, is why I bring him along," he says. "Climb back in your cozy corner and relax."

But Wire-Away does not relax. "Stand aside, Tony," he says, "and let Jake present Professor Janness. I will deal with

you later when I am not so busy."

So Jake shoves in the professor, who has now come out of his book enough he knows that he is no longer leading his own life, and he is all bristles and snorts.

"I hope, sir," he puffs, "that you have a valid reason for this invasion of my privacy? I am a busy man and have no time for frippery."

He looks like the Empire State building in a huff, but Wire-Away does not seem impressed, which is like his character that I hear around is full of ice water instead of raw blood. He makes a friendly smile at the professor and waves his paw.

"My sentiments exactly," he says, "and I am sorry to have put you to this inconvenience. But as you will see, it was most imperative that I have a little chat with you. Alone," he adds, and gives me a stare and then one at his stooges.

Tony is sulking, but he shrugs and nods me towards the door. However, we do not make it out. The professor pipes up again, interrupting things.

"Your airs are idiotic, sir, and I demand to know why this taxi driver was sent to abduct me. Also, who are these two men who claim to substitute for my driver?"

I try to shut him up, but I am too late, and Wire-Away is not so slow as he looks. He sits up fast and he is not smiling any more. "Tony," he roars, "did you have this hackie snatch Janness?"

I hold my breath, as with my cab parked out in front there is some slim chance of a flatfoot spotting it before this party gets too rough, which I have a feeling it is headed for, but it is not going to sit there long if Wire-Away finds out that I am already officially associated with the professor in this play.

If Janness has all his buttons it will be plain to him, too, that this is his out, but I am not lucky enough for that, and the next thing he does is spill the whole schedule to Wire-Away, blow by blow, like he is very proud of himself for remembering.

Wire-Away listens and his eyes get bright. "All right, Tony," he says. "Now, how did the cops get the idea that Janness was kidnaped?"

Tony is not happy and he is not even cocky any more. "You got me, Boss," he admits and shakes his head. "We put Jarvis on ice in the uptown room, then we

come back and wait until Janness shows up, and then we come here."

Wire-Away is not so long as he is wide, but there is plenty of him, and it is all beef which is usually very smooth and collected, but this collection he almost loses now.

"The professor was in the library when I sent you after him," he explodes. "Do you mean to tell me that you drove his car away, giving him the chance to miss it and report it stolen, and then came back expecting him still to be there? Just asking to be picked up, Tony? Or are you so tired of living?"

"Besides which," I cannot resist adding, "the cops tell me it is Jarvis who gets loose and phones in that his boss is kidnaped, and it is only his description of Tony and Jake that convince them I am not the snatcher." Which is not all the truth, Mamie, but at least I hope will keep Wire-Away from getting the idea he can tag me with this rap when I find out what it's all about.

It has a good effect on Wire-Away and he gets his hands full of all his chins and pulls hard until he gets himself back in control. Then he sends Tony and Jake out to get rid of both my hack and Janness' car, and keeps me around for his personal safety.

He rolls back on the couch and gives Janness a pleading look. "As the foremost alienist in town," he says, "will you please tell me who's crazy around here."

THE PROFESSOR sniffs. "That," he says, "is an elementary question which you could have asked me during my regular office hours. You have a tendency to psychosis, implemented, I suspect, by your avoirdupois. In your idiom, you are a fathead. Now will you call my car and allow me to go home?"

"No," says Wire-Away. "No, Doc. I didn't mean it that way. What I want from you is important. Sit down and relax. Here. . . ."

He is off his couch again and hauling out a chair for the professor, and then he brings out his sixty-four dollar question.

"Look, Doc," he says like he loves the guy. "You got a boy to pass on tomorrow. Loco Lewis, remember?"

The Professor nods and Wire-Away rubs his hands together.

"Okay. Now look. He's my boy, see? I—I sorta adopted him, and I been keeping him around for laughs, trying to keep him out of trouble. So all right, he should of been in the nut-hatch all along, but I hated to send him up there.

"Now it's different. He's in a jam. He's loopy, Doc. Believe me, I know. Had him around for years. What I want you to do is put him in the hospital for a spell. Have them fix him up."

He stops and stares at the professor like he is doing him a big favor and everybody is friends. And all of a sudden it clicks on me.

There has been a big push on to nail Wire-Away's scalp to the front door of this new Vice Committee, and I recall hearing some gab that they waved some greenery in front of Silent Simmy, who was a runner for Wire-Away before he was rubbed off. And it was Loco Lewis, with no doubt, that handled Simmy.

Up to now I think nothing of it because I always figure Wire-Away as a smarty who will not be disturbed if Loco takes a short rap, as I think he has his boys in hand and Loco will not pipe up with what he knows.

But now I see how it is with this Tony and Jake. They are featherbrains, and maybe Loco Lewis is the same and is not such a safe bet to leave him lying around in the cops' hands.

All this takes me but a twinkle to get, so I pat the professor on the back. "Sure, Loco is nuts, Doc," I say. "Tell Wire-Away he's all worried for nothing, and let's get out of here."

I grab him by an arm and start for the door, but it is like hauling Grant's statue around. He just sits tight and pins on his dignity. Then he pours coal on the fire but good.

"Mr. Wilkes," he says, "you are obviously assuming one of two hypotheses, neither of which is either true or flattering. Either you take me for a complete fool or a fraud. I am well aware of your connection with Loco Lewis, and I understand your interest in having him declared insane. However, I have already examined him and am happy to say I found him quite sane. Saner by far than others present in this room."

There is a long silence that I see is

going to cost somebody some unpleasant occurrences if it is not broke up soon, so I do some fast thinking and then I cough.

"Excuse me for dealing in, Wire-Away," I say, "but I think the Doc does not quite understand this suggestion you make and I know you are not a trigger-happy jerk that will begin doing violence to important guys that think you are asking favors for free."

Right in black and white I am telling the professor, Mamie, that he is riding for a deep swim in the river, and I point him the way to get out is to say yes and scam us off. After that he can do what he thinks he can get away with. But no.

Wire-Away sees my light and makes no hesitation about digging up a roll of greenbacks which will choke any horse he ever bets on. He rains them down on the table one at a time very casual. "You name it, Doc," he says. "How many?"

JANNESS is sitting there like this statue of Lincoln they got in Washington and talks himself right back in the soup. Deliberately. "The ethics of my profession do not permit falsification or bribery," he boils over. "Mr. Wilkes, this interview shall certainly be added to the complaints of the committee which is prosecuting you. I have never. . ."

Mamie, he goes on and on, and there ain't nothing I can think of to say but what he beats me to it by nixing it. Wire-Away stands there getting redder until I think he will blow a gasket, and all of a sudden what I have been wondering about comes out.

One minute his hands are on the table in fists, and the next there is a little tiny gun wrapped up in them sausages he calls fingers, and all his polish is rubbed off.

"Okay, wise guy," he says, and he sounds like coal going down a chute. "I ask you polite, and I offer you dough, and you're too nicey-nice to play. You got one more chance to cooperate, and then there is going to be one ex-alienist in town. You're big, but half an inch of lead is bigger. Which is it gonna be?"

The professor just looks at him, open at the mouth. Then he laughs, and it is a real laugh, Mamie, like you give a kid that does a cute trick. "Why," he says, "you fantastic imitation schizophrenic. To

save your hired gunman from a sentence he rightly deserves, are you willing to make yourself liable to the death penalty? How do you think you could justify my murder?"

The answer is easy to see, and it is that Wire-Away is not thinking any more, but only plain mad, and I don't mean nuts, and a guy that is mad with a gun facing you is not going to make your insurance company any happier.

All of a sudden I wish I am a woman, which people Wire-Away is notoriously polite to, and this gives me an idea. I give a little gasp like I am sick and fold up on the floor, slow, so I do not surprise Wire-Away, but complete so he can see I am fainted.

Then, while he is spending a couple of seconds catching up with why a hack driver should pass out on his floor, I roll under the table and get hold of his ankles. He is a very solid citizen, Mamie, but he is not expecting this play, and I put all I got into one big pull. And down he comes, backward.

I hear the bigger they are the harder they fall, and this one I think is going right on through to the next room down, but it is a good floor, and he only bounces once while the furniture rocks back in place. Then he is very still and the little gun goes plop on the floor out of his hand. I make a grab for it but I forget this board that runs along under the table top and I knock my brains into next week on that. I fall on the gun, and then the table falls on me with its edge on my neck.

Well, Mamie, this is adding injuries to insults, and I am not too careful how I heave the table off me and I am in no mood to do any spring dances when I climb on my feet.

I have got Wire-Away's popgun in my hand, waving it at the professor, and I am going to tell him off that he has not got enough in his head to be a good reverse bouncer in a booby hatch, let alone be allowed to say who belongs there, when I look around and there is somebody else in the room.

It has been sort of noisy so I do not hear them come in, but there is Captain Scott standing inside the door and behind him a jerk I do not see before dressed up like a chauffeur, and behind them there is

a bushful of uniformed policemen.

I am so glad to see this particular flatfoot I am ready to open up my arms and yell daddy at him when I see that there is another gun among those present and he is holding it and he is pointing it where my stomach was just before it dropped into my shoes. He is not looking happy.

The chauffeur jerk behind him pushes in and gives a squawk and dives for the professor, who is still sitting on the sidelines looking like he is bored with the show.

"Doctor Janness, Doctor Janness!" bleeps the jerk. "Are you all right? Have they hurt you?"

Janness pins on his dignity some more and raises his eyebrows. "Jarvis," he says, "where have you been? You've caused me no little inconvenience, not staying by your station."

The jerk droops like a lily. "I'm sorry, sir," he almost breaks out in tears. "I was kidnaped and held against my will. And I was given to understand that you were also to be a victim of my assailants. I had quite a time, sir, getting loose and notifying the police of your danger."

Mamie, it is the first time I ever hear a mechanical jockey spout like Park Avenue in the movies, but I have not got time to enjoy this as Captain Scott walks at me like he is peg-legged from the hips down and making faces like a beat man.

I hand him Wire-Away's gun and he snarls at me and does not even speak but turns toward the professor. "We found one of Wire-Away Wilkes' henchmen driving Hymie Beerman's taxi," he says. "With some persuasion he told us where to locate you, and it looks as though we were just about in time. Who do you want to enter complaints against?"

JANNESS smooths down his ruffles and looks at Scott all full of rights and indignation. "Why," he says, "as a citizen it is my duty to sign warrants for the whole miserable crew. They must be made to fear, if they cannot respect the law of the land."

Captain Scott backs up with his chin at this speech and then points his head at me. "Was Hymie part of the play?" he says.

I see he does not know the professor

like I do by now, and I can tell you ahead just what this prize joker is going to say before he cracks it.

"If this taxi driver is Hymie, then Hymie is one of the mobsters," he pronounces. "He kidnaped me originally and was brazenly released by the police. Immediately thereafter he and two others named Tony and Jake reabducted me and brought me here where I was bribed and threatened by that unconscious psychotic on the floor.

"It was Hymie who offered the bribe and used other persuasions to force me to find their man insane. It is my opinion," he goes on, wrapping me up, "that Hymie and not Wire-Away is the brains of this malicious organization."

Mamie, Captain Scott has known me for a long time and we have always ended up friendly so far, but with a cop, he don't trust anybody from one time to another, and now he gives me this dirty look and is going to say something, only I beat him to it.

"The guy," I tell him, "is battier than a Marx brother. He is like one of these mirror readers or something and everything he sees he gets backwards." I talk loud and fast, Mamie, and I tell him how things happen, and I say how do you figure Wire-Away is out cold on the carpet if he is my boss, and even the Doc cannot be balmy enough to tell you he puts him there.

Scott looks at the Doc and the Doc gives him a sad smile. "In simple phrases," he explains, "Hymie suffers from delusions and is emotionally unstable. He fainted at the sight of his master's gun, fell and knocked over the table, thereby upsetting Wire-Away who fell in turn. Rather like a line of dominos, you might say."

I know who is dominos, but I am too speechless to squawk, and Scott squints at Janness. "You mean Hymie is crazy?" This is my own private flatfoot sounding off, mind you, and he goes on like this. "That's something I've suspected for a long time, Doctor, but the thing that confused me is that sometimes he acts as sane as I myself."

Then it is my innings for a minute, and the Doc pulls on his lips to keep from

(Continued on page 128)

MAN OF PARTS

"That's me all over!" Willie Goldensuppe could have said if he had been alive to see himself dropped—piecemeal—all around New York!

THE MAN on the rubbing table could answer only in short, painful grunts, but that didn't stop Willie Goldensuppe from talking. "If there is one thing I can do," Willie said, his skillful hands working up the man's spine, "it is to keep my head." He gave the man an extra pummel. "Jah, I always keep my head."

Which just goes to show how wrong some people can be. Because not only was Willie destined to lose his head—but his legs, his arms and pretty much everything else that could be cut off by a barber's razor!

The first thing that Willie lost was his heart. But that didn't interrupt the smooth functioning of Willie's powerful body, because that essential organ was deposited in spirit only, at the feet of blonde, buxom—and married—Augusta Nack.

Augusta reciprocated. Augusta had a liking for strong men. When her husband, Herman, had thrown her down the stairs, had she flounced off and gone home to mama? She had not. She had gone out to work as usual so that she could earn enough money to keep her Herman in beer and tobacco. That was Augusta—always faithful to her man. Until the next one came along, that is.

So when Willie Goldensuppe came along looking for a room, Augusta took one look at his powerful body and decided that here was a lodger after her own heart. If Herman could toss her down one flight of stairs, Willie could probably toss her down *two* flights. *Jah!* A real man.

It wasn't long after Willie moved in that Herman moved out. Augusta didn't regret the change. She had been supporting Herman long enough. And besides, Willie now took most of her spare change.

Life in the Augusta Nack-Willie Goldensuppe menage moved on at a leisurely pace for a while. Willie spent

By
BUDD HOWARD

less and less time at the rubbing table these days, being content to let Augusta take over such trivial details as paying the grocer's bills, meeting the rent, etc., while he sported in the various New York saloons. And, of course, spending so much time at the bar, he could hardly be expected to know that a gentleman named Martin Thorn, a barber, had been commenting to his fellow scissors-wielders what a fine figure of a woman Frau Nack was, and that he, Thorn, was making excellent progress with the lady.

In fact, Willie didn't wake up to the new situation until Thorn was calling almost nightly on the lady to take her to the theater, on boat rides, and on other outings destined to advance his amatory campaign. Willie, being thirty pounds heavier than his new rival, decided that the only way to meet this threat was to beat his challenger up physically. Which he proceeded to do.

For a time, then, there was peace in the household, and a spirit of love emanated from the apartment where Willie and his Augusta were blissfully one.

To celebrate the state of his connubial affairs in proper fashion was manifestly impossible for Willie in a small West Side apartment. So Willie once again hied himself off to his old barroom haunts, there to toast, in mellow wine and strong beer, life, love, and the fair Augusta.

This time, Willie lost his Augusta permanently. Thorn was back again—and Willie was out in the cold. The scene had shifted, too. For, no doubt haunted by memories of her past loves, Augusta had moved from Manhattan to Woodside, Long Island, there to take up residence with Thorn in a seven-room house and

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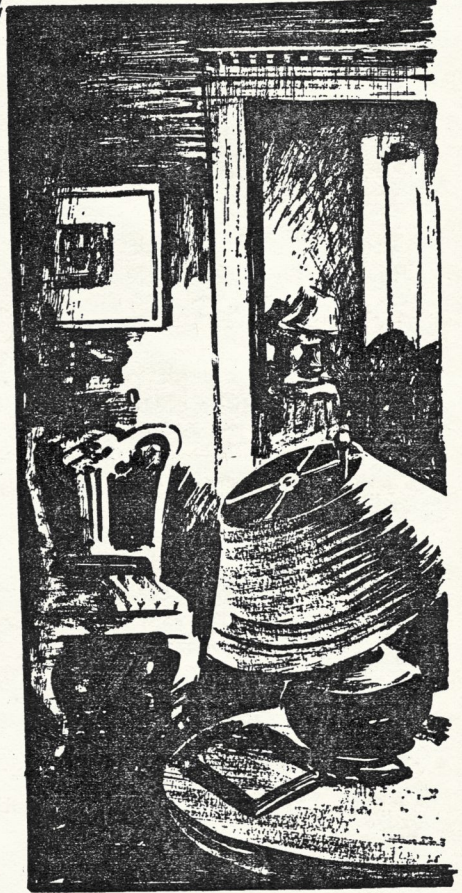
**Gripping
Murder
Novel**



||

"You won't do anything to me, Tommy," Limpy said. "Because in case you do, somebody is going to find a little letter I just mailed." ... Which gave Tommy two things to do now: Find the letter ... and then kill Limpy!

||



CHAPTER ONE

The Witness

IF IT HADN'T been for Lulabelle, Tommy would have been gone. The shop would have been closed, and Limpy would have hunted another place to sell his diamond. It was all because of Lulabelle, but naturally she didn't

know. Lulabelle was just a cat. Furthermore, she loved Tommy and would never have done it. She just didn't know.

The way it was, Tommy closed the safe and looked to be sure that everything of value was out of the showcases. It was

KILLING'S CATCHING!

By FRANCIS K. ALLAN

He had the body over his shoulder now. He turned out the light and peered carefully into the corridor.



just before six o'clock on a misty April afternoon and Max, who owned the little new and second-hand jewelry shop on Lexington had already gone home. Tommy turned out the lights and started out the front door. That was when he heard Lulabelle crying back in the office where she'd gotten shut in. So Tommy went back and petted her about half a minute. That was when this thin guy with the

withered leg came in and stood watching.

Without the lights on, Tommy couldn't see him clearly and for a second the idea went across his mind that this was a stick-up. Then, in a jerky voice, the guy said, "I've got a ring. Maybe you'll give me a price on this ring I've got." Tommy knew such a voice wasn't going with a gun. He turned on the light. Then he just stood there with Lulabelle purring

in his arms, his mind spinning crazily. This was just another one of those dreams he'd had so many times, these six years. A nightmare that some day, somewhere, they would find him and know who he was.

"This ring I got, it's from my wife, see? It's mine, on the square, but right now I need a little . . ." The words evaporated and the twisted little man's jaw sagged. A moist sound came from his lips and very slowly his dull eyes awoke to full memory. Tommy saw it. He knew he had to do something, to say something. He put down the cat.

"Yes? Do you want me to look at the ring?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah. I got it here." He limped to the counter and dug it out of the folds of his handkerchief. As Tommy picked it up, he met the man's pale eyes again. Now they were intense in thought. He stared at the ring. It was worth less than a hundred dollars. Max wouldn't want it.

"I'm afraid not," he said as he handed it back. "You might try Sharick's on Sixth Avenue."

"Sure. Okay." But Tommy could tell he was thinking of something else, and then he began to smile at Tommy. A jerky secretive smile that revealed his yellowed teeth. He picked up the ring. "Thanks." His voice was smooth now. "I was just needing a little money." His eyes roamed boldly around the shop. "I guess you've got a lot of nice things here. Maybe I'll come back some day." He went out slowly, limping, with his thin shoulders hunched slightly. The cat rubbed against Tommy's leg and purred gently. She was just a cat, and she didn't know.

AT LAST, hardly thinking, Tommy turned out the lights and locked the door. Instead of going directly home, he walked up Lexington Avenue to a little bar and grill where he sometimes ate lunch. He wanted to think about it, carefully but quickly, before he went home to Carol.

He got a beer and stood there, apart from the other customers, and there was suddenly a look of age and defeat on his plain face. He didn't touch the beer. He stood there, remembering.

Cecil Culbird, that was the guy's name, but nearly everybody in Hillview had called him Limpy six years ago. Sometimes he'd have a part-time job, but mostly no. But that night—Tommy's last night in Hillview—Limpy had been sitting by the pot-bellied stove in Nicholson's Garage when Tommy had walked in and hit Walt Nicholson with his fist. Walt had gone down, and he hadn't gotten up; Walt had never again gotten up. And when Tommy had backed away toward the door, he had seen little Limpy Culbird for the last time—until now.

Tommy remembered the fear—blind and breathless—of those first hours and days. And after that, the desperation to live—to live in a hurry, against the inevitable doom. And he remembered the times when he had almost gone back to Hillview, when he had promised himself that tomorrow he *would* go back, knowing all the time that the tomorrow would never come. And then he had found Carol. . . .

At last he lifted the glass of beer. It was six o'clock.

It was eight-thirty when he opened and closed the door of the apartment. He could hear Carol in the kitchen. He could smell the scent of food. He could taste the beer, then the whiskey he had drunk. The taste was metallic and cold. He walked slowly across the small room and Carol heard him.

"Tommy?" She came to the doorway. "Tommy, I didn't know where you were and I kept waiting until—Tommy, what's the matter?"

He looked at her and knew she was the most beautiful girl in the world. He couldn't have explained why, precisely. Her hair was dark and curly, and her nose was upturned. She wasn't what people called glamorous. She was just beautiful to Tommy. Then he remembered what she'd asked him, and he ran his fingers through his hair.

"I met somebody. Somebody I used to know a long time ago."

"Oh." For a moment she seemed about to say something else; then she shrugged. "Want to eat now, or keep glowing?"

"I don't know. I—Carol," he said. She turned. He touched his tongue to his lips; then he knew he couldn't, not now. "Nothing," he said. The doorbell rang.

Tommy did not move to answer. The sound of it was like a knife he had been waiting for. Carol passed him and he heard her open the door.

"Tommy? Isn't Tommy here?" It was Limpy's voice, soft and restless.

"Yes, he's here," Carol said uncertainly. "Tommy, there's a man."

He had followed him, of course, Tommy realized. But how did he know his new name? Then he remembered the card on the apartment door. Funny. He couldn't think clearly tonight.

Slowly he turned and faced Limpy. A starved bright glow filled the little man's eyes. His clothes were unkempt and dirty. He needed a shave. He seemed to pant rather than breathe. Tommy hated him for being in his room, for breathing the air that Carol must breathe.

"What do you want?" he asked angrily.

"I just thought we could talk about old times. I mean, I thought maybe you wouldn't mind talking about things, just us."

"Oh, is this the old friend you were drinking with?" Carol asked.

Moments passed. "Aren't we old friends, Tommy?" Limpy asked slyly.

Tommy's anger collapsed. There was no place for fury or denial. "Yes, we're old friends," Tommy said heavily. "This is my wife, Mrs. Case. This is Limpy Culbird."

"Hello," Carol said. Her eyes met Tommy's strangely, and he knew she disliked Limpy.

"I thought maybe we'd sit down and have a few drinks and talk," Limpy said softly. Tommy stared at him and his fingers shook.

"Sit down, Tommy, and I'll make something," Carol said.

Limpy's eyes roamed over the room and he rubbed his jaw. "This is a nice little place, Tommy. You must of been doing good, I guess, and settled down a lot."

Tommy heard Carol in the kitchen. He walked over until he was less than a foot from Limpy. "What do you want?" he whispered rawly.

"We're going to talk about all that. I can see how things are—like with you and your job and your wife. All I want is just a square deal, the same as I'll give

you. Only just remember something: I'm smart, Tommy, so I fixed it before I walked in here. You just remember: If anything was to happen to me, somebody is going to find a little letter I just mailed to myself. It'll be where the cops can find it, if they was to look. I guess—" He stopped as Carol came back with two highballs. Once more her eyes met Tommy's and he turned away.

"Tommy was just saying," Limpy said, "that I could stay here a few days. I told him that was nice. It gets lonesome in a hotel room."

"But—" Carol started. She stopped. Tommy felt his throat grow cool and his fingers tighten. He stared at Limpy until the sallow face became a blur that faded into the wallpaper; then he heard Carol's voice from miles away: "Of course. I've got to do the dishes." She went away. Limpy's features came swimming back from the mist. He was looking around the room again as he drank.

"I never got a square deal," he said softly. "Any time I ever got anything, there was a guy there to sneak it away. Listen, I want another drink." He held out his glass.

When Tommy entered the kitchen, Carol turned. "What is it?" she breathed. "Who is that man?"

"Don't ask me. Don't ask me tonight, please," he begged. He turned from her and picked up the bottle of whiskey.

Limpy was leaning back in a chair, smoking a cigarette. His vest was open. He reached out for the whiskey and his lips were damp. The whiskey gurgled as he drank. His eyes watered and he coughed. Malice filled his little eyes as he stared at Tommy. "I'm smart. I was always smarter than any of them, but I never got a break from anybody. But you better remember: I mailed a letter tonight, just in case. I'm going to stay here a little while. I'm going to stay here. . . ."

At eleven-thirty he lifted the bottle; then his fingers sagged. His head sagged, and the liquid poured over him. Tommy picked up the bottle. Limpy was out. Tommy hesitated, then felt through the pockets of the soiled suit. He found the handkerchief and the diamond, less than ten dollars in cash, a single key without any identification, and a book of matches.

That was all he could find on Limpy.

The bedroom was dark when he tiptoed in and undressed in the dark. He crept into bed and lay still. Carol's fingers found his and she moved close to him.

"Can't you tell me? Can't you, please?" she whispered.

"I can't. Give me a little time to think."

He paused a moment. "Carol, I don't want you to stay here while he's here. I want you to go to your sister's tomorrow. Will you? Promise me."

She didn't answer. He felt her trembling. She was crying without a sound.

CAROL had to be at work earlier than Tommy. She was finishing her coffee when he went into the kitchen. She said nothing. Her face seemed thin and pale. Tommy noticed her overnight bag standing by the door. He wasn't hungry. He poured a cup of coffee and stood by her chair. Desperately, he hunted for something to say. There was nothing. He touched her shoulder. "I'll call you. I'll call you this evening," he promised.

Long after she had gone, he stood at the kitchen window and stared down into the concrete court. Limpy was probably lying about the letter, he argued to himself. But he knew it was false. Limpy was a coward. He would have feared to come with a gun, but a letter was his weapon. But if the letter could be found—if it could be found, destroyed, then he could. . . . Tommy stopped thinking and looked at his strong fingers. He opened and closed them, and he could feel the bony structure of Limpy's throat. He would be free to kill Limpy, if only he had the letter.

He heard a hacking cough from the front room; then unsteady footsteps came into the hall and Limpy stopped in the kitchen doorway. His eyes were bloodshot. His frail body shook. His mouth looked ragged and shapeless.

"You've been doing something. You've been talking to somebody," he accused. "You're thinking you're going to get rid of me."

Tommy stared at him stonily. "I'm going to work."

"You fix me something to eat first." He stood in the doorway trembling and watching Tommy, and finally Tommy

pushed the pan on the fire and broke two eggs in it. He put on a piece of toast. Limpy was seized with a fit of coughing and sagged into a chair. "You better remember," he panted. "I'm smart. I fixed things. I wrote a letter." He lifted Tommy's cup and drained the last of the coffee. A flickering of shrewdness awoke in his eyes. As Tommy put down the plate of eggs, Limpy's clawlike fingers clutched his wrist. "While you're working today, you can just be thinking about which of those diamonds are worth most I like nice diamonds when I keep secrets for people."

Tommy's muscles stiffened. He jerked his arm away. Limpy cowered backward, shielding his face. "Don't you hurt me!" he cried sharply. When the blow did not fall, the cunning came back into his eyes and he licked his lips. "Just some nice diamonds," he whispered softly.

Tommy turned and walked out. He felt sick and frightened but not surprised. He had known there would be a price. But as he left the building, he thought of Limpy and he knew one more thing: There would never be an end to the paying, so long as Limpy lived. . . .

The sun was shining. The shop was empty save for Max when Tommy came in. Little egg-shaped Max, with his egg-bald head and gentle eyes, the cigars that he always chewed into pulp, and the beer he always drank "just to settle his stomach."

"Well, how is it today?" Max asked cheerfully.

"No good, Max." Tommy went back to the office and hung up his hat. Presently Max came in and looked at him worriedly.

"Not sick, are you? Nothing is the matter with Carol?"

"No, Max. It's nothing I could ever explain to anyone that—" His words faded as he met Max's brown eyes, and suddenly he knew he had to tell Max. It came with a rush. "I'm not Tommy Case, Max. I wasn't until six years ago when I killed a man in a little town in New England. But I didn't plan to kill him. I was just sore. I was mad, Max, but it wasn't a big thing. This man owned a garage, you see? There was a second-hand car I wanted to buy, but I didn't

have all the cash he wanted. I paid him two hundred dollars to hold it until pay day for me. I signed something; I didn't pay much attention. Hell, Max, I just wanted the car. And when I got paid, I went back. The man had sold the car. He wouldn't return my two hundred. He said it was forfeited when I didn't come back the next day. It was on the piece of paper. It made me mad as hell. I thought about it a couple of hours, then went back to hit him. He was big, Max. I knew I was going to get licked, but I didn't care. I hit him and he fell. He fell on a big jack and hit his head, and he never got up. I was scared. I backed out. Then I saw this little rat-faced guy sitting there, staring at me from behind the stove. He'd seen the whole thing. I—I ran. I got a bus and got out of town. I went to Boston and then Jersey City; then I came to New York. I bought the papers from this little town, and there were pictures of me and stories about the brutal death-beating. The little guy had told it all. I changed my name. When I went into the Army, I had nightmares all the time about my fingerprints. I don't know why they never caught it. I still get nightmares. Not so often, but I keep dreaming they've walked in the door—somebody from the little town—and they've recognized me and started shouting. They always shout in the dreams and—" He stopped and wiped his face on his sleeve. "Then yesterday it happened, Max. That same little guy with the rat face came in and he knew who I was. That's what's the matter, Max."

MAX MOVED the battered cigar and blinked like a baby owl. "And so? What is to happen now, you think?" he asked quietly.

"I—" Tommy halted. He stared at the ink stains on the blotter. "I don't know, Max," he said. He was too ashamed to look up. "I've never told Carol. Maybe I could go away—San Francisco or Houston or somewhere—but she wouldn't understand. I'd have to tell her why, and we'd have to change names again and . . . that could go on forever, maybe, and there'd never be any peace."

"No, that is not good," Max agreed slowly. "Here you have your job. You

are buying into the business. Life is happy. It is a shame. I do not understand the laws, Tommy. I do not know." He sighed and cleared his throat. "Let us wait and see."

Then, as Tommy looked up, Max's eyes were penetrating and dark. "It will be money he wants. I can tell you that already," Max said quietly. The bell at the front door rang and he turned away. Tommy opened the ledger and picked up a pen. His eyes fixed themselves on a line of purchase entries: diamonds. His eyes moved to the safe. The diamonds were there, good diamonds.

He dragged his attention back to the ledger and began to write. Perspiration blurred the ink. His fingers shook. His brain was following a stark path of its own: Max trusted him. Weeks might pass before Max discovered. Weeks in which he might discover Limpy's letter, and then kill him. Kill him. Kill for a second time. And after the second, a third? How could he know there would not be another Limpy, watching at the second murder. He stumbled from the desk and twisted at his collar. He couldn't stay in this room with the safe and diamonds. He had to get out, walk—walk far away and try to think and breathe again.

Max was showing watches to a customer when Tommy went by. "I'll be back. I'm going for a walk." Max said nothing. Tommy paused in front of a bar. But that wouldn't help, he knew. It would only make it worse. He walked up to Central Park and sat down on a bench. It was quiet and the sun was warm. Maybe you could talk to somebody like Limpy, he thought. Maybe the little guy wasn't *all* rat. If he could make a deal for a thousand dollars—even two thousand—and borrow it from Max, that was so much better. It was worth a try.

He stood up and turned homeward. Already he felt better.

The radio was playing when he unlocked the door of the apartment. The bottle of whiskey, empty, stood on the coffee table in front of the couch. Limpy lay there. Tommy's faith sagged. The little man was so ugly. It was a sort of ugliness that *had* to come from inside.

Yet Tommy reached down and touched

the bony shoulder. "Limpy," he said. Limpy did not answer. "Limpy, wake up!"

Limpy did not answer. His head rolled limply, and upon the couch arm where it had rested was a dark moist stain. Tommy jerked forward and seized the shoulders.

"Limpy!" he cried. Limpy was dead. The back of his skull was crushed inward.

CHAPTER TWO

The Letter

FOR A BLANK interlude, Tommy could not think. Mechanically, his fingers loosened. The body slid off the couch and lay, face down, on the rug. Limpy was dead. Dead. The message kept circling Tommy's stunned brain. Then his brain made the next leap: The letter would be found because Limpy was dead!

Over and over it drummed in his brain. He shouted at himself to stop, to think calmly. When would the letter be found? Surely not immediately, he argued desperately. Limpy had intended staying here. There must be a margin of time. But how long?

He walked up and down the room. Limpy was dead. But he hadn't killed Limpy. Who had killed him? Who had known he was here? Who?

And where was the letter? Surely he must have sent it to his room or hotel, knowing it would be found if he did not return. But where had he lived?

Tommy bent over the body again. There must be some clue, *something*.

He turned the coat pockets inside out. Tobacco grains spilled out. He found the matches, the key, the handkerchief and the diamond again. He opened the watch pocket. Nothing. Then he felt something in the shirt pocket. It was a scrap of cardboard with the number, 1882, and the name, Gustavsen's Shoe Repair. A receipt. It was a receipt, of course. Maybe they would know.

He stood up, then reached for the key. He put it in his pocket. Then he thought of the body. He hadn't thought of it before. Suppose something happened and people had to enter this apart-

ment? Suppose Carol returned? The body couldn't stay here. But it was daylight. The sun was shining. People were everywhere. He couldn't take it away. Not now.

He looked about him and hurried through the apartment. There was no place in the kitchen, none in the bath. In the bedroom? The closet was jammed. Under the bed? It was the only place. Under the bed. And Tommy laid back the edge of the bedspread and carried the flimsy body into the bedroom. He pushed it far back against the wall and smoothed down the bedspread again. When he rose, he felt sickened and filthy.

He found Gustavsen's Shoe Repair in the Manhattan phone directory. It was on Third Avenue. He walked one block east and took the El.

It was a damp-smelling place down under the steps of a worn tenement, just above the Bowery. A 1939 calendar clung to the wall, and a semi-nude brunette smiled brightly at the rows of battered shoes. A radio crackled irritably off-tune, and a lanky man with yellow-white hair was hammering at the work bench. He tossed the hammer aside and came toward Tommy. "Got a ticket?"

Tommy had tried to plan it. He nodded and surrendered Limpy's receipt. The lanky man hunted along the shelf, and took down a pair of brown shoes.

"Wait a second. Those aren't the ones," Tommy said. "Mine were— Say, I bet I know. Listen. I was in a bar a couple of nights ago, just up the street, talking to this little guy with the pasty face. And the thing that started us was a shoe ticket. I was taking money out, see, and I pulled out my ticket. The guy said, Say! He had one like it, so we got to talking. But what happened, we must have changed tickets, see?" He grinned. The lanky man shook his head.

"You gotta have the ticket for the shoe."

"But maybe you know the guy, so I could find him and get my ticket. He was thin. Didn't weigh much. Sort of crooked teeth, and yellowed." The lanky man shook his head dolefully. "But you *must* have seen him!" Tommy exclaimed. "He was— Limpy! That was his name! Do—"

It worked. "Yah. Limpy. The little guy lives at the Lantern Hotel. You shoulda said Limpy, then I know."

"Where is the Lantern Hotel?"

"Straight." And the lanky man pointed straight across the street at a six-story building, bulky and red-brown and sulky looking in the shadows of the Ed. "Ask Artie. Artie will tell you."

"Thanks," Tommy said. He hurried across the street. The lobby of the Lantern was small and vague with shadows. There was a cigarette machine by the elevator, and an office from whence came a weary voice:

"No, no, I don't want Blue Kid. I want Jessup to win in the sixth. Yeah. And you call me, be sure." A telephone banged down. "Always got a tout," the voice said.

"So what," a girl's voice countered drily. "None of them win. You should get a slot machine and play against yourself."

Tommy stopped in the doorway. The office was a desk, four walls, two chairs and a telephone. The girl was pretty in a way that wouldn't last forever. Her hair was gold and just touched her shoulders. Her eyes were blue and her legs were fine. So was the rest of her. The man was good, too, not counting about ten pounds around the belt line. His hair was black and curly, and he looked as if he'd been to Florida lately, judging by his tan. He looked up from filing his fingernails.

"Hunting somebody?" he asked in a voice that didn't care greatly.

"Artie. The shoe man across the street sent me over. Really I'm looking for a man named Limpy."

"Well, I'm Artie, but I wouldn't know about Limpy. He's here, and then he's not."

"He—he's got a ticket of mine I need. I need it now," Tomy said urgently. "I thought it might be around, or maybe he'd have noticed and mailed it back. He didn't know my address. He . . ." He floundered to a stop. Artie gave him a weary look, then reached into a drawer and pulled out a batch of letters.

"You look at them," he said and handed them over. "What time is that race over?" he asked the girl.

TOMMY shuffled through the stack. And there it was. It had to be the one. It was addressed in pencil to Cecil Culbird, c/o Lantern Hotel, and in the corner was the note: *If not called for by April 15th, send to Chief of Police.*

Tommy thrust the letter into his pocket while Artie was reading the racing sheet. Noisily he kept shuffling through the letters. At last he handed them back.

"It's not there. I suppose I'll have to wait till I see him."

Artie shrugged. "Maybe you will and maybe you won't. It depends on who sees him first."

Tommy frowned. "Someone looking for him?"

"They say," Artie admitted. "Anyway, if I see Limpy, I'll tell him you were around." He paused. "I'll tell him you didn't leave your name," he added.

"He'll know." And Tommy turned and walked out.

Two blocks from the Lantern Hotel, Tommy opened the envelope and read the penciled note:

Chief of Police,

In case you get this, you will know something has happened to me, Cecil Culbird. It is like this: Once when I lived in a town called Hillview, Mass., I knew this man and his name was George Barden. One night I was in a garage when he killed a man named Walt Nicholson, and he ran away. They never found him, but today I saw him working in a place called Max Kreston's Jewelry on Lexington Avenue. The way it is, I am going to talk to him and try to get him to go back and give himself up, so it will look better, but I don't know what he will say, so I am writing this, just in case. You can get his fingerprints and identification and all that from Hillview, and you can check at this Max's place, in case. I am just letting you know.

C. Culbird

Slowly Tommy folded the letter and tore it once, twice, then again and again, and then he let the pieces float away on the breeze. He smiled as he turned toward home. Then he remembered the body. The smile faded. He looked at the sun. It was almost beyond the lower skyscrapers toward the Hudson. He saw a clock in a cafe. It was almost four. Tonight, he thought. Tonight, somehow, he would get it away, and everything would be over.

Suddenly he stopped as he remembered the simplest fact of them all: Someone

had entered his apartment and murdered Limpy.

Was it just as simple as that? Had Limpy been hiding? Had someone followed and killed him, and ended some affair? Or was there more in the murder than he knew? Was there more to come?

He walked slowly while he tried to think, and the endless weariness came down on him again. It was somewhat like the nightmares of being discovered. This was a burden of fear carried for six years, carried until every bone and muscle in him was drained of strength, and still it remained. Oh, how quiet it would be, he thought, to go back and say, "Here I am, and I am too tired to go on."

And then he remembered Carol.

He walked on while he tried to think and plan. He could rent a car. After midnight the service stairs were almost never used, and there was a service door that opened on the delivery passage. It would be dark there tonight. Or was there a moon? But a moon wouldn't shine down there, not all night. . . . Yes . . . after midnight. . . .

IT WAS just after nine o'clock when he rented the car—a massive seven-passenger sedan—at a place above Columbus Circle. He drove to the apartment and parked on the side street within twenty feet of the delivery passage. The elevator was up when he entered the lobby. He climbed the stairs to the fifth floor and let himself into the dark apartment. Here was the odor of whiskey, of cigarette stubs, and somehow, the dankly melancholy odor of death. This was a strange and unclean place, not the place where he and Carol lived at all.

Without turning on the lights, he felt his way across the room to the hall and then to the kitchen. There was no moon. The sky was black, save for the crimson haze from neon signs. Down in the court the blackness was unbroken. It could be done now, he was thinking. But the stairs . . . someone might use the stairs this early. Better to wait.

He could think of nothing to do. He turned on the radio. The gay voice of a comedian came on, then dance music, then studio laughter. Every sound seemed brittle, as if swept to his ears from another

world. He turned off the radio. As he kept smelling the whiskey, he began to want a drink. He got up and found a bottle. He poured himself a drink and gulped it down. Then he remembered his promise to call Carol. But he could not bring himself to lift the telephone. He could not speak to her until this thing was done.

What time was it? Ten-forty. Over an hour until midnight. Then he realized he could not endure the waiting any longer. He took a long-drawn breath and went into the bedroom. The odor seemed thicker here. Of course it was nerves and imagination, he told himself.

Wrap it in a blanket. The old Army blanket would do, he thought. Pin it with safety pins, so nothing would show in case there was someone on the stairway.

He tried to breathe in shallow gasps while he worked. At last it was done. It looked like a crude brown sack. He lifted it over his shoulder and turned out the light. He peered into the corridor, then hurried to the stairs. No one was coming—yet. But the body grew heavier and perspiration poured off his chin. He reached the exit and the cool breeze of night, and at last the bulky burden lay on the floor by the back seat. At last it was done and time to go. But where?

Then Tommy remembered last summer and the trip he and Carol had taken in her sister's car. Across the George Washington Bridge and up into New Jersey. They had stopped and watched a deer in the woods. Thick woods, Tommy remembered, and there were lonely lanes up there, surely. He would take Limpy there.

Not until he had crossed the bridge did he remember the toll. He sat stiffly, not daring to look at the policeman who made change.

"Okay, go on if you're going," the police said impatiently.

Tommy sent the car away with a lurch. Miles beyond the bridge, the traffic began to thin. He reached the broad highway that climbed the hills that were crowded with trees. But still there were too many cars. Farther on, he kept thinking. It seemed to Tommy that he had been driving forever. At last he realized that, for a moment, there was only his car and one behind him. This was the place, if he

could find a side-lane. He slowed the car and peered into the darkness at the left of the road, then the right.

He was slammed back to attention as a voice shouted, "Okay, pull over there and let's see that tag, mister." The voice came from the other car that was alongside, now.

Tommy could do nothing for many moments. The car drove itself. Run! Drive as fast as possible, his brain screamed. But he knew it was hopeless in the heavy old sedan. Finally he put on the brakes and halted. The other sedan halted behind him. As Tommy got out, the other car's headlights blinded him. Beyond them, indistinct in the night, stood a man.

"Is that the way you like to carry your tag, mister?" the man asked.

Tommy looked at the license plate. It was bent upward so that the numbers could not be seen. "I didn't notice," Tommy said. "I just rented the car for tonight."

"Well, let's turn that tag down, huh?"

Tommy obeyed. The man turned off his bright lights and leaned back, looking at Tommy. "Better let me see your driver's license," he said finally.

Tommy licked his parched lips. Slowly he got out of the old sedan and walked over to the other car. As he approached, he heard a sudden roar behind him as the sedan's motor sprang into life. The tires spun and caught on the gravel, and the big sedan lurched away wildly. Tommy turned, stared incredulously.

"Listen," the man exploded in rage. "What goes on here?" But before Tommy could turn to say anything, that car, too, was roaring down the road behind Tommy's car.

For a long time, Tommy just stood there, staring blankly down the dark road as though by concentrating he could bring back the sedan again. Then he turned and started back.

He followed the road until it made an intersection with a four-lane highway. In the distance he saw a bus. As it drew nearer, he read the destination: New York. He waved. The bus passed him, then came to a halt. He got on and sat down at the far rear.

He could not think. He closed his eyes

and sat with his head bowed. It was too grotesque, too bitterly fateful. There was nothing left. Nothing, ever, but the hopelessness of flight. All because of a bent license plate. The car and the body would be captured. Or the license would be traced and his name discovered. And after that. . . . Tommy shook his head helplessly.

FROM THE bus terminal, he took a cab to the apartment. He pulled his suitcase from the closet and began to pack shirts, socks, anything that came in contact with his fingers. There was no plan. This was simply a record, playing an echo from six years ago: Get out, get out. Hide, hide!

It obliterated reason and drowned thought. But he *had* to think, he kept telling himself. This wasn't like last time. This time there was Carol. He would go to some small hotel and register under another name. He would have time to sit quietly, to think. He shut the suitcase, turned off the light and started toward the door. A key clicked in the lock. He stopped. The door opened and in the doorway, framed by the dim light in the corridor, stood Carol. Her head was bare and her hair tumbled. A gasp of relief rose in Tommy's throat. The light went on.

"Tommy!" she cried. "Oh, Tommy, Tommy!" She ran toward him and into his arms. For one timeless interlude, the fabric of reality dissolved and there was nothing in the world but Carol. The interlude ended. Slowly Tommy pushed her away. She was crying.

"I can't stay here," he said.

She began to nod frantically. "I know, I know," she whispered.

"They'll find me if I—" He stopped and stared at her. "You *know*," he echoed.

"Yes. I couldn't stay away. I was so miserable. I came home and saw the blood—drops of blood into the bedroom—and then I found him. But it doesn't matter, Tommy," she said. "I don't know why, but there must have been a reason. If you'll only tell me—"

"Carol, look at me," he interrupted. "Limpy. I did not kill Limpy. I did not, I swear to God." And just as the breath-

less glow came across her cheeks, he told her the truth. "I killed another man six years ago. I killed him and—oh, I can't tell you now. We can't stand here. I've got to get away from here. You—"

"I'm going with you. Don't say I'm not. I am." She did.

CHAPTER THREE

Murder to Remember

THEY WENT to the Paddock Hotel on West Forty-ninth Street. It was a place used mainly by the fight and sports boys who couldn't get the percentage to move away. Just off the flashy blue lobby was the bar, walled with glossy prints of this fighter and that, with actresses and song-and-dance guys thrown in between, and sometimes a horse. Tommy registered them as Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Cantwell, which had been Carol's maiden name. The grey-faced clerk neither looked or cared. He handed them a key to Room 428. The fat elevator operator took them up and leaned in his door, looking at Carol's ankles as she walked down the semi-airless corridor.

The room was a room—four walls of dirty grey, a bed, two chairs, a dresser with a cracked mirror, a table with a phone extension, and a sign on the wall saying, Turn Off Radio When Leaving. There was no radio.

Carol looked around at Tommy finally and gave him a half grin. "Just what we were looking for," she said. "Now, sit down and tell me what. And stop looking like—like that damned Limpy," she finished.

Tommy gave her the other half of the grin. "Sorry." And a strangely peaceful feeling went through him. He had told her; she knew he had killed a man, and yet she smiled at him.

"It was six years ago," he began, and the calm of his voice surprised him. Carol did not interrupt. She sat in the chair by the bed and watched him as he walked up and down the room and told her everything. Not until he reached the part about the bent license plate did Carol speak.

"Tommy, there's something wrong with that," she whispered. "I mean, something phony. Listen. I went to our apart-

ment and found the body. I went to Max's. He said you'd left early. I went to all the places I thought you'd be, then I went back to the apartment. It was night, then, and I couldn't stay up there with . . . it. It almost made me ill and it frightened me somehow, being there and knowing what was under the bed. So I couldn't wait for you there. I went down to the drug store on the corner, where I could watch from the soda fountain. I don't know how long I sat there, but it was hours. And once—listen, Tommy—once I thought I saw you getting out of a car; then I realized I must be imagining things. I didn't think of hired cars. But after that I saw a man drive up and he went up to the car and did something at the back—very quickly. Then he walked back to his car and got in. But it *must* have been you I saw, and the man must have bent the license plate. Tommy, it *had* to be the car, because later a man came out of the service passage with a bundle and drove away in that car, and then I saw the other car, with the man and the girl, and it drove away too."

"A man and a girl?" Tommy echoed. "Then she—she could be the one who stole the car! She could have slipped around to the other side, there in the darkness and— But why?" he demanded blankly.

"You didn't see a trooper's uniform on the man, did you? Did you see his face?"

"No. No, now that I think of it, he stayed in the dark all the time. I couldn't see his face at all." Tommy lit a cigarette and walked up and down the room nervously. "They followed me," he said. "They waited for me to get the body in the car, then— They *knew* there was a body!" he exclaimed. "And how could anyone but the murderers know that? They must have been the—"

The telephone rang, halting Tommy's words. He and Carol looked at each other. "But no one knows us here," he said.

"Oh, it's probably room service asking about something." Carol lifted the receiver. "Yes? What is—" The color receded from her face. The ashes spilled off her cigarette and over her skirt. "But I don't—can't—" She muffled the receiver. "A man wanting you. Tommy Case," she whispered.

Tommy moved his tongue across his lips. "They're still following," he said very softly. He took the telephone from her hand. "Hello?"

"You shouldn't move so fast. Everything's okay for you, back at your apartment. It's like this, Tommy: Limpy's still resting in the old Cadillac. Nobody's going to find it unless it just has to be that way; that'll depend on you, Tommy. You listening?"

"I'm listening," Tommy said.

"You can stall the rent outfit by getting your wife to take them some more money and say that you're delayed somewhere upstate. Then you can pick out a bagful of the best diamonds and emeralds around Max's. Plenty, Tommy. By tomorrow midnight you should be ready for taking a walk with the bag. I'll phone you. We'll work out a schedule. I'll take the bag and you'll get the Cadillac back—minus Limpy. I'll fix that. Now . . . that's the yes side. Are you interested in the no?" he asked ironically.

"Yes. Let's hear all the stories while we're talking," Tommy said.

"In case there isn't any bag of diamonds, everything is different, naturally. I'd been worrying Limpy a little, so when I found him, he was very nice about telling me his secrets, hoping I'd appreciate his confidence. So I could tell people about Hillview. Anonymously, see? Then

I could tip the folks off about where an old Cadillac might be. And who'll be dead in it? Damned if it's not the guy who put the finger on you six years ago. And the rent place remembers you, Tommy: name and all. And just for the cute touch, there's a piece of pipe in that Cadillac right now. I dunno, but maybe it fits the busted place in Limpy's skull. Do you get the picture now? The way things are, that car and the corpse will be a little hard to explain, somewhat like an elephant in a bathroom. It is all a matter of giving a guy enough rope, letting him set his own stage. And, Tommy, honest they wouldn't believe you if you said a cop stopped you and somebody snatched the car with a body in it. You've got to be realistic." There was a pause. "So I'll phone you a little before midnight about the bag."

"But what happens to me? You'll never let me off the fire!"

"That's where I'm different from Limpy. He wouldn't, but I've always had a feeling you shouldn't beat a horse that's paid you a daily-double."

"And the diamonds? Max will—" Tommy stopped abruptly.

"That's easy, too. After I've got the stuff, you get settled down in a bar where the folks know you. And be sure they know you're there *right then*. I'll see that a brick gets thrown through Max's window. You've left the safe open, see. So



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we've got us a burglary, and the window-smashing sets the time. But you're in a bar. So I'll be calling. And remember: Plenty of the best." He hung up.

Tommy had scarcely heard the last words. The man's previous statement was spinning around his brain: "*You shouldn't beat a horse that's paid you a daily-double.*" A horse. . . . And Artie at the Lantern Hotel had been betting horses. Millions of people bet on horses, but hadn't there been something familiar in this telephone voice? Something like the weary irony of Artie's voice? And a girl! There'd been a girl in Artie's office, then a girl in the car Carol had seen. Horses and girls. . . .

"The girl who was with the man in the car," Tommy said to Carol. "Did you see her? Can you remember anything about her?"

Carol shook her head. "She stayed in the car. I didn't even know she was there until the car passed the street light and I saw—oh, I *do* know she had blonde hair!"

And Artie's girl was blonde, Tommy recalled silently. He stared at the telephone and kept thinking: The man wouldn't know I was here unless he had followed me here from my apartment. And if it's Artie, he probably hasn't gone back to the Lantern Hotel; there wouldn't have been time.

He turned to Carol. "I'm going to take a walk. I'll be all right. Don't worry about me. And I'll be back here before morning."

"Tommy, wait." She came toward him. "You're *not* going to do what that man wants?" she asked slowly.

"Oh, yes." And then he smiled as he kissed her. "Yes. Up to a certain point, if I have to."

TOMMY used the stairway, then turned left at the lobby and went through the kitchen. Two waiters were eating a late snack. "Greetings," Tommy said, and went out the rear door and into a cab. It was after two o'clock when he reached the Lantern Hotel. Except for one yellowish globe at the foot of the stairs, the lobby was dark. The elevator was locked for the night. He walked back to the dark depth of the lobby and shifted a couch. He sat down behind it, his back to the wall.

He could see the shadowy doorway and the lighted area at the stairs. Now and then the El rumbled by.

Presently three men came slowly down the stairs. One was cursing softly as they departed. Perhaps twenty minutes later, two men entered from Third Avenue and went up the stairs. From the echo of their footsteps, Tommy knew they had turned into the second-floor hall. In less than five minutes two men came down; they were not the same men.

Then Tommy's nerves tightened. Out of the night and into the lobby came Artie and the blonde. There was a low interchange of whispers; then Artie unlocked his cage of an office. The light was turned on. A drawer rubbed open and shut. The light went off and Artie returned.

"That's enough traveling for tonight," he said. "Let's see how the game's doing and call it a day." Together they went up the stairs and a door opened and closed on the second floor.

Slowly Tommy rose, while the words kept sounding in his ears: "Enough traveling for tonight. . . ." He tested the knob of the cage-office. The door was locked. The walls did not reach the ceiling. They were about seven feet high. He listened, then moved a chair against the wall. From the chair he could grip the top of the wall. He pulled himself up, crawled over, hung a few moments, then dropped to the floor inside. Again he listened, then felt his way across the darkness until he touched the desk. He struck a match and opened the first drawer. There were matches, cigarettes, pencils. In the second drawer lay a key on a chain. A single key on a chain. And the rented car had had a single key on a chain.

It was just like the horses and the blondes, Tommy was thinking. Now this key . . . millions of them all over the world, yet this time they *had* to fit into one pattern.

Then Tommy saw the blunt revolver at the back of the drawer. It wasn't much of a gun. He struck another match and lifted it. It was loaded. The match went out. He stood absolutely still, his head half raised while he looked toward the ceiling.

I could make him tell, he was thinking. And then I could kill him. I could make him tell where the car and body are hid-

den. Then I could kill him. The girl? She would talk. But I could kill her, too. I could kill them both, and my life could go on then. I could get the car and dispose of the body, and my life could go on. No one would find me. It couldn't happen twice. I could kill them. . . . I could—

It became a rhythm that filled his brain. His breathing grew soft and thin. Slowly he slipped the revolver into his pocket. He struck another match and pushed a chair near the wall. He climbed out of the cage-office and fingered the revolver again. Something queer seemed to happen to him, something he could not understand, exactly, but there seemed to be an odor of the past in his nostrils, and a sensation of moving through an old pantomime. It was like a dream that an ancient actor might have of a part he had played long ago.

Tommy climbed the stairs silently. He tiptoed along the corridor until he found the only door beneath which a light shone. He listened. The restless sound came from deep within. At last he made out the words:

"All down, for or against. The dice are rolling. Seven! Seven's a winner! Pay the line, and down again. . . ." The chant of the dealer went on and on. Slowly Tommy toptoed back to the dark end of the corridor and waited. His moist fingers stroked the gun, and the scent and sensation of the past roamed through him, ever stronger.

Four men went out. One man came up the stairs. But at last the door opened and Artie and the blonde came out. They turned toward the stairway. Tommy heard them pass the third floor. They turned into the fourth-floor hall. He followed swiftly. The door closed. It was a door toward the front, one of a pair of adjacent doors.

Tommy wet his lips. The gun felt sticky in his fingers. He lifted his hand and let it fall. The knock echoed. Moments passed before the lock turned. The door opened and the blonde looked out.

"What do—" she started. Tommy put a foot in and gripped her shoulder. With the other hand, he thrust the gun into her ribs.

"You know I'm not kidding," he said quietly. "Call Artie in here." He shut the door behind him. The girl seemed

frozen. Her cheeks were white and there was a worn look to her beauty, suddenly. "Call him," Tommy repeated. He turned her and fitted the gun against her back. For the first time he could look at the room. It was large and very luxurious compared to the rest of the Lantern Hotel. Wall-to-wall carpeting covered the floor. Golden drapes hid the dirt of Third Avenue. There was a red leather bar in one corner.

"Artie. Come here, Artie." The girl's voice was faint.

"Huh? You say something, Janie?" Artie called from the next room.

"Come here," she repeated weakly. His shadow crossed the doorway and he walked in, drying his face on a towel. His shirt was off and his skin was pale below the neck.

"What's the matter with—" He saw Tommy. Tommy moved the gun, and Artie saw it. A drop of water fell from his nose. The sun-tan ebbed from his face and a line stretched down his forehead.

"What's the score, bud?" he asked boldly.

"Where is the car and Limpy?" Tommy asked deliberately.

"What car? What are you talking about?" he said loudly. "I—"

"If you don't tell me now, I'm going to kill you."

"Listen, what kind of—" He stopped and a puffy greyness crossed his face. He swallowed and took another fast look at the gun.

"Where is the car and Limpy?" Tommy asked stonily.

"Artie, I . . . Artie, tell him for God's sake," the girl whimpered.

A FRAGMENT of fury shone in Artie's eyes, then evaporated. He swallowed thickly. "Tommy, we—we—" The word stuck on his tongue and he had to cough it off. "We can make a deal. Limpy, he—he was a yellow little rat. He was a yellow little rat. He stole chips from my dice game and peddled them to the players, then he said he'd yell if I did anything about—"

"Where is the car and Limpy?" Tommy jabbed the gun at the girl's back. "Where is it?"

"In the Bronx, in the Bronx in a vacant warehouse," she gasped. "Where Artie

had a club once. Tell him, Artie, please, please," she begged.

A ragged damp look gathered around Artie's mouth. Many moments passed. At last the throat moved. The words came. "At the end of Arbont Street, where it dead-ends. The old brick building on the right. It's in there," he said slowly.

"And who else knows about me and about Hillview?"

"Nobody that I've told. Nobody," Artie said.

"Nobody," Tommy said softly. "And it's in a warehouse." A warehouse. Vacant. No one would hear a shot. No one would know. A warehouse, Tommy kept thinking. Slowly he moved his gun. "Put on that coat on the couch. We're going to take a look at this warehouse. We're going slow and we're not going to make much noise. Put on that coat."

Artie obeyed slowly. The greyness was spreading, covering his face. The girl trembled. Tommy motioned Artie to the door and stepped aside. He shifted the gun to Artie's spine. "Very slow. And, little girl, just remember: It's not far from you to this gun. Let's go." They went slowly down the stairs and out on the avenue. "We'll go in your car," Tommy said.

Artie made a wordless sound. He turned and walked heavily toward a sedan.

"Open the back door, too," Tommy ordered. "Both of you get in the front. Don't try to pick up anything that might be there. Just drive slow and go to the warehouse." He slid into the back seat and leaned forward, with the gun less than a foot from Artie's head. The car started slowly. The headlights played through the massive beams of the El. Third Avenue Avenue was ragged and empty. The girl was crying very softly.

"I'm afraid, I'm afraid, I'm afraid," she began to sob.

Artie said nothing. Tommy kept thinking: I will kill them and it will be done. I will come back for the car keys. I will leave the body and return the car, and everything will be over.

Perspiration flecked his lips. He licked it away. It was hard to breathe. I will kill them and it will be over, he thought again.

Then another corner of his brain began

to whisper: But it wasn't over the other time. The nightmares never ended, and Limpy found me. Maybe the nightmares will be worse this time. There will be three to remember. Three. . . . And he wouldn't be able to tell Carol about this.

The girl kept sobbing. Artie was silent. He was breathing harshly. He was desperately afraid, Tommy knew. Perhaps he knew, intuitively, that he was going to die.

But I must never tell Carol. Never. I will hide it. Always. And she will never know. . . . Then Tommy remembered that moment of starved peace and freedom when he had told her the truth. The moment would never come again, if this happened. Never again. Only the nightmares and the silence inside himself, and the endless waiting for someone to find him. Never again the freedom of the truth.

The girl kept crying. Artie said nothing. Tommy began to tremble. It was hard to breathe. His throat felt hot. He felt as if he needed to scream. He stared at the shadows that raced away from the El beams as the car approached. Like fugitives from sunlight. Like people, hunted and silent and mute. Like the man he had been and would be forever. A shadow, running away forever.

"Stop! Stop this damned car!" he screamed. Artie gasped and slammed on the brakes. The girl was too terrified to cry. Tommy sat there, panting and shaking. And then, very slowly, the decision came. It came with the memory of that one moment of honesty with Carol.

"You can go on now," he said. "Turn at the next street and go to Times Square." Artie started to say something. "Go to Times Square," Tommy repeated slowly.

Times Square was virtually empty. A few cabs prowled. Newspapers moved listlessly in the night breeze, and a cop walked his beat.

"Stop," Tommy said. Each word he spoke, each motion he made seemed like a puppet's motions, a puppet's words. He did not understand himself.

"Get out," he ordered. The cop was coming closer. The stick was rolling in his hand. Artie got out and the girl got out. A newspaper rattled.

"Listen," Artie started thickly. "What crazy damned idea—"

He stopped as the cop stopped and peered at them. "Something wrong?" he asked tentatively. Tommy held out the gun.

"I can't do it again. All of us are murderers. Take us—"

Artie let out an incoherent cry. He spun and seized the girl and with a hard shove he sent her stumbling against the cop. The revolver clattered to the sidewalk. Tommy leaped for it as Artie did, but the girl was sprawled in his way. Artie snatched it and leaped back. The cop was drawing his own gun as Artie leveled the revolver. There was no way to reach Artie in time, Tommy knew. The cop was going to be too late—the cop that he had stopped, had hunted, had caused to be here at this moment!

Tommy threw himself in a sprawling leap in front of the cop. While he was still in mid-air, he heard Artie's revolver crashing out. He felt nothing. He sailed on and crashed on the sidewalk. As he fell, he heard the dual roaring of both guns. He heard the girl screaming. He heard a choked gasp from Artie, then a tangling of footsteps as Artie tried to run. The cop's gun roared again and the footsteps ceased moving. Tommy saw Artie fall. He fell slowly, as if he could not believe it, and would not believe it. He did not break the fall with his arms. He fell face forward and he seemed to squeeze himself together slowly for ten seconds. Slowly he relaxed. Artie was dead.

"You fool! You crazy damn fool!" the cop raged. He stalked over to Tommy. "You got no better sense than to jump where a gun is banging, huh?" But his Irish face wasn't exactly furious. Tommy started to get up. His left leg made it. His right leg bent and went south. He sat down. He tried again and sat down once more. Then he sat still and stared at the dark stain that was coming from his thigh.

"Like I said! Just like I said!" the cop wailed. "Crazy as a peacock, only God bless you. Hey, sister, where you going? Get back here!" Then people began to appear. Cabs stopped and the cop began to yell. Tommy just sat there, beginning to feel a little drowsy, wanting a smoke.

IT WAS along in the afternoon of two days later when the nurse brought in the fat man with the walrus-like mustache and the big watch chain draped across his vest. Tommy took one look and knew him. He was Mr. Custis, the chief of the three-man police force of Hillview.

"Oh." Tommy said. Then he said, "Hello. It's been a long time."

"Quite a spell, quite a spell," Mr. Custis boomed. He said it again and mopped his damp jowls. "Been quite a trip here to New York, too. Been talking with lots of people. Max is one of 'em. Been meeting your wife, likewise. Likewise Tierney. Tierney. Seems like a good cop. Wouldn't mind having him in Hillview, either. Been getting the straight of lots of things we didn't understand too clearly up in Hillview." He took another gulp of air. "Mighty lucky thing for you that this scoundrel named Artie lived long enough to say what he said. Mighty lucky, I say again."

Tommy took a hard look. "Huh? What's that?"

"Guess you were too excited to see things straight. Yep. This Artie told Tierney what Limpy said, just before he killed him. Told him how Limpy confessed to killing old Walt Nicholson himself, after you knocked him unconscious and ran away. Yep. Didn't surprise me a bit, either. Never had any use for Limpy."

"Listen, Mr. Custis," Tommy began. "Listen, I saw what happened, and I know when you're telling a—"

"Yes, sir. Anybody can tell when Mr. Custis is telling the truth," Mr. Custis said loudly. "Furthermore, Mr. Custis knows about psychology, as they say. Always could tell a murderer from otherwise. Yep." He glared at his watch. "I've got to be getting along, but I just wanted to stop in. Just wanted to say good-bye."

He turned around and his eyes were gleaming. "One thing I always remember about that bird, Walt Nicholson. Back in 1928 I bought a Ford from him, and derved if he didn't drain the gas tank. Yep. Mr. Custis never forgot, either."

He laughed and closed the door. Tommy sagged back on the pillow and closed his eyes, and at last the truth sank in: It was over, and he was free again.

THE END

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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 31)

little something about women I—I would like a piece of advice."

I knew what was on his mind. "Take Millet's car back where we got it," I told him. "Then go in and talk to Bessie. Bust in a window or kick a door down if you have to. No," I corrected myself. I took Sally's key to Millet's front door from my key ring and handed it to him. I'd had my use of it. "No," I repeated. "Use the front door. Don't try to soften the story. Don't try to make it tougher than it was. Just tell it as it happened."

He thanked me for the key but made no motion to take his foot from my running board. His heart was in his words. "You think in time she'll grow to care for me again?"

"I'm positive," I told him. "And I'll tell you how I know. The same thing happened to another lad about ten years ago. Steve Millet married his girl right out from under his nose. And in a way it was worse with him. He had to eat his heart out for two years before she realized she'd made a mistake, divorced Steve and married him." I hesitated, told him, "That was her key I just gave you."

"Oh," he said. "Oh, I see." He took his foot off the running board.

I stopped at the big gas station on the corner of Van Nuys and Ventura, told them to fill up my tank and check the oil and called Sally while I waited.

"I'm on my way home," I told her.

She said, "Oh, honey, I've been so worried."

She meant it. Her voice had that little catch to it that can make a man's eyes smart.

"There's been quite some trouble," I admitted. "But Steve Millet is done for, finished."

There was no hesitation. She said, "I'm glad." Her voice was almost harsh, but concern crept back into it as she added, "But you're all right, Johnny? You're okay?"

I was tired. I was hungry. My shoulder was giving me hell. But I was telling the truth when I told her, "I feel fine. Just fine. Put on a pot of coffee, sweetheart. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

THE END

DON'T TALK OF THE DEAD!

(Continued from page 51)

was the only way I could take it from her. I didn't want it in the back. The .25 went off with a loud, sharp report that almost drowned out the dying wail of the siren in the street below. She took part of my ear off with that first shot. Her eyes grew wild and panicky at the sight of the blood and she fired again as I went over in a low, fast plunge. I rolled fast and tried to get out my own gun. She dropped the overnight bag, cursing in a high, wailing voice. I grabbed the fringe of the scatter rug with one hand and tore it away as if it were the only thing I had left in life to hang onto, and her next shot showered plaster over both of us as she went down in a wild tangle of legs and skirt and polo coat. The gun skidded across the floor.

She was up again and heading for it as leather heels pounded along the hall. She caught up the little gun and turned and fired twice through the door. Then she sobbed out a curse and spun on one heel and ran into the bedroom as Slack, his face white with fury, kicked open the front door and came in with a Police Special in his hand. Behind him I caught a fast glimpse of the night clerk, his face a startled white oval.

Slack swept the door shut with one back-hand sweep and swung his revolver for a fast shot. He hesitated at the last moment, his face savage. He ignored the locked door and loped across the living room to the window, smashed it out with his gun barrel and stuck his head out.

And then she screamed, just once, just one long wail that I can hear sometimes when I'm going off to sleep at nights.

There was silence then.

Slack pulled his head in and walked slowly over to the phone, holstering his gun, and picked up the receiver and dialed a number. I crawled up one wall like a broken beetle and went past him to the window and looked out. A couple of feet from my face the iron railing of the fire escape was a wet black bar against the night.

Beyond it there was nothing but the open window of Ava Rocco's room and below that, the dark well of the courtyard.

THE END

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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 108)

grinning. "The halt judging the blind," he cracks. "The only difference between yours and Hymie's neurosis is in direction. You both exhibit a marked need for bolstering your egos. Hymie imagines himself the arch mastermind criminal, while you, fortunately for society, find it necessary to constantly appear as the heroic guardian of the people."

I have got sense enough not to laugh out loud, Mamie, but the captain's face is something you gotta see to believe.

"How," he stews, "under the oath of Hyppo-whatever-it-is did you work that one out?"

The Doc is not impressed a bit and lays it on very glib. "Quite obvious, sir, since as a homicide detective you have no conceivable connection with this incident, yet you rush to usurp a fellow officer's jurisdiction, hoping to be praised for your assiduity."

For a minute, Mamie, I think Scott will eat this joe out but good, and then he is interrupted by a noise on the floor, and Wire-Away is coming out of his trance swinging. His hand hits Scott's leg and he starts climbing the captain's frame and yelling off his head that Scott is me and Tony should boil him in oil for busting up his play-party and he is going to declare war on all the hackies in New York.

And this time, Mamie, the Doc hits the nail right on the nose. "Dementia Praecox," he declares about Wire-Away. "It will save the citizens a lot of money and time to commit this person to a hospital rather than try him as sane on counts that are difficult to prove. I will so report to the committee."

On this the captain and I will back the Doc all the way. Then we both get an arm of the Doc and escort him out before he decides he will report the whole committee for being nuts.

Like Captain Scott tells me, "Hymie, it isn't safe to be so nearly right about people, and will you please go and make friends with somebody else in another department of the police, because this is positively the last time I will ever take personal responsibility for you. You're driving me crazy!"

MAN OF PARTS

(Continued from page 109)

try to forget the part of her life that had been spent with Willie.

But Willie wouldn't be forgotten. There were scenes during which Willie flexed his muscles menacingly at the barber, and there were threats which Thorn, rubbing the spots where Willie's hamlike hands had once landed, could not forget.

Which made it all very simple. If Willie, like a good chap, would not remove himself from the lives of Augusta and Martin, then, perforce, Augusta and Martin would remove Willie. Permanently.

WILLIE must have been somewhat surprised to get an invitation from Augusta to come out to her new home. But no doubt he reasoned that the same charms which had so often before swayed the fair frau were once again working in his favor, and he went.

Augusta had never been so sweet to him. Was he hungry? Soon there would be something to eat. He looked starved, poor man. But first, he must look over her new house. He must be sure to look at the bedroom. She would be outside.

She waited in the garden for him, but Willie never came back to her—in one piece, that is. For soon there came the shot that meant that Thorn, hiding in the bedroom closet, had killed Willie.

It was quite a while before Thorn emerged from the house. He had had much work to do. Willie was such a big man. There was so much to . . . cut up. Even with his barber's razor it was hard work. And there were so many packages to make.

There was one package for Willie's head and two packages for his legs and two more for his arms, and such a big torso as Willie's would surely make at least two more bundles. A neat man was Thorn, too, and each package was neatly done up in oilcloth—that was to keep the blood from dripping out—and twine. The head was encased in plaster of paris so that it would sink.

Then ensued a busy time for Augusta and Thorn. There was a lot of Willie to dispose of. There was the head to drop in the East River, off the Ninety-second Street Ferry, and there were the legs to

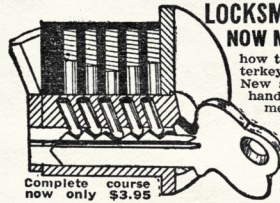
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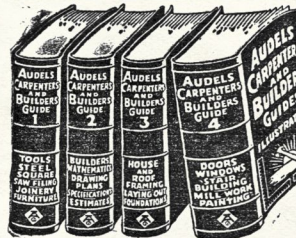
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DETECTIVE TALES

drop off the Thirty-fourth Street Ferry. The arms and torso were dropped off the Greenpoint Ferry. The last part of Willie Goldensuppe, the lower part of his trunk, was deposited in an uninhabited part of the Bronx. And now there was nothing to keep Martin from his *Liebchen*, or Augusta from her *Geliebte*.

Except one thing: a white pekin duck that came home to its master with its feathers smeared with human blood.

Parts of Willie had been found, picked up here and there, but who can identify a leg, an arm, a piece of torso? Not the police of those days, a half-century back, still unaware of the possibilities of the microscope and other instruments of crime-detection.

But there was the duck. Martin had placed Willie's body in a bathtub while he dismembered him, letting the water run so it would flush out the blood. But Martin had made one mistake: Instead of the water running into a sewer, as he supposed, it ran on the surface of the ground, forming a bright red pool—a pool very attractive to a little white pekin duck that strayed one day from its pen and came to wallow in the water brightened by Willie Goldensuppe's blood.

From then on, events moved swiftly. After the duck got home, its startled owner took one look at the bright vermilion feathers and called the police. It didn't take the police long to find the pool where the duck had gone swimming, and when they did, it was all over with Augusta and Thorn. The whole story was there for even a child to read: It was written in Willie Goldensuppe's blood along a drain-pipe that led from the pool where a duck had wallowed to a bathtub in a house rented by one Augusta Nack.

In the murder trial that followed, Thorn was ably defended by William F. Howe, one of the great criminal lawyers of the day, but not even that could save him, and on August 1, 1898, he went to the chair.

The more fortunate Augusta served only nine years in prison. Released in 1908, she came back to her beloved New York and opened a delicatessen where, as far as anyone knows, she is still cutting up—knackwurst.



TOP (L. TO R.): PETE REISER, BRUCE EDWARDS, EDDIE MIKSIS
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