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BURNING
BLONDE**

by **JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

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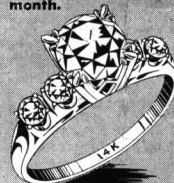
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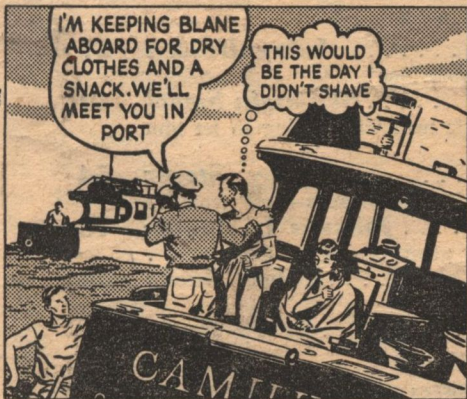
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VOL. FORTY-FOUR

DECEMBER, 1949

NUMBER ONE

Three Dynamic Murder Novels

1. **CASE OF THE BURNING BLONDE** **John D. MacDonald** 10
—took more extinguishing than Gerran could give—without pouring his own blood on the flame!
2. **STORM WARNING!** **Frank Ward** 58
—caught Investigator Mike Foster with nothing between him and the impending hail of bullets—but a beautiful brunette!
3. **KILL ONCE—KILL TWICE!** **G. T. Fleming-Roberts** 106
—but the trouble, Pete Kells told himself, was that Number 2 was going to be a too-nosy guy named Pete Kells!

Two Smashing Detective Novelettes

4. **REDHEAD, STAY DEAD!** **William Campbell Gault** 36
—Rocky told that lovely, bad-penny corpse—that *refused* to stay away from his garage!
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—Private Eye Tim Dant wondered. Also, can anybody use some spare corpses?

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—Dave Lait, wanted to swap a night club—for a tombstone!
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—was Policeman Pete Sheldon's motto, and the little man was willing to let him have it, too—the business, that is!
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—put perky Mary Madison on a trail lined with greenbacks—and trouble!
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—led the kid to a grim crossroad . . . with a grim choice to make. . . .
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—said Latter—and opened the door to his executioner!

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By **SKIPPY ADELMAN**

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Rothstein's particular sphere of operation was the "grey" area, somewhere between the crooked and the legitimate. His projects were legitimate enough when looked at from one angle, but when observed from another, they were as wicked as sin. A good example of his mode of operation is the story of how Rothstein made a \$200,000 killing on the Black Sox scandal, at the same time keeping his own skirts perfectly clean.

Abe Attell, former featherweight champion of the world turned gambler, was the man generally credited with the idea of bribing certain members of the 1919 Chicago White Sox to throw the world series to the Cincinnati Reds. Attell was a man with an idea but no capital. He asked Rothstein to come in with him as his partner, supplying the money. "I've approached some of the key White Sox players and they're willing to throw the series for \$100,000. If you put up the dough you'll be sure to get more than twice that in return," Attell is reported to have said.

Rothstein pretended to recoil in horror, saying he didn't want to get into anything crooked. Attell went away disappointed. But Rothstein knew that the former champ would shortly find someone else to finance his scheme. Rothstein bet heavily on the underdog Cincinnati team to win.

When the scandal broke two years later Rothstein was proven to have been \$200,000 richer because of the thrown series, but there wasn't a jot of evidence to tie him into the criminal act of bribing the Sox players.

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By NELSON and GEER

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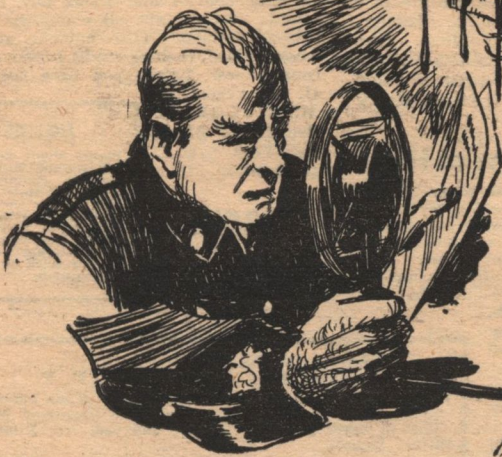
Police of six states knew the terrible phantom strangler of the mid-1920's only as the "Gorilla Man," a hulking creature with dangling arms, hairy hands and black unwinking eyes that had the phosphorescent flecks of a beast's. His twisted mind had evolved a pattern for murder—always the same—that had brought death to twenty women. After each killing he vanished without trace.

In 1927 a young Winnipeg, Canada, electrician entered his silent home. "Where's mommy?" he asked his small children. "A big man with funny eyes wanted to rent the spare room," they told him. "Mommy showed it to him and we didn't see her after that." Searching, he found his wife's beaten and strangled body under a bed.

This time the elusive phantom made a mistake—he had changed into the electrician's new whipcord suit. Police grabbed the slim clue. Hurriedly canvassing second-hand stores, they found where he had traded the whipcord for another suit and bought a hat with a colored band.



Enlisting the aid of radio—the first time it was ever employed in a manhunt—police broadcast a description of the strangler which quickly brought word that he'd been seen hitching a ride to Regina, where he sold the hat and bought overalls. Then from Killarney came a report that a hobo answering his description had been placed in a cell. He had broken out and escaped almost immediately, but the aroused countryside had thrown a cordon around the area and were hunting him down.



A special train crowded with police rushed to the scene. As it pulled into the Killarney station the Gorilla Man, thinking it was the regular train due a few minutes later, ducked from cover, scrambled aboard and shouldered his way into the arms of a Mountie, who made the capture.

This strange mass-killer, who proved to be one Earl Nelson, was found guilty and hanged—because, in spite of his mad craftiness, he failed to realize that there is just no successful pattern for murder!





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CASE OF THE

By

JOHN D. MacDONALD

CHAPTER ONE

The Face Is Familiar

DURING the ride in from the airport to Carondelet Street in the Pan-American limousine, Hunt Gerran strove to find within himself some secret store of excitement, but found only the bitter lassitude, the wry dejection,

that was the result of the dengue fever. The doctor at the Rangoon hospital had said, "We have found that the morbidity of dengue lasts for many months, dependent on the severity of the case. Do not make any decisions while

Cursing his own weakness as he stumbled back, Hunt yanked at the gun in his pocket.



BURNING BLONDE

Hunt Gerran wouldn't have minded playing husband to the slim, soft-lipped blonde who posed as his wife. But when she brought into the household three homicide-happy hoods, Hunt wisely figured it was time to check out—before the brand-new Mrs. Gerran became a brand-new widow!

**Smashing Novel
of Murder
at the
Mardi
Gras**



you are in this mood, Gerran. Wait until your spirits are right again."

It was easy for the doctor to say that. "Make no decisions." What kind of a life requires no decisions for many months?

There had been just seven weeks with the honeyed beauty of Morgan before he had left on the prospecting trip to North Burma, the trip that was to have made him rich. And the trip had ended in a nightmare of fever and the agony of fighting his way back through the leech-ridden jungle while dengue had made his eyes feel as if they were set in sockets of broken glass, had made his jaw tighten on screams that were caused by the pain in his back and legs. "Break-bone fever" it had once been called. He had arrived at the hospital with a temperature of a hundred and six.

Make no decisions? Seven weeks with Morgan Saenger—Morgan Gerran after the brief ceremony. Five of those weeks had been an intoxication. She was tall and blonde and sunbrowned. She moved with the sleepy tightness of a golden cat and her eyes were luminous. She was greedy and demanding and as heady as spiced wine. And enormously wealthy. The last two weeks of the seven had sown the seeds that had finally burst into full realization in a sweat-soaked hospital bed in Rangoon.

He realized, far away from Morgan, his wife, that behind those luminous eyes were thoughts only of self. Self-gratification, amusement, enormous self-esteem. The fates had given her the face and body of an odalisque, plus a vast inheritance. But they had failed to give her the smallest trace of unselfishness, the incalculable gift of character.

To Morgan all the world was a shining, golden spectacle which revolved for her own interest and amusement. Threatened by boredom, she had merely to buy a change in tempo. Hunt Gerran had met her at a party when she was bored. Three days later they were married. And not until he had time to think while recuperating in Burma did he realize that she had collected him the way a hunter would collect a trophy. He had been collected because he was tall, lean, dark and amusing. He knew that a faint hint of

brutality in his manner had attracted her. You can't acquire an engineering education by picking coal, driving trucks and fighting preliminary bouts in tank towns without acquiring an edge of hardness that a woman of Morgan's temperament would be quick to discern.

He had come up the hard way, from blue denim to dinner jackets, and Morgan had liked to trace with cool fingertip the whitened scars on the backs of his knuckles.

He had wanted her to come with him. He had wanted to be able to show her some of the far places of the world. But she had laughed at him and had taken him with her to select the French Quarter apartment on St. Peter Street where she said she would be waiting for him when he returned.

And he had expected to return in triumph. Make no decisions! All his savings plus the five thousand he had borrowed from Morgan had disappeared in the rust and rot of the jungle. All he had in the world were the clothes on his back, the small suitcase and the duplicate key to the apartment. The key was flecked with jungle corrosion, but it would open a door. Beyond the door he would find a woman—but he would find no understanding. Beyond the door he would find a golden girl who by now would be bored with him, who had failed to write to him, who hadn't answered his cable.

The busy confusion of Canal Street glittered and sparkled in the February sun. Over New Orleans was the hot fever of expectancy, the period before Mardi Gras.

Yet there was no expectancy in him. He was returning to an empty marriage, and he had decided to propose divorce. Make no decisions. What a laugh that was!

His face felt fevered and yet the back of his neck was like ice. His hands trembled with weakness. The doctor had advised him against leaving so soon, against selling the few undamaged bits of equipment to buy his air passage back to the States. The doctor had advised a leisurely sea voyage. Hunt Gerran's ears still rang with the throbbing vibration of the plane motors.

THE LIMOUSINE stopped and he got out, took two steps toward the waiting cabs and then paused. The cab would get him to the apartment too quickly. The sidewalk tilted dizzily as he turned away, and with the back of his hand he wiped the perspiration from his upper lip. The wrinkled suit hung in folds on his wasted body. He had dropped from one ninety-five down to a low of one-forty, and had gained back but fifteen pounds of the loss. The small suitcase felt enormously heavy.

Yet he walked. He crossed the shining confusion of Canal Street, walked down the narrow carnival spectacle of Bourbon Street. Inside the myriad bars there was coolness and empty music that struck flatly out against the sunlit street. A ragged man with a box camera on a bowlegged tripod stepped up to Hunt to give a sales pitch about having a picture taken. But he saw the look on Hunt Gerran's face, gave him one startled look and turned quickly away. Several small boys ran by, one jostling Hunt so that he nearly fell.

Suddenly the weakness was too much. Hunt walked dizzily over to the nearest building, leaned against it. His handkerchief was damp and sodden. He mopped his face and swallowed nausea. Four more blocks.

Suddenly he turned into the nearest bar. He slid onto the high stool, and only his elbows braced on the bar kept him from toppling off.

The bartender came over, looked at him cautiously and said, "You sick, Mac?"

"Double brandy—straight," Hunt said thickly.

For a moment it looked as though the man would refuse to serve him. Hunt forced himself to sit erect. He looked coldly at the bartender and said evenly, "You do speak English, don't you, friend?"

"Sure," the man mumbled. He poured the brandy, set it in front of Hunt. The liquor stung his throat, brought tears to his eyes, but he felt the warmth and strength well through him.

He went back out into the sunlight, and the world was an unreal place. His weakness made the drink hit him with

the sudden force of a blow. But his long stride was steady as he covered the blocks, looking neither to left nor right. Bienville, Conti, St. Louis, Toulouse and, at last, St. Peter. A block and a half down St. Peter toward Chartres. Cross the street. Ignore the scream of tires, the blast of horn, the scared curse of the startled cab driver. Long step up onto the far curb. Doorway. Mailbox. "Mrs. H. L. Gerran—2 B" Narrow staircase, smelling of the dampness of aged stone.

Second-floor hallway. Turn toward the front of the building. Fumble for the key. Insert it in the lock. Turn, push the door open. Smell the faint perfume of her, stand looking into the apartment of a stranger. French doors wide. Wrought-iron balcony, fragile against the sun-lit pastel of the building across the street. Blond furniture, ashtrays of massive crystal. White and wine-red with tiny touches of an acid green.

A room that was a movie set, a room that was a frame for Morgan.

"Morgan . . ." he called softly, and then, almost with panic, with shrillness, "Morgan!"

The silence of the room answered him. A breeze in the hallway shut the door behind him with a click of finality. The small suitcase slipped from nerveless fingers, thudded on the rug. He took two shattered steps toward the couch and then fell. But as consciousness faded, long training made him turn so as to take the force of the fall on his shoulder.

What should have been a heavy shock was as faint and remote as a half-remembered caress. Hunt Gerran lay on his side in the scented, silent room, his knees drawn up, his face at rest, the beads of perspiration on his white face glistening.

IT HAD been a four-round amateur bout in Scranton, a semi-final, and he had known as he looked across at the hairy shoulders of the squat Polish boy in the far corner that he had been poorly matched.

The first round had been a nightmare of flicking out a left that bounced off the impassive forehead of the boy who continually inched toward him. A night-

mare of keeping the right cocked without ever finding an opening for it.

Just before the bell a fist like concrete had thudded against his temple and knocked him sprawling.

In the second round the lights had gone out. Now he was on the canvas. He could feel it against his cheek. It didn't have the hard surface of canvas. It had an oddly tufted surface. Also, he could feel the weight of clothes on his shoulders. That wasn't right. And the ring didn't smell right. It should have smelled of cigar smoke, disinfectant, perspiration. But there was an odor of—of perfume. And the crowd was too silent.

He opened his eyes, looked straight ahead along the surface of the rug, saw red strap sandals on slim bare feet, saw the fragile ankles, the swell of calf. He looked up into her face. It was like looking at Morgan through a haze of pale blue smoke.

Morgan, and yet not Morgan. A stranger. He looked at her through the veil of weakness, across the long months of separation. He sat up, shuddering with the pain that beat against the inside of his skull.

"Sick," he said weakly. "I cabled you."

She extended a slim, cool hand. He took it, got with difficulty to his feet, stood swaying.

He looked at her and she would not quite fit his mental image. Blonde hair the exact shade of the hair he remembered. Grey eyes. A tall girl.

He wondered why she looked frightened. He could not imagine Morgan ever looking frightened. Yes, there was fear in those grey eyes. Fear and what looked like contempt. Revulsion.

He moved cautiously over to the couch and sat down.

"You've changed," he said.

Almost Morgan's voice. Yet not quite. "How did you get in?"

That wasn't right. Surely Morgan would not forget the key. She had made such a ceremony of giving it to him, lending their marriage the flavor of an intrigue.

"Have you forgotten giving me the key?"

"Key? Oh, of course."

He glanced over at a small table near the open French doors. He saw, almost with a feeling of relief, his picture standing there in a heavy silver frame.

It was the partial madness that had been born of his illness, he thought. Sick images of Morgan had replaced the real girl. He had given her a hardness and selfishness that did not exist. Maybe there should be no divorce. Make no decisions.

He forced a smile. He said, "You'll have to make allowances. Dengue fever does funny things to your head. I thought you weren't my wife for a little while. Why didn't you write?"

She shrugged. "Other things to do. I hate writing letters."

Again he frowned. The voice wasn't right. And there was a pallor about her that could be born of fear. He glanced at her left hand. The familiar rings were there. The rings he had bought her.

She was like a picture faintly out of focus. The slim length of her was right. The rounded arms the shade of honey. Black brows and lashes in striking contrast to the blonde hair.

During the long weeks in the hospital and throughout the trip back he had decided that he would not be moved by her beauty and her desirability. For Morgan was desirable.

Yet to see her standing there was almost more than he could bear. He reached out quickly, caught her slim wrist to pull her down beside him. She pulled away, almost with panic. "No," she gasped.

He let go her wrist. A hot blush reddened her tanned face. That was odd. He could not remember that Morgan had ever blushed.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Your wife," she said flatly.

The weakness twisted at him, and it seemed impossible to draw a deep breath. He saw the quick concern in her eyes.

"Lie down," she said.

He stretched out. She moved quickly to the foot of the couch, untied his shoes, pulled them off. "Undo your tie," she said.

He began to shake with a chill. Her sandals made quick sounds as she went

to the bedroom, came back with a blanket which she spread over him. She looked down at him and said, "Do you have any medicine you're supposed to take?"

He shook his head and closed his eyes. He was conscious of her looking down at him. The chill slowly faded away and he slept.

CHAPTER TWO

Lethal Lady

WHEN he awoke it was night and the apartment was dark. He felt better. When he clicked the lights on he saw her note on the floor by the door.

"Back soon—Morgan," it said. Morgan's writing. An angular, back-handed, sprawling line written in jet-black ink. He smiled at his own delusion that this was not Morgan.

As he stood holding the note he heard the key in the lock, and the door swung open. She gave him a shy smile, carried the armful of bundles out into the kitchen, calling over her shoulder, "You look bet-

ter now, Hunt. How do you feel?"

"Hungry, darling."

"I'll have something ready for us in a little while."

"New talent?"

"Oh, I've always liked . . ." A startled pause. A flat tone of voice. "I've learned to cook, Hunt."

He was certain that it wasn't what she had started to say. All of the doubt came flooding back to bewilder him.

He walked to the kitchen door. She had tied on a crisp apron. Without meeting his glance she said, "I thought that something light would be best for you. Scrambled eggs. Bacon. Toast. Does that sound all right?"

"Fine."

He felt better and he knew that at the moment his reasoning powers were not weakened by the aftermath of the disease. He closed his eyes for a moment and reconstructed the Morgan he remembered. Then he opened his eyes and looked at the girl. The differences were so subtle. All of the differences except one. And that was a major difference. It was

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a difference in basic attitude. Morgan had been laugor and passion and half-sleepy amusement. This girl had a crisp competence. But it had to be Morgan! What sense would there be in an impersonation?

"You've changed," he said softly.

She gave him a startled look. "We've both changed, Hunt."

He suddenly remembered that Morgan had never called him Hunt. She had added another syllable to his name, had called him Hunter.

He walked over to her, put his hands on her shoulders, felt her stiffen under his touch. "Wives should kiss husbands," he said. He turned her around slowly, tilted her chin upward with his knuckle. Her lips were fresh, cool and oddly timorous.

Morgan had always kissed with heady and practised ease.

She turned away from him. He went back into the living room, picked up his bag, carried it into the bedroom. He dug out shaving equipment and a fresh shirt and went into the bathroom.

Some small nagging worry ate at the back of his mind. Something he had noticed and yet had not been able to analyze. He shaved quickly, left the fresh shirt open at the collar and stepped out into the bedroom. He heard the distant clatter of dishes.

What he vaguely remembered had something to do with her clothes. He stepped to the closet, pulled the door open. The bedroom light shone in. He saw clothes that he vaguely remembered. He looked down at the shoes.

It came then, the memory that he sought. An afternoon a few days before he had left Morgan. She had been teasing him, laughing at him. He had been standing at the foot of the bed looking down at where she was stretched out, completely relaxed.

Running one finger along the inside curve of her left foot he had said, "For a gal that thinks of herself as a patrician, you certainly have peasant feet, my love. The width is D, I believe."

He had laughed at her sudden fury. Yes, Morgan's feet had been oddly wide compared with her slimness, the narrowness of her hands.

He picked up one of the shoes from the closet floor. Inside was stenciled "6½ AAA." The shoe slipped out of his hand, fell to the closet floor.

He moved away from the closet just in time. She appeared at the doorway and said, "Ready, Hunt."

In the light of his new knowledge, he looked at her and wondered why he had at any time considered that she was Morgan. The resemblance was superficial. She had Morgan's ripeness of line and curve, but none of the hard glitter that had been such an integrated part of Morgan's appeal.

With this knowledge came fear. What did this girl want? Who was she? Where was Morgan?

The handwriting on the note had been very like Morgan's writing. He wondered coldly if she could write a check with the same dexterity. A check with Morgan's signature was a gateway to great wealth.

She had set the table near the open French doors. The warm night air was filled with the carnival murmur of the French Quarter. The overcast sky reflected the dim rose glow of the city. In the distance a woman laughed. Carriage wheels clattered on the uneven pavement. Across the street a man and woman on a balcony, making but one shadow, were welded together by the night.

The soft light slanted across the table. The strange woman sat opposite him as he ate. The light made shadowed hollows under her prominent cheekbones, made a mystery of her eyes, made a pale cloud of her hair.

She did not sit at ease. She smoked, the cigarette trembling in her slim fingers, the motion of her hand erratic when she placed it to her lips.

He was possessed with the idea of further proof. He did not trust his own memory. As Morgan had had no friends in New Orleans, the substitution was possible, provided it had been arranged very shortly after his departure.

More proof.

AS he ate, he carefully planned what he would say. He finished, took one of her cigarettes from the pack on the table, lit it and leaned back so that the

light no longer struck his face. He did not want to give himself away by his expression.

"It's nice to be back here with you, Morgan," he said gently.

"Thank you."

"All the time I was away I thought of you and your little habits. Have you found a place here that can make Scotch Manhattans the way you like them?" Morgan had said that Manhattans were sickeningly sweet.

"Yes."

"We'll have to go there together and sit at the bar." Morgan had refused to sit at a bar. She thought it cheap.

"That will be nice, Hunt."

"What did you do with the convertible?"

"It's in storage." Morgan had told him before he left that she had a purchaser for it.

He slid out of the chair, went around behind her, bent and kissed her on the curve of her throat. When he had done that to Morgan, she had invariably shuddered deliciously and made mock of slapping him.

This girl sat stiff and cool.

He went back to his chair. In the distance there was the brazen clang of cymbals, the boom of heavy drums.

"What's that?" he asked.

"The first parade of Mardi Gras. The Krewe of the Knights of Momus. They're starting from St. Charles and Calliope Street."

A trick of the wind made the sound suddenly louder, and then it faded until they could no longer hear it.

The silence between them brought tension. With startling suddenness she lifted her wrist, glanced at the time.

"Who are you expecting?" he asked.

"No one," she answered calmly enough, but she seemed to huddle in the chair. Her lips were tightly closed.

He leaned toward her. His voice was harsh. "What happened to Morgan?"

"I'm Morgan. You're ill, Hunt."

For a crazy moment he wondered if he had been wrong. Then he thought of the shoes. "How do you manage to wear a triple-A shoe, darling? When did you learn to drink Manhattans? Why didn't you sell the car?"

Once again she glanced at her watch. "Waiting for your fellow crooks?" he asked. "What did you do to Morgan? How much have you stolen?"

For the first time she seemed to come to light. Her eyes flashed. "You can't steal that sort of money, Mr. Gerran, or whatever your real name is."

He stood up, leaned across and almost shouted, "What did you do to Morgan?"

Her purse was beside her. He saw too late that it was open. Her hand dipped in, and the round, deadly eye of a small automatic looked implacably at him.

"Sit down and be still," she said, a trembling in her voice.

He sat down slowly. "Where is Morgan?" he asked.

"She's in protective custody."

He moved one foot until it touched the leg of the table. With one motion he kicked the table toward her, fell sideways out of the chair, expecting the whip-crack of a shot. He reached, caught a slim ankle in his right hand, pulled her down toward him, found her wrist and, as she writhed under him, he twisted the automatic out of her hand.

He stood up, went quickly to the doorway and turned on the lights, all of them. She was on her feet when he turned.

"Sit down over there," he ordered. She obeyed meekly.

"This won't do you any good," she said. "They're on to you."

He frowned at her. "Look, Miss. I don't know who you are or what you're talking about. We better let the police straighten this out."

He walked toward the phone. As he reached for it, she laughed. He turned and stared at her. A bruise was darkening her cheek. The laugh was thin and fragile.

"What's funny?"

"The idea of you, of all people, threatening to phone the police."

He walked and stood over her. "Let me assure you that I am going to phone the police. I don't know what you think I am. I am an engineer. I have no police record. I come back here to find someone impersonating my wife. I gather that you've written checks in her name. My guess is that you'll draw at least ten years. I can think of no extenuating cir-

cumstances that would enable you to squeak out of it."

NOW that she was no longer playing a part, she had assumed her own personality. In her own way, she was as vital as Morgan had been. And yet there was something softer and more human about her.

"My, you talk convincingly, Mr. Gerran! How many holes have you talked your way out of? You won't talk your way out of this one, my friend!"

He ran his hand through his hair in a gesture of helplessness. "Lady, I want to give you a break if I can. You don't look like a crook. But we won't get anywhere if we keep talking two different languages. Just who the hell are you?"

She shrugged. "I might as well tell you. My name is Laurette Chambers. This is my home town."

"Who are you working for?"

"The United States Army. Intelligence."

He was rapidly growing more confused. "What on earth does the Army want with me?"

She lifted her chin proudly. "This country isn't safe any more for your type. You and your so-called wife."

"Just what do you think I am?"

She tilted her head to one side and smiled in triumph. "Of course they didn't tell me everything. But they did tell me enough so that I know how important you and that woman are to the espionage ring, and I've got a pretty good idea which foreign government you're working for. I can't understand what sort of mind you must have to betray your own country. Obviously this country has treated you well."

He wanted to laugh. Or cry. This pretty girl was the essence of unreality. It seemed incredible that she could sit there and tell such a fantastic story with every evidence of believing it.

He sat down suddenly, his knees weak. "Miss Chambers, I've never heard such a fantastic story in my life. Who fed you all that?"

"Go ahead. Call the police. You were pretty anxious a minute ago."

There seemed to be no starting point. He said carefully. "My wife's father was

a wealthy manufacturer. He died eight years ago and left every dime to Morgan. I met her several weeks before I left for Burma."

"That's what they call a cover story, isn't it?"

"Where do you think her money came from?"

"From the foreign power, of course. That's money that is used to tempt weak citizens. The Army has been drawing it out at a rate of twenty-five hundred a month, so as not to make your superiors too suspicious. I told the man in charge while you were asleep that you had come back, and he said that we should draw out the balance in the account. I gave him the check. He's cashed it by now. So all your funds are gone and you won't get any more. The check was for nearly eighty thousand."

With the air of a parent lecturing to a child he said, "Miss Chambers, did you ever stop to think that this might be a wonderful scheme to steal a lot of money?"

For a moment she looked startled. Then she smiled smugly. "He told me you'd be clever."

Suddenly he remembered a name. Morgan had told him the name. Arnold Febre. A New Orleans merchant and importer who had gone to school with her father. He had argued with Morgan about the man, insisting that it would be only polite to phone him, as their friendship had been strong right up until the moment of her father's death.

Morgan had refused to phone, had said that Febre was "stuffy."

And this girl had said that New Orleans was her home city.

"Do you know Arnold Febre, Miss Chambers?"

"Of course. He's very prominent. I don't know him personally, but I know of him."

"Would he be one of these fantastic spies you have on the brain?"

"Of course not!"

"There's the phone. Call him up and say you are Morgan Saenger and see what happens?"

"Why should I?"

"Because, Miss Chambers, you are beginning to have a small and awkward

feeling that something is very wrong."

SHE SAT very still for a moment, then stood up with one quick motion and walked to the phone. She took the book, looked up the number and dialed.

"Mr. Febre, please . . . Hello, Mr. Febre? This is Morgan Saenger. . . . What! Oh, yes, of course. . . . Yes . . . Yes, sir. . . ."

She hung up the phone and turned, her eyes wide, her face white. Hunt smiled at her.

"He—he asked me why I hadn't come to see him and he wants me to come over tomorrow. He said that there was always room in his heart for the daughter of his best friend."

"Now, Miss Chambers, if you want to be exceedingly stupid you can start thinking that my wife is a spy who took Miss Saenger's name and identity. If you want to be smart you can start helping me get to the bottom of this. As soon as I know the truth I'll phone the police and we can start trying to recover the money. If you help, I'll try to save you from a jail sentence."

She stood looking at him for a moment, her eyes still wide. She held clenched fists at her breast. When she tottered he stepped forward quickly and caught her as she fell. He carried her to the couch with difficulty. In a moment her eyes opened. She tried to sit up but he forced her back.

"Who is in this with you?"

"Three men. I was . . . in dramatics school. One of them came. A young blond one. Nice looking. He looked at fifteen of us, picked me. He made me promise not to talk and then he took me to a place, an old house on the other side of the river.

"I met the other two there. They didn't give me any names. They gave me a hundred dollars in cash and I had to stay there five days until I could write just like Miss Saenger from the samples of her writing that they gave me. They gave me pictures and I fixed my hair like hers and wore lipstick the way she did.

"They told me to stay indoors as much as possible. That was so my friends here in New Orleans wouldn't see men and

start asking questions. They brought me here and I have been making out the checks for them and they have been bringing me my money in cash."

"Could you find the house again?"

"I—I think so."

"They will have skipped by now. They have the money. You're here to take the rap. It's wonderful from their standpoint. How on earth did they sell you such a yarn?"

"The first day at the house the young blond one wore his uniform. They talked a lot about citizens helping out their government and . . . Oh, I've been . . . fool!"

The tears dampened her cheeks and suddenly she looked very young and very contrite. He wanted to put his arms around her and comfort her.

It had been a perfect confidence game. If anything had gone wrong, it would be Laurette Chambers, not the group of three, who would take it in the neck.

He suddenly realized that Morgan was dead. The certainty came to him as clearly as if he had suddenly seen her body. No one could keep Morgan under lock and key.

That might mean that this girl who wept would be considered by the court to be an accessory to Morgan's murder.

"I'll get hold of the police," he said.

As he stood up they both heard the footsteps coming up the stairs. There was no caution in those footsteps. More than one person.

There was a knock at the door. Hunt Gerran put his hand in his pocket, his finger on the trigger of the little automatic, the safety off.

He went to the door, swung it open.

CHAPTER THREE

Carnival of Blood

THE THREE MEN came in faster than he had expected. They were dressed as street maskers. But the masks hung at their throats. Their eyes were cold. Cursing his own weakness as he stumbled back, understanding from Laurette's gasp that these were the three, he tried to yank the automatic out of his pocket.

The young blond one was in the lead.

He had the brown young look of a tennis star, but there was an un-young impassivity about his face. He moved with blinding speed, and during the fraction of a second when the automatic caught in the fabric of Hunt's trousers, a hard fist hit him full in the mouth, driving him back.

Hunt shook his head, found that during the few seconds of partial unconsciousness, the blond young man had taken the automatic.

Hunt sat on the floor and looked up into the tanned face. He felt the blood at the corner of his mouth.

The other two men had the blond one's hard competence. They were older, smaller, thinner, darker. Though they were obviously unrelated, they moved and talked with almost identical gestures.

The blond one tossed the little automatic to the man who had just shut the apartment door, saying, "Catch, Sam. If I'd known this was what he was trying to pull out of his pocket, I could have saved my strength."

Sam grinned at Hunt, pulled the trigger of the little gun. It clicked. "No firing pin," he said.

The blond one turned to the girl. "Good work, Miss Chambers. I can see that he didn't get suspicious, or he would have left here."

Hunt was shocked at Laurette's pallor. She stood up and said with a smile, "Now that you have everything under control, you won't mind if I call the police?"

The blond one shrugged. "If you want to. It's hardly necessary."

"I'd like to."

"Go ahead."

She walked to the phone. The three of them watched her. The blond one evidently made some sort of a gesture. As Laurette's fingers touched the phone, one of the other two men grabbed her wrist, pulled her away. Laurette went after his face with the nails on the other hand. The man, gouged deeply, swore and hit her across the eyes with the back of his hand. She reeled back, tripped over Hunt's legs and fell heavily.

The blond one said, "Now that wasn't very gentlemanly, Stanley." But he smiled as he said it.

"Sorry, Jimmy," the smaller man said

with an answering grin. "I just don't know my own strength."

Jimmy, the hard-faced blond, immediately became brisk. "You, Gerran, get up and sit on the couch. Keep an eye on him, Sam. And you, Laurette, go over to the desk. You have some writing to do."

Hunt didn't move. Jimmy, with impressive ease, grabbed him by the shirt front, half lifted him, and slung him onto the couch.

"I won't do any writing," Laurette said.

"I'm surprised you came back," Hunt said. "Check was too big, I suppose."

Jimmy ignored him. He smiled at Laurette and said, "Honey, you've got a lot of writing to do. I want fifteen checks for five thousand each. Now don't be coy."

"I know what you are now," Laurette said hotly. She stood up.

"Honey, I'm surprised you didn't catch on months ago. Just goes to show that blondes are stupid."

"You can't make me write the checks," Laurette said.

Jimmy pursed his lips. "Now that is an interesting point of view. Very interesting. Don't you think so, Stanley?"

Stanley grinned and nodded.

"If you kill me, you still won't get the checks," Laurette said, her cheeks flushed.

"Honey, we wouldn't think of killing you. Not with the talents you've got."

He looked at her deliberately, from head to toe.

"Write the checks," Hunt said flatly.

"You're a smart man, Gerran," Jimmy said. "You hear the man, honey?"

"She'll write the checks for a clean trade," Hunt said. "She writes them and she doesn't join Morgan."

Jimmy swiveled a startled stare back at Gerran. "Friend, I'm awfully sorry you said that. Really sorry. That was a mistake. I'm disappointed in you. Now we'll have to go write the checks some other place."

Laurette threw her head back and screamed with all the power of her young lungs. The scream filled the apartment from wall to wall. When she had finished, Jimmy said, "Now listen, honey."

They all listened. Answering screams came from the distance. Yells of revelry,

not of terror—and yet they were indistinguishable.

Laurette whirled and raced to the door. Sam caught her at the door. He got her from behind, and as she writhed in his grip, Stanley got the nod from Jimmy, pulled a woven leather sap out of his pocket and tapped it delicately against her blonde head, just in back of the right ear.

She slumped and Sam lowered her gently to the floor. Jimmy was already pawing through the top desk drawer. He sighed with satisfaction as he found the check book.

Tucking it under his arm, he said to Hunt, "Okay, Gerran. Pick her up and carry her down the stairs. Take it slow. If anybody comes along, laugh it off." As Hunt hesitated, he said, "Move, guy! Move!" There was a snarl in his tone.

FOR the twentieth time, Hunt Gerran swung his long legs off the cot, stood up and made a circuit of the small room. The single window had been boarded over. The room was incredibly hot. His shirt was off and rivulets of sweat poured down his ribs, dripped off his nose and chin.

They had not taken his watch. The car had been waiting at the curb. The fact that they had made no attempt to conceal the location of the ancient house on Route 30 beyond the Huey P. Long Bridge was ominous. It had been ninety-fourty when they had left the apartment.

It was a quarter to two in the morning now.

Twice, distant screams had chilled him, because he had detected in those screams a little of Laurette's tone of voice.

He thought that if he were not weakened by disease he might be able to force the door. There was nothing in the room to serve as a weapon. No one had come near him since the blond young man had shoved him into the room, slammed the door, shot the bolt with an audible click.

One of the effects of the disease that he had suffered seemed to be to make him callous to fear. He knew beyond any doubt that the three men meant to kill both him and Laurette. It was inevitable. They stood to gain a hundred thousand dollars plus an equivalent value in gems. And they would also be ridding themselves of two people who could identify them.

There was evident madness in the eyes of the one called Jimmy. Madness combined with animal quickness and shrewdness. The other two, Sam and Stanley, seemed in awe of Jimmy. It was the same awe with which a trussed-up person might watch a burning fuse.

It was small wonder that Laurette had fallen for their story. Jimmy was sufficiently presentable to convince her that his story was true. And Laurette was imaginative enough to fall for the wild yarn. The boldness of the execution of their plan had made it almost certain to succeed. Laurette's pledge to keep silent had enabled them to avoid discovery.

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Had he failed to remember the name of Arnold Febre, Laurette's life might have been spared. They would have spirited him away, thanked Laurette for her great assistance and warned her to keep silent about the whole affair.

Should she ever have gone to the police, her story would have been almost entirely unbelievable.

He tried to feel sorrow for Morgan. Instead he was able to feel only the regret that he would have felt at the destruction of a fine painting. There had been such a lack of compassion in Morgan that her evident death could not call forth compassion from his heart. Merely regret. . . .

The bolt clicked and the door opened. Hunt sat up on the cot. The hanging bulb made sharp shadows.

Jimmy came in, stood grinning at Hunt. "The lady signed the checks."

"I'm so happy for you."

"Knew you would be. I came in to give you the plans. You'll have just about twenty-four hours to think about them. I'm calling it Operation Torch."

"In keeping with the military flavor so far?"

"I could almost like you, Gerran. Under other circumstances, of course."

"Sorry I can't say the same."

"I like the military flavor. During the war I impersonated a major in the Air Force. I even lectured to some Rotary Clubs. But they spoiled it all by sticking me in a mental institution. The damn fools! I was giving the Army better public relations than most of the legitimate boys."

"They made their mistake when they let you out."

JIMMY ignored him. "I was staying at the same hotel you and your wife were at right after your marriage. I checked at the desk. Heiress. I followed you when you got this apartment. It looked like a better future than knocking over gas stations and night spots. I was around when you went away. Then I paid a call on Morgan. The boys had found this place and rented it. Morgan thought I was an old friend of yours. The boys held her here for me until I picked up a reasonably accurate facsimile to in-

stall in the apartment. Then Morgan became too much trouble to keep around. She never knew what hit her. She's buried back at the edge of the marsh."

Hunt cursed, slowly, viciously.

"Don't waste your breath Gerran. She was a bad-tempered piece. Besides, you're not going to outlive her by very much."

"How do you expect to account for the disappearance of three people?"

Jimmy rubbed his hands together. "That's the beauty of my plan. Operation Torch. I just thought of it half an hour ago. Hunt Gerran and his blonde wife drove out here with me to look at a car I have for sale. He wanted to road-test it. I followed in my car with a friend. He drove it too fast. At the approach to the Huey Long Bridge it got out of control and crashed through the wall and fell the full sixty feet. We stopped and turned, went back to where we could leave our car and race to their aid. Just as we reached the car, it burst into flames. We were driven back. Too bad. See? Then the only disappearance to account for is the girl. And embryo actresses are always disappearing. Like it?"

"Dandy! Just what I'd expect of you. A plan quite worthy of you, friend."

"Glad you like it," Jimmy said.

He turned his back as he went to the door. But some instinct warned him. He spun as Hunt charged him. Hunt's eager right fist flashed over the man's shoulder and Hunt caught a hook in the stomach that felt as though it had torn him in half.

The door slammed and the bolt clicked. It was many long minutes before Hunt could stop gagging and gasping and get back on his feet.

When he was strong enough, he went to work on the door with his bare hands. When his nails were bleeding, his flesh torn, he gave up and went back to the cot.

There was no reason why the plan should fail. There was no reason why the presentable Jimmy could not arrange to cash all of the checks before the following night.

People would say that it was another drunken Mardi Gras automobile accident.

Hunt hoped that both he and Laurette would be unconscious when the car went

crashing through the retaining wall.

His solicitude for Laurette startled him. In some odd way he had grown very attached to her. It was as if he had married Morgan because he saw in her the very traits that were refined and strengthened in Laurette.

Soon he began to shake with another chill. He put on his damp shirt, pulled the blanket over him. When the shudders began to fade away, he turned out the light and fell immediately into deep sleep. It was a sleep of emotional and physical exhaustion.

CHAPTER FOUR

End of the Road

HE AWOKE to spiritless lethargy, the same dull depression that he had experienced in the hospital. He could evoke no fear of imminent death, nor any concern for Laurette, nor any fragment of optimism or will to resist.

He could not even summon up the hatred of the one called Jimmy—hatred that had been crystal clear the night before.

He knew it was daylight because a tiny crack in the boards across the windows let a thin shaft of white light into the room.

A few hours later the one called Sam brought tasteless food and a bottle of tepid water. He drank the water thirstily, picked at the food.

Sam stood with his back against the door and watched him.

They had taken his matches. Sam, on request, threw him a cigarette and matches. The smoke was acid in his throat. Sam shoved the matches back in his pocket, told Hunt to move away from the tray and bottle. He picked them up without taking his eyes off Hunt and left.

Slowly, resolve and the will to fight began to creep back into him. Sam had either forgotten the glowing end of the cigarette or had considered it of no importance.

Hunt felt suddenly ill at the thought of the time he had wasted. He put the inch-long cigarette on the window sill, hastily began to pick at the boards on the windows, picking off minute slivers of the

hard wood, making a tiny pile of them.

When only a half-inch of butt remained, he piled the splinters, campfire fashion, on the cigarette butt, breathed gently on it, seeing the coal glow hotter, blackening and crisping the splinters. He saved two sizeable splinters.

In desperate haste he added some threads from his shirt, was finally rewarded by a frail little tongue of flame that began to devour the slivers. He put the two larger pieces on the flame.

Before they were consumed, he had to have more fuel. He ripped at the rough boards, obtaining a pathetically small amount of wood. He had to keep it burning long enough for the flames to begin to devour the window sill. From there the flames, shooting up, would begin to burn the boards across the windows, stout boards that he had been unable to budge.

Thin grey smoke began to fill the air.

Suddenly he felt another chill coming on. His whole body began to shake. He could not make his hands work properly. He tried to blow gently on the fire, but the chest convulsion suddenly expelled his breath, scattering the fire.

By the time the chill had subsided, he could find, as evidence of the flame, only a warm spot on the window sill and a small bit of greyish ash.

He sat on the edge of the bed, pounded his fist helplessly into the palm of his hand and wept like a disappointed child.

A long time later he thought of his belt. He took it off and, with the metal tongue, began to work at the narrow slit between the boards. The daylight faded while he worked. Just as the light was entirely gone, the metal tongue broke in two and became useless.

This time he did not weep. This time he began to think of some other plan. Any other plan. He was ashamed of the weakness, engendered by fever, which had permitted him to weep.

He took off his shoe and, aiming for the slit in the boards, began to pound at that spot with the heel of his shoe. Twenty minutes later Sam came into the room and took from him his belt and his shoes.

While he was sitting in the darkness and the silence he heard a muffled tapping. For a time it made no sense to him. Then he realized that there was a pattern to

the tapping. Eight taps, then twenty-one, then fourteen, then twenty. H was the eighth letter in the alphabet, U the twenty-first, N the fourteenth, T the twentieth. His name! Over and over.

The sound seemed to come from the top corner of the room beyond the window. He shoved the cot over to that part of the room, stood on it and, with his fist against the ceiling, tapped out 25—5—19. Yes.

It was an unwieldy way to communicate. Before long his arms ached and almost all feeling had left his bruised knuckles.

He found out that it was Laurette and that she was unhurt. He found out that she had been told what was to become of them. She told him that she was frightened, that she was tapping with the heel of her shoe.

Many messages had to be started over because the other person lost the count.

There was nothing he could tell her to cheer her.

At last she tapped out, "I'm sorry."
"Never mind, darling."

There was a long pause. "Repeat last word."

"Darling."

Another long pause. "Why that word?"

"I love you."

She sent a long message. "Do not lie to make me brave."

"No lie."

She began again. "You are . . ."

But there was the tell-tale click of the bolt. Hunt stepped down from the bed, flattened himself against the wall beside the door. He lunged at the man who came in, but was knocked down brutally. The light clicked on. The three of them were there.

"Here's the rest of your clothes, Gerran. Put them on."

HE DID as he was told. Resistance was hopeless. When he was dressed, Sam and Stanley held him down on the cot while Jimmy lashed his wrists and ankles with hard plastic thongs. They bit into his flesh.

"These, Gerran, are made of a rather poor plastic. Inflammable. Burns with almost no ash. Take him out to the car."

He was carried through a dark hallway. At the front door they put him down and

Sam stuffed a wadded handkerchief between his teeth, taped it in place. The car was a cheap sedan, several years old. He was dumped unceremoniously into the back seat. He writhed into a sitting position.

Stanley stayed with him, leaning against the outside of the car, smoking an idle cigarette.

Ten minutes later Jimmy and Sam came out carrying Laurette. By the way she sagged in their clasp Hunt thought she was unconscious. But a gleam of light hit her wide and terrorized eyes.

She was thrust in with him. He managed to get numbed fingers onto her arm, to exert a gentle pressure which he hoped would give her the strength to endure what they both faced.

The three stood just outside the open window of the car. Jimmy said, "You've got it, I hope. We'll park near the approach to the bridge. Sam, you drive this car and, Stan, you go with him. I'll follow in the Buick. When you stop, take the gags off them. Tie the wheel with this strip of plastic and move the two of them into the front seat."

"Leave the motor running, but take it out of gear. Wait until the road is clear and run it out onto the highway. Then you boys come back with me. I'll push them with the Buick. With the wheel held steady, I can get them up over fifty by the time we come into that curve halfway up the bridge approach. The tank is full?"

"I don't like it," Stanley said weakly.

"Shut up. Do as you're told. Roll it."

Sam got behind the wheel and the door chunked shut. Stanley slid in beside him. The motor made a starting clatter and then idled until the Buick rolled smoothly up behind them.

Its headlights shone through the rear window. Laurette's eyes rolled wildly and he could feel her shaking beside him.

He knew that had he been alone in the situation, he might very well have dropped into a numb hopelessness. But it was an unthinkable horror that this girl should die. There was nothing she could do to avoid death. Any rescue must come from him.

And he could think of nothing whatever to do.

The sedan started raggedly, swept out

onto the highway and toward the bridge a few miles away.

Stanley and Sam rode in silence. Laurette was behind the driver. Soon it would be too late to do anything. His mind was racing, estimating and discarding remote possibilities. The road had many curves. Sam drove at high speed. His very speed shortened the time available to them.

Hunt wondered if he could lurch into a half-standing position, throw himself over into the front seat, his body wedging the wheel so that the car would crash.

Sam and Stanley were ignoring the two of them. He glanced at the rear-vision mirror. Sam had turned it so that the Buick lights following would not blind him.

Carefully he pulled his heels in against the seat, leaned forward. But with his hands tied, he could not redistribute his weight so as to stand.

He tried helplessly. He turned his head and looked with mute appeal at Laurette. She had been watching him. There could only be moments left. Soon they would reach the approach to the bridge.

Suddenly she slid over behind him. He thought at first that she had fainted, and then he felt the hard pressure of her elbows against the small of his back. Good girl! She had understood that he had wanted to stand. He tried again. Her pressure against him enabled him to do as he wished. His hair brushed the top of the car. Gaining momentum, he fell over between them, thrusting with his head and shoulders toward the steering wheel.

There was a feline scream from the

driver and Stanley clubbed Hunt across the back of the neck. But the damage was done. The tires screamed as Sam tried to apply the brakes. The car lunged ahead toward the curve.

Behind them there was an answering scream of rubber on concrete as the blond Jimmy, traveling too close to them, tried to fight his wheel, steer out of danger.

The little car hit the shoulder, bounded into the air with a sickening wrench, hit with a smashing, rending sound, rolled with a noise of shallow thunder down a rocky slope.

Hunt was battered helplessly about, forcing his body to relax. The car, lights out, came to rest with a residual tinkle of glass, a last groan of ripped metal.

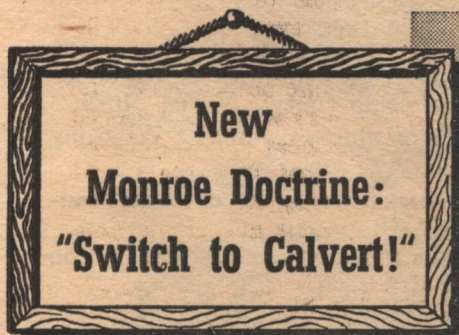
SAM was very still under him. The door on the driver's side was sprung open. The car, miraculously, rested on what was left of the wheels. Hunt thrust himself forward, slid down over Sam's still form, rolling out onto the rocks and earth.

There was a sudden roar, and angry red flames spewed from the cowl vents.

Hunt inched painfully toward the flame. He rolled to his knees, extended his bound hands into the flame. There was a searing pain and consciousness nearly left him as his hands were suddenly freed of the plastic thongs.

With the haste of pure panic, he fumbled with the thongs that bound his ankles, pausing to slap at his smouldering sleeve, paying no attention to the skin that sloughed from the backs of his hands.

He stumbled to the car, and the back door on Laurette's side was jammed. He



NEW YORK, N. Y.—George H. Monroe, New York singer and entertainer, advises men of moderation: "Switch to Calvert Reserve—as I have. Calvert really is lighter, milder, finer. It always makes your occasional highball taste better."

went around to the other side. She was unconscious. He pulled her out roughly, picked her up, went twenty feet in a stumbling run and fell heavily with her, unable to keep his weight from landing on her.

A crimson flower blossomed in the night. It blossomed with the stench of death, with a blistering wave of heat, with a rising billow of acid smoke, with a thin, awakening scream that came from within the car and then was choked off as though the mouth that made it had suddenly been stopped with a mammoth hand—or had suddenly ceased to exist.

They were too close. He protected her from the heat with his body, and, as the crimson flower died, the heat faded.

From the direction of the highway a hundred feet away he heard the excited babble of voices, the sound of car doors slamming.

He got to his feet and looked toward the highway, saw the white eyes of the flashlights coming down across the rocks.

Even as he looked, something passed between him and the flashlight, something that was as silent as a shadow in the night.

Out of instinct he dropped flat as the shot cracked, as a tiny orange spat of flame appeared in the night.

He rolled to one side and his hand closed over a stone the size of an apple. A rock clattered ten feet away. The glare of the flames had ruined his night vision. But he hurled the rock at the dim sound.

Another shot sounded and the lead whined away into the night as it ricocheted. Hunt suddenly realized that he had not had time or thought to remove the gag. He stripped the tape off his mouth, yanked out the sodden handkerchief.

The people who had seen the fire were coming closer, more intrigued than frightened by the sound of the shots. Possibly they thought it was something in the glowing wreck of the car that was exploding.

Suddenly a beam from the approaching lights swept near where Hunt was crouched. It outlined the man called Jimmy. It sparkled on the metal in his hand. It stayed fixed on him and someone

yelled, "You there! What happened?"

Jimmy yelled a hoarse curse, turned and started to run back up the uneven slope. The voice yelled, "This is the state police! Halt!"

The answer was a wild shot, and an answering thud of two heavier, more authoritative shots. The blond man went down as though a sledge had caught him in the small of the back.

Up on the highway a truck rumbled into position and two brilliant searchlights clicked on, were angled down until they illuminated the scene.

A heavy man in uniform covered Hunt Gerran and said, "On your feet."

Hunt stood up. Then, ignoring the man, he walked to Laurette, knelt beside her and began to gently peel off the tape that had been slapped across her young lips.

IT WAS the last night of Mardi Gras. Bearded Comus, on his elaborate float, carrying his golden goblet, was borne in majesty down to the Louisiana Club where the Queen awaited him.

As Comus lifted the golden goblet to toast the Queen, Hunt Gerran looked down into the eyes of the girl who stood beside him.

She held his arm, smiled up at him.

Hunt's hands were wrapped in heavy bandages.

They moved out of the tumult to a dark corner where they could talk.

She reached up and touched his cheek with her fingertips. "It's a bad dream, Hunt. But in it I found you."

He laughed. "Ever since the lawyer said that I had to press charges against you if I wanted you punished, you've been very sweet to me, gal."

She pouted. "You catch on too quickly."

"They found most of the rest of the money yesterday. It was taped under the glove compartment of the Buick."

"That's another reason why I'm being nice to you, of course."

"How does it feel to be out of the headlines?"

She had a better answer than if she had used words.

When they looked up, the street maskers were circling them.

By **LARRY HOLDEN**

Smoothly, Dave's Luger came out of his pocket and he shot the man in the face.



MAN WITH A REP

*Every man can die. But not every man,
Dave Lait discovered, can kill. . . .*

DAVE LAIT'S face was normally cold and set, but now, at this minute, it felt pinched as his hand hovered indecisively over the phone. It was the house phone to the hat-check booth downstairs.

Finally he jerked up his chin and asked shortly, "Did Hogan show yet, Dolores?" "Not yet, Mr. Lait."

The girl lying on the chartreuse-leather chaise across the office watched him narrowly as he dropped the phone back into its cradle. She was wearing a sea-green

evening gown that covered her from neck to instep, yet she appeared naked. She was relaxed and quiet, but there was violence in every line of her, from the curve of her bold breasts to the full flame of her mouth. Her hair was a rich blonde and it burned like the corona of the sun. She sat up and swung her feet to the floor.

"Well?" she demanded.

Lait shook his head.

Her eyes narrowed. "How much longer are you going to stall around?" she asked angrily. "He's an hour late now. What're

you waiting for, the end of the Truman administration?"

He said, "Shut up," but without conviction and looked down at his lean, bony hands.

She lunged up from the chaise and took two swinging steps toward the desk.

"Damn it, Dave," she said, "if a guy welches on a ten-G IOU in this town, you've got to do something about it or you're finished, done, washed-up. You know that. What're you waiting for?"

"I said, shut up."

"No, I won't shut up. Listen, Dave"—she was almost pleading—"let Zyla take care of Hogan. He'd love it, and he'll stay clammed forever. Give Zyla the word, and you'll have nothing to worry about."

THIS time he didn't answer at all, even with a shake of his head. He walked to the bar beside the window, turned his back to her and downed a pony of cognac. When he swung around again, she was gone. The office door closed as noiselessly as the door of a vault. But her violence still hung in the air, like the smoke after an explosion.

There were things he had wanted to say to her, things he had never said before. With them, it had always been Dave, tempered steel—and Tess, diamond hard. No sentiment. A pair of realists rather than two lovers.

But she was right. If he didn't do something about Hogan, he was finished. The Blues Club couldn't exist twenty-four hours without the roulette, the bird cage, the craps table, the blackjack. When the boys found out they didn't have to pay up, they wouldn't, and that would be the end.

He didn't even bother cursing Hogan. He had been taken, and he had been taken good. Ten G's worth. Hogan had always been loaded, always. But Hogan had shot his roll at Jamaica and had come into the game last night with the leavings. He would never forget the pallor of Hogan's face when he turned up four treys to Hogan's full house, aces up. Hogan had looked like a three-week corpse. A heart flush had been the biggest hand all night, and Hogan had shot the works—the works he didn't have—on that full house. Ten G's.

The office—the game was always in Lait's office—had been silent as a morgue when Hogan had spread his hand and looked sick as Lait turned over his four treys.

There had been five in the game—Johnny Michaels, Big Jim Farr and Aarons. Farr and Aarons had almost sweated blue, and Michaels had edged nervously toward the door. Dave's iron rule was No Credit. And Dave was supposed to be—well, tempered steel.

Hogan had stammered, "Tomorrow night, Dave. Tomorrow night at nine, I swear. It'll be right there on your desk. Ten G's." He shook as if he expected Dave to blast him down where he stood. He had asked for it.

But he had walked out, and the others had darted out after him, their eyes bright and a little gloating. Tough Dave Lait had been taken for ten G's. It was all over town by now.

Unless he did something about Hogan—something final and frightening, something that would keep the boys in line.

Dave was lean and over six feet tall, but he looked much less than that now as he slouched wearily in front of the tiny bar. The Blues Club was a gold mine, a kind of end-of-the-rainbow—and he was throwing it down the drain, because he didn't intend to do anything about Hogan.

He could give the word, and Hogan would be beaten and maimed. But that wouldn't be enough. Ten G's was important money. He'd have to go all the way with Hogan, and he wasn't going to. To hell with the Blues Club and everything else; he wasn't going to play God and order a man killed. He downed a quick cognac and wondered dully if it would have been different had it been Johnny Michaels. He liked Hogan, and he didn't like Johnny Michaels. Michaels was predatory and feral, ambitious. Hogan was—well, a likable guy, that was all. A likable guy. Johnny Michaels was a Hitler in miniature.

But even as the cognac inflamed him, he knew he would never have ordered Michaels killed, either.

He was glad he had canned Zyla. It removed the temptation. Zyla had the conscience of a grey wolf and sooner or later that would have spelled trouble.

He filled the pony for his third cognac, lifted the glass and said sardonically, "Well, it was fun while it lasted. . . ."

The office door opened. Tess stood rigidly in the doorway, the ends of her mouth dipping at the sight of the glass in his hand.

"Getting soused?" she asked coldly.

He grinned, warming at the sight of her. His face, congealed by fifteen years of professional poker, suddenly started to feel warm and full again. It was over—and so what? He was glad. It had been a rat race from the word go. He was glad it was over now. He had enough money. Tess and he could take time out and go to Florida for the deep-sea fishing, or to California for the sights. They could get married and start out as humans. He stared at her as if he had never seen her before. He loved her! The realization flooded through him and made him feel like laughing, like bubbling over. Tough Dave Lait—that was all finished. He could be a human being. He could love and ask to be loved in return; he could make jokes; he could guffaw; he could *live*! And not worry about who was out to take him for a fast buck.

He started gaily, "Tess . . ."

She interrupted abruptly, "I've taken care of it for you. You can relax." There was contempt in her face, but also a kind of fear.

He stiffened. "You what?" he asked carefully.

"Taken care of it for you," she cried shrilly, her hands clenching at her sides. "Did you think I'd just stand around and watch you take a nose dive? *I took care of it!*"

Then it penetrated, and very carefully he set down his pony of brandy.

"And just how did you do that?" he asked.

"I called Zyla."

Her eyes widened. She thought she had seen every expression of which his face was capable, but suddenly it was all gaunt bones and harsh shadows, a death's head.

"And I'm supposed to thank you?"

Her hand flew to her mouth and her fingers trembled at her lips. She turned and ran.

HE STARED at the empty doorway, then furiously swung his arm and cleared the little bar of bottles and glasses. They tinkled and smashed and gurgled liquidly. He strode to the desk and snatched up the outside phone. He called Zyla's number and waited, freezing as it rang and rang and rang without an answer. Finally it was obvious, even to his forlornest hope, that Zyla was gone. He slammed down the phone and rounded the desk, jerking open the bottom drawer. He grabbed up a slim Luger and pulled out the clip. It was fully loaded. He dropped it into his jacket pocket and sprinted out of the office. He went down the stairs, two steps at a time. The doorman gaped after him as he leaped into his Caddy roadster, swung it around and sped down the driveway in a spray of flying gravel.

He clung grimly to the wheel with both hands and stamped the gas pedal to the floor. It was almost an hour's drive from Harwood Cliffs to Newark, where Hogan lived. He swept through the 9-W traffic,

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using his horn instead of his brakes. Through the towns he was grimly careful not to be stopped for a ticket, but once on the Pulaski Highway out of Jersey City he opened it up again.

He didn't blame Tess. She was protecting her capital. With the Club out of business, there wouldn't be any more mink, caviar or filet mignon. She'd have to rough it on hamburger. She had acted according to her pattern.

But he hated her, all the same. He hated the whole pattern, now that he'd had that brief insight into how it would be to be a human being again. Brief. Thirty seconds!

In thirty seconds he had lived and loved. For a normal person, living and loving meant a whole lifetime. He had done it in thirty seconds. He laughed insanely. That was the way to do it—fast. Get it over and forget it. Dave Lait, gambler. The turn of a card.

Only he couldn't. There were hooks. Hooks with barbs like fish hooks, and you couldn't shake them free. Tess still had her hooks in him.

But the greater urgency was the life of Hogan. He had to get to Hogan before Zyla did. He swore at a produce truck that momentarily barred the road, then clamped his hand on the horn and swept around it.

He was sweating. It was salty on his lips and it stung his eyes. He fanned his hand across his face. The road danced in front of him.

He drove mechanically, the roar of the tires filling his ears.

He had known, when he dealt his first card, that there was danger in it. But he had provided for all that. No Credit. If you paid up when you lost, that was the end of it, until the next time.

But Hogan had crossed him. Not willingly or intentionally. He was a likable guy, Hogan. If only Hogan had come to him at nine o'clock and said, "Dave, I can't pay. Give me time."

He would have given Hogan time. He knew Hogan would have kept his mouth shut. He would have given Hogan all the time in the world—if only he had asked. Swearing was futile.

Only one thing was important now—to reach Hogan before Zyla killed him.

He raced recklessly down McCarter Highway beside the railroad. Hogan lived in a dingy hotel on Mulberry Street.

Dave felt as if he were plodding through sand as he walked up the worn carpet to the desk.

If only he hadn't been such a phony. If only he hadn't pretended to be so tough. But, of course, if he hadn't, he wouldn't own the Blues Club, he wouldn't be in the chips. No one had ever called his bluff before—but that had been only a matter of propaganda. Zyla had always spread the word that you couldn't fool with tough Dave Lait. Tough. What a joke. But Zyla was smart and Zyla looked hard enough to back up anybody. And he was, too. Zyla couldn't think for himself, but he *was* hard enough to back up anybody, once the word was given. Zyla was an animal. Zyla would kill and go on killing. He had to get to Hogan before Zyla did.

The sleepy-eyed, bored desk clerk said, "Hogan?" and turned languidly to look at the key rack behind him. He shook his head. "Nope. Sorry. He ain't in. There's his key. Wanna leave a message?"

"Yes, I do. Tell him Dave was here. Tell him it's okay. Tell him to wait in his room and let nobody in but me. You got that—nobody but me."

The clerk opened his eyes. His face became crafty. "What was the name?" he asked.

Dave got it. He threw a five-dollar bill on the counter. "Dave," he said. "Dave."

The clerk's hand hungrily covered the five. "Dave said stay in his room—right?" He leaned over the counter until his stomach bulged over the edge of it. Is he wanted?"

Dave smothered his anger. "Nothing like that. It's a private matter. He'll understand. You'll be sure to tell him now, won't you?" At this point he couldn't afford to antagonize anybody.

The clerk shrugged, "For a V-note, own name." He shot Dave a sly glance and giggled.

Dave turned away, disgusted. Not that he had wasted his five. But if Zyla came along with a ten, the clerk would forget the five. That kind of thing belonged in the same category as ordering a man

killed. It was a matter of—well, integrity, if you wanted to call it that.

But outside, on the sidewalk, his anxiety returned. Hogan. Where to look? Newark was a big place. . . .

He forcibly calmed himself by holding a match to his cigarette until it curled in his fingers and burned his hand.

Finding Hogan wasn't so impossible if you put your mind to it. Hogan wouldn't run. He wasn't that kind. He wouldn't run and spend the rest of his life hiding. He was bold and reckless, willing to take a chance. He had grinned, even when he had seen Dave's four treys. He had grinned pallidly and turned green, but he had grinned. He wouldn't run. Nor would he crouch in his bed and shiver like a rabbit until the dogs came for him. Not Hogan.

But, with a flash of insight, neither could he see Hogan come begging for an extension of the IOU.

A voice called, "Dave. Hey, Dave."

DAVE turned. Behind him, the lobby was empty. On one side of the hotel was a tailor shop, at the other side a dark parking lot. He walked over to the edge of the hotel, leaned against the corner and lighted another cigarette.

The voice said nervously, "I thought you'd show. I've been waiting for you. I got a little property you might be interested in."

Dave placed the voice now. Quiggy Moore. Quiggy, the little stoolie who had his ear at every rat hole. By "property" he meant information.

Without turning his head, Dave said, "How much?"

Quiggy stammered, "Fi-fi-fi-five C's." Then hurriedly, "It's worth it, Dave. It's worth it."

Dave went cold. Quiggy had never asked for more than a sawbuck at a time. Never. A five-C bite meant that Quiggy really had something special, something he knew Dave wanted badly.

Dave said tersely, "Shoot."

Quiggy said eagerly, "Skip town, Dave. Hit the grit, beat it and keep going. Zyla's Johnny Michael's right hand. Johnny wants the Blues Club. They're gonna hang the Hogan kill on you, being's everybody knows Hogan welched on that

ten-G IOU—and Zyla's even gonna put the boots to you, if you're still hanging around. I'm leveling, Dave. Beat it!"

Dave didn't ask where Quiggy had gotten his information. He didn't have to. Quiggy knew all the rat holes. Dave asked, "Did they get to Hogan yet?"

He could almost *feel* Quiggy shrug.

"A half-hour ago Hogan was down to the Shamrock Bar on Ferry Street, drunker'n a plumber's helper. Now that's worth five C's, Dave, ain't it? I coulda got better'n that from Johnny Michaels to clam up, but being's I'm a friend of yours . . ."

Dave said savagely, "Okay, okay." He pulled five C-notes from his wallet, balled them and tossed them into the shadows. As he walked away he could hear Quiggy scrambling in the gravel for them.

Ferry Street. That was down in the Ironbound, down Neck, the tough section of Newark.

The back of his neck prickled as he braked the Caddy at the curb in front of the Shamrock. He looked up and down the shadowed street. Zyla could be anywhere, in any of those dark doorways, and Zyla would kill as a wolf kills—without fear, without heed, without even hate.

Dave wiped his shaking, sweating hands down his thighs, then slid out of the car and walked quickly into the tavern. His eyes quickly cased the smoky, noisy room. Zyla could be there, too. It would be a logical place, but Zyla wasn't. There was the usual border of rummies around the rim of the bar, and in back of them, about twenty muscular young kids in a state of high, boisterous elation because they had beaten the Ulster Club of Harrison, across the river, in a soccer match that afternoon. They were drunk and joyously ready for a fight.

Dave glided inconspicuously to the end of the bar. There was an empty space, but a beer sat on the bar before it, claiming it. A sullen-faced blonde squatted on the stool beside it, sucking at a cigarette.

The barkeep came down, and Dave said, "Hennessy." Casually, then: "Hogan come back yet?"

The barkeep looked back over his shoulder and shook his head. "He was hungry. He went out for some fish and chips. He's nuts about fish and chips. Hennessy?"

"I'm nuts about fish and chips, too. Where can I get myself a plate around here?"

"You can't, friend. The nearest is Harrison, across the river. You said Hennessy, didn't you, friend?"

"Yeah. But listen." Dave held out his hand. He went on quickly, "If Hogan shows while I'm gone, tell him to go back to his hotel and stay there. Tell him Dave said it's okay. Tell him Dave said—"

The blonde mashed out her cigarette on the wood of the bar and swung around, facing him.

"That wouldn't be Dave Lait, would it?" she demanded belligerently.

Dave nodded, then caught himself as her eyes blazed at him. She swung for his face with the back of her hand, missed and tumbled off her stool. The tavern went quiet.

The blonde shoved herself to her knees and screamed, "That louse is Dave Lait, the rat that's gonna put the boot to poor old Hogan." Her hand flabbily pointed at him. "That's the guy Hogan's been running from. C'mon, you lousy athletes—molder the rat! Break him up!" She swung her arm provocatively at the massed soccer players. "Molder 'im!"

Dave flattened against the wall. The kids were still for a moment, and then they grinned and their eyes shone. A fight. They surged toward him. Dave jerked the Luger from his pocket.

The barkeep, scared, yelled, "Hey!" and ducked down behind the bar.

Dave sucked in his breath and swept a tight quarter arc with the mouth of the Luger. The kids stopped. They had never faced a gun before, but they weren't afraid of it.

"Put it away, Hawkshaw," one of them called, "and I'll take you on alone."

The rest of them laughed and leaned toward Dave, anxious now and ready for the fight. They were between him and the door, and they weren't going to move until they were satisfied. Dave felt the sweat as it broke out in pebbles on his face. He couldn't take on the gang of them—for that was what it would amount to—and he wouldn't shoot them.

The drunken blonde was waveringly hauling herself to her feet, clinging to the barstool, screeching, "That's the son

that's gonna knock off poor old Hogan. Kill the louse! Smear 'im!"

DAVE hadn't said a word. The athletes took that for a sign of weakness and surged toward him again. Dave dropped the nose of the gun and fired a roaring shot into the floor at their feet.

"Scram," he snarled, for now he knew he had to say something.

They stared, aghast, then whirled and rushed for the rear of the tavern, smashing two tables and eight chairs, overturning the occupants and trampling them in the rush to get farthest from the open mouth of the Luger.

Dave jumped to the door and sprinted for the Caddy. Behind him, the blonde was still shrieking. Dave slid quickly into the front seat of the car and stamped on the gas pedal. The Caddy shot from the curb with an outraged roar. He went through two red lights, went over the Harrison bridge wide open, but he didn't begin to shake until the neon lights of central Harrison splashed the sky in front of him. Then he shook so hard that he had to pull to the curb. He took a bottle of Hennessy from the glove compartment, then angrily shoved it back without opening it. No. No liquor. He rubbed his lean, bony hand down his angular face. Oh, hell.

Those kids in there would have beaten the devil out of him. Three feet more and they'd have been all over him. Time. He didn't think about the beating he would have taken; he just thought about the time it would have taken. Time. Zyla. Hogan.

He stiffened his muscles and forced calm into his shaking hands. He stepped gently on the accelerator and prowled out from the curb. Up at the neon lights, he stopped in the middle of the busy intersection and waved his arm imperiously at the traffic cop in the booth on the corner.

The cop came out, sweating. He charged up to the open window, but his anger evaporated as Dave tucked a folded V-note behind his badge.

"If I were an Irishman in this town," Dave said, "where would I go for a plate of fish and chips?"

With a loving hand, the cop slid the bill from behind his badge and concealed

it in his hand. He turned to the honking traffic and roared, "What're ya asking for, a ticket? Can'tcha see the man's wanting information? Come around and take it easy."

He turned back to Dave and spread his forearms on the window ledge. "So yer wantin' fish and chips, hey? And Irish?"

"Ulster," said Dave, gritting his teeth.

"Ulster? Well, now!" The cop laughed, turned and pointed straight up the street. "Right up there's where the boys is holding the wake, beaten as they was by the boys from Newark this aft in soccer. A terrible beating and tragedy it was. The Ulster Fish and Chip that's where ye'll find them. They tell me there's a crazy Irishman in there, buying fish and chips for all comers and paying on the line. I wisht I was able to get away meself. There's nothing I like better'n a dish of fish and chips, well doused in vinegar and salted down. The Ulster Fish and Chip, just this side the bridge between Harrison and Kearny. Maybe I'll see you there meself, if you stay long enough."

He turned and his arm shot out, holding up traffic until Dave rifled the Caddy up the street in full throttle.

Dave bounced the Caddy against the curb across the street from the Ulster Fish and Chip. It didn't look like a restaurant. The store front could have been that of a shoe store or a lingerie shop. A sway-backed Venetian blind hung in the window, and on the glass, in a circle, was painted—Ulster Fish and Chips.

Dave waited as a car careened danger-

ously down the avenue in front of him, then he sprinted for the opposite curb as another car zoomed toward him. Quite a town, Harrison. But he was too empty of emotion to feel very strong about it.

When within thirty seconds you have lived, loved and died, there was not much else to give a damn about.

Except the bone-breaking shock of a bullet from a gun held by Zyla. He might have lived and loved, but that harsh jangle in his nerve trunks told Dave that he hadn't quite died yet, no matter how else he felt about it.

He had suddenly discovered that he loved Tess, and the realization of it had been a warm fire heating a cold body. Now he knew she had not only siced Zyla on Hogan, but she had double-crossed him as well.

Tess liked her mink. She liked her caviar and filet mignon. Tess had tipped off Johnny Michaels. Maybe she had even said in actual words, "Dave Lait is chicken. Move in and the Blues Club is yours."

Johnny would have jumped at the chance. Johnny had been slaving at the chops for months for a chance at the Blues Club. Zyla was Johnny's man, Quiggy had said, and that was reasonable.

Dave sprinted for the doorway. He couldn't let himself be shot down by Zyla now, not before he had at least warned Hogan. He was not even noticed as he slipped inside and slammed the door behind him. It was a small room and it was crammed with young, muscular kids and their girl friends. The din was terrific. The gaudy juke box blared its loudest, but no one paid any attention to it, for



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they were all furiously debating the soccer game they had lost that afternoon.

DAVE spotted Hogan the minute he walked in. Hogan was standing up at the counter by the cash register, waving a crumpled handful of dollar bills over his head.

"Fish and chips for the house," he was shouting. He was grinning, but there was a far-away, doomed sadness in his eyes. "C'mon, step up and get your fish and chips!"

Then he caught sight of Dave. His jaw grew slack and he seemed to shrivel a little. Dave started slowly through the tightly packed crowd. A tall, red-headed kid, who looked like a young heavyweight, threw his arm around Hogan's shrinking shoulders and bellowed, "Yeaaaaaa for Hogan!"

The crowd stamped and whistled and shouted.

Hogan stood straighter and threw up his head. Dave stopped and felt a shiver go through him. All Hogan had to do now was point a finger and the fists would start swinging.

Hogan's face grew tight as Dave worked closer and closer to him. White-faced, Dave stopped within two feet of him.

He said, "Hi-ya, Hogan."

The big redhead sensed there was something wrong, and he looked from Hogan to Dave, then back to Hogan again. He nudged Hogan with his thumb and demanded belligerently. "Is he after you, pal?"

Hogan took a breath. When he let it out, it was a sigh. He shook his head. He looked sadly at Dave.

"I'm sorry, Dave," he said. "I just couldn't raise the dough."

"Why didn't you come to me and tell me?"

Hogan looked around the room. His mouth twisted. "I was having meself a last fling. I used to be a soccer player meself. Can I buy you a plate of fish and chips, Dave?" However drunk he had been earlier, he was cold sober now. He slipped from under the redhead's arm. "Let's go."

He started for the door. Dave crowded him and whispered angrily, "Do you think I'd have anybody gunned down for

money? Why didn't you come to me?"

Hogan said incredulously, "You're gonna give me time?"

"All the time you want."

Hogan grabbed his hand, "Dave, I swear—"

"You're not out of the woods yet," Dave said grimly. "Johnny Michael's got Zyla after you, and I'm supposed to take the fall for it. Zyla's been on the prowl since ten. That's why I'm here."

Hogan nodded. "I thought Johnny was getting ambitious. He wants your spot, hey?" Then meekly, "What now, Dave?"

Dave stopped at the door, his hand on the knob, debating with himself. "The best thing, I guess," he said finally, "is to get back to the Club. We can straighten it out there among friends. Johnny won't throw any punches, once we got it settled."

He opened the door and took three steps out into the street. There was a cab at the curb. The door of it swung open and he grabbed wildly for his gun, throwing himself down and to the side, dragging Hogan after him. But it was Tess who exploded out of the cab.

She cried, "Dave!" and ran to him. Her face was as pale as death.

He rose, slapped the dust from his knees. "What happened, Tess—your conscience get too big?"

She made a small, appealing gesture with her hand. "I'm sorry, Dave. I didn't mean . . . I thought I was doing you a favor."

"Doing me a favor, having a man shot?"

"I didn't think of it that way, Dave. I was only thinking of you. When you broke out of the Club, I knew you'd be going to Hogan's hotel, so I followed you. I wanted you to know that . . . Damn it, Dave, when you're in love with a guy . . ."

He stared at her in wonder. The tears were spilling naked and unashamed down her face. He laughed, empty, self-mocking laughter. What a pair they were, each loving the other, each too hard-boiled to admit it.

He put his arm around her. "Okay," he said. "It's okay, honey. But how'd you know where to find me?"

"Quiggy told me. He was at the hotel."

"Quiggy's making quite a night of it," he said drily.

He took her arm and ran her across the street to the Caddy. Hogan pounded after them. Dave didn't relax until he was on the Harrison Turnpike.

THE PARKING LOT was jammed when they reached the Club. The dance floor would be closed in an hour, but the gambling room would be open all night. Dave took them straight up to his office on the second floor. He flipped on the light—then froze.

Johnny Michaels, wearing that small, tight smile of his, was sitting behind the desk. The heavy door closed behind them, and Dave whirled involuntarily. Zyla leaned against it, deadpan, hefting his gun in his hand. Hogan looked sick.

"Kind of thought you'd show up here, Dave," said Johnny softly. "And look who you've brought with you. Well, well, well. The gang's all here, hey, Dave?"

"You're sticking your neck out, Johnny," Dave said. "This is still my Club. My boys are downstairs . . ."

"Sure they are," Johnny chuckled. "And when they come busting in here, they'll find all three of you nice and dead. And tomorrow they'll be saying: 'If Dave hadn't pushed Hogan so hard for those ten G's, the little jerk wouldn't have gone crazy and shot him and his girl friend.' That's just what they'll be saying, Dave, and there'll be nobody to say different, because Hogan'll be cold meat, too. Now ain't that a shame. . . ."

Hogan screeched and flung himself on Zyla, yelling recklessly, "Take him, Dave!

Take him!" His arms flailed madly.

Zyla's gun roared. Dave dropped to the floor, smoothly sliding his Luger from his pocket. Johnny half rose from the desk, grabbing for the gun under his arm. Dave shot him in the face and without waiting to see him fall, turned toward Zyla. Bleeding down the side of the head, Hogan was clinging to Zyla's right arm with both hands. The big gunman shook him furiously, then raised his left fist and clubbed him behind the neck. Dave steadied his hand and shot Zyla through the knee. The man went down as if his leg had been cut off under him. Dave fired again, getting him in the right shoulder. Zyla fell back against the door and sat there, his eyes huge with sudden fear.

Hopelessly he watched Dave pick up his gun from the floor and straighten up.

Tess moaned, "No, Dave, no!"

He shook his head at her and bent over Hogan. Zyla's only shot had grazed the Irishman's skull, gouging out a shallow gutter, but otherwise had done no serious damage. Johnny Michaels had disappeared behind the desk.

Dave said heavily, "If he'd waited till morning, he could have had the Club a lot cheaper than that." He looked at Tess. "I'm through, honey. Done. Washed up. When the cops are finished pushing me around, I'm buying myself a little orange grove in Florida. If you come with me, it means no more mink, no more caviar, no more filet mignon . . ."

She lifted her face. She was still shaking a little. "What's wrong with orange juice?" she asked defensively. "They say it's very healthy."

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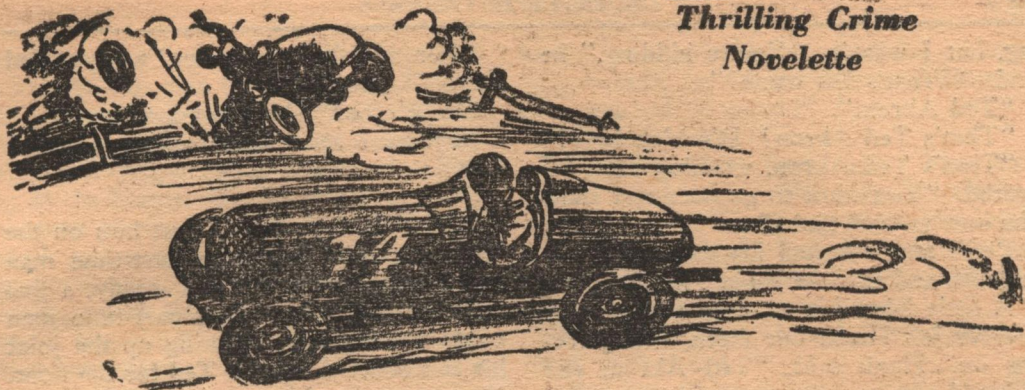
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the car. Just laying there, all twisted
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**Thrilling Crime
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RED HEAD, STAY DEAD!

**By
WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT**

Chasing Ted Akron around got to be a habit with the luscious, man-hungry redhead. So when she died, where else would she turn up—but in Ted Akron's car?

CHAPTER ONE

No Fun Like Murder

LIKE I told Marge, if a guy wants to be a cowboy, he should get some spurs and a gun and head west. He shouldn't be parking cars in a garage. There's no room for a rodeo in a garage, and it runs the insurance rates way up.

Trouble is, the kids I've got working there are young, and you put a young guy behind the hundred and sixty horses under a Caddy hood, it does something to him.

The customer's waiting on the first floor for his car, and I suppose the kids figure you can't hear those big tires screaming for trackage. But I'm in the office, and I can hear them, so it's a sure thing the customer can.

I was glad when Ted Akron came in for

the night shift. I broke him in days so he'd get to know the customers, and then gave him the shift from six in the evening until two. I watched him when he first came, and it was a pleasure to see the regard he had for the customers' cars.

Not that he wasted any time or mortion, you understand; he put them away clean and quick, and there wasn't a hole he couldn't snake those big jobs into.

Red was standing next to me that first day, and he said, "This new guy acts scared. He probably hasn't driven much, huh?"

"A little," I said. "He won the Association dirt-track title three years in a row."

Red looked at me to see if I was smil-

ing, but I wasn't. "You're kidding," he said. "What's his name?"

"Ted Akron."

"That's Ted Akron? Working here?"

"That's Ted Akron, working here," I agreed. "You want to go over and show him how to start that Chev?"

Red's face matched his hair for a few seconds, and then he walked away.

A little later I went over to check on a valve job Hank, our mech, was working on. Hank said, "Ted Akron, eh? When'd you get the money to hire that kind of help, Rocky?"

"He gets the regular starting rate," I said. "I can't figure it, either, but he said driving is about all he knew, that and motors, and I've already got a mech—so-called."

Hank ignored the insult. "Heard he was in trouble. Heard he lost his nerve, and that's why he's not racing. You hear that, Rocky?"

"No," I said, "but I don't listen like you do. That job going to be ready to go out at five?"

"Sure. Heard that Akron—"

"Save it," I cut him off. "Tell your wife about it. I'm not interested."

Just like a bunch of women, I thought, these old-timers around here. It was the start of a bad day, that first one. Johnny took a bumper off Mr. Green's Buick, and Mr. Green was tough enough to get along with, without that. Al forgot to get the number on a tankful of gas. They're the kids, Al and Johnny, and nobody in the garage is safe when they're wheeling. Red's getting older and more sane; he's down to about one fender a month.

At four, the part-time man came in for the five-o'clock rush, and at five-thirty things had simmered down a little. I went home.

Marge had liver and onions waiting, which helped some.

"How'd I ever get into this crazy business?" I asked her.

She just smiled. "The boys giving you trouble again?"

"Johnny tore a bumper off old man Green's job."

"For a dollar an hour you can't expect Barney Oldfield," Marge said. That's the only name she knows in the whole automotive field.

"For a dollar an hour I've got Ted Akron," I said.

"Who's he?" she wanted to know.

"I'll have some more onions, please," I said.

COUUPLE days later I put him on the night shift, with the part-time man and Port. Port is old and steady, a fine man for the office. The part-time man worked until eight, cleaning up the joint his last hour. I figured Ted for the floor. He was neat and courteous, and Port can drive, too, so that would take care of the shift. All I'd have to worry about was the day gang, which should have cut me down one ucler at least.

Everything went along fine for a week. That should have been the tipoff that trouble was storing up. Garages have their quota of trouble and it's better if you get it spread out, not in bunches.

Tuesday afternoon, I was leaving when Ted came in. I asked him, "How's it going?"

His face is the kind that needs a smile to show how young it is. He was smiling now. "Okay."

"I can't figure it," I said. "You must make more on a track than you're making here."

He smiled again. "A little more." He looked past me, toward the cashier's cage near the door. "It's safer here, though."

"Not with Johnny and Al driving, it isn't," I said.

"I can stay out of their way," he said.

I went home, to beef stew and Marge. Marge told me all about the new automatic washing machine the Tellers had bought, but I wasn't listening. I was thinking of Ted's saying, "It's safer here, though." And I was remembering Hank's, "Heard he lost his nerve, got into trouble..."

Marge said, "And you can save your soapy water and use it over. It's really an economy."

She wanted to spend over three hundred dollars so she could use her soapy water twice. That's my Marge.

Next day things were still quiet until three o'clock. That was when this punk walked in. Kid about twenty, I'd say, blond, with a thin face and eyes that were mad at the world. Kind of good looking,

but nothing that would appeal to a man. "Ted Akron working here?" he wanted to know.

"Right," I said, "but he won't be in until around five."

"You the boss here?"

"Right again."

He looked me over like I was in a showcase. "Need any help?"

"Not young help," I said. "I've got two too many of those right now."

"I work cheap," he said.

"I'm not taking any applications right now," I said, and looked him straight in the eyes.

He looked back at me for a few seconds, and then he shrugged, turned, and walked out.

Port came in at four, and I left. At five-thirty, Port called me on the phone.

"That part-time guy quit," he said. "And the Wednesday-night gang from the Athletic Club will be piling in in another hour."

They run a dinner dance every Wednesday night at the Club, and we're usually busy. The Athletic Club is right across the street.

"Get somebody," I said. "Call Johnny or Al or Red. Get anybody. I'm bowling tonight."

"All right," he said, and hung up.

I didn't get a call back before I left for bowling, so I figured everything was under control.

Port dropped in around noon the next day. "How'd it go last night?" I asked him.

"Okay," he said. "I hired a guy. I figured that was all right, since the part-time man quit. He's going to work from

four until eight, unless we need him longer."

"How'd he work out?"

"Fine. Young, but he's no tiger like Johnny and Al. Kind of a quiet kid. Good looking, too."

I don't know why a premonition should slug me, but one did. "Blond kid?" I asked, "with a thin face and hot eyes?"

"That's right. You know him?"

"I met him yesterday for the first time. I told him there weren't any jobs open." Then I had another thought. "The part-time gent have any excuse for quitting?"

Port shook his head. "You think something's cooking, Rocky?"

"Simmering," I said. "I hope it never comes to a boil."

IT COULD be coincidence the man didn't show the same night this kid came in. I took the cards out of the rack and checked his name, Larry Felcher.

Felcher . . . There'd been a Bruce Felcher killed at the Madina oval just two months before. I'd seen that race. And I remembered it because Bruce Felcher had been crowded when he went through the fence.

I hung around until six, when Ted came in. I called him into the office.


I asked him, "This Larry Felcher a friend of yours?"

"I wouldn't call him that. The kid's got some kind of crazy idea he's my conscience."

"That race where his brother was killed," I said. "You were inside of him there, and you went into a slide?"

"I didn't bump him enough to put him through the fence. He was out of con-

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trol when he went around the turn, before I hit him."

"Then why did you quit?"

Ted looked away. "Maybe I'm wrong. I don't know. . ."

"You lost your nerve?"

"Call it that."

"It's none of my business," I said, "unless it means trouble around here. Then it's my business."

"There'll be no trouble, none that I'll start, Rocky."

"I know that," I said. "You want me to fire this Larry?"

"Not for me. He's—he's just one of my troubles, and I can't run away from them all."

"You don't think he's . . . punchy?"

"Only on this one subject." Ted sighed.

"And maybe he's right about that."

Larry was bringing a car to the door for a customer about then, and I watched him. He was like Ted the way he handled a car, smooth and easy. Ted was better looking, I thought, but probably women wouldn't think so.

Ted went up to get his working clothes on, and Larry went up to spot the cars on the second floor. By spotting them, I mean getting them in an accessible spot for quick delivery. Accessible you'd have to look up.

I sat in the office for no reason that I know of. It was after six, and Port was here to take over, and Marge doesn't like me to be late for dinner. But I sat there and saw this redhead come in.

She stood in the doorway a second looking over at the office, and then she saw Ted coming over from the elevator. He stopped walking as soon as he saw her.

She came over the rest of the way to him. She put a hand on his arm, and he shook it off. I couldn't hear a word from where I sat, but it was plain she carried a torch.

Ted kept shaking his head. I don't know what he was turning down, and I haven't enough imagination to figure what it could be, with that redhead. She looked like a lot of fun and a lot of money, and who'd turn either of those down?

After she left Ted came back into the office to punch in.

"Your wife or your girl?" I asked him.

"She'd like to be my girl," he said, "but

she's somebody else's wife. I don't want any part of her."

I couldn't think of any answer to a statement as ridiculous as that, so I said nothing.

Ted said, "I figured after I left the track she'd cool off. Maybe she will, after a while." He put his card in the rack. "You want me to spot that stuff on the first floor?"

"All the stuff with tickets on them," I said. "You can put the monthly stuff upstairs. They won't be going out any more tonight."

The cars with tickets were the transient trade. Most of my trade consists of monthly accounts and carry a plate instead of a ticket.

He was working with Port, getting things lined up when I left.

As I said before, a garage has its quota of trouble. Ted and Larry weren't fender wreckers, but they were both of them carrying trouble.

MARGE was sitting in the living room reading. "Your dinner's in the oven," she said.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I said. "Something serious came up."

She didn't lift her eyes from the book.

"Some beautiful redhead . . ." I said, and then broke off with, "Oh, well, you're not interested in Ted, I guess."

I had just opened the oven door when she came out into the kitchen. "Spare ribs," she said, "and you like them hot. I'll make some fresh coffee."

She fixed up my plate and sat across from me.

I smiled at her.

"Don't be so cute," she said. "Your face wasn't designed for it. *What* redhead?"

I told her about the redhead and about Larry Felcher.

"Rocky," she said, "why did you ever get into this business?"

"That's my line," I told her.

"This Larry Felcher, do you think he might . . . I mean, is he dangerous?"

"I don't know," I said. "He probably wouldn't be, for anybody but Ted. But you can't tell, when a guy gets a kink in his mind like that. Maybe it puts him over the brink."

"You should fire him," she said. "You should fire both of them. One of them chasing married women, and maybe a murderer, and the other one maybe insane."

"The woman was chasing Ted," I corrected her, "and Bruce Felcher's car was out of control long before Ted Akron hit him."

"That's his version of it," Marge said.

"And I believe him. As for the kid, he's not going to buddy up to a guy he thinks killed his brother, is he?"

"No. But if he was normal, he wouldn't follow him around like that, either."

"And if I was normal, I wouldn't be in this business. Why don't we go to a movie tonight?"

"As soon as I stack the dishes," she said.

Nothing happened the rest of the week. Except that this redhead came in to see Ted every single night. Port told me about it.

Port said, "The guy must be nuts. You should see her, Rocky."

"I've seen her," I said. "Ted might just happen to be a right guy. Did you ever think of that?"

"He can't be right and turn that down," Port said. "She's screwy for him. You ought to see Larry watch them when they're talking."

"You know the girl's name?" I asked him.

Port nodded. "Larry told me. She's Carol Rowan. Used to be an actress, and now she's married to that guy runs Medlin Steel. I've never seen him, but I've heard of him."

"Rowan?" I said. "A. J., isn't it? A big wheel."

"A very big wheel. But she's got a lot of money in her own name. Ted's simple."

"At the risk of repeating myself," I said, "maybe he's just a right guy."

That was Saturday. Sunday and Monday were quiet. Tuesday I decided that I was getting to be as much of an old woman as the rest of them, worrying about things that didn't happen.

Wednesday night, at eleven o'clock, Port called. His voice was hoarse. "You'd better get down here right away, Rocky."

"What's happened?" I said.

"Murder," he said, and hung up.

CHAPTER TWO

The Lady Is Dead

I WAS down there in five minutes. He must have called me before he called the law, because a prowler car came skidding in as I walked across to the office.

Port was white and sick looking. He was alone in the office.

"Where's Ted?" I asked him, and he pointed upstairs.

"Who was killed?"

"That girl, that redhead—Carol Rowan. She . . . I found her in Ted's car."

"In Ted's car?" I asked, and then the law was there, and loud.

"Who called?" the plainclothes man at the window wanted to know.

"I did," Port told him. "There's a dead woman in one of the cars upstairs."

He headed for the stairs as a uniformed man came into the office. Port gave the uniformed man his story, and the man put it down in a notebook.

There wasn't much to tell. Ted had gone out to deliver a car to the Athletic Club across the street, and Port had gone up to get the thermos bottle out of Ted's car. The thermos bottle wasn't in the front seat, and Port had looked in the car.

"That's where she was, on the floor in there," he said. "She was blue and . . ." He stopped talking and shook his head.

"You came right down and phoned the police?"

"That's right. I called the boss first."

The officer looked at me. "You're the boss?"

"That's right."

He took my name and home address as the police ambulance came swinging into the garage. Out on the sidewalk I could see a knot of people gathering.

"May as well take the ambulance right up," the cop said. "One of you come along to run the elevator."

Port just sat there, and I went over to run the elevator. That ambulance just about made it; the front bumper was almost scraping as we went up.

Upstairs, the detective was talking to Ted. All the lights were on, and the door of a Chrysler Town and Country stood open. The car was near the elevator, and the light overhead showed me the twisted

body of Carol Rowan in the rear of the car.

"She bothered you a lot, huh?" the detective was saying.

"I didn't say that," Ted answered. "She came to see me here quite often, but I never took her out after I found out she was married, and—"

"You never took her out where anybody could see her, right?"

A guy from the ambulance went by with his little bag, and a white-jacketed gent trailed him.

Ted's voice was rough. "I never took her out or went to see her. I told her not to bother me here any more."

"And when she did, you couldn't take it?"

Ted swore. I could see his right fist bunch.

I said, "Easy boy. Only a dummy argues with a cop. Wait'll you get a lawyer."

The detective turned to face me. "And who might you be?"

"I might be Charlie McCarthy," I said, "but I'm not. I'm Rocky Devers, and I own this garage."

"My name is Sergeant Sloan," he said. "I'm from Homicide, Mr. Devers, and I'll get to you when the time comes. Just wait downstairs, in the office."

I took another look at the body in the Chrysler and went down the stairs. Port was alone in the office. The uniformed cop and another one stood over near the open garage doors.

I asked Port, "When did Ted start parking his car upstairs?"

"Saturday night. He brought it in after you left. He wanted to work on it. I told him that when we weren't crowded he could bring it in, and when we weren't busy he could work on it."

"And about this coffee?"

"Well, he's got a quart bottle, you know, and he can't drink it all, so we go halves on it. He gets it filled at the diner before he comes to work."

I sat down and looked at the time clock. It was eleven-thirty. I lit a cigarette and put it out a minute later.

"If you hadn't gone up for the coffee..." I said, and stopped.

Port looked at me. "So—if I hadn't gone up . . . ?"

"I don't know. What do you think, Port?"

"Ted's no killer."

"How do we know?" I asked. "I never had anything to do with a killer, and neither have you, probably, Port. How do we know if Ted's one or not?"

"I'm believing what I want to believe," he said. He wasn't looking at me. "When I found her I waited until Ted got back. I told him about it first. *He* was the one who told me to call the cops, Rocky. He wouldn't do that if he was guilty, would he?"

"Maybe," I said. "You knew it. How'd he know you'd shut up about it if he went out and dumped her some place?"

"If you killed somebody," Port asked, "would you carry her around in the back of your car?"

"Until I could dump the body. If he killed her at five-thirty, say, and didn't show up for work, wouldn't that be something against him, when they found the body? But he leaves here at two, and he's got the whole night to find a spot to dump her."

Port just looked at me. "Do you believe that, Rocky?"

"No," I said.

From the doorway, somebody asked, "What's that you don't believe?"

IT WAS Sergeant Sloan and he was looking us over very coldly.

"I don't believe a Cadillac will deliver forty miles to the gallon," I answered. "Do you, Sarge?"

"You're pretty smart, aren't you?" he said.

"I try not to be," I said, "except when some city employee walks in here like he owns the joint."

"Having trouble with the inspectors, Devers?" He was half smiling now.

"Always have," I said. "Sit down, Sergeant."

He tilted his hat back and sat down. He laid his notebook on the counter and reached for a cigar.

I said, "I suppose you've got it cold. Ted's your boy, and you're not looking any farther."

"You got a better choice?" He was lighting the cigar and not looking at me.

"None that I know of."

He looked at Port. "Just you and this Akron working when you found the body?"

Port nodded.

Sloan looked at me then. "What are you paying Akron?"

"Dollar an hour."

"And he drives a Chrysler Town and Country."

"He was Association dirt-track champ three years in a row," I said. "That's where he made his money."

Sloan was frowning. "You mean he's that Akron, the big racing guy?"

"Correct."

Sloan nodded. "So. He's the guy put Felcher through the fence, right? One of our men worked on that, but Akron was cleared."

I didn't say anything.

But Port said, "Felcher's brother works here too. From four to eight."

Sloan looked from Port to me and back. "How in the hell did that happen?"

I told him how it happened, and he looked thoughtful.

The phone rang, and it was Marge. "What's going on down there, Rocky? More trouble?"

"More than ever," I said. "I'll tell you about it later."

"Who was that?" Sloan wanted to know.

"My wife," I said.

Sloan said, "I want to check this Akron's address against the one he gave me."

I went to the employment-application cards and read it off to him.

He nodded. "Okay. And Felcher's?"

I gave him Larry Felcher's address. He

wrote it down in his careful way and stood up. "I'll be taking Akron along with me. Anything else you know, I'm waiting to hear it."

"If I think of something, I'll let you know," I said.

He went out as Ted came down the stairs, flanked by one of the uniformed men. He and Ted went out together, and the uniformed man came over to the office.

"One of you had better come and run the elevator now," he said. "The ambulance is ready to go."

"You take it, Port," I said.

Port went out with the cop. I still had Larry Felcher's card in my hand. The telephone number was on it, and I phoned.

After a couple of rings, Larry's voice answered.

I said, "This is Rocky. Were you here when Ted brought his car in tonight?"

"That's right. Something wrong, boss?"

"Nothing wrong," I said. "I just didn't know he was parking it here, is all. Was that redhead around, when you were here?"

"I didn't see her. I had to deliver a couple cars. She may have been in, though."

"Okay," I said. "Good-night." I hung up.

The elevator stopped, and Port lifted the gate. The ambulance came out slowly, swinging wide for the turn around the cars on the floor.

It went by the office, carrying the body of that lovely, super-charged redhead Ted could have had, and didn't want. As far as I knew, that is.

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Outside, the cops were breaking up the crowd, and one of them called in, "You'd better close these big doors now."

Port pressed the button, and the doors hissed shut.

Some of the gang from the Athletic Club came in, and I stayed with Port, getting them out. After the rush we spotted the rest of the cars and I went home.

MARGE was playing solitaire in the kitchen. She looked up when I came in, but she didn't say a word.

"It's worse this time," I told her. "It's murder."

She stared at me.

I sat down and told her all about it. She made some tea after a while and dug out some sweet rolls, and we sat there, not saying much.

"What kind of a man is this Ted Akron?" she asked.

"A good guy, for my money," I said. "But I've been wrong before."

"And Larry?"

"He could be, if he didn't carry that hate around with him like a club. With young guys it's hard to tell; they haven't had the rough edges knocked off yet."

Marge sighed. "It's the detective's worry, not yours, Rocky. It will all be cleaned up."

We went to bed, and after a while I could tell Marge was sleeping by her regular breathing. But I couldn't sleep. I kept remembering the way Ted had looked, walking out with that cop. He'd seemed sort of resigned about it, as if this was to be expected the way things had been breaking for him.

I got up after a while and phoned Port, but there was no answer. I looked at the clock in the kitchen and saw it was two-thirty. Port had left a half-hour ago.

I phoned Headquarters and asked for Sergeant Sloan. The man at the other end said he was out, but they'd have him call me when he came in, if he came in.

I said I'd be up for an hour yet, and gave them my number.

I sat there chain-smoking until the sergeant phoned.

"Your boy's in bad shape," he said. "Went over to his apartment while he was down here and found Mrs. Rowan's

handkerchief and some of the poison the coroner found in her. You still think he's clean?"

"She was poisoned then?"

"About four-thirty. So that let's this Felcher punk out. You'll only have to hire one new man."

I said, "Good-night," and hung up.

I'd been trying to make a mystery out of something that wasn't. From the sergeant's angle, everything made sense, and the sergeant had dealt with lots of murders.

I went to sleep on the couch. I knew I'd be tossing and I didn't want to keep Marge awake. At seven I was up and frying some eggs.

At seven-thirty I phoned Red and told him I wouldn't be down for a while this morning, and were they jammed?

He said it wasn't anything they couldn't handle between the three of them, and Hank could drive if it got bad.

Marge got up, and I had some more coffee with her.

I told her what the sergeant had told me about the handkerchief and the poison.

"That's plain enough," she said. "Rocky, stop fretting about it. You're old enough to know the facts of life. Just because he's a race driver, you think he's some kind of Galahad. Heels come in all sizes and all trades."

"He's not only a race driver," I said. "He's a guy loves motors and turns down redheads. He's special, I'm telling you, kid. He's no more killer than I am."

I don't know if I was trying to convince Marge or me.

"Then do something about it," she said. "Don't just stew."

I went down to Headquarters. I'd bowled with the Chief, and a word from him got me in to see Ted. They had him in a cell all by himself, at the end of the corridor.

"Get a lawyer yet?" I asked him.

He nodded. "Bitkorn."

"A good man," I said. "Ted, what's the story?"

"I've told it a hundred times," he told me, "but they won't believe it. I hadn't seen her all day until Port told me he'd found her body in my car. I went upstairs—and you know the rest."

"Why'd you quit racin', Ted?"

"Bruce Felcher was one of my best friends. Don't let Larry tell you anything else about that. We quarreled the morning he went through the fence. I don't think I put him through, but I wasn't going to lose to him, not that day. I was crowding him, sure, but that jinx jalopy of his was out of control when we bumped. But I can still see him going through the fence and over that bank."

His face was white now, and he was breathing hard.

"What'd you quarrel about?" I asked him.

"About his car. I told him it was a lemon and he ought to get rid of it. He said he was just as much a mech as I was, or better, and he had never bought a lemon. He was kind of touchy about his handiness with a wrench."

"The car was checked after the accident?"

"Sure. Everything was okay as far as the steering went."

"That's where he'd had his trouble before, though, with the steering?"

"Right. What difference does all that make now, Rocky?"

"None, I suppose," I said. "I've just been trying to talk about something I understand. I'm trying to figure Larry in this, Ted."

"Larry was working when she died," he said. "Larry's punchy, and always has been, though not as bad as now. But he was at the garage when she died."

"I know," I said.

"And you know a lawyer isn't going to do me any good, either. Not even Bitkorn. So what else is there to know?"

"Nothing," I said. "Where's Bruce Felcher's car, now?"

"Out at Bill Girard's garage. Remember, out near the Point?"

When I left him he was sitting on the cot, his face in his hands. He was beat.

CHAPTER THREE

Tickets to Trouble

BILL GIRARD had worked for me years before. Then he got into the racing game, and now he ran a garage for the local speed demons. He was in his office when I got out there.

There isn't much about racing motors he doesn't know. But the trouble, I've learned, with the real experts is that they overlook the obvious. That was my hope. They have trouble with a car, and they tear it down without bothering to look first, to see maybe if it was out of gas.

"You're uglier than ever, Rocky," he said. "Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"In the garage," I said. "Felcher's car here, Bill?"

"In the back shop. Got it figured out, Rocky?"

"Not until I see it," I said.

He came out to the back shop with me. He was grinning. Bill likes to think he's the best in town, and maybe he is.

It was a green job, somewhat banged up. I took one look at it, and something clicked in my memory.

"The exhaust," I said. "The tail pipe. It runs down the left side."

"So what?" he said. "There's no law against that."

I said, "Remember at the track that year they had those experimental jobs? Those heaps were running wild after a couple laps."

He shook his head.

"They had the tail pipe running down the left side, too."

"And?"

I lifted the hood, and showed him how close the exhaust pipe came to the steering-gear box.

His eyes got bright. "It's too simple," he said. "I can't believe it."

"That's the trouble," I said. "It was too simple for them, too. The pipe gets hot, expands the worm, and the steering gear binds. The car is brought into the garage, but by that time the gears are cold again. Everything hunky-dory. They found that out too late for the race, but after that they put a shield in there, between the box and the manifold."

"Sure," he said. "Hell, yes. That's got to be it." He shook his head. "Rocky, you—"

"Don't say it," I told him, "because you wouldn't mean it. I'd be grateful, though, if you'd phone Larry Felcher and tell him you discovered it."

"I will," he said, "but it won't bring Bruce back."

"No. But call Larry, anyway. Call him this morning and tell him."

I went back to the garage from there. Red was in the office, smoking a cigar and trying to give the impression he owned the joint.

"What's the latest?" he said.

"It looks bad for Ted." I went over to check the transient tickets.

Red said, "If I was going to pick a killer, that Larry would be my bet. I can't see this Akron guy as—"

From the doorway somebody said, "Mr. Devers?"

I turned to face a tall, well-dressed man with a haunted, thin face. "Right," I said.

"My name is Rowan," the man said. "Arthur J. Rowan, and I'd like to talk with you for a few minutes, if I could."

Red said, "I'll handle the board, Rocky," and went out.

"Sit down, Mr. Rowan," I said, and he sat down.

His eyes were wet. "I suppose you're busy. I . . . won't take much of your time. It's about my . . . about Carol."

I nodded, saying nothing, feeling uncomfortable.

"I had no idea . . . I mean, since the police, since talking to them, it seems there's reason to believe Carol and this Ted Akron were . . ." He shook his head. "I can't believe it. There's never been the slightest breath of scandal, and Carol just wasn't the kind who'd . . ." Again he shook his head.

"What did you want from me, Mr. Rowan?" I asked.

He faced me. "Assurance, I guess. Your word that there was nothing between them, that it's all just talk."

"Ted was an employee," I said. "I didn't live with him. But it was mostly talk, if anything, I'm sure. I can guarantee you he didn't want to get mixed up with your wife, Mr. Rowan."

He took a deep breath. "He didn't want to. You mean she—"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know what was in her mind. But nothing happened between them. I'd bet on that."

"Then why should he—"

"He didn't," I said.

"But if he didn't, who—"

"I'm no cop," I said. "I've just got a lot of faith in Ted."

He rose. "I wish I could share it. Thank you, Mr. Devers."

I WATCHED him walk out, then turned to watch Johnny bring a car up from the basement, a light car. There are too many posts in the basement for the big ones. He spotted it over near the door and came to the cashier's window.

"How about Ted?"

"In jail," I said. "You want to help out on that night shift, Johnny, until I get another man?"

"Time and a half?"

"Time and a half."

"You don't figure Ted will be back, then?"

"I don't know."

"Pretty good driver," Johnny said, "but a little too careful."

I started going through the transient tickets then, and got an idea. I called Red back into the office.

"Take over," I told him. "I'll be back in a half hour."

I went through the tickets, discarding those I knew. The rest I took with me to the License Bureau.

I knew Cal Girard over there. I'd had reason to use him before.

"Trouble again, Rocky?" he said.

Every time they see me they think of trouble. I can't blame them.

"Just checking some license numbers," I said.

It didn't take long. All but one of them were from local cars, and I recognized most of the names. The other one was a Buick from upstate, 2-9449.

I took a good look at the pair of nines, a real good look. The ticket was signed with Port's initials, and the time had been stamped as five to five-ten. That was our busiest time, and most of the cars would be going out, not coming in, at that time.

I thanked Cal and went back to the garage with the name and address of the man who owned the Buick. I thought about it for five minutes before I called long distance.

I identified myself when I got him on the phone, and asked him if he'd lost anything from his car. We'd found a wheel rim, I told him, which could have come from his car.

He didn't know what I was talking

about, as I'd suspected. He didn't know anything about it.

I called Cal back, and asked him about another number, and there it was, the whole case.

That was when Sergeant Sloan walked in.

I said, "If your wife was cheating on you and was killed, who'd be the first person you'd suspect?"

"I'm not married," he said. "I wanted to look at your tickets for last night, Devers."

"I've already looked at them," I said, and picked up the phone.

When Port finally answered, I said, "I hate to bother you, but it's important. Can you get down here right away?"

He said he could, and I phoned Larry.

Larry said he'd be down in ten minutes.

"What the hell's going on?" Sloan asked me.

"Detective work," I said. "I'm wasting my time here."

He sat down and lit a cigar. "It's a pleasure to watch somebody else work, for a change. I had four hours sleep last night."

"Take a look at these tickets, Sergeant," I said. "They're all consecutively numbered, see? Got to use them all, can't throw them away without voiding them and making a record of it."

"I noticed that last night," he said.

Then Port was there, and I showed him the ticket he'd written up. He looked at it closely, then looked at me.

"I don't remember it," he said thoughtfully, "but I'd say it's been changed."

"Not by you?"

He shook his head. "I don't make those kind of nines. Look at some of my other tickets."

"I have," I said. "And the nines were changed with a different pencil, a harder one."

Sloan said, "What are you getting at?"

"The nines were originally ones," I said. "That's what Port wrote up. They were changed later."

"I delivered a car about ten to six," he said.

"That's when these numbers were changed."

"You mean," Sloan asked, "this license number was originally 2-1441?"

That was it, I told him. And I also told him about my call upstate.

I asked Port, "Do you remember the car?"

He shook his head—as Larry walked into the office. Larry saw the ticket in my hand, and his face was white. His hands were shaking.

I handed it to him. "Did you make this out, Larry?"

He looked at it a long time. "No. Port's initials are on it."

"But you changed the license number."

"Why should I?" He looked around at all of us. "What's going on here?"

"Girard phone you about Bruce?" I asked him.

He nodded.

"Then you know the accident wasn't Ted's fault. You've no reason to hate Ted. Come clean, Larry."

"What are you talking about? What is this?" He looked scared and wild. He started to back out of the office.

Sloan said, "If it isn't too much trou-

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ble, I'd like to know what's going on, too, Devers."

I said, "If my wife was cheating on me, nobody else would have to kill her. I'd take care of that. That's the trouble with experts; they always overlook the obvious."

"Rowan, you mean? You crazy? He didn't even know what was going on," Sloan protested.

"You think Larry wouldn't tell him? You think Larry wouldn't take a chance to pile all the trouble he could on Ted? Rowan was in here pulling an act not ten minutes before you came."

Larry was still edging toward the door, and now he wasn't right in the head. You could see it.

"You're trying to frame me," he said. "You're—"

Sloan said, "Take it easy, son. Nobody's going to—"

Then he stopped talking and just looked at the gun that was suddenly in Larry's shaking hand. By his eyes, I guessed we were all due for it if his aim was any good.

He kept backing toward the door, and now he was through it, and the gun was steadier, and I couldn't look at his eyes. I just kept looking at that gun. I figured it was the last thing I was going to see on this earth, and I wanted a good look at it.

That was the second Johnny's cowboy blood came to our aid. Because Johnny was backing Judge Neckland's Caddy past the office, and when Johnny backs up he just puts it in reverse and tramps that foot feed.

He was boiling, and watching only the left. Johnny claims the left side is all he can watch at one time. Larry was to the right of that gunning Caddy, and the rudder taillight must have caught him at the seat of his pants.

He was screaming when he slammed into the door frame, and the gun went bouncing off the office ceiling. He was out before he hit the floor. . . .

"I DON'T get it yet," Marge said. "Have some more coffee and start over."

I had some more coffee. Also some doughnuts.

"Look. Larry tells Rowan about his wife going to see Ted every day at the garage. Rowan might have got hot about it, or he might have realized it was the way to get her money. Because he can tell Larry hates Ted's guts. So he poisons her, puts her in the back of his big sedan and drives to the garage at the right time. He parks upstairs, saying it's overnight. Larry puts the car up there, takes her body, puts it in one of the dead storage cars and waits for his chance to shift it somewhere else."

"Dead storage?" Marge asked. That's how much she knows about the business.

"Cars that aren't used. Sometimes they sit there for months. When Port's out of the office Larry changes the license number on the office copy of the ticket, so that's clean. When nobody's around upstairs, and Ted's car is sitting there, he puts this Carol's body in Ted's car. He probably figured Ted would drive home with it without noticing, and then Rowan could claim his wife is missing, and the cops would start the search, and Ted would be a cooked goose. Ted's keys are usually left in his locker, and Larry had a duplicate made. That's how Rowan got into Ted's apartment to plant the poison and the handkerchief."

"And you figured all that out?" Marge asked.

"More or less. Sloan helped, after he broke Larry down."

Marge shook her head. "The garage business. What's next?"

"Well," I said, "Ted's got his nerve back now that he's *sure* the accident wasn't his fault. So we're going in fifty-fifty on a little D-O-4 Ted's been wanting to get, and—"

"Racing? Auto racing?" Marge said. "Dear God, haven't you got enough trouble now?"

"Trouble?" I said. "If we make the money, we're going to branch out. With a couple of hot wheelers like Johnny and Al, I'm wasting my time in the garage business. Why, even Girard couldn't figure out what was wrong with Felcher's car, and I—"

But I was talking to myself; Marge was in the living room by now with the radio on. Women!

DEATH IS MY BUSINESS

"All the way in," the little man said. "And shut the door behind you."

By
**BENJAMIN
SIEGEL**

*It took a crazy little man with a gun to teach
Patrolman Pete Sheldon what cops are for. Cops
are made to die.*

"**A**N HOUR to go," Pete Sheldon said. He moved his big shoulders inside the blue uniform, put his hand against the back of his neck and craned to get the kink out. "You tired?"

"No," Barker said. He wore a field jacket with an armband marked "Police." He grinned at Pete while maintaining the alert questing of his eyes, up and down

the streets, toward the windows of the apartment buildings, listening for a shot or a scream or the squealing of brakes.

Pete sighed noiselessly, shook his head faintly. He was only a year or so older but he felt immeasurably more mature than Barker. The boy had run out of questions on procedure but everything about him was taut with interest and pride and excitement. No sense telling him,

Pete thought wearily. No sense in breaking him down with the things I've learned. Let him find out for himself. Let him go on, for a while, thinking that being a cop was a dedication, that the power of his youth and ambition would propel him up the Department ladder. . . .

"You've got to get credit for good arrests, that's the way, isn't it, Sheldon?"

Suddenly Pete found Barker's chatter irritating; his own hard-won cynicism that he had been going to keep to himself, the special, solacing information, wasn't bulwark enough against the probationer's enthusiasm.

"Look," Pete said harshly. "Look, it's just a job. The quicker you figure that out the better off you'll be."

"Oh, sure, I know that. . . ." But what Barker really felt, Pete realized, had to be hidden, something to be slightly ashamed of, the delicate things a man won't put into words to other men. Pete snorted.

He noticed the parked car, then, with the part of his mind that checked everything on his beat, while the rest of him speculated about what he would do when he was off duty, about the couple of dress shirts that he needed to buy, about a date for Saturday night. The car was a few yards in front of them when the information clicked into place. Pete jumped to the drivers side, flung open the door. "Get out!"

A couple of kids were in there, but they were too well, too flashily dressed. Pete stood them against the side of the car, arms' length, wary with automatic caution. "Registration?"

"I haven't got it with me. It's my friend's car."

Barker was whispering excitedly behind him, "What is it, Sheldon?"

"The car's hot, reported stolen on that last flash, remember?" Pete said to the boys, "All right. Get back in."

"Go on, now," Barker said.

Pete grinned to himself, opened the rear door and prodded Barker. "You take them in," he said. "Book them yourself."

"Me?"

"Yeah. Think you can handle it?" Pete said, grinning.

"Sure!"

PETE finished off the tour alone. Back at the station house, he signed out. He was opening his locker, working on the buttons of his coat with the other hand, when Barker came in behind him.

"Sheldon, I sure appreciate the credit for that arrest. But—"

"I'll tell you what I'll do. If I see you around you'll do all my booking for me. Okay?"

Pete had finished changing and he winked at Barker and went out.

Good arrest. Sure, he'd felt just the same as this new cop. Not too long ago, a year, year and a half. He was going to be the best damn patrolman on the force. For a short time, anyway. Long enough to move up to third grade detective and up to second and—well, he hadn't expected to become a lieutenant right away. . . .

First there was Benton—he'd gone to the academy with Sheldon at the same time. He'd been in Plainclothes for months now. Sensational work? Sensational apple-polishing and a ward-heeling uncle. And Barnes and Ingles and—but what was the sense in raking up old hurts? He had made up his mind. You got your yearly increments. You put in eight hours a day. Twenty years and you retired.

In the covert suit and maroon tie, blending with the non-uniformed citizens, free time ahead of him, Pete was able to see it as truly no more than a job, something you cast off when you got out of the blue. It hadn't been like that at the beginning. You weren't, then, a guy who worked eight hours a day for a salary. You represented the law. In the familiar uniform that clothed you, you gave the people a feeling of security by your presence alone, you were the assurance of civilized living, the guardian of decency against the occasionally erupting jungle. And you wanted to be a good cop, and you wanted to advance in your field, and you felt that devotion to the force paid off. . . .

Pete shook his head angrily, climbing the stairs to the elevated. He spread out his newspaper and looked at the ads. This was Thursday and the big department stores were open late. He had saved up a lot of shopping needs.

He got off at Thirty-sixth, where Morrow's sprawled over the entire block. Pete pushed through the rotating doors and strolled past the counters heaped with merchandise and blocked by anxious women shoppers who acted as if they were in at a wartime shortage. Pete edged into a necktie sale, fingered several, bought a red-and-blue rep stripe at ninety-eight cents; it was marked irregular but he didn't see anything wrong with it. He stuffed the purchase in his pocket and moved on. He bought some socks at another counter and was moving toward the shirt section when he noticed someone familiar—a burly man leaning against a wall, searching each face as it went by. It was Green, in plainclothes, an old-timer.

Pete was about to say hello when he recognized another man standing a few yards away. He too was against the wall, plainclothes, watching the faces. Alerted now, Pete picked out the faces of the others, not all known to him by name but obvious in their stance and manner. The store was ringed.

"What gives?" Pete said to Green.

"Oh—hello, Sheldon. It's a general. They rounded up everybody in the house. Payroll robbery across the street. The guy shot a clerk and a passerby and the word was he ducked in here. A little guy, no hat, the stuff was in a satchel." Green talked to Pete without looking at him, eyes roving across the busy stream of shoppers.

"Uh-huh," Pete said. "Well, good luck."

He went back to the shirts. Good thing he had left when he had, else he might have been in the hunt himself. It had nothing to do with him now.

He tried not to think of a desperate little man, with a gun, loose in a store with unsuspecting women and kids and ordinary people who had never seen a gun and didn't know what happened in the mind of a killer. It was none of Pete's business. . . . Then he saw a tall, straight figure, hatless, walking aimlessly through the crowd, looking about him ostensibly for bargains. Lieutenant Bascom. If he spots me, he'll put me on, Pete thought. Not me. I'm off duty.

Pete moved quietly toward the elevators and pushed into one about to go

up. The operator kept up a monologue concerning the goods carried on each floor and Pete allowed himself to be eased out when sporting equipment was mentioned. He walked past the tennis display and looked speculatively at the fishing rods and an array of plaid woolen shirts. There was an interesting arrangement of canoes which held him for a while. Then he wandered down the length of the floor and finally went into the rest room.

He had washed his hands and was waiting for the man in front of him to finish with the paper towels, a big man, built like a football linesman. Pete had his face in the coarse paper when he heard a voice: "Put that satchel down, mister."

THE BIG MAN was standing there with a small bag in his hand. The one who had spoken was standing sideways at a basin. This was a little guy with a thin and pasty face, and he didn't seem to have a hat. . . . The hell with it, Pete said to himself. I'm not on duty. He finished wiping his face and hands carefully.

The big man looked at the satchel in his hand and then over to another one that looked the same, standing under one of the empty basins. "I'm sorry. I didn't know this was yours. There's the other one. . . ."

"Put it down, mister."

"Just a minute," the big man said. "You don't mind if I check, do you? They look just about the same."

"I said put it down, mister." The menace in his tone, when you thought about it, seemed very silly coming from a little guy like that to the strapping man he was talking to. The football player thought so, too. "Now, look," he said, with the affected patience of someone whose size affords him tolerance without the assumption of weakness. "Look, I just want to compare the two, that's all. It'll take a second."

"You won't be alive in a second if you don't put that bag down." A dumb move, of course, pulling the gun, drawing attention to himself. Still, Pete thought, the guy was pretty jittery. He couldn't take a chance on the bag being opened.

Pete felt cool and removed. There were

enough cops in the store to bag this guy. There was no reason for him to interfere.

The big man stared and his face went slack as if the form underneath had melted. He dropped the bag and moved back. The little man stepped in swiftly, grabbed the bag by the handle, turned and went out quickly. None of my business, Pete was thinking. He crumpled the paper and tossed it into a can and left.

A scream from a woman. A sudden, air-tearing sound that stopped you dead and sent a cold shaft through your stomach. "*He's got a gun!*"

The dope hadn't put it away. Now the mob was on him with their eyes, shrinking away and watching, scared and yet pressing forward. The killer was near the escalators now. A woman laden with bundles was in his way. He sent her sprawling with one hand. A man behind her, with her, the situation uncomplicated for him, went for the little guy. The shot was louder than one bullet, went thunderously to the ceiling, bounced deafeningly away.

None of my business, Pete had been thinking. Then he saw the people, saw their faces white and frozen, saw what violence did, how nobody could stand up against it, how a little crazed man with a gun, scared as he was, could get away with this.

The wounded man lay on the floor, holding his leg, on his face more surprise than pain or fright. A crowd surrounded him. Pete watched the killer wheel from the too-slow escalator and head for the red Exit sign over a doorway. Pete was behind him, then, ten, fifteen yards, no gun.

No question about what he had to do. No question at all. No time, of course, to figure out all the motivation, knowing only one thing: Somebody had to stop this guy.

Pete didn't hesitate at the door. The little man wouldn't be waiting behind it; he was in too much of a hurry for that. The stairs stretched up and down, with no sound, no hint of which direction to take. And then a boy, jacketed like an employee, came from the floor below with a sheaf of papers in his hand. His undisturbed face was enough; Pete didn't need to ask.

"How many stories to this building?"

"Eight." The reply rose like a question. Pete ignored it. "This the seventh?"

"Yes. . . ."

Pete went up the flight fast. Quietly, but fast. Killers trying to get away don't loiter, don't spring traps. He opened the door to that floor, spotted, luckily, a sales girl nearby. "A man come out of here? A little man, carrying a satchel?"

"No. . . ."

"These stairs lead to the roof?"

"No, that's a dead-end up there."

Asking, Pete had held the door open. The little man was up there, listening. He'd taken a chance on the roof and there was no way out. Except back down—and Pete was there.

Pete was there, and he didn't have a gun, and the little man would have to come down the only way there was.

Pete said to the girl, a little girl with big glasses and lipstick that didn't fit too well, "Listen, you go on down to the street floor. There's cops at all the exits. They won't be wearing uniforms, just pick on a couple of big guys with their hats on. I've got the man they're after up here above me." Pete gestured. "You got that?"

The girl giggled. She had her hair done up in a big knot on top of her head and a pencil stuck in it. She took out the pencil and began fiddling with it. She looked coyly up at Pete, over her glasses that had slid down her nose. "I guess it's a gag," she said. "The other girls told me about things like this. I only just started working here," she explained.

Was the killer getting a kick out of this? Did he have a sense of humor mixed with the twisted ethics that told him it was all right to kill?

"My busted back!" Pete said. Then, "Listen, stupid—" She colored, was about to flare. Belatedly, begrudging the time, he took out his identification, waved it under her nose. "Will you hurry now!"

She had taken the edge from his alertness. He was back in the hallway, almost through the door, when the voice said, "All the way in, and shut the door behind you."

Cat-footed he had come down, padding like a thing of the jungle where other men trod on squeaking leather.

This, finally, was the spot they told you to beware of, the nightmare of the man who guards the peace. Alone, without a gun, facing desperation who has used the gun and would again.

Pete was scared. He was so scared that it took the form of anger directed against himself, and he almost forgot the gunman. You wise guy, he sneered. You weren't going to mess with this, it had nothing to do with you. Will you ever learn?

And then it occurred to him that in that much-used expression there was an assumption of time in which to learn. And now he wouldn't be having the time. . . .

"Turn around," the little man said softly.

"Oh," Pete said. "Getting sensitive?" He died, he thought, with a wisecrack on his young lips. Then the building fell on him.

"**H**ELL be all right," the voice said. "He's one of my men and we don't take on anyone whose skull is less than two inches thick."

Pete opened his eyes and the face of Lieutenant Bascom, leaning over him, seemed to be blocking a huge bright sun. The rough functional features seemed somehow ridiculous and Pete restrained an odd desire to giggle. A man on the



lieutenant's other side stood up; he wore a white coat and it was his fingers, then, that Pete had felt probing gently on the back of his head. "Yeah," this white-coated figure agreed. "He'll be all right."

Then he was being raised to his feet. The dizziness threatened to swamp him for a while, but then it passed and the throbbing in the back of his head was

even not unpleasant, like a steady reminder of life flowing through him.

"Can you walk, son?"

"Sure," Pete said.

Funny, how you could feel a flood of affection for somebody just because he had used a term like that. The lieutenant, ordinarily, was an imposing and distant figure whom one addressed as "sir" and who was an extension of the vague machinery that determined the functioning of the Department. He was even holding onto one of Pete's arms and Pete was embarrassed but didn't know how he



could shake him off. They walked toward the elevators.

Then he remembered, and his first bitter reaction was self-abuse again. Why the hell hadn't he stayed out of it the way he had planned? "What happened, sir?" he asked. "I mean, is the guy still floating around?"

"Oh, we got him." Casually. The usual Department procedure. "He made a break for one of the exits."

Sure, routine. But he, Pete Sheldon, the big shot . . . "I wonder why he didn't shoot me," he said.

"You're just lucky. He didn't want to give his position away."

"Yeah."

He had forgotten the "sir" the way they were talking and he glanced up at Bascom's face to see whether the omission had registered. The lieutenant tightened his grip on Pete's arm. "Sure you're all right?"

"I feel fine."

Outside it was dark. It wasn't a cold evening but Pete felt a chill; that was as close as he had ever been to dying. He said good-night and started toward the El station.

"Wait a minute." Bascom took a step after him. "I'll give you a lift—you're up-town, aren't you?"

(Continued on page 129)

By SHELBY STEGER

Gold was where you found it, Mary told herself. And she wasn't the kind of person to be backward in looking.



Perky little Mary Madison was all set for the big game-hunt: Her hat was tilted at the right angle. Her talons were sharpened. And before her lay the prey—six feet of well-beeled, unsuspecting sucker!

MANHUNT!

IF ONLY, she thought, they were traveling on the same train. Or, since that was not so, if their trains, hers west-bound, his east, were stopped here for hours rather than just long enough to change diners, or whatever it was that took forty minutes.

There was virtually no chance that anything could come of this—even *she* was

not that fast a worker! But ever since, years ago, she had rudely, foolishly, brushed off a certain old party in dusty blue serge, later to learn he was a widower who owned half of Iowa, she passed up no opportunity. Gold was, after all, where you found it. And her luck had been bad lately, hence this otherwise pointless trip west. Sometimes you met nice people on

trains. Men, that is. Prosperous ones.

He—this Mr. Burke who had sat at the small table with her here in the crowded station cocktail lounge—was so precisely the type she always looked for and too rarely found. Sixtyish—young enough to be interesting, old enough to find her dieted slenderness, her skillfully tinted bloneness, young. Handsome in that distinguished, expensively tailored way; silver hair, strong, even features, grey eyes. And—for she had expertly drawn him out during the conversation he had begun with such charming diffidence—single, substantially wealthy, and obviously taken by her own considerable appeal.

Her rosy mouth curved into a confiding smile. "It's so nice to talk to—well, an attractive man. I've been alone too much, hugging my grief. Since George—Mr. Madison's d-death"—the little, bereaved catch in the voice which showed a depth of feeling to be stirred, then plumbed—"it's been far from gay. And I had no idea that money was such a responsibility!" She widened her blue eyes and laughed ruefully. "I'm afraid George allowed me to believe it grew on trees."

HER ACT, she thought contentedly, improved with use. The pretty widow who has walked with sorrow, but at last is ready to be wooed again. With the money her indulgent, adoring husband never taught her to handle. It was an irresistible combination; no matter how much money a man had himself, he was lulled to know a pretty, susceptible woman had means of her own, was no adventure. Later, when suddenly she needed financial aid—the dividend passed, the bad investment, the mix-up in the transferred checking account; whatever story seemed best indicated at the time—it made it all much easier.

Besides, a man was more generous with a woman used to luxury. When she had been younger, less adept, she had pretended to be poor but deserving. Bad psychology, that. They had, as it were, tossed a coin, instead of writing a check. . . .

"The more I acquire, the more I'm convinced money does *not* grow on trees," he had told her. "You're too pretty, and much too young, Mrs. Madison, to han-

dle your own affairs. You should find a competent trust company."

His eyes were young and alert, his wide mouth gently humorous and somehow tender. Odd, she thought, that he had never married; many women must have found him attractive. And eligible. Well, even clever, handsome, wealthy bachelors of his age had been caught. Lately, as the faint but inexorable wrinkles had begun to appear at the corners of eyes and mouth, she had begun to think more of marriage. It would be restful to marry, to no longer have to coax, wheedle, threaten, or—not often, and only when there was a lot—steal.

"I know. But right now I'm just having fun, traveling and being spendthrift. Are you vacationing?"

He laughed; his teeth were very good. "No. I retired a few years back, but I've been restless, loafing. Now I'm on my way east to establish a new business venture." He shrugged heavy shoulders. "For pleasure, I tell myself. But frankly, Mrs. Madison, I like money. I've enough, but I want more." He kept it light, but she felt he meant it. "People are foolish, aren't they?"

"No! I think people are perfectly lovely!" She tilted her smartly hatted head so that her artfully darkened lashes flirted with him, not too much but enough. "Do you know, I feel as if I'd known you for ages. Do you suppose it's because we've told each other so much about ourselves? Ships," she added with mock drama, "that pass in the night?" Now was the time for him to ask where he could reach her. The Blake-Buford in Beverly Hills, she'd tell him. She could manage somehow to pick up mail there, no matter what dreary hovel she'd have to check into until she made a score. She shivered to remember how close to broke she was. Her luck had to change—and it had. *Here* was her luck. Headed east, on another train than hers!

"There should be something we could do about those ships," he said, smiling. He glanced at his watch; his hands were well-tended. In a lifetime of men who did not always have breeding to recommend them, she had always enjoyed being with gentlemen. "We're both going to have to dash, Mrs. Madison. I'm—I'm not going to forget you, my dear." His

grey eyes looked deep into hers—yes, she thought wistfully, if things had been different she could have done very well here. . . .

"Nor I you." She gave him her hand. "It would be wonderful if we met again. I'm often in New York. If I called your office . . . ?"

"I'm barely settled. I hate this, but—good-bye, Mary."

"Good-bye—Walter."

He was gone, without asking where he could find her. Yet she sensed surely that he liked her. . . .

Swiftly she wheeled and almost ran to her train. She snatched her traveling bag from the rack above her seat, sped again from the car, darted to where the other train stood. His train.

She went directly to the club car, seated herself at a table and ordered a drink. Beneath her the wheels stirred and smoothly began to roll. Slowly the train gathered momentum.

When the conductor had come through the easterly speeding train and she had paid a fare through to New York—she had been too late to purchase a ticket, she explained—she asked the waiter for pen and paper. Rapidly she scrawled the note to him:

"Walter: People *are* foolish, aren't they? I decided it might be—oh, let's say exciting, to return to New York, as long as you'll be there, too. Come to the club car and tell me I haven't been too foolish. Yours, Mary."

First he would be astonished, perhaps faintly alarmed, but then he would be flattered to realize that a charming affluent woman could be so attracted as to turn in mid-continent to follow him. Oh, it was nice, she thought happily, to be a smart

girl! It was so nice to be able to handle yourself in difficult situations.

There was a small bill, some change, in her purse. This was a gamble, but then, what wasn't? For years she had lived very well on just such gambles. And this one—oh, she knew it—would pay off. And big.

A little smile on her lips, she sat back to wait.

WALTER BURKE watched the landscape slither past. This Mrs. Madison—extremely pretty, and a lady. Oh, not young any more, of course, but there was a certain worldly sweetness there that appealed to him greatly. Well fixed, too, although she needed a manager. Like himself.

He sighed. There had been so many women who had loved him—young, old, pretty and otherwise, but always well fixed. Women he could have married, had he not always balked short of that. This time, though, he had found one whom he could—well, one didn't prattle of love at his stage of life. But he was ready, finally, for marriage; he was old and tired and he craved its calm security.

He didn't bother to plan a campaign; women instinctively trusted and were drawn to him; courtship had always come naturally. It had been, through the years, the assault upon their bankrolls which had required his calculated skill and cunning. But he would marry this one; it would be easy.

He beckoned the conductor to him. "Yes, through to California," he said, and manipulated his wallet so the man could not see that this was his last bill. "And, conductor, there's a Mrs. Madison aboard I'll want to find. . . ."

**Invest
in
Tomorrow**



**Buy
Bonds
Today**

ODDITIES IN CRIME

By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON



Crime may not pay—but sometimes it pays to be suspected, Frederick L. Roth of White Plains, N. Y., recently revealed. At one time, Roth, incapacitated by a painful sinus condition, tried to cure it by living a totally outdoor life. For more than two years he traveled the country by automobile, sleeping in his car at night. Suspicious policemen disturbed his slumbers so often that he decided to stock his car with a sideline—shoes especially designed to ease the nether extremities of the nation's flatfeet.

The cost of Roth's two-year vacation? His suspicious customers covered all expenses. When a cop stuck his head in the car window—Roth simply sold him a pair of shoes!



Nightly, neighbors witnessed Senhora Virginia Mendonca watering her lushly flowering Brazilian garden near Rio de Janeiro. To one little plot, where nothing grew, she paid so much attention that her neighbors' suspicions were aroused. Eventually, the authorities investigated. Under the bare patch they found the two-year-old corpse of a woman killed by her lover, who had hired Senhora Mendonca to keep the grave green. Until then the murder had been unsuspected. The reason nothing had grown on the grave was the presence in the soil of quicklime, with which the killer, one Tony Bento, had tried to destroy the body!

They had to whittle Napoleon's world down to one little island before he became fit to live with, but four-foot-ten Leo Halterman of Ohio probably met the bitterest end ever meted out to a murderous little man. Embittered by the fact that his wife had left him because of his size and that his own children referred to him as Shorty while calling their uncle, Leo's brother, Daddy, Leo axed him to death, both his brother and the latter's wife. When it came time to kill him, Fate played its bitterest joke on Leo. Ohio's man-sized electric chair didn't fit him. A special "high chair" had to be built to take the pint-sized killer's life!





STORM WARNING!

By **FRANK WARD**

CHAPTER ONE

Trip to Troubled Waters

IT WAS a long haul for six dollars and eighty cents, roundtrip, but they made up for it by taking a long, jolting time getting you there, up a dismal stretch of Pacific coast that glowered out over cold grey ocean, and was dotted here and there

with squalid-looking fishing villages half shrouded in a late afternoon mist.

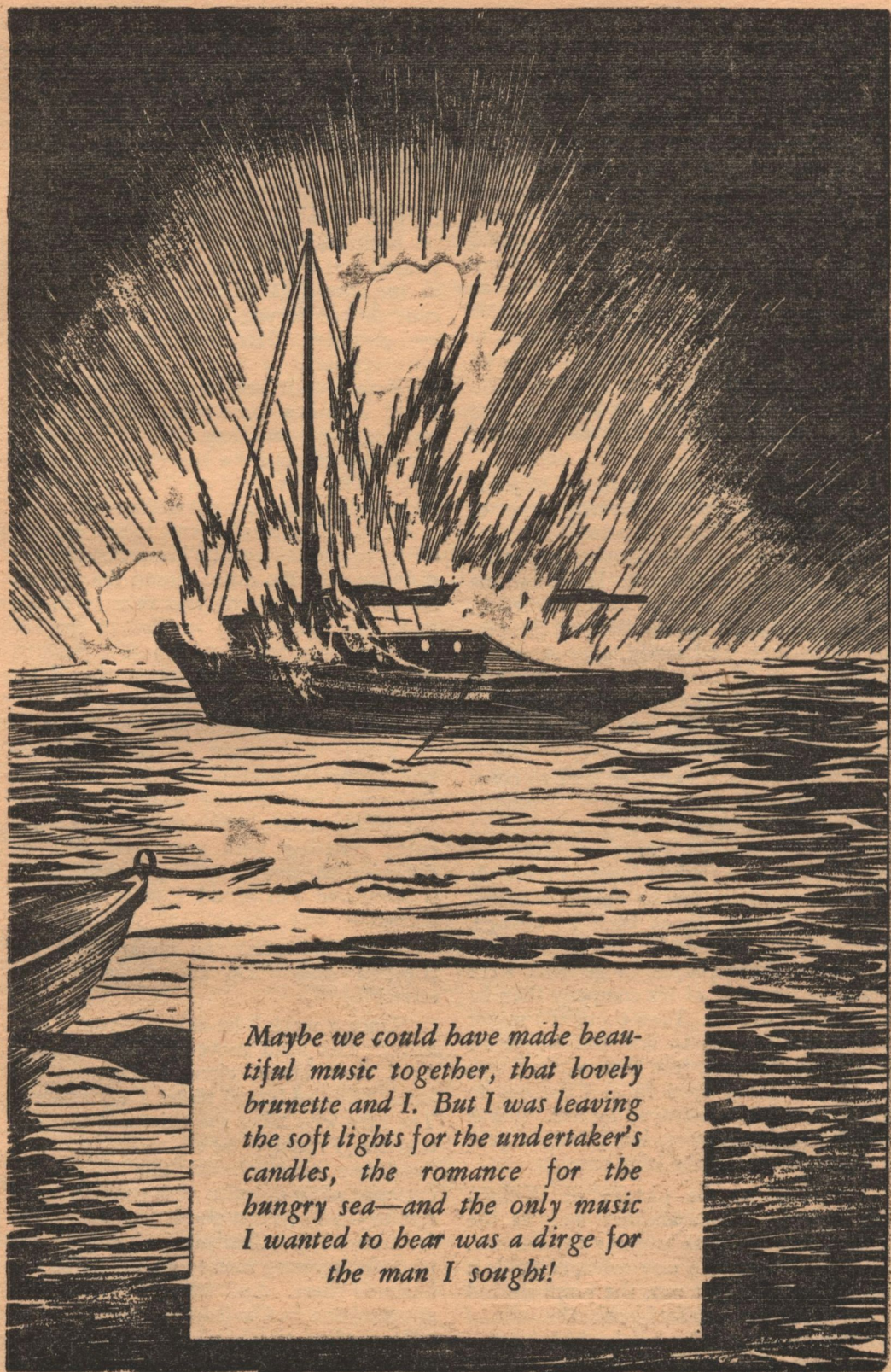
I was on my second pack of cigarettes, nestled down on the sharp, prodding end of a broken spring, gazing without any particular fascination at the photo of the

Hard-Boiled Homicide

Novel

"I was on my way out to the ketch when she burned," the old man said. "I had made plans to be aboard. Someone knew that. Someone wanted me to die there."





Maybe we could have made beautiful music together, that lovely brunette and I. But I was leaving the soft lights for the undertaker's candles, the romance for the hungry sea—and the only music I wanted to hear was a dirge for the man I sought!

man I would be looking for when I got to Chatham, when the blind man came into the car. He was smiling, as if someone had told him what a lousy day it had turned out to be and he was happy because he didn't have to spend his afternoon looking at it. His face had been beaten and buffeted and generally kicked around by the sun, and pocked by wind to a ruddy healthiness; his hair flowed as thick and smooth as country cream, back over a long, high skull. He had a friendly smile and good teeth, and he was easier to look at than the photo of William Reynolds I had in my hand, but I was getting paid to look at and for Reynolds, among other things.

I glanced at the picture again, idly. It showed a grey, mousy-looking man of about fifty, with a flimsy mustache that was designed to hide a long, sloping upper lip and did nothing of the sort. It showed me vague, blurred eyes that were, according to the description on the back of the picture, blue-grey, and sandy, grey-streaked, thinning hair. It showed me a man who had gone prancing out of an investment brokerage one afternoon with far horizons on his mind, and had not come back.

Nobody actually expected him to come back. He had taken eighteen thousand dollars worth of negotiable securities with him, a battered Gladstone bag from his apartment, and a slightly beaten-up blonde with a reputation for squeezing a nickel and getting two dimes back as change. International Indemnity, in particular, and a few other people, in general, were yearning for more of his company than he was willing to give. They thought I might take a week or so to find out where he was; they thought, too, that while I was about it I could drop in at Chatham to look over a boat destroyed by fire. It was double trouble for me, but it might save a dollar or two in the long run.

I sneered at the picture of William Reynolds and took another look at the blind man. He was coming toward me, holding his cane the way a fencer holds a foil, almost straight out, the point dipped slightly, and he walked with the rolling motion of the coach as if he had spent a lot of time on salty planks that never stopped moving, out where the wind gets a chance to whistle. He had been a big man

once, with a chest he could see without bending his head, and nothing that had happened to him was going to change the spring in his walk or the way he carried his head.

THE POINT of the cane tapped the back of the seat I was in, and he paused and turned that blank smiling face at me, the dark glasses gleaming. The cane flicked forward, just barely tipping my shoulder. His face moved, almost imperceptibly.

He said, "Do you mind if I take a seat here? This is a damn tiring trip and life's too short to spend any part of it alone." He chuckled, as if he had made a private joke. His voice held an illusion of echo, deep and rolling, but not quite real.

I said, "Not at all," and tossed my hat onto the opposite seat. He measured the distance with his cane, spread the tails of his old Burberry coat, and relaxed in the seat. He sighed. He smelled of the sea and of pipe tobacco, with just a dash of this morning's shaving lotion tossed in. He folded two large hands over the head of his cane and leaned back into the seat.

"You're a stranger on this run," he said abruptly, without moving his head. His smile held evenly along the steady line of his strong white teeth. "I always enjoy chatting with strangers. It's so difficult learning anything from one's friends, and I'm afraid I don't have too many."

"I can see what you mean about the trip," I said. "Do you make it very often?"

"Once a week," he said. "From Chatham." His head moved and the glasses fixed their blank, circular stare on my face. "You're bound there, I understand. The man who takes the tickets at the gate told me. Frankly," he added thoughtfully, "and you may consider this simply the curiosity of an old man with nothing much else to do, I've been pondering the reason for such a trip. Chatham isn't exactly the place for a young man to go, unless he has business there. And what business could anyone have in Chatham?" He chuckled. "No roaring times, y'know. Nothing of the big city to draw the younger generation."

I chuckled with him. I said, "You have

a nice, casual air about you that puts a man at his ease. Who told you I was six chairs back on the left-hand side?"

"Ah," he said. He tapped the point of the cane on the floor twice, musingly, and then the chuckle flowed again, strong and smooth. "You have a good eye," he said softly. "As good as mine used to be. You followed the cane, eh?"

"Every time it touched the back of a seat."

He spent a little time thinking about that. It didn't seem to bother him, if anything ever did any more. He didn't look like a man who would worry easily.

"Well," he said eventually. "That's caught out for fair, eh?" He reached into his pocket and drew out a stubby bulldog pipe and an oil-skin pouch and began packing in tobacco with steady fingers. I didn't think he was stalling for time. Nothing I had said would take that much thinking about. When the pipe was going to his satisfaction he leaned his head back against the seat cover and blew smoke at the ceiling.

"Shall I say I'm the unofficial ambassador of good will for Chatham's infrequent tourists?"

"We can say that. Neither of us has to believe it."

"That's good," he said, grinning. "For an insurance investigator you have a refreshing style. I had expected something a little more gruff, with a little less polish. My name is Lister, sir. George Lister. Yours?"

"Michael Foster." I moved one of the windows up an inch, tossed my cigarette out into the fog. A little rain blew in. I closed the window and looked again at Lister and thought about what Jordan, claims manager at International, had told me about him. He had owned a boat, a sweet thirty-foot ketch with an auxiliary, that had burned to the waterline one night about two weeks back, and he was claiming the ten thousand insurance he had taken out on the craft. He had signed the policy more than ten years ago, but there are men who have long-range minds, or who suddenly need cash in a hurry, and International was not the firm to throw ten grand out the window without first taking a good look at the street below. "Take a good squint at that claim first,"

Jordan had said, "and while you're at it, sneak around a little on that Reynolds business. We don't know who wired in the tip he was somewhere around Chatham—probably some old witch with more time than good sense—but we can't take any chances. Not with that much money involved. You can kill two birds with one stone."

I THOUGHT about that while looking at Lister. I said, "Meeting you may save me a lot of trouble. About that boat of yours." I tapped him gently on the knee. "Look here, Mr. Lister, I can be convinced that this craft burned all by itself, an act of God. I can look at a hulk in the water and know, all by myself, that this was once a boat and is now a destroyed boat. But for ten thousand dollars worth of claim, Mr. Lister, it's going to take more than a cute approach and a pleasant line to convince me that someone wasn't mixing kerosene and matches on board the night she let go. Do you see my point?"

"Did you make one?" he asked quietly.



"I'll tell you something, Mr. Foster. We might as well have our cards on the table now. I went to a good deal of bother to arrange this cute approach, as you term it, because I wanted to have a word with you alone before you reached Chatham. I'm not primarily interested in the insurance, although it would be a lie to say I couldn't use the money. But I am interested in something else."

"All right," I said. "I'll understand that. Just what are you interested in?"

"I have not been on that boat for three years. I have not seen it for more than eight. I know it existed until recently because Sybil, my daughter, told me it was so." He paused. "The night that craft burned down I was on my way out to it. I had made plans to be aboard." His face took on a deeper hue and his hands clenched over the silver head of the cane until his knuckles whitened. "It would have been a long swim," he went on, "on a night such as that was. Perhaps even too long, had I gone the wrong way, out to sea. Do you follow me?"

"No," I said. I looked at him. His face was as empty of emotion as the lettering on a divorce decree, but sweat was standing out on his forehead.

He sighed then and stood up. "I have no desire to be jailed for attempted insurance fraud," he said. "And I have less desire to go through what remains of my life in Chatham with the feeling that someone is trying to kill me. If anything is wrong, if that fire was started intentionally, I want you to remember this conversation."

"Of course you do," I said. "What does that prove?"

"Use your eyes," he said soberly. "Look well and long." He started away and then paused and half turned his head. "I would consider it a favor if you would have supper with us, out at Sutter's Point. My daughter would enjoy your company, I'm sure. Life for her is very drab where we live. Sometimes I think it is bad for her. There is so little to do." He seemed about to say something else, then shrugged.

I didn't say anything. I watched him moving back down the car, the tip of his cane thudding solidly on the floor of the car. When he had gone I picked up the

photo of Reynolds and looked him sourly in the eye and cursed him, Jordan and International Indemnity for sending one man to handle two jobs at once.

I was still thinking about that when the train pulled into Chatham two hours later.

CHAPTER TWO

Murder on the Meter

CHATHAM was one of those places where last week's whisper would still be an echo. I stood on the sagging board platform, watching the train haul its short length down the track into the fog. There was no sign of Lister, who had got off before me, if he had got off at all. I shivered and walked over to a dimly lit parking lot where an ancient Packard touring car, top down and a scrawled "Taxi" sign on its window, hulked under the overhang of the station wall.

The driver was a short, lean, slick specimen with bright grey hard eyes that glistened moistly, as if he had a habit of shoving his face into old fish bowls. His hair gleamed blue-black in what light there was and the salt air hadn't affected his curl at all. If I was lonesome after the long trip, if I wanted a nice cute dish to comfort me, he was the boy who was going to make all the arrangements. I thought I had left his type ninety miles down the coast.

He looked up at me, blinking his eyes a little. "Salesman or sightseer?" he asked flatly. He didn't move from behind the wheel. His voice was just a voice in the fog.

"Would it make a difference in any town this size?"

"Population two thousand," he said crisply, as if he hoped the city fathers were listening. His voice dropped a notch. "And you'd be surprised, Mac. You really would." His cigarette glowed hard and bright against the pallor of his face. I threw my bag in the back seat and got in beside him.

"Surprise me," I said.

His nostrils twitched. He could smell money, and it was an old beloved aroma that came his way not too often. The Packard's motor tried to climb out from under the hood, fell back in place dis-

gustedly and lay there quivering and growling. He spun the car backward in a shallow arc, touched his brakes, flipped the wheel over and rolled past the station. His lights caught lacing fingers of yellow fog in the beams. He drove slowly along the main street, the cigarette in his tight mouth just another part of his face. The engine sang a light, positive tune that didn't go with the age or condition of the car. I thought it might have been used for a less innocent purpose, once upon a time. I thought it was none of my business.

When he reached the end of the street I put one hand on his arm and said, "Wait a minute. I've changed my mind." He pulled into the curb and sat looking straight ahead. He didn't care if I changed my mind. He didn't care about anything.

"Let's go out to Sutter's Point," I said.

He looked at me then, hard, and the cigarette wagged nervously. "That costs money," he said.

"What's money?"

His eyes bit off a chunk of my face and chewed on it quietly, thoughtfully. "Like that, eh?" he said. The Packard pulled away from the curb and went down the street with a rumble and a purring rush that echoed hollowly against the building fronts. What few neon signs there were flickered past like gaily lighted streamers. He took the first turn at the edge of town and settled himself down in his seat and let his weight slide down his leg onto the accelerator pedal.

After a time he slowed down to forty-five and shot out of the side of his mouth at me, "You won't find any fun at Sutter's Point, friend. Believe me, that is one dead place to be, unless you got connections there." He took his eyes off the yellow roiling wall of fog ahead long enough to give me a quick, fond glance. "Or maybe you aren't looking for fun, Mac?"

"That all depends on what you call fun. Why in hell don't you put the top up on this cruiser?"

"No top left," he said loudly, above the rush of wind. The car slewed a little on the ruts. "What business you in?"

"My own."

He seemed to like that. He chuckled. "I kinda figured that. You don't have the

look these soap salesmen got today. Maybe you could use a smart boy on whatever trick you got in mind?"

"You know any?"

He gave me a hurt look. The car slowed even more. We were practically crawling along. He swung to avoid a hole in the road, flipped the car back to the center. He could drive, that boy, even if he had to kill you to prove it.

"I know some," he said. "Where you from, Jack? L.A.?"

"I've been there," I said. "The man I work for is interested in buying boats. Auxiliary-powered ketches. Something fairly fast that doesn't look fairly fast, if you know what I mean. You might say I was interested in the import trade."

"I get you," he shot crisply at me. He took a spare cigarette from behind his ear and popped it between his lips, spitting the old butt on the floor, and reached for the dash lighter. "There was one," he said. "Some say it saw its day, back around Prohibition. Lots of dark-water traveling. Y'know?"

I said I knew.

"Got burned out not long ago. You know how those things are, eh? But people talk a lot, 'specially in a town the size of Chatham. Old Lister'll be sorry you didn't call a couple of weeks ago. He owned that boat. He could use the dough, I guess. And you say you got dough."

I TOOK a crisp ten out of my wallet and held it between my fingers, watching it grow limp and soft. I didn't look at him. "You seem like a lad who could be a lot of help, if he had the reason." I dropped the ten in his lap. "Lad a man could depend on, if he had to. What would it cost to find a man around here?"

The Packard skidded suddenly, the tires grabbing at the rutted blacktop. The car swung halfway across the road and wound up with its radiator half in a ditch. The engine made a soft, drumming sound in the fog. I could hear his breathing in the sudden still. I could feel his muscles taking up the slack in his shirt.

He turned his thin face my way. His eyes were muddy grey now, and hard, and slitted as if the fog bothered them. "I don't think I like this," he said, liking it even less than he said. His left hand made

a sly movement toward the pocket in the door of the car. "What kind of a man would suit you?"

"I don't like 'em very big," I told him gently. "Or very young. About fifty-odd. Silly-looking mustache. Ginger hair, could be any color now. Long upper lip. With a blonde wench, not too innocent. Would that ring any bells?"

"Nix," he said.

I grinned at him. I watched the left hand. I didn't think he was looking for a road map. "I had word I might find a man like that up here somewhere."

"Nix," he said again. His mouth hung open, the lips wet. His tongue flickered nervously. He sounded like a man with a bad cold coming on. He started to take his left hand out of the door pocket.

I put one hand out and smeared the cigarette into his face. He squalled in a high, sharp voice and kicked his feet on the pedals, stalling the engine. We were all alone in the quiet night. The gun he had been pulling from the door pocket fell on the floor. He made a fast frantic pass at his scorched mouth, tried to kick me and only wrapped his leg around the gear shift.

I hit him once, not very hard. He folded back over the edge of the door and hung there, like last week's dirty wash. Some of his blood came out through his grinning locked teeth and trickled down his chin.

There was a flashlight in the glove compartment. I took it with me and walked around to the other side of the car and lifted the engine hood and swung the light inside. The car was a 1930, the engine at least a '46. It had been installed by a man who knew his business. I didn't think the car was worth what the installation had cost, unless you were the kind of a man who liked a lot of power with none of it showing.

I was standing there holding the hood cover up with one hand and wondering about the engine and about why the driver had such an aversion to small, mousy men as a topic of conversation, when I heard the road surface behind me give way under a quiet foot. I heard the foot, an intake of breath. I didn't hear what hit me. I hardly felt it. When I woke up I was lying on my back in the ditch with the mud for a mattress. There was a lump at

the base of my skull you could have hung a coat on.

I STAYED in the ditch long enough to make one outstanding deduction. I was getting very damn wet. If I had stayed there long enough I would probably have drowned, for want of something better to do. I thought maybe that had been the original idea. I thought about it as I crawled back to the lip of the road. The Packard was gone, but the fog and the fine, thin rain that was more like driven mist was still with me, and so was what was left of my luggage.

The bag itself lay in the middle of the road with its seams torn open. There was no way of telling whether Wet Eyes had done it out of pure bile or whether he had expected to find something. But nothing had been taken. Even my gun was there, half buried under some spare shirts. There wasn't much I could do about the shirts, or about anything else I'd been left, but kick it into the ditch, mark it down on the expense account and start walking in what I hoped was the right direction toward Sutter's Point. I felt like Macbeth after a hard night. I felt as if it would be a good idea to wire in my resignation to Jordan at International and go back to the chicken ranch or to peeling potatoes in the army.

It took only about twenty-five minutes to reach the Point, but I was practically walking on my knees when I passed the first neat white picket fence and fell on my face over the edge of the board sidewalk. The sound of surf loomed soft and melancholy through the fog which was, if anything, thicker than it had been. At a street corner I found a lonesome urchin who looked as if he had just come out of the sea and had serious plans about returning, and for a quarter I bought directions to the Lister place. What I could see of the Point I liked, as much as I would ever like anything on a night like this. I went up a short, graveled walk between knee-high hedges, and as I staggered, pale blobs of light that came from windows flanking the front porch became nice, friendly, solid rectangles, with frilly chintz curtains over them.

The room I was looking into was small but high, square, and old enough to give

you a feeling of reassurance. There was a small fieldstone fireplace with the fire neatly laid. There were enough rugs to keep you from doing the splits on the highly polished floors. There were big, comfortable, leather armchairs that had the imprint of a lot of sitting-down in them, handy smoking tables, leather divans, two of them, with gaily colored car-rugs thrown over the backs. There was a wall solid with book shelves, and bright dust-jackets frayed and curled over with the wear of friendly, curious hands. The monotony of half-paneled walls had been broken up artistically with lively hunting prints. The room had that lived-in look no interior decorator can give you, even if you have the money to buy lived-in looks.

I thought I must look pretty well lived-in myself. I went up three broad steps and across a narrow strip of porch and banged weakly on a brass ship's anchor that served as a door-knocker, and waited. Over the rattle of the knocker I could hear a sudden stopping of sound, a shutting-off of movement. Then along the hall, heels tapped briskly, the door opened, and I was looking at a tall, dark-haired girl with dark, intense eyes. She was wearing slacks of some dark material, a sweater coat, a white blouse buttoned high at the neck, as if she were cold. She would never stop the fleet, but she could paddle my canoe any day.

I smiled at her politely, said in a strong clear voice, "Your father is expecting me," and slid gracefully down the doorpost and tried to push my face through the floor into the cellar.

CHAPTER THREE

"Let's Have Trouble!"

NOT very far away someone was exploring the strings of a Spanish guitar with soft, sympathetic fingers. I lay, as usual, on my back, as warm as a three-minute egg and feeling just as soft, with my eyes closed against the gentle pressure of the light in the room. There was a faint elusive fragrance of jasmine in the air, not enough to give an Eagle scout any ideas about tearing off his badges and going to hell with himself, but enough to make me want to open my eyes and seek

it out with its musical accompaniment.

The light hurt. I closed my lids against it and began moving muscles hopefully while the tune drifted dreamily around me. There was a drowsy nostalgia to the idle music. I thought it might be *La Golindrina*, dolled up a little bit, but not enough to smother the original melody. I opened my eyes again. The guitar ended on a muted note and there was a rustle of clothing. The girl moved into my line of vision.

I looked up at her blearily. She came over and put a soft, cool hand on my forehead. It was a businesslike gesture, with no feeling or nonsense about it. I had the impression she had spent a lot of time with her hands on cold foreheads and didn't get much of a kick out of it any more. There was a curious hardness about her eyes, as if she had a definite reason for not liking me, or for not wanting to. The eyes, I decided dreamily, were so dark a grey as to be almost black. Her hair was black, almost without sheen or substance except for a white streak about two inches wide running back near the part. She would be able to look twenty-five in the face or turn her back on it, and you would never know the difference. I wondered what she would do to relieve the monotony in a place like Sutter's Point.

Then she smiled, just the faint twitch of a full, wide mouth, and the darkness about her flowed away quickly as if it had never been there. It had all been in my mind. "Men don't usually fall for me at first sight," she said. She said it huskily, in a voice that was a whisper of a voice and husky as a silken cord is husky, with a caressing inflection that at the right time would have you dancing barefoot through the lilacs with a rose between your teeth. I wriggled my toes to see if they would wriggle.

"I don't usually fall like that," I said. My voice was husky, too. It sounded like a rusty hawser going down a drain. "I think somebody pushed me."

"With a large, hard hand," she agreed. "Dad told me to expect a man about your size for dinner. I didn't think I'd have to bring him in on a stretcher."

"I usually carry my own," I said. We were getting along fine. We were going

to like each other a lot, if we didn't get tripped up in each other's lines. I sat up, which put me leaning up against her. I felt her hand caress the back of my neck and touch the lump I had collected along the shore road. I let my head rest against her leg.

She laughed softly, just a bare trickle of sound, and slid down onto the couch and said, gently, "You'd better put your head in my lap before you lose it."

I put my head in her lap and let my feet dangle over the end of the couch. Her lap was warm, soft and not quite as comfortable as a feather pillow, but I was too weak to complain about it. I didn't really care, but it seemed polite to ask, "Where's your father?"

She glanced at the watch on her wrist. "If you're thinking of food, you're about two hours too late. It's past nine now. He wasn't certain you were coming. You didn't say you would. When you didn't show up at seven we ate, and after that he went down toward the beach to listen to the surf and smoke his pipe. The fog wouldn't bother him."

"He's a great guy," I said, just to be saying something that would keep my head in her lap. I thought she probably had other things to do.

Her full lips curved in a smile. "Let's stop making small talk, Mr. Foster. What happened to you?"

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "I made a mistake. I went for a ride with a strange man and talked too much money and underestimated his recuperative powers. I was looking at something else when he hit me. I woke up in a nice soft ditch with the water lapping around my necktie. If I had stayed there waiting for the water to rise I probably would have floated right out with the tide."

HER eyes, not looking at me, were troubled. In the dim light they seemed smoky, unreadable. She sighed. "Dad told me all he said to you on the train, coming up. He thinks someone tried to kill him the night the boat burned, you know. He doesn't know why, but he thinks it's so, and that's almost as bad as if it were so."

"How do you know it isn't?"

She moved her hands impatiently.

"Don't be ridiculous. Dad has been here all his life, except for the first world war." She hesitated. "Back in the thirties he—well, he had a fast boat and everyone around here had a hand in running the stuff, so I don't suppose there was much harm to it, but the only real old-timers around here now are a man named Spain and a little fellow called Tony Franks who runs the taxi service at the station, and Dad never had any trouble with them."

She reached for a cigarette and lighted it carefully and blew a plume of smoke. "The night the boat burned he was on his way out there. I tried to stop him, but he can be pretty stubborn. He had a line rigged up, running through an eye on our dory, and all he had to do was row and the dory would follow the line to the ketch. He said he heard noises aboard her; she's moored just a little way out, and sound travels on water, you know, and his ears are exceptionally good. But I think he was mistaken. I don't think there was anyone on board. How could there be?"

"Let's guess," I said. "Let's guess that someone who wanted a safe place to hide came up here and snooped around on a dark night and found out that the ketch was never used. He could row out there with supplies, rig up a pulley system that would ship the dory back to shore, and lie doggo. He could drop a match and start a fire, too." I looked up at her. "Believe me, kitten, if there was any fooling around on that craft, you'd better pray that's the way it happened, because you'll be ten thousand dollars richer if that's the way I find it."

She moved suddenly then. "You'd better get up, Mr. Foster. I think you're well enough. I'll get you a drink."

I got up reluctantly and stood massaging the back of my neck while she was out in the kitchen rattling glassware. She came back carrying tall glasses filled with the reason they make ice cubes. I leaned against the edge of the mantel shelf with the drink in my hand and watched her. She sat down in a chair by the window and held her drink so the light filtered down into it and gave it a deep old meerschau quality. Then she looked at me abruptly and said, "What kind of a man would you mean, Mr. Foster?"

I shrugged. "I think your father is under the impression I'm up here just to look at his boat. Actually, that's half true. But this trip arson is just a sideline. I'm looking for a man named Reynolds." I told her why I was looking, and what I wanted. I said, "Anything else is just so much cream puff to me. If I find Reynolds isn't around here, or wasn't around here, they'll send another man to look at the boat, although what they expect to find two weeks after it went up is beyond me. In the morning I'll take a look at this ketch, and we'll settle it then."

I put some of the drink down my throat, kindling liquid fire. She made a mixture that had personality to it. I looked around the room fondly. I threw a stray thought after Tony Franks in his big Packard. I thought he had a long arm, and I thought he was a little tougher and a little smarter than I'd given him credit for. The glass-jaw attitude had been so much malarkey. I hadn't hurt him enough to take the muscle out of his arm or the evil out of his eye. He'd had enough time and punch left to dump me in a ditch, all by himself. I asked her, "Who'd you say this character Franks works for?"

"Martin Spain. If you like warts and toads, you'll like Spain. He has an air about him that could stand disinfecting. He knows everybody, and he knows just about everything. I think Franks used to be his triggerman, or whatever you call it."

"Trigger will do," I said. I put my glass down and massaged the back of my head. She watched me with no expression at all except possibly a faint compassion. "I think I'll take a look at him," I said thoughtfully. "I think I'll do that little thing." I dragged a grin up from somewhere in the vicinity of my hip pocket and gave it to her. "I don't think you'll have too much trouble with International Indemnity, honey. Your brand of hospitality softens a man up."

"I never saw an insurance man yet who softened up that much," she said.

"How many of them do you meet up here?"

"Not many," she admitted. Her eyes clouded over again. "There isn't much to do here. A place like this can get on your nerves."

"It does," I said soberly. "It most certainly does."

She saw me to the door and pressed a key into my hand. "The garage is on the right. It's not much of a car, but it's better than walking. You follow this road all the way in. You won't have any trouble. You'll see markers."

I said, "Thanks. When do you want it back?"

She looked at me long and hard in the mist that coiled and steamed slowly into the lighted hallway. "I'll wait up for you. Bring it back when you get through with whatever you're doing. Perhaps we can go for a little drive."

I said, "All right," but I didn't move. She put her hand against the wall and clicked a switch and we had complete darkness. I could hear the sound of her breathing, shallow and even and very close. Much too close. Her perfume mingled with the fog. I felt cold all of a sudden. I started to shiver. I put out one hand and touched wood and realized that she had closed the door on me, silently, without another word. I let my hand rest against the wood and smiled my rueful little smile, the only one I had left. I used it all up, standing there.

Then I went down the path and along the picket fence and up the short driveway to the garage, got out the car and drove slowly back toward Chatham and Martin Spain.

THERE was enough of Martin Spain to go a long way in any town. I found him quivering gently in a big swivel chair behind a desk in the back room of a dine-and-crap joint called Spain's Place. He might have been Buddha's twin brother, if Buddha had run to sleazy seersucker suits and wilted neckties. His face seemed to float like a pat of butter in a bucket of warm grease and I could smell him before I was more than two feet into the room. Behind me, beyond the door I had just closed, Chatham's racy set was whooping it up on the kind of sodas they concoct of two parts gin and a weed that smelled like marijuana.

I stood with my back to the door, breathing in the earthy smell that Spain gave off. You could have piled it with a shovel. He looked to the right of him and

then to the left of him, taking in both peeling, blank walls, and began generating enough power to smile. Apart from that motion, with his dead-white skin he was just somebody who looked as if he had been dead for two months and was waiting to be buried.

It was a plain room, cheesily furnished. It had chairs, a desk that kept Spain from overflowing onto the cheap imitation Persian rug, and a desk lamp of the old goose-necked type. There was a greasy cup of what might have been coffee not so far from his hand that he would have to call in outside help to reach it. He put both his paws on the shabby desk blotter and flowed forward a little, watching me walk across the room toward him, and blinked his eyes at me. The effort seemed to tire him. He yawned.

"Good-evening," he said.

I stopped and leaned my hands on the edge of the desk. The wood had a sticky feel to it, as if somebody had been cleaning fish on it. I took my hands away and put them in my pockets. Spain's eyes, frog-like, followed the movement.

I said, "Look, Mr. Spain, I'm going to go over this once. That should be enough. I came into town four hours ago, minding my own business. I was picked up at the station by a pale-faced little jerk named Tony Franks, who claimed he was driving a hack. Halfway out to Sutter's Point he got an idea. Now maybe I helped him get it. Maybe he was carrying it with him, and maybe it grew by itself as we went along. I don't care about that. When I finally got out of the ditch I was cold, wet, had a headache and a four-mile walk to the Point. That was what I had. What I didn't have was about forty bucks in cash, my suitcase, and what went in it. About two hundred dollars' worth all told. He works for you, Spain. You must have had these complaints before. What are you going to do about it?"

His head rolled doubtfully between his shoulders. His mouth slid open and a fat, pink tongue flicked out, sluglike, to explore his lips. "Indeed," he said. His voice was as soft as a velvet noose, caressing before it tightens. It flowed down over his expanse of chins and seemed to hang gently in the air, like the memory of a hidden chime in a stockyard. "Indeed."

"Indeed," I said. I put a cigarette between my lips and touched a match to it and blew some smoke down my nostrils to kill the smell of him. It helped a little but not much.

He dropped a hand to a drawer in the desk, fought it open and heaved a phone out into sight. He lifted the receiver, all by himself, and struggled with the cord. With the receiver halfway to his mouth he gave me a long, speculating look. Then he put the phone back and said calmly, "I think you're lying, my friend. I think you're lying in your teeth."

"Let's have some trouble," I said softly. I took my cardcase out and flipped it on his desk.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Passenger for the Meat Wagon

SPAIN glanced down at the case, then up into my eyes, then down at the case again. Finally he reached over and picked it up and went through it, reading with his lips moving, reading everything twice. Then he nodded to himself and sighed and picked up the phone, an old hushaphone affair, and spoke softly into it. He put the set back in the drawer.

"There's been a mistake, I think," he grunted. He fumbled around in the drawer and found what he was looking for, a bottle of whiskey with the label half rotted off, and put that out in sight, got the cork wrestled out of it and matched it with two glasses that might have been wiped out once with General Lee's red flannels. He'd just done a day's work. He leaned back and wiped his brow and blew his breath out between his lips. "You pour," he wheezed.

I poured. It took paint off all the way down to my belt buckle and began working on that. Spain lapped the whiskey out of his glass impassively, eyed the bottle with a certain restraint, and said, "Tony isn't too bright. There are times when he generates an idea that has a basis, shall we say, in older, more rugged times." He blew more breath at the bottle. "It hasn't happened for quite a while. You must have frightened him, Mr. Foster."

"About what?" I said. "He didn't look like the kind of boy who would frighten

very easily. Not over a little thing like a burned-out ketch."

Spain heaved an eyebrow up into sight out of the rolls of fat shrouding his eyes. He pursed his lips, made a slight whistling noise. "Nothing else?"

"A man named Reynolds," I said quietly.

"Ah," said Spain. He glanced down at his hands, then speared a cautious look my way. He seemed to find his hands fascinating. He began cracking knuckles slowly, expertly, as a butcher cracks short ribs, and for a short time only the sharp clicks disturbed the silence of the room. "Well, now," he went on. "Reynolds, hey?"

"Don't let's be coy about it," I growled. "If he passed this way, you know about it."

"If he passed this way," he agreed, and a thought seemed to fall softly into place behind his eyes, darkening them, drawing a sluggish veil. "And if I learned about it. I've had other things on my mind. I do indeed wonder. . . ."

He paused. The door had opened. Spain's eyes swiveled, and a slow smile rearranged his face. It wasn't a nice face. The smile did nothing to help it.

He said quietly, "Tony, come here."

Tony came into the room, slinking sideways and not looking at me. If there was any expression on his face it wasn't enough to be noticeable. He went past me, scuffling his feet on the floor, and stopped beside the desk.

Spain stood up. The effort purpled his face. He said, in that same lingering, melodious tone, "Tony, you've been keeping things from me. After all the trouble we have seen together, Tony, you have been keeping things from me." He drifted around the corner of the desk, noiselessly, flowing, the smile still warping his features, and put one hand gently around Tony's throat. He held him there, without actual force, staring into his eyes, smiling. Then the veins stood out in his forehead. His arm heaved. He lifted Tony off the floor with one hand and waddled the rest of the way to the nearest wall and propped Tony against it, as if he were hanging a picture and couldn't quite make up his mind where it should go. He chuckled, a high slimy oozing of noise

that whistled in his throat. Tony hadn't said a word. Now he gurgled and made a quiet, mewling sound that beat against the walls. His heels began tapping against the baseboard, pathetically. Spain reached out with his other hand and slapped Tony's face. The blow banged the little man's head against the wall.

I shut my mouth and propped my back against the desk and watched him work. He seemed to be enjoying himself. The huge paw flailed back and forth, with rhythm and purpose. After a time Tony's heels stopped kicking at the baseboard. His face was a peculiar shade of mauve that clashed with his necktie and his breathing.

I said hoarsely. "You better let him down, Spain. You're killing him."

The steel went out of Spain's shoulders. He opened his hand and Tony slid silently down the wall and folded over on his face. There was only the sound of Spain's painful breathing now, and the muffled whoops of the lads in the front room. Spain backed away from the wall, wiping the palms of his hands on his coat. He put one foot out and heaved Tony over on his back. The little man had his mouth ajar. Spain kicked it shut with a disgusted twitch of his foot. A little blood ran out of Tony's mouth and began dripping on the rug.

Spain made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "He's yours, sir," he said harshly. "If he has your property, take your value." He went back to his desk and reached for the bottle.

I WALKED over to Tony and put my hand in under his coat. His heart fluttered wearily under my palm, like the struggles of a broken sparrow. I thought he might live, but he wouldn't enjoy it for a long time to come. I leafed through his wallet. He had nearly four hundred dollars in fat, green bills, and even without the two hundred I took, that left him enough to take him to the county hospital.

"You pay your boys well," I said, getting to my feet. "I didn't think there was four hundred bucks in the entire town."

Spain looked at me balefully. He said without emotion, "Take what's yours and get out."

"In time," I said. "In a way, you fas-

ciate me, Spain. You didn't have to put that show on for my benefit. All I wanted was a fast pass at the boy and my money back. Now I'm curious all over. Now I want to know where a punk like this would get four hundred dollars."

"Ask him," Spain said acidly.

I grinned, a lonely little grin that died from lack of company or reason. "I'm impressed," I said. "I think you're a very hard man. But I think you're a curious man, too, or you wouldn't last long in the business you're in. I think you're just about as curious as I am to know where Tony here got all the folding cash. I think you might be even more curious if you had, say, five percent of eighteen thousand dollars coming to you for information received. Don't you think so too?"

Spain giggled suddenly. "Of course," he said. "Information for sale, eh, Mr. Foster? This is really like old times." His face became doughy again. "What would you want to know?"

"You should play chess some time," I suggested. "It would keep you amused. You know damn well what I want, Spain. I want Reyonlds, and don't tell me this slimy little scab hasn't been digging his fingers in the pie. He hasn't had that much dough in ages, even if part of it is mine. He picked it up somewhere, and he picked it up recently. There's only one place he would get it, for hiding a man with a lot of money to use up and a desire to be free enough to spend it. You know what I want, Spain. Let's see how good you are."

He shoved a fat, grimy finger in his mouth and sucked on it noisily. His eyes were hooded. After a while he jerked his head sideways. "There is no place in this town, or in its vicinity—"

"On water," I said softly. "Far enough out to make the three-mile limit on a dark night if he had to. With someone who would know if a stranger came looking. With someone who would know enough about fairly fast craft to take them out in the dark. Name me one man who's had that kind of experience around here, and don't drop your eyeballs on the floor."

He chuckled. "Where can I reach you?"

"Across the street at that flea-bag hotel.

Just tell me when so I'll be there."

"Give me two hours. Not later than one-thirty."

I nodded and walked quietly over to the door, not looking back, not wanting to think too closely about what might happen when Spain found out there was no five percent of anything but trouble in it for him. I thought he might have a decided talent for trouble. I went down the hall and out through the main room, through a battered door and a sparse crowd of country boys who looked as if they had been brought up on old nails and empty .45 cartridge cases and were still hard enough to spit brass.

It was still raining a little. The fog had thinned, but not so much you could see more than two fingers on each hand in front of your face. It was a nice clean world.

I got a hotel room, went up and lay down on the bed without taking off my clothes and drifted off into a sleepy that was crawling with fat homicidal maniacs chasing tall, dark-haired girls over the sand, carrying lighted torches between their teeth.

I WOKE up with the phone on the bedside table whispering asthmatically in my ear. It rang in short bursts of muffled sound, because some previous tenant had shoved tissue paper under the bell. I fumbled the receiver to my ear and said, "Yes?"

There was no sound at first except the humming of the connection, and that was none too clear. Then someone began breathing in my ear. The breathing whistled sharply, raggedly, with a tinny jangle that was not quite real, not quite human. After a few seconds the breathing stopped, suddenly, as if a hole in a windpipe had been plugged. There was a sharp ear-jarring clatter as the receiver was dropped. I listened to the silence, not quite awake myself, lying in a cold sweat in that never-never land between nightmare and reality. The room was dark and moist and chill. I rolled over and put the phone back, pulled a cigarette from the pack on the table and lighted it. I could see the clock in the match flare. The hands stood at one-twenty. Spain was overdue.

The floor was cold under my socks. I put on my shoes and walked over to the window and looked through the thinning mist to the cracked neon sign over the entrance to Spain's Place. It was dark now. A dim night-light burned in the front room. There were fitful street lights the length of the main street, placed one every hundred yards and giving about as much illumination as a safety match in a high wind. I thought abruptly that Spain might be feeling lonely about that time. I had a feeling he might be in a mood for company. I took the Detective Special from its berth under my pillow and went out to see for myself.

I didn't see much. I stood disconsolately in the chill night air, rattling the front door of Spain's Place. No one moved along the street. An alley cat missing one ear stalked out of the alley next door and moved up the street toward me, dragging his tail. Once he stopped to make a pawing motion at his whiskers. I crouched down and made the noises that are supposed to be dear to any cat's belly. He stood up and stared at me, his tail waving like a thin strand of tarred rope, then approached. I hunkered there and wiggled my fingers at him. He sniffed them suspiciously, took a dainty step sideways, sneezed.

My fingers were wet. They were also red. There was red around the cat's jaws and on his whiskers. I made a quick move to grab him and he went off down the block yowling angrily. I could hear him fading in the distance. Then it was quiet again, much too quiet.

For a long time I stood looking at my fingers and rubbing them absently together. Then I wiped my hand on my pocket handkerchief and moved on my toes to the mouth of the alley and looked in. I could see about three inches and then it became just another alley, pitch-black. There was a smell of discarded garbage on the night air.

My hand felt lonely. I filled it with .38 gun and stepped reluctantly into darkness and went a few yards with one hand scraping along brick wall before running into the inevitable garbage can. It fell, but softly, with a muffled jar. The smell became stronger, and not all of it was yesterday's lunch. Part of it I had smelled

before—a smell that no man forgets.

The match flared bright and strong for just a flicker of a second in the gusty blackness, but that flicker was all I needed. Piled under the trash that had spilled from the can lay Martin Spain. His eyes were open and his mouth grinned foolishly at me. The handle of a screwdriver jutted weirdly from the soft folds of blubber above his dirty shirt collar. He had stopped breathing some time before, but if he could have mustered one long breath then it would have been a whistle and a gasp of air through his ruptured windpipe. His blood was sticky and dark and somehow dirty. I remembered the phone in his office, and I looked at the door slightly ajar just behind him. It fitted like a shroud. I shivered. He had looked and he had cocked an inquisitive ear, and what he had heard or seen had been important enough to earn him a filed-down screwdriver through the neck. That made me important too. It was the kind of importance I could do without.

I got quietly to my feet and went quietly back down the alley and out into the street and away from there. I had gone all of two blocks before I realized that I had a gun in my hand. I stopped and put it away and stared at my reflection in a plate-glass window. My face was pulled over to one side, the eyes bulging and the mouth a warped distorted grimace. I stayed there long enough to force the features back into my face. Then I wiped the back of my neck, got the girl's car out of the parking lot and went for a long drive out toward the nearest state police patrol booth on the highway ten miles south of Chatham.

THE SERGEANT'S name was De-fore. He was big enough to fill half the alley and he looked hard enough and big enough to chew rock and spit gravel. He had a young, sun-tanned, boyish face and stiff blond hair, and a gun swung off his hip that was not much bigger than the ones they used to sink the *Maine*. He swung his light over Spain's twisted face and cursed mildly in a Southern accent.

"Well," he said finally, "I don't suppose there's much we can do for the joe except call a meat wagon. He looks as if he's been dead long enough."

"About an hour and a half," I said. "Roughly speaking."

He glanced at me, his eyes gleaming in the backwash from the flash. "How would you know that, chum?"

I told him about the phone call, about what Spain had promised to do for me. Then I said, "Let's get the hell out of here, Sergeant. This guy gives me the jitters."

"Yeah?" he said. He sounded as if he wanted to ask me what jitters were.

We went back and sat in the patrol car and smoked my cigarettes while Defore put in a call on the radio. He racked the set, swung the spotlight on the coupé over to cover the alley with light, and turned to me.

I said, "If all these things follow patterns, you might go looking for a little man named Tony Franks. He worked for Spain, and he had a good reason for evening scores with him. What I would call a killing reason." I told him what Spain had done to Franks, and why.

He was a nice kid, big as he was, and now he looked worried. He said gloomily, "This is one of those things the local law should handle, if they had any local law. I don't like playing with it, frankly. And the way you tell it, it doesn't sound as if this Franks would have enough strength left to do that kind of a job." He nudged his head toward the flood-lit alleyway. "It would take a big man for that."

"You could do it," I said. "And I might be able to, given a good reason. A guy Tony's size couldn't manage it in a month of Sundays, not the way he was feeling. Nor could Reynolds, who would have an equally good motive, even if he were still around. And you can bet your big brown boots he isn't."

"Maybe somebody put rollers under him," Defore said disgustedly. "Why in hell don't these cheap bums ever learn anything?" He tossed his cigarette out the window.

I looked at the dash clock and saw it was well past three, and looking at the clock I remembered what Sybil Lister had said about waiting for me to bring the car back. I thought she would probably be like all the other women who had grown tired of waiting for me to show, but it was worth the effort to see. I shook my head

sadly and climbed stiffly from the car. A long way off a siren keened in the fog.

"Well," I said, "if you want me, I'll be around early in the morning. Say about seven. I'll drop in at the station and write all this down for you."

"Sure," he said. "And thanks for giving us the call. You could have walked away from it, you know."

"What for?"

He shrugged. "Some people would. Thanks, anyway."

I nodded to him and left him sitting there in the car. I walked slowly down the street, away from the hotel and toward the station, where the freight sheds loomed stark and cold against the early morning gloom. The platform boards echoed suddenly underfoot. There was a light in the dispatcher's office, but no dispatcher. I banged on a section marked "Telegraph," and after some time had gone by, an ancient character with a straggling grey mustache and no other hair to speak of peered out, grunted, opened the window and grudgingly took down the message I had for Jordan at International. I waited while he cleared his circuit and began tapping it out, hoping it would get Jordan out of bed.

I gave the old man a quarter and walked back the way I had come, past sloppily stacked racks of baggage dollies. I almost fell over one of them. I stopped and lighted a cigarette and gazed down the track. The place was as dead as Spain's ugly laughter. There was only the smell of wet wood and cinders and the sharp dank smell of the fog. I sighed a weary sigh and got in behind the wheel of Lister's car and drove out of town, with only the dash lights for company. There was a dull greyness to the fog now, as if somewhere on top of it morning light was being born and would break through sooner or later. It was the most encouraging thing I had seen in twenty-four hours.

As I drove I began wondering where Tony Franks with his souped-up Packard had gone, and how hard it would be to find him. I didn't think Tony had pushed the screw-driver into Spain. He had been through the mill with Spain before, as even Spain had intimated. I wondered if Franks would have a woman anywhere, waiting for him. It was possible. Any-

thing was possible in this kind of setup.

CHAPTER FIVE

Too Late for Tears

IT TOOK me nearly an hour to reach the Point. I wheeled into Lister's driveway, scanning the darkened house-front, stopped the engine and set the hand brake. Then I walked around and up the front walk with the car keys jingling in my fingers. I would drop them through the slot, I told myself, and go about my business, whatever that happened to be. I wasn't too certain any more. I was at the foot of the porch steps before I realized there was somebody standing there, half shrouded in gloom under the porch overhang, waiting.

Her face moved in what might have been a smile. She said, a trifle wearily, "I thought you'd never come back. I thought perhaps you were one of those men who always say yes and never come back. I've had my share of that."

I climbed three steps and paused, just barely touching her. I said, "Sometimes it's the other way around. Sometimes the women don't think it's worth waiting for. I couldn't get here any sooner. I found business, my sort of business, in town. With Spain." I reached over and tucked the car keys in her coat pocket. I said huskily, "I brought the car back. With thanks."

"You can do better than that," she said.

Her mouth was soft but cool, with a coolness that was partly rain and fog. She leaned into me and put her arms around my neck, slowly, languorously, as if I were the first man she had kissed that month, as if it were something important that might not happen again. After a little while I began to think it might be something important, at that. When I moved back, clumsily, I could taste salt, as if she had been near the sea or had just come from it. I put my back against a post and tried to see her face in the darkness. She didn't say anything for a time. Then she said, "I'd like to get away from here. I'd like to go a long way, and perhaps never come back. Drive me."

I mumbled something that meant I would drive her. We went down the

steps and along the walk and got into the car together. She sat very close on the leather front seat of the convertible, so that her shoulder pressed against mine. I backed the car out into the street, turned around and began cruising slowly along the cliff road. When we had gone a little way I said, "What about your father? I didn't get the idea he'd approve of this sort of thing."

Her mouth was nibbling at my neck. "Stop here, Mike. What difference would it make to him? Does he think he can keep me penned up here all my life, without anything to think back on or look forward to? Do you think it's easy to live in this place, day in, day out, with no excitement. . . ?"

I stopped the car right there and put on the brake and sat looking straight ahead through the windshield. I said quietly, "Look, angel. Maybe I've got the wrong kind of a mind, but something just occurred to me. It occurred to me that this might have a lot to do with my eyesight when I look at that boat of your this morning. All this is very nice. It's been a long while and I didn't know just how much I've been missing it. I like being kissed by women old enough to go to the movies alone. I like it a lot. I might like it a lot better if I thought I wasn't being kissed just to have you do my thinking for me, too."

Her body stiffened, then went lax again, and this time she slid across my chest, slowly, as if there were all the time in the world, as if the sun were never going to come up again and we would always be alone in darkness. She pushed her face in against my chest. She murmured, "Don't talk so much, Mike. You're talking too much. . . ."

I put one arm around her and held her tight. Her face was moving softly, urgently, against my neck. She began crying, quietly, and the sound of her crying was a tiny lost thing muffled against me and not very big or important at all, but big enough to make me want her to stop. I didn't think reaching for a handkerchief would do much good. I tilted her head up so I could see her closed eyes. Her eyelids were fluttering and there was blood on her chin where her teeth had clamped tightly into his lips.

AFTER a while she stopped crying and lay very still in my arms. Through the half-open window of the car I could hear the hungry call of a cruising seagull out hunting an early breakfast, and beyond that the monotonous pounding of surf on sand. I thought it would be a good life to spend some of my time on a cliff overlooking the sea, when there wasn't fog, and watch the sun throwing shafts into the blue-green water and listen to the waves on rock. There was a faint, elusive fragrance of jasmine in the car, and I remembered then it was her car and there would be a faint elusive scent of her perfume wherever she went. She would always leave a memory of her presence to remind you. I sat still in the car, holding her in my arms and staring at the windshield and thinking small, dim, unconnected thoughts, and let the picture I had in my mind of Spain fade out. After a while there was nothing left of him, just the beat of the surf on the sand and the lonesome foraging cry of the gulls and the beating of her heart.

I moved finally. It must have been an hour later, if not more, and there was a definite promise of day in the air now. She awoke instantly, without moving. Only her eyes moved. They roamed the car, and I looked down at her and grinned. "Breakfast call," I said.

She smiled and yawned. She was one of those women who could yawn and still remain attractive. She yawned and stretched in my arms and smiled and purred drowsily, "I've been asleep. That was very rude of me."

"Not that rude."

"Well, rude enough. It's been a lovely night. How long was I asleep?"

"About an hour and a half. Perhaps more. Not very long. You don't look as if you'd been asleep at all."

She giggled. "One of my many if fading charms, darling. Could we go have some coffee?"

"In those?" She was wearing pajamas under her coat.

"I'll button my coat. Practically everyone around here wears lounging pajamas." She reached up and kissed me lightly on the mouth. "You know what I think? I think you're an old fuddy-duddy."

I grinned back at her. "Want me to prove different?"

"I dare you," she said softly.

When we broke apart I pushed her away and said hoarsely, "We'll go look for some coffee. There's a place about ten miles from here, near the state police booth. We can stop there. I've got to go and see somebody there this morning. It won't take long. Then we'll have the day together."

"Let's not go that way." Her face was suddenly cold and stiff. "I'd rather drive back the way we've been."

I put the car in gear, started the engine and let out the clutch. "So would I," I said. "I've seen enough of this road to last me a life time, but duty calls and I have big ears. One of those things. It won't take long."

"All right," she said slowly. The fast-disappearing fog curled around the windshield of the car, but the rain had stopped and there was a hint of humid heat in the air. I could see well enough to drive at more than a crawl. I could see well enough, after we had gone a few miles, to pick out the ragged fringe of white-painted board that had been a fence barring the road from the lip of the cliff. The broken ends were fresh, as if something had gone over there recently, and at speed. I pulled over and got out and stood looking at it.

"What's wrong, darling?" she asked.

I said I didn't know. I walked over to the gap and peered down over the edge of the cliff. Grass had been flattened and several small bushes torn up by the roots. There was a drop of about fifty feet, straight down, and at the bottom of the drop lay a burned-out wreck that could once have been a Packard touring car, dark blue or black. I stood there stupidly, staring down at it. Then I went over the edge, moving carefully, and crawled down the face of the cliff until I was a ten-foot jump above the car. I hit with a jar that rocked my back teeth. The stink of seared rubber and gas and paint was overwhelming. There was another smell, too, that stood out above the others. Something else had burned with the car. I walked around the wreck with my lips pulled back from my teeth in a snarl that was designed to keep my stomach down around my belt

buckle where it belonged. It wasn't working too well.

He lay half in and half out of the driver's seat, pinned under the wheel, and what I could see of him I didn't want to look at. He had been a small man once; his hair might have been any color, and his face might have been white and wise and very sharp. His name might have been Tony Franks. One hand lay out-flung, the fingers clenched tightly, just clear of the car.

I looked up and saw her white face peering blankly down at me over the lip of the cliff. I waved her back. She shook her head and came down the steep incline the way a man would, with a rush and a clatter of small stones and clods of dirt. When she saw Tony Franks she let out a stifled animal cry and sank her teeth into the back of her hand. She sounded as if she wanted to be sick. I didn't blame her. If we stayed there much longer we would both be sick together.

I said, "Well, that winds it up. That's all there is to it. He knocked Spain off and tried one of his fast-driving stunts through the fog and wound up down here. That's all there is to it. That's all the sense it makes." I swore and took her by the arm and walked her fast down the narrow strip of beach to where a rough, curved path spiraled upward against the cliff. At the top I paused, breathing hard and fast. I said, "Take the car and drive out to the state police booth and ask for Sergeant Defore. Tell him about this. Give him my name." I gave her a push toward the car and went back down the path again. Above me the car clashed roughly into gear and pulled away with a high, whining, tortured noise. I thought about the last two hours, about the time in the car, about the seagull and the wash of the water, and cursed savagely, and walked back to the wreckage that had once been Tony Franks.

DEFORE sat on an outcropping of rock, his baby-blue eyes red-rimmed and tired. He had his eyes fixed on the efforts the wrecking crew were making to get Tony Franks out of the Packard. He was chewing thoughtfully on a blade of long, coarse sea-grass, severing sections of it with a sharp snap of his teeth and spit-

ting the chewed pieces out onto the sand.

"Somebody once told me," he said gloomily, "that police work was a good deal. Just the thing for a young man to go into." He shook his head and looked at me. "All this adds up, I suppose. Spain found out that Franks had been helping hide Reynolds out, for a price, which is where he got his roll. Maybe he angled in for a cut of the proceeds, maybe he thought it would be a good idea to put the bite on Reynolds again, and Tony thought it wouldn't be. So Tony killed him, made a fast getaway and went over the cliff. He could have done it."

"Sure," I said. I didn't say anything else. I felt as if I had been dragged through a couple of miles of sand dunes by the feet, sledding along on my face.

Defore spat out the last piece of grass and eyed it sourly. "Here's the capper for you," he said heavily. "We got word on the ticker this morning about Reynolds. He won't bother you any more. They picked him up in Tucson, where he's been registered at a hotel for the last couple of weeks. He was wrapped around a chandelier yelling bloody murder and trying to chew the neck off a bottle of hooch. The broad he was with was out cold from where he hit her with the bottle. She may come out of it or she may not. So I guess that this ties the whole thing up."

I looked at him and sneered. I said, "You honestly think that poor jerk under that car killed Spain? You sit there with your hick grin and try to tell me this whole thing is all tied up, all wrapped up neat, with no strings hanging over the edge?" My throat hurt. It hurt all the way down to my shoelaces.

His head snapped up and his eyes fixed hotly on my face.

"You aren't giving Spain credit for anything," I told him. "He wasn't stupid. Reynolds was here, all right, and he was on Lister's boat, and Lister didn't know about it. He didn't know a damn thing about it. How could he? Even Spain didn't know it until last night, when he pounded it out of Franks. You know what happened to Spain? He found out what he wanted to find out and he was calling me to let me know. But before he got a chance someone walked in on him and shoved that screwdriver through his neck. But

he didn't die." I kicked at the sand and got more of it in my shoe. "He didn't die right away. He was left alone long enough to crawl over to the phone, and before he died he got my number and tried to tell me what he thought he was getting paid to tell me. He was sore at Franks for double-crossing him on the deal, and he didn't give a damn about him. He wouldn't go to all that trouble to tell me about Franks. But Franks had a partner. He wasn't good enough to plan all that by himself."

"Go on," said Defore coldly.

"Why not? What have I got to lose? Look," I said. I opened my hand and held it out, palm upward. "That's what Tony had in his hand when he died. That's all he took with him when he went over the cliff. He was a lousy little rat, but he had to take something with him, some memento of the whole rotten triple-cross. He didn't drive off the edge of that cliff in the fog. He knew the road backward. He was slugged, the car put in gear, the hand throttle set. Those old jobs have hand throttles, you know, Defore. It's a damn handy gadget. Go look at your road surface. There's a trampled spot about fifty yards down the road, facing the corner. There are skid marks where the car took off with Tony draped over the wheel, so it would seem he took the corner at speed...."

One of the wreckers had straightened up and was beckoning to Defore. Defore said, "Just a minute," and went loping down the sand to the car. When he came back his face was empty of expression but whiter than it had been. He looked at me for some time. "Take first base," he said quietly. "The back of Tony's head was pushed in." He took off his uniform cap and ruffled his blond hair with one big, freckled hand and cursed.

MY VOICE rasped in my throat. My face was hot, flushed. I opened my hand again and looked down at the singed strands of black and white hair I had pried from Tony's reluctant fist. It felt soft against my skin, as her hair had been soft against my face. I sat looking at it. I said unevenly, the words tight and hard as knots in a wet leather shoelace, "Only you and I know about this, Defore. Just the two of us. Just you and I know she was

Tony's girl, for the hell of it, for the excitement of it, for anything to kill the monotony of living here with the old man, with nothing to do. Maybe it was just fun at first, maybe it was a stake to go away with the guy after Reynolds paid off. Tony would pick Reynolds up at the station, as he did me, and they'd get to talking and money would whisper back and forth. There wasn't a better place in the world to hide Reynolds out than on that boat. Lister himself said he hadn't been aboard her for three years, hadn't seen her for ten. They'd hire a boat, or Frank would steal one and ferry Reynolds out one dark night, coming in from the ocean side, and board her with supplies. The girl would have the keys. When Reynolds had cooled enough to head south, while everyone was looking for him north, they could go along. Panama, the Canal Zone, South America. All the bright lights in the world, all the excitement. All of nothing." I didn't look at him but I could feel his stare heavy on my face.

"Tony was the one who set fire to the boat. They were going to get the old man out of the way. Maybe he didn't like the idea of his daughter going around with Tony, or maybe he just couldn't stand to let go of her. I don't know. But they had to get him out of the way. I suppose he has some money, too, and then there's the house and the ten thousand in insurance the boat would bring. The old man had been hearing noises coming from the ketch, and he'd become suspicious. That was when they shipped Reynolds out. That was also the time they rigged up a plan whereby she would signal to Tony when the old man became suspicious enough to go out to the ketch. Tony would set fire to the boat when the old man got aboard, then loose the dory and take off. But Tony was too excitable. He set the fire prematurely, and the old man heard the crackle of the flames and turned around even before the fire could burn out the line where it was attached to the ketch. But they still weren't suspected of anything, and they weren't afraid.

"The kite went up when I came in. If Tony had kept his head and left me alone none of this would have happened. I would have inspected Lister's craft, or

what was left of it. I would have looked around for signs of Reynolds, which I wouldn't have found, and gone chasing my tail off up the coast. Everything would have been fine. Then it would have been just an adventure for her. But Tony went back to his old habits. He couldn't stand to see a buck floating free, and I scared him with my talk of Reynolds. He could have killed me last night, and perhaps he thought he had. But he didn't, and I was looking for him, and suddenly he was dangerous game.

"When Spain got wise, through me, and started asking questions, Tony got scared and phoned her. He'd run, that boy, when the heat was on. You can check the calls from the village out to the Point, and the other way around. You can check it all, of you want to. She told him to come out and get her, because I had the car. He picked her up and they went to see Spain. I don't know who cut him open. Maybe Tony. Maybe she did. But it would be Tony who went over to the station and picked up the baggage dolly, that handcart with wheels on it, and together they went back and heaved Spain onto it and rolled him out into the alley. Just to make it seem that a big man had done the job, while Tony was small and she was only a girl. On the way back out here Tony blew up, got scared and she killed him. Just

THE END

like that." I snapped my fingers. They made a sharp click in the hot air. "He made a try for her while he was dying, probably, but all he got were these strands of hair. Black hair, as her hair is black, white where the streak is."

I HELD it out and watched the sea breeze fluttering the fine hairs. Only one closed finger held them there. I could open my hand and the wind would pick them up, gently, and carry them out to sea or down the coast or out of sight. I kept my finger closed and after a while I closed my whole hand and sat staring at the white knuckles.

I looked at his face. Then I got up and took a soiled envelope from my pocket and put the hairs in it. I sealed the flap and dropped it on the sand.

He bent over and picked it up and while he was picking it up I turned and began walking up the path toward the rim of the cliff, where her car was parked. I knew she'd be waiting for me, waiting under the sun for the long day ahead, watching for me with that strange smile on her face.

The sun was hot on my back. The fog had gone, drifting out to sea. The car shone bright green in the sunlight. I paused and looked back down the cliff.

I looked at him, and then I turned around and began walking toward the car.

Private-Dick Bill Rye came to crook-infested White City to answer the fighting prosecutor's S. O. S.—and walked right into the strong-arm reception committee of the . . .

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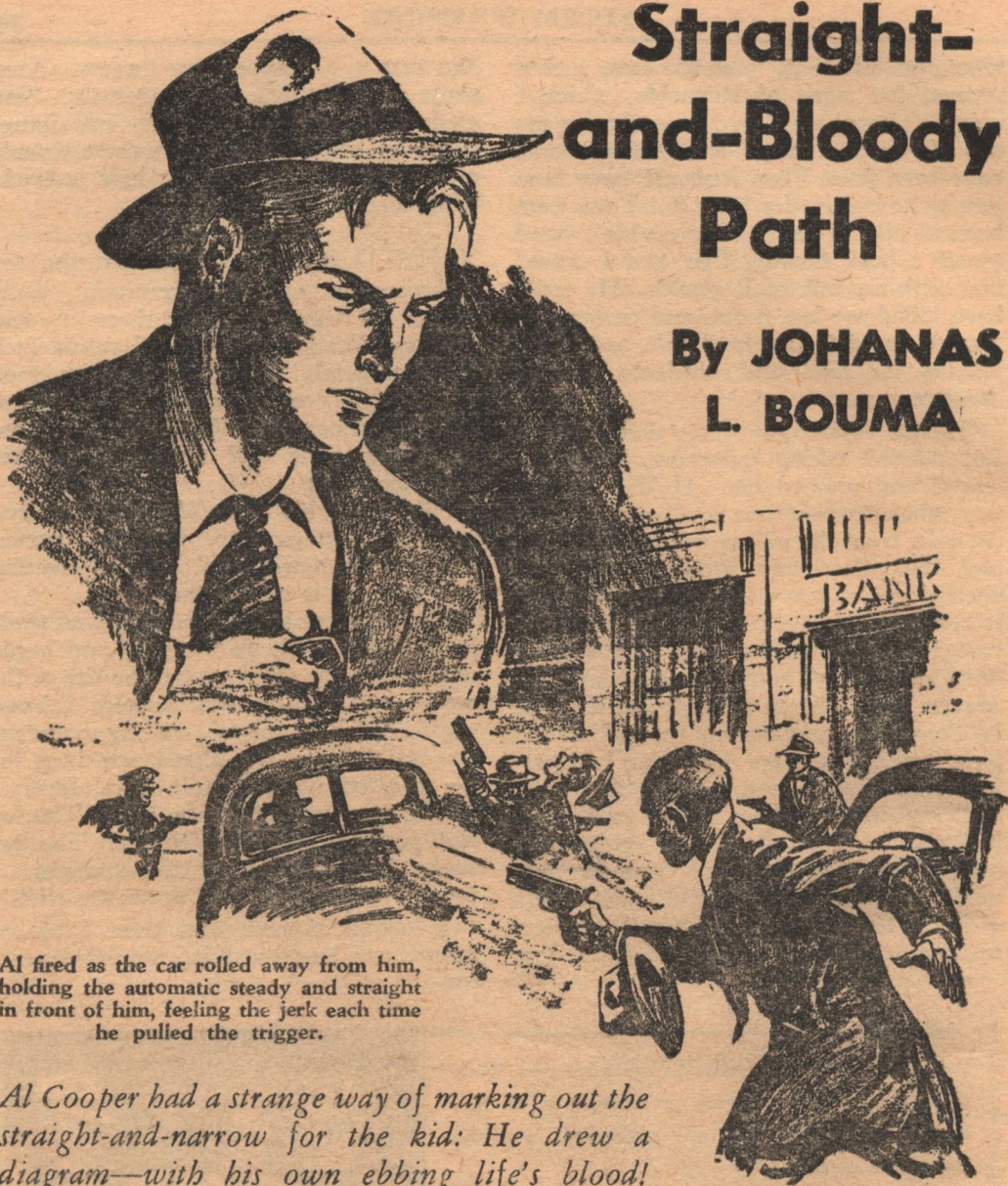
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Straight- and-Bloody Path

By JOHANAS
L. BOUMA



Al fired as the car rolled away from him, holding the automatic steady and straight in front of him, feeling the jerk each time he pulled the trigger.

Al Cooper had a strange way of marking out the straight-and-narrow for the kid: He drew a diagram—with his own ebbing life's blood!

THE kid prowled the room like a nervous animal. He stopped to light a cigarette and Al Cooper could see his fingers tremble. He felt sorry for the kid and it bothered him. It had bothered him for a long time.

The kid, whose name was Bill Morris, turned suddenly from his pacing. In a strained voice he asked, "How much longer we got to wait?"

"Forty minutes," Al said. "Take it easy. You'll wear yourself out before we go on this job."

"What about Vic and the rest of the boys. Will they be there on time?"

Al's voice got flat. "They'd better be. Listen, in about twenty minutes I want you to go out and pick me up a bottle."

The kid laughed shrilly. He was young and blond, with a nice face, and Al thought it strange to hear him laugh in that way. "You need a bottle to make you brave?" the kid asked.

Al sighed. He moved to a more comfortable position on the couch, but he could still feel the beast eating away at his

guts. "Just do as I tell you, kid," he said quietly.

There was a fancy round mirror on the opposite wall. By turning his face he could see himself. He could see the gaunt frame on the couch. He could see the thin face hollowed with shadows. The dark eyes glowed with fever brightness. I'm one step from the edge, he thought. It'll be good to go the way I planned it. Maybe it'll balance some of the rotten things I've done in my forty-five years. It was a lousy life and I can tell myself that now. I'm ashamed of most of it, but I guess the man wasn't born who hasn't done things he's regretted.

I'm worried about that kid, though. I hope Garrison doesn't mess up his part. Well, I guess I shouldn't worry. Garrison is a good cop. There must be plenty of good cops around, only I would never let myself think about it in that way.

THAT was one of the things he had wanted to tell the kid, but somehow he had never been any good with words. He had spent eighteen years of his life behind bars, and that didn't help with the talking. He remembered coming out the last time, three months ago, and Garrison waiting for him outside the gates. Garrison, thick and pudgy, but plenty smart in the head. A detective sergeant when he had sent Al up ten years before. A lieutenant when he met Al at the gates.

"Hello, Al," Garrison had said, and they had shaken hands. Al could see the highway leading to the bridge across the river, and beyond it the city. It had been there for a long time and it hadn't changed. As he watched, he saw a black sedan coming across the bridge and take the road toward the prison. Garrison noticed it too. "Vic Linck," he said. "Your pal."

"My pal," Al said. "Sure he's my pal. He got me a lawyer, didn't he?"

"And the lawyer got you ten years," Garrison said. He found the stump of a cigar in his pocket and let it become part of his face. "We know what we know," he said, "and I hope there's no trouble."

"I hear Vic is respectable now," Al said.

Garrison chewed on the cigar and talked around it. "A couple of clubs for camouflage." He looked past Al at the high stone walls. He said, "He'll be watching you

now. He'll want you back here where you can't make trouble."

"He'll want me in a place where they lay flowers," Al said. "Then he won't worry any more."

"Anything I can do?"

"I'll let you know," Al said. He watched Garrison walk to his coupé and climb behind the wheel. He felt very kindly toward the cop. This last stretch had given him plenty of time for thought, and with the thought he had glimpsed the other side of the fence. Or maybe it's the dying that does it, he thought now. Six months, the doc had said, and he had not been unkind. Al waited for the black sedan to pull up alongside him.

The man next to the driver climbed out. He was big and his swarthy face was clean shaven. There was no grey in his black hair, and his bigness was not caused by fat. He slapped Al on the shoulder and pumped his hand. "Al," he said, "damn but it's good to see you."

"Nice of you to meet me," Al said. He looked past Vic Linck at the driver of the black sedan. He saw this youngster of about twenty and it hit him then how long he had been away.

"I tried everything to get you out sooner, Al," said Vic, "but it didn't do any good."

"It's always been tougher on a three-time loser," Al said. He wondered what was running through Vic's head. He would have given plenty to know.

"Come on," Vic said. "I want you to meet the kid. Bill Morris," he said, "this is Al Cooper," and Al leaned over and shook the kid's hand. Vic is picking them young, he thought. He never would fool with a punk before.

Riding to Vic's apartment in the city, he tried to feel his freedom, but he couldn't grab hold of it. Vic was being the congenial host. He talked and smiled as if he meant it, but Al could almost see his brain working overtime.

"I still can't understand how it happened," Vic said. "You getting caught and taking the rap for the rest of us."

"Forget it," Al said. "It was one of those things, and it happened too long ago to make any difference now."

Vic smiled. "You still have your cut coming, of course."

"Fine," Al said, and it came to him that if he had a gun he would shoot Vic in that moment. The crawling louse, he thought. The filthy little louse who hides behind his smile and his fake manners and his respectable clubs and his bodyguards. We sit here and talk like old friends and both of us planning ways to get rid of the other. I hope I'm way ahead of him on that. Ten years makes for a lot of planning. The ten-year plan. How many days and nights did I spend figuring it out? Figuring them out? And then I knew they weren't any good because in the end it was all so simple. Act dumb, that's the ticket. Act the way I acted when he tipped off the cops ten years ago. Dumb. Well, they had me. There was no use being a stool because my brain didn't run that way in those days. Take it with a grin and keep your mouth shut. I wonder if he thinks I know. I wonder if he thinks I'm that dumb. I guess not, or he wouldn't have met me. He wouldn't even remember me. That's the way he would have acted, anyway. Ten years is a long time in this racket. He might have slipped me a few bucks to get out of town. But he met me, and that tells me better than words that he knows.

"We haven't done a bank since," Vic said.

"But you're still circulating," Al said. "I heard about the clubs, but I figured that was cover."

Vic looked at him. "Things have changed, Al. The strong-arm stuff is out. It's a science these days. Everything is planned, like they did in the Army."

"I wouldn't know about that," Al said. "I didn't know there was a war on."

Vic laughed. "You'll find out how we work. I've got two guys besides the kid. You'll make four. I plan the jobs, and—"

"That makes you the general," Al said. "The rest of us are your army."

"That's right," Vic said. "You're fast on the trigger as ever, Al. Listen. I've got something planned in a couple of weeks."

"Let it keep," Al said. "I want to get to your place and take a bath in a real tub."

NOW, with the kid still pacing the floor in front of him, Al thought about the past three months. They had pulled only

one job during that time. Vic had gotten word of a jewelry consignment to a local store. It had been simple enough but it hadn't amounted to anything. Eddie and Buttons had come up on either side of the man as he stepped from the railroad terminal. They had walked him to the curb where Bill and Al waited in the car. After a short ride out in the country Eddie had bopped the man on the head and they had dumped him. Vic hadn't been in on it and he had laughed at the few dozen rings and bracelets that were in the jewelry case.

I'm glad they didn't kill that salesman, Al thought. That Eddie and Buttons are two of a kind. Give them half a chance and they'll pump lead for the fun of it.

He hadn't cared about getting those two involved. The way they were going they would end up on a slab sooner or later, anyway. Sooner, probably. Even with Vic it was not a matter of revenge so much as it was a matter of justice. A man like Vic Linck caused terror and heartbreak that was in no way justified. He took kids like Bill Morris and brought them up to his way of life. Picked them up when they were broke and easy marks. Show them a few easy bucks and they soon became part of the web.

But the kid was different. At first Al hadn't paid much attention to him, even if he had noticed the difference. This kid had been pushed into it for one of many reasons. Al had seen his face tighten when Eddie had slammed the butt of his gun against the jewelry salesman's temple. He had felt the kid's hatred of this, and he was sure that Eddie and Buttons had felt it. But they had said nothing, and that was the important part. Their type was dangerous when they kept silent.

"You want me to go now?" the kid said.

Al looked at his watch. "Five minutes more."

The kid took the small black automatic from his shoulder holster and handled it delicately and with distrust. "You think I might have to use this?"

"It depends," Al said. "It's hard to tell on a bank job."

The kid put the automatic away. "I never killed a man before."

"There's always a first time," Al said.

He closed his eyes. As soon as he had

gotten interested in the kid it had been easy to find out about him. He had gone to work in Vic's downtown club two years before. After a while Vic had had him running one of his bookie joints. When a rival outfit had opened operations Vic had teamed the kid with Eddie and Buttons to drive them out of town. Luckily there had been no killings involved. After that the kid had worked with the two gunsels on several unimportant jobs.

Garrison had given Al the information. "Are you interested in the kid?" he had asked.

"He's a nice kid," Al had told him. "If you knew about these jobs, why didn't you grab them?"

"Vic is smart," Garrison said. "He's been king around this territory for a long time, and he's smart enough to stay in the background. If we had grabbed his boys he'd've had them out the next morning. No, Al, one of these days he'll plan something big and he'll handle it personally."

Garrison hadn't asked for information, but the deal was there between them. There was no need to shout about it. Garrison knew Al was on his side, and Al thought Vic knew, too. There was no use kidding himself. He was never meant to get away from that bank job alive. Eddie and Buttons would see to that. Or perhaps Vic would handle it personally. It would be very much like the last time. Well, not like the last time, either. The last time he had taken a stretch behind bars. This time it wouldn't be behind bars, and the stretch would last him to the end of time.

THE ONLY HITCH as far as Vic is concerned, Al thought now, is that I'm way ahead of him on this little deal.

In a tight voice the kid said, "Let's see if I've got it straight. Vic and Eddie and Buttons left the apartment here a little over an hour ago. They're driving straight through to Clearwater. We'll leave here in a little while and we should reach there at two-thirty."

"Twenty to three," Al said.

The kid breathed. "All right, twenty to three. They'll be parked a block away from the bank. As soon as they spot us they go inside one at a time. Then—"

Al looked at his watch. "Take it easy.

If you take it easy everything is simple. In the first place Vic isn't going inside. Listen, you go down now and get me that bottle."

"All right," the kid said. "I won't be over ten minutes."

You'll be longer than that, Al thought after the kid had gone. He had called Garrison as soon as he knew what was going to take place.

After the kid had been gone five minutes Al wondered if he shouldn't get up and look out the window. But he decided against it and thought of how Vic had planned the bank job. Clearwater was a little farming community in the valley, about forty miles from the city. It was all settled now and nothing could stop it. Eddie and Buttons would enter the bank at closing time. Vic was to walk diagonally across the intersection and climb in the car the kid was driving. At the same time Al would get out and walk over to cover the bank entrance. By that time, Eddie and Buttons would be finished with their part of the job, and meanwhile the kid and Vic would have driven around the block and be coming by the bank.

It would work, Al thought, lying on the couch in Vic's apartment, feeling the slow death moving inside him. It would work because they would blast me the second they were ready to roll.

He stood up and felt his insides move in protest. It's time to go, he thought. I'll have to get there a little early and give them a story.

He went out the door without bothering to lock it. He could feel the holstered automatic pressing beneath his left armpit. Downstairs he walked to the corner bar and had three whiskeys, neat. The kid said the liquor was to make me brave, he thought. I don't need it now to make me brave, but it sure dulls that old pain. He had another shot and walked around back to where the stolen sedan was parked. It was a blue sedan, like a thousand others on the road, and he chuckled at the thought that for once in his life he could handle stolen property without worrying about getting caught.

He took his time driving out of the city. Then the buildings were behind him and the green fields sloped on both sides of the highway. He could see farmhouses in

the distance and a man running a tractor across a brown stretch of land. This is where I should have started, he thought. A small edge of pity went through him for the lost years. Cut it out, he said to himself. You thought you were too big and too smart for that kind of a life and you found out different. Now who the hell do you think you are? You know what you are, all right. And now you're trying to be a sentimental wonder about something you never grabbed when you had the chance. Listen, don't start that old song about never having had a chance. You had it and you laughed at it. You rolled drunks in the alley when you should have been learning a trade. You went up for burglary when you were about the same age as the kid. Three years, but you had plenty of chances to figure it out during that time.

He looked at his watch again when he saw Clearwater in the distance. It was thirty-five minutes to three. First there was a gas station on his left. Then there was an empty lot and after that the beginning of the business district. Three blocks down was the center of town. There was a chain grocery on one corner, a men's clothing store opposite. Diagonally across from the grocery was the bank.

The cars were parked at an angle along the curb. He drove slowly, his eyes on the cars. The dark green sedan, also stolen, was parked a half-block from the bank. As Al passed, he saw Eddie and Buttons climb from the front seat without looking his way. They were small, dapper-looking young men in grey, double-breasted suits. They wore grey slouch hats low over their eyes. Vic was looking at him through the back window of the car; then he climbed out and crossed the street toward the intersection. Al slowed down at the corner and made the turn. He wondered where Garrison had his men stationed. In the bank, probably, he thought. It's too damned bad they can't nab us before we get into our act. And then a greyness settled in him and it was as if he had always known it couldn't end that way. He saw Vic approaching as he rolled along in low gear, the bank behind him now, and then Vic had the door open and was beside him, motioning him ahead.

"What happened?" Vic said when they were rolling.

"The kid went out for cigarettes. He didn't come back."

VIC was looking at him, his face a mask.

"You're early. You wait for the kid?"

"I told him he wasn't supposed to leave." Al looked at Vic and then back at the road. "Don't kid yourself. That one turned yellow."

If Vic had sworn, Al would have known it was all right. But Vic didn't speak until they were rounding the block. "Take it around," he said.

"Is it off?"

Vic didn't answer. The greyness built up in Al. It's gone wrong, he thought. I might have known it wouldn't work. But I had to get rid of the kid. He saw the bank ahead again. Eddie and Buttons hadn't moved from in front of the green sedan.

"Double park," Vic said, "and scoot over." He was jerking his head at the two men on the sidewalk.

Al put the gears in neutral and braked to a stop. He opened the door and edged from behind the wheel. Eddie and Buttons were coming between the parked cars. Suddenly they hesitated and ducked.

Al made a half turn and saw the uniformed cop halting traffic at the intersection. And then Garrison stepped from the bank and moved down the middle of the street at a slow pace. Other uniforms were holding pedestrians back, clearing the sidewalks, and Al thought, What the hell! What does Garrison think he's doing?

Behind him, Vic said softly, "Into the back seat, Al." Al got out of the car slowly and stood beside it, hesitatingly. The stillness of the street crawled into him. Across the street Eddie and Buttons crouched against the fenders of a car like hunted beasts, their faces jerking from side to side. Al's hand moved automatically to his shoulder holster. His fingers found the gun and settled in the familiar grasp.

Why don't they just walk over here, he thought, looking at the crouched men. His legs felt suddenly hollow. He saw Garrison come to a stop; and then Garrison said in a clear voice, "Don't start anything boys. You're blocked off."

Beside Al the engine roared to life. Before the car had started to roll he saw

Eddie and Buttons running low toward him. Like magic a gun appeared in Garrison's hand. There was a shot, then another, and Eddie's legs buckled as if they had been chopped with an axe. He sprawled wide and rolled. Without thought Al turned and fired at the car going away from him, holding the automatic out straight in front of him, feeling the jerk each time he pulled the trigger. Like a deliberate wreck in a second-rate movie the car lurched and spun suddenly. At the end of the street it crashed into the back of a parked car. There was the rattle of Tommy-gun fire from that direction, and on top of it a club came down and hit Al in the back.

GARRISON was very tired and he felt older than he had ever felt in his life. Even though he had felt it would end like this, that as a cop he had been justified in taking this action, he could not get over feeling bad about Al. There were men and there were crooks, and never did the crooks think on the level of honest men. But this one had been a man as well as a crook. He would have liked to talk it over with Al, and in his mind he formed what he would have said.

It was this way, he would have said. I had the feeling that Vic wasn't going through with the job, that it would be a long time before we could pin him down and put him away for good. You understand that, Al? I'm a cop and I know what Eddie and Buttons are. I figured out how they would react if they were cornered. Yes, even how Vic would react. There's fear in them, Al. Always the fear beyond everything else. I took a chance, sure, but there was Vic, wondering what had happened to the kid, wondering about you. You were already dead, Al. You know that. But the fear and the doubt were there for them, and I closed in. If they had come peacefully that would have been the end of it as far as we were concerned. We had nothing on them, and after that there would have been the waiting for a next time. But I didn't think they'd come peacefully, Al. Not with us closing in and Eddie and Buttons across the street, wondering what this was all about. I wanted it to happen, Al, and it happened.

They had the kid in Garrison's office. The lieutenant of detectives nodded the cop out of the room. Then he went around his desk and sat straight in the chair, looking at the kid.

The kid twisted nervously. "I've got nothing to say."

"I didn't ask if you had anything to say," Garrison said softly. "Your friend is dead. The rest of them, who aren't your friends, are also dead." He looked at the kid hard. "I don't know," he said. "Maybe Al was wrong about you."

"Al," the kid breathed. His face twisted as if he were trying to understand what Garrison had said.

"Al was dying when he left prison," Garrison said. "I give this to you straight, kid. Vic double-crossed him on a job ten years ago. He left Al to take the rap. And Al kept you out of this one because he liked you, because he didn't want to see you follow in his steps."

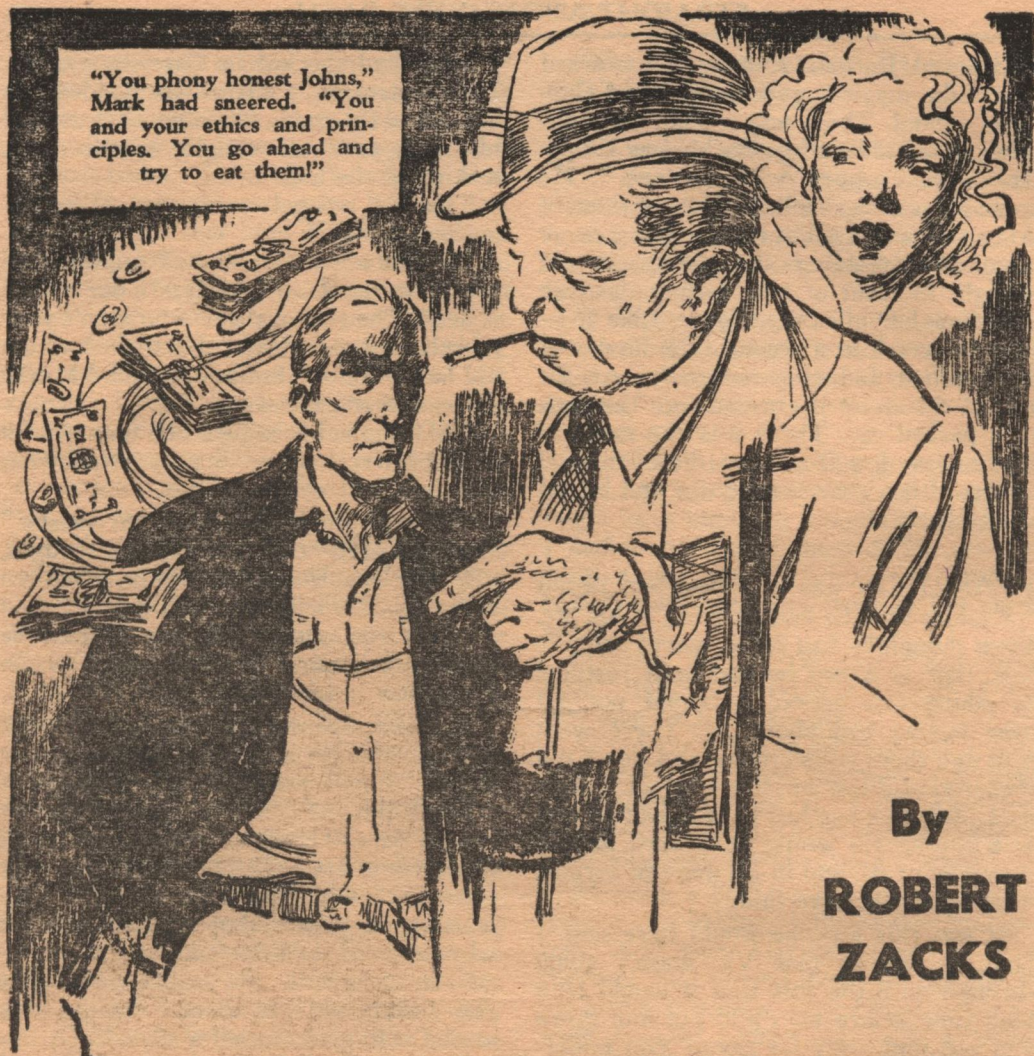
Garrison opened his desk and took out a small, blue book. He tapped it with one finger. "This represents eighteen years of a man's life, Al's life, the years he spent behind bars. The few hundred dollars in this account are probably the only he ever earned honestly. And he earned this money working in prison shops. Don't ask me why he saved it. I don't know. He wanted you to have it. He said it would give you a start. Maybe at one time he was saving it to give himself a start."

It was as if a light that had been dimmed inside the kid was again starting to flame. It glowed in his eyes, a freedom from something he had not fully accepted or understood. "Listen," he said shakily, "I was supposed to be in on it. I—"

Garrison stood up. "We got nothing on you. As far as I'm concerned you didn't even carry a weapon when we picked you up. Just see to it that you play it square with Al."

The kid's eyes moistened. "Funny," he said. "I keep thinking about him wanting me to go after a bottle. I asked him if he needed it to make him brave. I should have known. You see, I—I never knew him to take a drink. Once I asked him why. I thought he was joking when he said a drink would only kill him that much quicker."

"You phony honest Johns," Mark had sneered. "You and your ethics and principles. You go ahead and try to eat them!"



By
**ROBERT
ZACKS**

SALES TALK

How much is a man's honesty worth? A dollar? A thousand dollars? A hundred thousand? Joe found out that night. . . .

THE MAN had refused to leave his name, and Joe's stomach churned with tension as he hurried to the bar and grill where the caller would be waiting. He didn't like leaving Ann alone; one of those terrible coughing spells might come on and she'd need him, but Ann insisted he go. The man had said it was urgent and important that Joe see him.

He found the place down on First Avenue, a garish, dimly lit bar with small booths discreetly set distances apart and as he went inside Joe suddenly realized who it probably was. He swore silently and peered through the gloom.

Mark was at a table in the far corner, smiling. His face was fuller than when Joe had last seen him a year before. As Joe approached, controlling his anger,

Mark waved a genial hand at him. "I might have known," said Joe. "What's the big idea?"

Mark's smile faded and his hand, which was stretched out for a handshake, dropped. Listen," said Mark coldly. "Stop being a jerk. Sit down. Act like a person."

"Why didn't you say who it was?" said Joe, in disgust.

"I wanted to be sure you'd come," said Mark. "Don't get up on your high horse now. I called you for your own good, not mine. For old times' sake."

Joe hesitated. Then he shrugged and sat down. He was still angry. He didn't say anything, just waited politely.

Mark stared at Joe's rigid face and shook his head impatiently. "Listen," said Mark. "I hear Ann's sick. I hear you ain't doing so good."

"That's right," said Joe quietly. "She's got a bad bronchial condition. They call it bronchiectasis. She coughs a lot."

"Tough," said Mark, nodding. "New York winters, eh?"

Joe nodded silently. His face was stony as he absorbed the evidences of prosperity about Mark. Mark's suit was crisp and woolly, his nails were manicured. A sickness grew in Joe.

Mark said deliberately, "Would it help her any to get away to a warm climate, Joe?"

Joe nodded bitterly. "Yes."

Mark was looking him over speculatively.

"My offer is still open, Joe," said Mark. "You turned me down last year when I was getting started in this racket. I told you you were crazy, didn't I? You know what I cleaned up last year?"

Joe didn't hear Mark too clearly. He was thinking of Ann back at the furnished apartment. It was cold outside and the gas fumes from cooking would be filling the one room they lived in. He pictured her standing it until she desperately needed fresh air. Then she would open the window and the draft would blow on her and she'd cough. That racking, steady cough. . .

"I made eight thousand a month, average," said Mark calmly. "Nice dough, eh?"

"Nice," said Joe wearily.

"Well," said Mark impatiently. "How about—"

"No," said Joe flatly. "It's crooked. It stinks. Those phony oil stocks of yours. . ."

"Listen," said Mark, leaning forward. His eyes were glittering. "Listen, what's the matter with you? What in *hell* is the matter with you? Your wife is sick. All you need is money to send her to a warm climate, to make her well. I'm offering it to you. Nice and easy. With your gift of gab, with your polish and college talk you could—"

"No," said Joe, feeling faintly nauseous. "I'm no crook."

Mark took a deep breath and leaned back. There was a bitter look on his face. "When we were kids," he said, "we



Outside, a figure waited in the darkness of the alleyway. . . .

weren't so unfriendly, were we? That's the only reason I'm giving you a break. That's the only—"

"No," said Joe, shaking his head. "I'm no crook."

Mark's self-control broke. He clenched his fists and slammed them on the table in a soft, deadly way. "You phony honest Johns," he whispered. "You and your ethics and principles. You go ahead and eat them. Put mustard and catsup on them. See how nourishing they are. Feed them to your wife. See if they stop her coughing."

Joe quivered. His face went pale. Mark smiled a little. He eagerly pursued this first successful attack on the thing that had always disturbed him about Joe. His unyielding honesty.

(Continued on page 130)

HEGMANN BAR AND GRILL

WHO'LL

By **DONN
MULLALLY**



Tim dived to the sidewalk and tried to claw a foxhole in the cement.

CHAPTER ONE

An Eye Out for Trouble

TIMOTHY DANT stood at the window of his hotel room and glowered at the San Vincente Mountains. They were a poor excuse for a mountain range, but they glowered back at him through the heat shimmering off the desert floor. Outside, the dry fronds

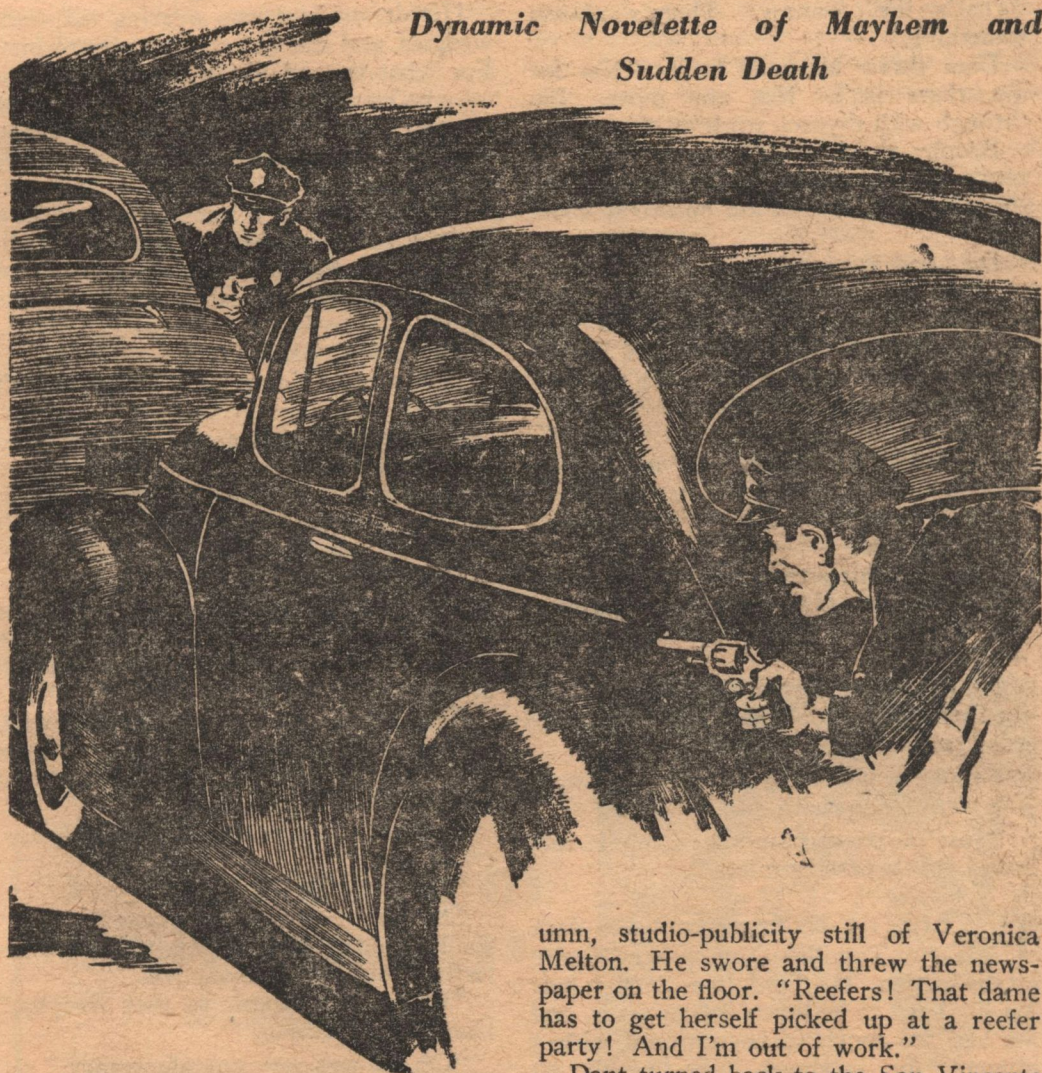
of a palm tree rattled in the wind like a bunch of ghosts with too much starch in their shrouds.

Tim wheeled and made a helpless gesture for the benefit of the man hunched in his easy chair. He said, "Nuts! This is one of those situations that make me wish

BUY MY VIOLENCE?

Meet Timmy Dant, the blonde-hungry private eye, who was so dumb—that he fingered his own client for a kill!

Dynamic Novelette of Mayhem and Sudden Death



I could hustle a more honest living."

Joe Brophy grinned sympathetically, patted the sweat off his bald head. "Yeah, Tim, it's rough."

Dant scooped the Los Angeles paper off his bed, glared at the smirking, two-col-

umn, studio-publicity still of Veronica Melton. He swore and threw the newspaper on the floor. "Reefers! That dame has to get herself picked up at a reefer party! And I'm out of work."

Dant turned back to the San Vincente Mountains. They were at least as bald as Jim Brophy, the house man at the Palm Court Hotel, and almost as talkative—which was fine with Dant. What he needed was an audience. . . .

"Three months," he raved. "I tail this

guy all over California because Veronica wants a divorce and wants her hooks in his bankroll. Eighty-five days of watching this joker act like a Boy Scout patrol leader. I finally corner him down here with a redhead—and what happens? Veronica louses up the whole picture for a cheap thrill. Her husband could be keeping a harem now and it wouldn't make any difference."

Tim heard Brophy clearing his throat. "That's life, Timmy. There's always something."

Dant threw his head back. "Not for me, there isn't. Not any more. I'm through with divorce work as of now."

Brophy chuckled. "The first time the rent's due, you'll be back in the racket, shamus. Leave us not kid ourselves about that."

Dant had lost interest in the bleak crags of the Vincente Mountains. He was watching some other projections that weren't bleak at all. A blonde in a French bathing suit was sauntering along the edge of the swimming pool beneath his hotel window.

He heard the chair sigh as Brophy hoisted himself out of it. "I suppose you'll be going back to L.A.," the house detective suggested.

Dant tore his attention from the undulating swatch of blue cloth. "Los Angeles? No, Brophy—I think Timothy needs a rest."

He grinned at Brophy. "Do you think the Sport Shop would have a pair of swimming trunks that'd fit me?"

Brophy's jaw hung limp. "I thought you were fed up with San Vincente."

"Just a passing mood, Brophy, old man. Just a passing mood."

IN YELLOW bathing trunks and dark glasses, Timothy Dant was no figure of distinction. He didn't have enough hair on his head to be taken for an actor, and he had too much to be confused with a director or producer. He wasn't fat enough or dried up enough to be a big wheel in business.

After four hours in the desert sun, Tim's hide was a subversive pink. But if his blonde friend knew he was alive, she didn't let on. There were so many other hungry eyes behind sun glasses, following

every move of her tawny, long-limbed form. So many eager, little imaginations titillated by the thought that she must be that sherry color all over. . . .

It was after lunch of the second day before she seemed to notice him. Timothy, more cooked than somewhat, had retreated to the shade of a covered glider at the edge of the pool. He'd about written the whole experiment off as a painful lesson when he saw her smiling at him.

His dream boat was wearing tall, cork wedgies, and she was coming toward him. For what seemed like a lifetime to Timothy he was afraid there must be someone else on the receiving end of that smile. But he couldn't make himself crane his neck to see.

All right, so for a minute he lived in a fool's paradise. It beat no paradise at all.

Then, as she was directly in front of him, her lips formed a word. It was his name.

He couldn't believe it.

She said, "You're Mr. Dant, aren't you?"

Tim nodded. It was the best he could do. He realized she was waiting for an invitation to sit down. He scrambled, making room for her in the glider. "Won't you?" he asked.

She did.

Tim felt his hands become moist, his throat dry. The tender, burned skin on the back of his legs itched. He was a hell of a lover!

The blonde had taken off her dark glasses, and he saw that her eyes were very large and blue. They looked at him quite frankly, appraisingly.

She said, "You're a private investigator, aren't you?"

"Does it show?"

She was twirling her glasses. "No," she laughed. "Mr. Brophy, the house detective, told me all about you."

"I'll have to speak to that Brophy," Dant said, grinning.

"Oh, he was very complimentary," she said. "He told me you were one of the better private eyes—that is what you call them, isn't it?"

"One of the things," Dant admitted. "What do I call you, Miss . . ."

"I'm Mrs. Breslow," the girl said, stressing the *Mrs.*

For the first time Dant was conscious of a wide wedding-band-and-solitaire combination that should have blinded him. He had been wearing sun glasses, he alibied to himself.

"And you're in the market for a private detective?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes. Mr. Brophy thought you might be available."

"Brophy was never more right. What can I do for you, Mrs. Breslow?"

The lady leaned back in the glider and crossed her long legs. Momentarily, she was stuck for words.

A waiter came by with a tray and Dant gave his blonde prospect a few minutes by ordering a drink. When they were alone again, she said, "I want you to find a husband."

"Suppose you tell me about it," he suggested.

She did, a fantastic story—as fantastic as the idea of *her* needing a detective to locate her husband. About a week ago he had come home from work highly nervous, told her he was in a jam. He was going to have to drop out of sight for a few days. He wanted her to go down to the desert and stay until he straightened something out. He'd keep in touch by telephone and, as soon as he was in the clear, come down himself and make it a vacation for both of them.

"What does your husband do?" asked Dant.

"He's an automobile dealer," the lady answered.

"Not True Blue Breslow, the used-car monarch?" gasped Dant.

Mrs. Breslow's blonde curls bobbed.

Dant thought of a couple of things he might have said about used-car dealers hiding from their gypped customers, but let it go. The lady was too overwrought for any flip remark from him. Besides, this was beginning to sound like money; and, for money Dant could pass up a crack.

"Do you have any thoughts about this jam he said he was in?" he asked.

"No. Lou never discussed business with me."

Dant thought about that—about the constant dinning radio commercials, the frantic jingles urging people to buy automobiles from True Blue Lou, the sky-

writers scrawling Lou's name in smoke over Hollywood any day you could see through the smog.

"Has he kept in touch?" Dant watched Mrs. Breslow retwine her legs, kick rhythmically with those cork wedges, her painted toenails winking sunlight at him.

She nodded. "Yes, every night. He calls me every night."

DANT leaned back, studying Mrs. Breslow's no-expression. "Perhaps I missed something. If he's calling you as promised, he can't be in too much trouble, can he?"

"That's what I thought, too," she said, "the first few days I was down here. Then—I know this will sound silly and female—but I began to worry. I tried to reach him at the house, and Basil, our butler, said he hadn't seen Mr. Breslow since I left."

"Is that a surprise? He told you he was going to have to drop out of sight."

Mrs. Breslow pouted. "I know. I've tried to think of it that way. But—"

"Look," Dant cut in. "We might as well get the obnoxious part of this over with. I can't help you if you hold out. What do you suspect it is with your husband? Another woman?"

"No. But I—"

"Then what are you worrying about? He said he'd call you. He has. He'll probably be down here in a few days, and you wouldn't want to have to explain why you sicced a private investigator on his tail. Now, would you?"

She shook her head. "No, but I—"

"Okay," said Dant in disgust. "I'm still on the outside. That's all right. I don't want the case anyway—not if I have to knock myself out for a week finding out what you already know!"

He picked up his drink, watching Mrs. Breslow make a small fight with herself. When he put the glass down, her lips were trembling.

"That night," she said tonelessly, "when I left and went out to get my car, I saw Lou's coupé in the garage. I don't know why it was important, but I noticed that he'd backed his car in—which he never does. It seemed as though he were trying to hide something from me, something on the other side of the car."

"So," said Dant, "you went around to have a look. What was it?"

"There were four bullet holes in the door."

Dant sat up straight. "I think I see what you mean. Somebody is being very unfriendly. Do you have an idea who it might be?"

"No," she replied. "But I can't stand any more of this, Mr. Dant! I can't loll in the sun waiting until I hear that Lou has been hurt . . . shot. I have to talk to him, find out what it is, why he's hiding."

Dant had forgotten his sunburn. He stretched his legs and was sharply reminded that the skin was drumhead taut on his kneecaps. He winced. "Look," he said. "What about these calls? Hasn't he said anything?"

"All he ever says," replied Mrs. Breslow, "is that he's all right. I'm not to worry."

Her voice tightened to a hurt wail. She seemed very close to tears. "Not worry! What kind of a person does he think I am?"

Dant cleared his throat. "Don't be too hard on him. He probably thinks it's easier for you this way."

"I realize that," she cried. "But I can't take any more, Mr. Dant! I can't!"

Mrs. Breslow was about to make a sensation to top her French bathing suit. Dant noticed a couple of old gaffers eyeing them curiously. Tim pulled a package of cigarettes out from under the belt of his swimming trunks, passed his new client a smoke.

"We'll find him," he assured her.

CHAPTER TWO

The Man With No Face

IT WAS a three-hour trip from San Vincente to Los Angeles. The road cut across the desert and through orange groves and vineyards that had been reclaimed from the desert. Traffic was heavy enough to keep Dant alert and complicate his thinking about the Breslows. Except for those bullet holes Mrs. Breslow had seen in her husband's car, Dant reflected, this assignment would be too obvious to be fun.

It could be a very cute switch of an old, old routine. It might even be that switch with a little extra stage-dressing—although Dant found it hard to believe a man would shoot up a car to get a wife as lovely as Mrs. Breslow out of town. Of course, Dant had to admit, if that was the gimmick, it had certainly worked.

The last thing he'd done before leaving Mrs. Breslow was to borrow the key to her Beverly Hills home.

"Not that I expect to find your husband," he'd said, "but it's a start. I might turn up a lead among his personal effects."

By the time Dant got to Hollywood it was early evening. The air was damp and heavy with ocean fog, soupy enough to foul his windshield. He bucketed along Sunset Boulevard through the Strip, squinting into the oncoming headlights. His head ached. He felt as though a hatchet had been buried in the base of his neck.

Mrs. Breslow had described the house as a large Colonial affair off to the left of Beverly Glen road. Dant recognized it before he saw the address in wrought-iron numbers on the gatepost. The house loomed up in the fog and dusk like six frosty mint juleps on a tray—white columns supporting the porch roof.

Dant turned in the open drive. He was leaning out the window in order to see. Just as he rounded the last curve in front of the house, he was blinded by lights, and another car roared away from the porte-cochere. He had only a flash impression of a large car that narrowly missed tearing both right fenders off his coupé.

Dant swore, realized he'd jammed his foot on the brake and killed the engine. He got out of his car in time to see tail-lights wink as they swung through the gate.

He looked at the house. The windows were dark and he had a fair hunch that he'd missed scoring a ten-strike on Mr. Breslow by a matter of seconds. With the start the other car had, he knew it would be useless to try to follow. As long as he was there, he might as well satisfy himself about the house.

He went to the front door and made with the bell. Mrs. Breslow had mentioned a butler, Basil. Dant decided Basil must be playing footsie with somebody's

upstairs maid. He wasn't answering the door tonight.

Tim used the key his client had given him, stepped inside. He found the switch for a huge crystal chandelier that hung in the entrance hall. Dant blinked, craned his neck at the maple stairway swooping around the curve of the wall. It was strictly Scarlett O'Hara—honeysuckle-pattern wallpaper.

The house smelled the way a house does when it has been closed for a week. The air was heavy, oppressive, like the odor of dead cut flowers.

Dant made a fast tour of the first floor, found nothing he wouldn't expect in the home of a millionaire or a used-car dealer. Someone had shown beautiful taste in the selection of furnishings with a Dixie accent. But the whole thing looked as lived-in as a model home.

He went back to the main stairway and trotted up to the second floor. As his eyes came level with the last step, he saw it.

He stopped breathing. He stopped—period.

Lying on the hall floor was a snub, ugly shotgun, the stock cut down as well as the barrel so it could be handled like an outsize revolver.

Tim dropped his handkerchief over the weapon, sniffed the barrel. It had been fired recently. Minutes ago.

He looked down the hall at the closed, silent doors. He had to start somewhere. He returned the gun to its original position and, still using his handkerchief, unlatched the nearest door.

He had to put his shoulder against it to get it open. He was afraid he knew what was holding it.

Dant saw the man's legs first, sliding over the thick carpet ahead of the door. In the light from the hallway, that was all he saw. Tim fumbled for the light switch inside the room. It had been better before—when he couldn't see. Now the room was flushed with a pale rose light. A large bedroom, it made the man at Dant's feet look small. He was very dead, his body covered by what had been white silk pajamas.

The charge from the shotgun had torn away his face. Dant rolled the body over carefully, noticed a monogram embroidered on the pocket. *L.B.*

He had expected to find Lou Breslow. But not like this.

Dant stood up and pushed back the brim of his hat. All at once the leather hat band seemed made of steel. He leaned against the wall mopping his face. Sick.

Ten minutes off his time coming in from San Vincente and he probably would have taken a charge from that shotgun, too. Like Lou, who'd been met at his bedroom door with the full blast of it in the face.

Dant's knees trembled.

Then he had something else to think about. The front-door chimes.

He remembered the car when he drove up. Maybe the killer had reconsidered leaving him there, had come back to finish the job.

But why so damn formal? Why the routine with the doorbell? That didn't make sense to Dant.

He stepped around the body, passed the gun again and went to the top of the stairs. Someone was hammering on the door now, and Tim thought he heard the word "Police" being bruited about.

Great. He was in a wonderful position to have the cops arrive. Alone in a house with a corpse.

And he was the guy who was through taking divorce cases!

Dant had a small argument with his knees getting downstairs. But he made it, managed to hold himself together long enough to open the front door. He almost caught the butt end of a Police Positive on the chin for his trouble. The .38 was wrapped in the meaty fist that went with a certain Homicide Squad joker Dant would just as soon have been meeting in some bar. Even if it meant buying the drinks. Kurt Levee.

Inspector Levee was two hundred pounds of officer with a sense of humor like an undertaker. His small eyes fastened on Dant but expressed no surprise at seeing him there.

"Hello, Timothy," he rumbled. "What gives?"

Dant started back from the door, fighting his feeling of being trapped. He knew it was no coincidence that Levee had arrived when he did. The car that had almost de-fendered his coupé—he'd showed just in time to provide the killer with a patsy.

He gulped. "You police guys are improving. You're only ten minutes late for this kill."

Levee shouldered through the door, followed by another policeman Dant had never seen before. Levee said, his face brightening, "A kill? It must be getting tougher in the divorce racket, huh, Dant?"

Tim wiped his hands dry, shrugging. "Things are tough all over, pal. Come on. You'll want to meet the cadaver."

INSPECTOR LEVEE wasn't impressed by the body Tim had found for him. He gave it his dead-fish eye, took a ten-cent cigar out of his vest pocket and pinched the end. He tested the stogie's draw before rolling it to the corner of his mouth. "Now," he asked Dant, "who'd you say it was?"

"Did I say?"

"No," drawled Levee, "but as long as you were on the ground, I thought you'd probably know."

Dant held a match to the inspector's hemp, watched Levee's eyes cut through the blue smoke like foglights. Tim said, "I'm guessing, but for a start I'd take the stiff to be a gent who called himself True Blue Lou Breslow."

"The used-car dealer," supplied Inspector Levee, with no question mark in his voice.

Dant nodded. "It figures. This is his house, and it looks like the body is wearing Lou's pajamas and was sleeping in Lou's bed."

Levee spoke through his cigar: "That's real sharp. While you're rolling, suppose you let me know what you're doing here."

"Sure," Dant said weakly. "It was like this. I was down on the desert, at San Vincente..."

The inspector seemed to notice Dant's sunburn for the first time. "You private ops lead a rugged life, don't you?" he growled.

"Let's not be jealous," said Dant. "Anyway, I meet Breslow's wife. She's worried about her old man—says he's acting strange, sent her down there for a few days while he worked himself out of a jam..."

"What kind of a jam?"

"She didn't know," Dant explained. "That's what worried her. So she hired

me to come in and see what I could find out."

Levee grunted. With his chin he indicated the body on the floor. "I hope you got an advance. Have you called her yet?"

Dant shook his head. "No. I'd just found it when you arrived. Incidentally, Levee, I'm curious. What kind of a tip-off brought you and your boy out here?"

Levee walked over toward the ivory phone on a bedside table. As he picked the instrument up, he acknowledged Dant's question with a minor quake of his heavy shoulders.

"Anonymous call," he growled. "Said we'd find a corpse."

"Did I get billing?" asked Dant.

"No, sweetheart, I don't think they mentioned you." Levee was dialing as he spoke.

Dant flopped on the edge of a brocade chair, listened as the inspector made his report and ordered up the shock troops: cameramen, medical examiner, fingerprint artists.

Levee turned and looked at Dant after he'd hung up. "I think you'd better call your client," he said. "Tell her nothing about this, but say she better get in here. Have her fly. There'll be somebody at the San Vincente airport glad to make a buck on a charter. I'll have a car for her at the Inglewood Airport. Tell her that."

Dant crossed to the phone. He dialed long distance and put in a person-to-person.

Mrs. Breslow's voice sounded fresh and untroubled when she answered the phone. Of course, Dant realized, there was no reason why it should be otherwise. But it was a shock to be talking to her from the room where she had just been made a widow.

He said, "Dant speaking, Mrs. Breslow. I phoned to let you know I've found your husband."

"You found him?" Her voice rose a note. "That's odd. I was talking to him and he didn't say anything about you."

"You what?" gasped Dant.

"Spoke to him. He called not five minutes ago."

Dant played it smart. He said, "Hold the line a second," and laid the instrument on the table. He mopped his hands and face with a limp handkerchief. Levee

was watching him closely. Too closely.

Dant said, "I've got news for you, Inspector. Mrs. Breslow says she was talking to her husband in the last five minutes. How about that?"

Levee's no-expression glance traveled from Dant to the dead body. He chewed his cigar. "What I said still goes. I want her down here."

Dant picked up the phone again, said, "Mrs. Breslow, I think you'd better come into town right away."

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Let me put it this way," said Dant, "Something's not right. Look, grab a cab out to the airport and see if you can charter a plane. There'll be a car to meet you at the Inglewood Airport. Remember. Inglewood."

"All right," his client said, dutifully. "I'll be there as soon as I can be."

Dant nodded to Levee as he put the phone down. "She'll be here. You'll want a description so your men will know her."

Levee shook his head. "That won't be necessary. You and I are meeting her."

Dant fumbled a cigarette into his mouth, lit it. "What about this stiff?" he asked.

"He'll have lots of company."

Dant was standing over the faceless corpse, looking down at it. "If she really was talking to her old man, I wonder who this guy was?"

"I don't know," said Levee, "but I'm not buying that pitch you gave me. How about trying me with a new story?"

Dant rocked back on his heels. "There isn't any new story, Kurt. I gave it to you straight, the way I saw it."

Levee made a face as though his cigar tasted as bad as it smelled. "I think you can do better, Dant. A lot better. That's why I'm hanging on to you."

Tim snorted. "Next you'll tell me you think I killed this guy."

"I might," Levee agreed. "Somebody did, and up to now you're the only joker in sight."

"How thick can you get?" snapped Dant. "You said there was a phone call on this kill. I hope you don't think I made it, then waited around until you arrived?"

He told Levee, then, about the car that had almost crashed into him when he drove up. "What do you make of that?" he asked.

The inspector stepped over the body with a backward glance at Dant. "Not bad—for an afterthought."

CHAPTER THREE

Sorry—Wrong Corpse

LEVEE and Tim Dant met Mrs. Breslow at the airport. A two-place monoplane let down out of the dark sky and taxied to the passenger ramp. Dant saw his blonde client step out of the plane in a flurry of lingerie. Somehow, with Levee hanging over him like a storm cloud, even Mrs. Breslow's gorgeous gams left Timothy cold.

She trotted toward the gate, eagerly scanning the crowd for Tim. He waved to her.

As she took his hand Mrs. Breslow began talking. Everything she said began with "why" or "what." What had happened to her husband? Why wasn't he here with Tim? Why had Tim insisted she come back to Los Angeles? What was it all about?

Tim would have been all night answering her questions—if he'd known the answers. So he settled for introducing his big cop friend. "Mrs. Breslow, this is Inspector Levee, Beverly Hills Police Department." He didn't have the heart to add, "Homicide Bureau."

Levee remembered his manners, put himself out touching his hat-brim, mumbling, "Mrs. Breslow . . ."

At the word *Police*, Dant's client froze. She looked at the two men with those large eyes of hers as if she were about to break up. Tim gripped her elbow, wished he could make some corny speech to perk her up. But he wasn't up to it.

They got in Levee's car and started back through the Signal Hill oil derricks to Beverly Hills. The silence in the sedan lasted for several minutes before the inspector snapped it. "Mrs. Breslow, Dant here tells me you spoke to your husband tonight on the phone."

In the glow from the dash panel, Dant saw his client swallow, her lips move soundlessly, before she said, "I did."

Levee kept his eyes on the road ahead. "Would you be able to tell me the approximate time he called?"

"Why, yes," answered Mrs. Breslow, speaking more easily now. "I told Mr. Dant. It was about five minutes prior to Mr. Dant's call. That's what seems so strange. I mean, Lou didn't mention Mr. Dant."

She brought herself up short and looked at Tim. "You did tell me you'd found him?"

"That's what I said," Tim acknowledged. "But I—"

"You see," Levee cut in, "there's some question about just who Timothy found. We thought it was your husband—until you said you'd spoken to him."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Breslow. "Why should my having—"

"This man of Dant's happens to be dead."

Mrs. Breslow's hands tightened into sharp fists in her lap. She said a very small, "Oh."

Levee cleared his throat and went on. "The body, Mrs. Breslow, was discovered by our friend Dant at your home, in the master bedroom, wearing a suit of pajamas that we presume was your husband's. The face was too badly mutilated for identification. But I thought perhaps you might be able to help us. . . ."

The inspector drove straight to the Beverly Hills Civic Center, the tall, white building housing the City Hall, Fire Department, police station and morgue. Levee led the way to the morgue.

Dant's client was riding her nerves with a very short rein. Her desert-acquired tan had taken on a slightly muddy look. Her mouth was stiff, like a kid trying not to cry. She'd be repeating over and over to herself that the body she was going to see wasn't her husband—it couldn't be—and yet, she'd be terrified that all the logic in the world wouldn't help her if it was.

The corpse was waiting for them, laid out on a slab and covered with a sheet. Dant had to give Levee a certain amount of grudging credit. He'd expected the cop to throw the sheet back and let Mrs. Breslow take the full impact of that shot-torn face. But the inspector was positively chivalrous.

Explaining that she would be able to tell nothing from the head anyway, he lifted the sheet from the side. Only the

torso of the man on the slab was bared. Dant heard Mrs. Breslow's quick breathing stop. Time stopped.

He saw her shake her head slowly. "No, it's not Lou."

"You're sure?" Levee said.

"Yes. This man . . . You see, my husband has quite a lot of hair on his body, and he's darker . . ."

Levee nodded. "Good enough. Do you have any idea who it might be?"

Mrs. Breslow bit her lower lip. She was looking at the hands of the dead man. Deeply imbedded in the flesh of the left pinkie was a brown star-sapphire ring.

She said, "Why, yes. That ring. I think . . . No, I'm certain. Our butler, Basil, wore one like it."

Levee dropped the sheet over the body. "I'll buy it," he said.

They went up to Levee's office and spent the next hour on Mrs. Breslow's story, checking it against Dant's. Levee seemed satisfied.

"I don't imagine I can alarm you any more," he rumbled at Mrs. Breslow, "but this is how it looks. Tying those bullet holes in your husband's car to Basil's murder, I'd say Mr. Breslow is in a very unhealthy spot. There have been two attempts on his life. The second caught your butler indulging in a little high living while you and your husband were away. Somebody shot before they looked . . . and then it was too late to be sure they hadn't got their man.

"I'm telling you this, Mrs. Breslow, because I want you to influence your husband, if he should get in touch with you again. Make him understand he's got to come to us. These killers can't keep missing him forever."

On that happy thought, the interview was over. Dant stood up with Mrs. Breslow, asked Levee, "You won't be wanting me any more?"

The inspector needled him with a glance. "If I do, I'll know where to find you."

He flicked a knowing look at Mrs. Breslow.

TIM DANT took his client back to San Vincente. He explained to her that he was now convinced the only way they'd locate her husband was by tracing his next telephone call. If he called.

"Here's the thing, Mrs. Breslow," he added. "The papers are going to carry the Basil story. Your husband will know how close he came to getting knocked off when he reads it. There's a fair chance he'll lam out of the area altogether. If it was me, I'd be on my way to South America."

It was past midnight. The road was practically deserted. For several miles Mrs. Breslow watched their headlight beams leaping ahead of the car.

"Is it very difficult to trace a call?" she asked finally.

"Harder than a lot of people think," Dant replied. "With dial phones it takes between five and ten minutes for the company to run a call down. So I want to be at this end, to get it started as soon as Mr. Breslow phones."

"Ten minutes," echoed his client. "You mean, after I've spoken to him?"

Dant shook his head. "No. *While* you're talking to him. You'll have to keep him on the wire that long."

"What if I can't?"

"Then," shrugged Dant, "we'll have to try our luck the next time. But it's up to you to hold him. It wouldn't hurt if you gave that a little thought."

Dant said good-night to Mrs. Breslow in the lobby of the Palm Court Hotel. As they came in, his friend Joe Brophy bobbed up from behind the desk, where he'd been playing gin with the night clerk. Tim had business with Joe.

When Mrs. Breslow was safely in the elevator, Dant doubled his fist and playfully tapped the house dick on the jaw.

"Let that be a lesson to you," he said, grinning.

"What do you mean?" Joe asked.

"The little public-relations job you did for me with the blonde," Dant answered. He told Joe about his trip to Los Angeles, the rhubarb with Inspector Levee.

"I think I'm in the clear," he added, "but with Levee, you never know."

"Aw, Tim," apologized Joe, "I'm sure I—I didn't mean . . ."

Dant rubbed his hand over Joe's bald head. "Of course you didn't, curly. Forget it. You can help me polish up my slightly tarnished reputation, though."

"There'll be a call coming in tomorrow afternoon that I want traced. Clear it

with your switchboard and the L.A. exchange."

"Sure, Timmy," Joe replied. "We'll handle it."

Tim thanked Brophy and went up to his room, to bed. He was one beat private eye.

* * *

Dant ripped himself away from the sack about eleven o'clock. He was over his eggs and bacon when Brophy entered the hotel dining room. The house detective had a big smile for him.

"It's all set, kid," Joe said. "Now, how's for filling me in?"

He sat down with Dant, had a cup of coffee while Tim explained that the call he wanted traced would be for Mrs. Breslow and would probably originate in L.A. "I'll be with her," he continued. "We'll keep the party talking as long as possible. By the way, have you seen her this morning?"

Brophy shook his head. "No, I just got up myself." He beckoned to the headwaiter and asked about Mrs. Breslow. She hadn't been in the dining room.

After breakfast Tim killed some time in the lobby going over Los Angeles papers. The Basil murder was page one with headlines, but a very short, no-information story.

Mrs. Breslow came down for brunch shortly before twelve, and Dant joined her. "I hope you won't mind seeing a lot of me for the next few hours," he told her. "I don't care to gamble with that call."

"Not at all," she smiled. "I understand. And to be quite frank, Mr. Dant, I'll enjoy your company. You have no idea how difficult it is for a woman by herself to make friends at a place like this."

She caught her breath and Dant's smirk. "Of course, I mean the *right* kind of friends. There are so many wolves."

Dant glanced around the dining room—at the other wolves. "You are *so* right, Mrs. Breslow!" he chuckled.

TIM DANT had himself an afternoon to remember. They spent it swimming and lounging under the beach

umbrellas beside the pool. Happily, Dant suffered sunburn on his sunburn. One look at his client's long, flowing lines in that French bathing suit, and he felt no pain.

They had dinner in her suite. Candlelight and champagne. Dant had given serious thought to the idea of tearing the phone off the wall. He'd never had it so good.

A bus boy cleared away the dishes. Timothy and his client were alone with soft music and brandy glasses. The phone spoiled it all by popping off then! Kay—it was Kay now—leaped to answer it.

Dant cautioned her, "Remember—make him talk!"

She nodded and picked up the instrument. "Hello," she said, then nodded again, frantically, at Dant.

He rose from the divan and went to the radio, turned it up full.

Kay looked at him, startled, and made a wild gesture for him to turn it down. He did lower it a couple of decibels, but that was all.

She held her hand over the mouthpiece. "Please, Tim," she said, "I can't hear."

He laughed, louder than the radio.

Kay looked troubled and confused, tried to talk over the din. Dant put his arm around her waist. She was saying, "No, Lou, no . . . of course not!"

Dant growled, close enough to the mouthpiece for Lou to get what he said, "Aw, come on, honey, hang up!"

She pushed him away. "Lou . . . please listen to me. It's only the radio . . . a play on the radio, Lou. There's no one here with me. I know you are, dear. I know."

Dant was back, mumbling, "Tell that guy to drop dead!"

Kay was trying to plead with both of them at the same time. From her end of the conversation, Dant knew his gimmick was working. Breslow must be as frantic as his wife—sure she was having a big time while he was dodging killers.

Dant stood off and let Kay beg her husband to believe in her, trust her. She loved him, and all the rest of the soft soap that only made her side of the argument sound worse.

When Dant saw they'd been at it for ten minutes, he dealt himself back in.

Tipping his client a big wink, he helped himself to the phone. He listened for a moment.

Lou sounded as though he were practically crying. "If that's Johnny with you, so help me, Kay, I'll kill you both!"

Dant brayed, "Who's Johnny?"

There was a gasp at the other end of the wire, and Tim added, "Sorry, chum. Wrong number," and hung up.

He waited a moment, then spoke to the hotel operator. "How're we doing, honey?" he asked.

"Los Angeles reports they were able to trace the call," she answered. "They'll have the number and address for us in a few minutes. I'll call you back, sir."

He turned to Kay, who had crumpled on a corner of the divan, her face buried in her hands. She was sobbing.

"Look, baby," Dant said, "I don't have to tell you what that was all about. I had to make certain Lou would talk long enough for the call to be traced. I'll explain the whole thing to him tomorrow. We'll have a good laugh about it."

Kay peeked at him through her fingers, then ran into the bathroom. When she came out, Tim saw that she'd made her face up again so that except for a pink-flushed look around her eyes, he'd never know she'd been crying.

He poured her another brandy. "Here," he said. "This will help. I'm sorry—I should've called that shot, but I . . ."

The phone rang and Dant took it.

It was the hotel operator with a Los Angeles address. He wrote it in his pocket notebook. This time, when he hung up, Kay was smiling at him.

He poured himself a drink, grinned back. "By the way, Kay," he said, "now that's over, I'm curious. How do I stack up as a wolf?"

Her eyes danced. "Very, very well, Tim."

CHAPTER FOUR

Coroner's Bait

THE NEXT morning, Tim got away from San Vicente before breakfast. He left a final message with Brophy and a scribbled note for Mrs. Breslow, telling her to keep her fingers crossed.

He really hammered over the road to Los Angeles. There was a full day waiting for him.

Before going to his Hollywood office he stopped on Automobile Row, at the place of business of True Blue Lou Breslow. The used-car lot covered about half a block. Several hundred brand-new cars and some that weren't so new crowded it.

Dant left his coupé at the curb and walked into the lot—to a small replica of Breslow's Beverly Hills house, complete even to six miniature white pillers.

There was a sign on the door: OFFICE—STEP RIGHT IN. Dant did that, and closed the door behind him. Inside the building he found a couple of salesmen warming their hands at a small electric heater.

Dant made a good act of his entrance, apologizing for being so early. One of the salesmen—a Texan, by his drawl—assured Dant it was never too early for bargains with True Blue Breslow. Throwing an arm around Dant's shoulders, he led him back out to the lot.

"Now then," Tex said, "suppose you tell me what kind of automobile you-all are interested in."

Dant smiled naively. "I don't know. Something not too expensive, but good."

"Son, you came to the right place. That's the onliest kind of automobiles we got here!"

He took Dant down the line until Tim began admiring a 1949 convertible. Tex moved right in. "That one catch your fancy, son?"

Dant shook his head. "Yeah . . . but I'm afraid it's a little too rich for me."

He was being pushed toward the driver's seat of the car. "Jes' get in and drive that car. If you like it, we'll let you set the deal."

Tim shook his head. "No. I would like to look at the motor, though. If it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all!" Tex lifted the hood and Dant let himself get worked up about the power plant, the wheel suspension, the brakes, the trunk compartment. For a finish he decided against it.

But he'd been able to keep the car between Tex and himself long enough to write the engine number on the cover of

a book of paper matches. 14GKH—63230.

He and Tex went through the same routine with four more gleaming heaps. Then Dant shook his head. He'd have to come back later . . . after he'd made up his mind.

It was a grey day in the Lone Star State. Tex looked beat as Tim crawled in his own coupé and drove off.

Tim Dant went straight to his office. His secretary was just opening the morning's mail when he came in. She seemed surprised to see her boss, chirped excitedly, "Oh, Mr. Dant! I wasn't expecting you."

He picked up his mail—several days of it—and leered at her. "What's the matter, honey—got a boy friend in my office?"

Miss White gave his gag exactly the anemic giggle it deserved. She said, "Will you be in for a while?"

Dant nodded. "Several hours. Bring your notebook—there's something I want to get off."

He flopped in the chair behind his desk. As Miss White followed him through the door of his private snake pit, she said, "What I meant was, are you back for good?"

"One never knows, honey."

Dant waved her to her chair and dictated a wire to a man he knew in Sacramento, using the data he'd taken from the cars on Lou Breslow's lot. He said to Miss White, "That's all for now. When you get it typed, take it down to Western Union yourself. The sunshine will do you good."

He wasted the next twenty minutes going over his bills and looking wistfully for his bank balance. Then he sighed and closed the checkbook as he heard someone enter the outer office.

Tim said, "Miss White. . . ?"

It wasn't. A very tall, thick gent with a nose bent clear around to here padded in on his heels. He was dressed on the sharp side—sport jacket, gabardine slacks.

"What can I do for you?" Tim asked.

The man looked as though he weren't certain where *that* voice came from. He seemed to decide it was really the man behind the desk. He asked, "You're Timothy Dant?"

Dant admitted it, wondering if he ought to go for his gun. But the big hood type

smiled and sat down. His breath whistled through his bent horn.

"They tell me you wanna buy a new car, Mr. Dant."

Dant smiled. "They? Who?"

"I hear you was down to the Breslow lot this morning."

"So . . . ?"

Dant's visitor leaned back and smiled confidently across the desk. He had a mouth full of gold. "I think I've got a good deal for you—something you'll go for," he said.

"In a car?"

"Yeah. How'd you like a brand-new, twelve-cylinder job?"

Dant shrugged. "Sure . . . and a yacht to go with it."

The man snorted, squinting his small eyes at Dant. "On the level. Here's the deal—your car and a hundred bucks. You can't pass up an offer like that, Dant."

Tim thought a minute, did a fast translation on what this joker was saying. Dant had played a hunch when he'd dropped by Breslow's lot, and now he was being told to forget it. In a nice way—if you go for bribes.

Dant scratched his chin. He made a noise like a cricket. "I'll have to think about it. A car that big takes a lot of upkeep."

"I wouldn't worry about upkeep, Dant," said the hood, shuffling toward the door. "You might get a bigger car. One of those black jobs, with red velvet curtains. Know what I mean?"

"I'm afraid I do," said Dant. "Where can I get in touch with you?"

The man grinned. "You can't, pal. I'll get in touch with you."

TIM DANT stayed in his office until his answer came through from Sacramento. That hunch of his looked better all the time. Better—and more like sudden death. He made a couple of fast telephone calls, then told Miss White to close the office. Timothy was off to the address the telephone company had given him on Lou Breslow's call.

It was in South Los Angeles, about as far off the Hollywood glamor pitch as you can get. An old neighborhood, a run-down neighborhood. It needed new paint, new buildings, new people, and a new

start. The address, to Tim's no-surprise, was a small, one-man bar.

There was a public phone booth near the door, Dant noticed as he entered the joint. The bartender was alone, having a quiet drink for himself. He looked up hopefully when Tim mounted one of the battered stools chained to the footrail. "What'll you have?" he asked.

Dant said Eastern beer, and while the man was uncapping a bottle he broke out the picture Mrs. Breslow had given him of her husband. "Ever see this man in here?" Tim asked.

The barkeep conned the picture. "Yeah. Every night, lately. Comes in and has a drink with me."

"Been in today yet?"

"No. Generally comes in a little later. What is this, mister—you a cop?"

Tim nodded. "Private cop. But don't let it get around. Here—buy yourself a drink." He put a dollar on the bar and the man poured himself a shot of whiskey.

Dant bought another beer, settled down to wait for Breslow.

In about five minutes business began to pick up. Two men in soiled dungarees, carrying lunch-boxes, came in together and went to the other end of the bar. A third strolled in, had a fast shot and went to the men's room.

Dant lost interest in the bartender's trade about then. Another man had ducked through the door. This was Lou Breslow! He was dressed in a suit a welfare mission would turn down. He needed a shave. His eyes were red, his hands trembling.

Dant watched Breslow shut himself in the phone booth. Sound of quarters dropping in the box.

Something that was happening at the other end of the bar snapped Dant's attention. The two men with lunch-boxes had opened them. Out of each box came a very significant bit of machined metal. Put together it added up to a grease gun. Not the filling-station kind.

The third man came out of the men's room. He packed a .38 automatic and was evidently running the show.

Dant couldn't untrack himself, even to shout a warning to Breslow.

It was too late for warnings. The three men closed on the phone booth, and the grease gun opened up in short, profane

bursts. Glass shattered. Breslow screamed.

Dant watched the three killers go to the door. The guy with the .38 jerked his chin nervously and said, "Come on. That does it. For sure, this time."

Tim started to make a move. Started, was all. The world split in half and exploded in his face. Like an atom bomb. He felt plenty nuclear . . . as long as he felt anything.

He came to with a lot of fuzzy lights streaking in front of his eyes. They stopped wavering and jumping, and he



"You heard me," Tim said.
"Johnny talked."

realized they were the neon around the bar mirror. He was lying on his back, looking up at it.

There was firing outside. He heard men running, and the three characters in dungarees who had taken care of Breslow stampeded into the bar, shooting as they came. Dant gathered they were cut off. There were cops in the street outside.

The guy who was calling the shots saw Dant was conscious. He yelled at his two pals to shut up. They'd been talking about making a break, shooting their way out.

This character came over and prodded Dant with his toe. He said, "Get up, Dant. Get up." He raised the barrel of his .38 to gun-whip Timothy—which wasn't necessary. Dant scrambled to his feet, very subdued.

"Dant," the man said, "those are your friends out there, those cops. Tell them you're in here; we've got you. Tell them we're coming out, with you. The first shot that's fired, you'll get it. Tell them that. Tell them you want to live."

He prodded Dant to the door. "Go on," he said. "Yell!"

Dant yodeled. Like the man said. He identified himself, told the cops the four of them were coming out with him for a shield. He put real feeling into the part about not shooting.

Someone—it sounded like Levee's voice—said, "Okay, Tim. Bring 'em out."

THEY pushed him through the swinging door ahead of them. The sidewalk was wide, about fourteen feet—fourteen miles to Dant. He could see police behind every car and telephone pole—following them, waiting for a break to open fire.

The killers were crowding Dant, walking almost in lock-step.

Tim decided this was as far as he went.

He lashed back with his heel at the shin nearest him, the guy with the .38. The man swore. Tim dived to the sidewalk and tried to claw a foxhole in the cement. All hell had blown its top over his head. The night buzzed with violent death. Tracers flashed like eager, jet-propelled lightning.

Then it was quiet. Dant couldn't hear a sound. He wasn't sure he'd ever hear a sound again. He didn't feel anything, either.

He couldn't make himself lift his face off the pavement to take a look around. Not until he heard Levee's heavy: "All right, sweetheart. It's all over."

Dant rolled to his side, looked into the inspector's round, expressionless face. "You might give a guy a hand," he croaked weakly.

"I suppose it's either that or get you a tin cup and pencils," Levee growled. He slipped his hands under Dant's arms and lifted him to his feet, helped him wobble back into the bar. They had to detour around three very quiet forms lying on the sidewalk.

Levee guided Dant to a bar stool. Tim's nerves had settled down to a steady gallop. He looked at the chopped-up phone booth. Breslow was sprawled out on the floor, the receiver dangling.

Stepping over Breslow, he reached the receiver and held it to his ear, shouted, "Hello, hello!" at the mouthpiece.

Kay Breslow's voice came back to him. She sounded far on the ragged side of

hysterics. "Who is this? What's happened?" she cried.

"Tim Dant. You remember me," he said.

"Oh, Tim! What's happened?" she repeated. "I heard shots."

"That's right, baby," Dant said. "That's what you heard. I'm afraid you're a widow."

She gasped.

"That's only part of my bad news. Get a grip on yourself, honey—the cops got Johnny! You know, your friend—the guy Lou was jealous of. And *this* is really tragic: He talked. Just before he died, Johnny talked."

"What are you saying, Tim?" Kay shrieked at him.

"You heard me, baby. He talked . . . about you and him, how you planned this kill. Brophy is on the wire, too, honey, so don't swoon right away. He'll be up to catch you."

Dant dropped the receiver on its hook, turned to Levee. He felt better; he had his legs under him.

Levee smiled. "Congratulations, shamus," he said. "You're almost a good cop."

Dant bowed, then threw a leg over the stool next to the inspector. "Leave us not be insulting, pal."

Tim opened his mouth and closed it again. He was looking at a ghost, a green-at-the-gills ghost—the bartender.

"I'm sorry," babbled the man. "When I hit you with that bottle, I—I thought you were one of them—those guys out there."

"Yeah," Tim said. "You did me a favor. Relax."

Dant glanced at Levee. "So how did it figure, sweetheart?" he mimicked the inspector's heavy growl. "It was strictly a hunch, but it made sense. Look. Here's a nice, clean used-car dealer who suddenly turns up with people shooting at him. What should he do?"

"If he's really clean, he goes to you jokers and screams murder. But Breslow goes into a big, fat sulk; won't even let his wife in on who's after him. So he must think he knows. And he must be pretty certain that you legal beagles won't be any help to him.

"That checks, because today I cased his used-car lot and found he's got a lot of rolling stock down there with phony serial numbers. Engine numbers he's copped off crates that have been totally wrecked or burned. He thinks, when the shooting starts, that the hoods are moving in on his racket.

"Great! Great for Mrs. Breslow who has a boy friend named Johnny and a large urge to take over her husband's fortune. If she can make Lou think his shoulder-holster buddies are planning to liquidate him, she ought to be able to sell the idea to the cops. Only first she's got to find him for her boy friend. That's why she needed a detective—to finger her old man's kill."

LEVEE grunted. "Wait a minute, Dant. I know you're a glib guy and I buy the stuff about Breslow dealing in hot cars, but what's this Johnny-and-Mrs.-Breslow routine? Who is Johnny? And what was that thing you were giving Mrs. Breslow? Johnny talked, you said."

"He did," exclaimed Dant. "Just before he made me take him and his boys outside. He knew me, called me by name. There was only one person who knew I was going to be here to meet Breslow—his wife. So it had to connect back to Kay Breslow. All I know about Johnny is that Lou considered him serious competition . . . and I have a nasty imagination."

"That I'll buy," said Levee. "Also the beers." He waved two fat fingers at the bartender, said nothing until the beers trembled up before them. Dant slugged his down fast, letting the suds shove the nervous tension out of him.

Then he turned to Levee. "I almost forgot to ask. What brought the 7th Cavalry to the rescue?" He motioned at the cops that were all around the place.

Levee flashed him a big grin. "Didn't you know, sweetheart? I've had two men tailing you all the time. They were outside when the fireworks went off, and they held the killers in here until reinforcements arrived."

Dant sighed and signaled the bartender to refill the glasses. "And," he told Levee, "I'll buy these."

By HENRY HASSE



"Don't worry about the gun," Penger said. "Just be a good boy."

WELCOME, KILLER!

For his buddy, Lieutenant Penger had a special going-away present: A bright red, tinsel-tied, no-return murder rap!

HE OPENED the door the barest trifle, and it was Penger standing there. Lieutenant Penger, just as he remembered him, just as big and ugly. "Hello, Latting. Well, you gonna stand there? Don't I come in?"

Latting fell back a step. "Yeah, I guess

you do. Seeing as how you've got a gun in that pocket. . . ."

"The gun? Now don't you worry about the gun. Just be a good boy." Penger pushed in, closed the door softly. "Well, how about a drink? Is this any way to greet an old friend?"

Latting hesitated. "A drink? Sure, sure. I've got rye."

"Rye is fine."

Latting moved across the room as if lead weights were on his feet. Watching this man, all the old hate came back, washing up in his brain where it clung hot and cloying. He watched Penger sink down in a chair.

"Sa-ay, Latting, you got a nice layout here. When you hole up, you really do it right!"

"I do okay." Latting came back, and the lead was gone from his feet. "Here you are."

"Ah-h, thanks. Well—here's to the old days."

"To hell with that! Get to the point, Penger. I don't know how you found me, but I know damn well you're here to take me in."

Penger tossed down the drink, and then he settled in the chair and his grin abruptly vanished. The hand inside his pocket moved with the barest suggestion. "Sit down, Latting. Sit down and relax. Talk to an old pal."

Latting's fingers clenched and unclenched. He walked over to a chair, sat erect on the edge of the cushioned seat.

"That's better," Penger said. "Don't get excited, Latting. You didn't used to get excited. Mel Latting, one of the level-headed guys on the force, they used to say. Boy, you've changed."

"You haven't, Penger, except your promotion. I heard about that. I don't see how in hell a dumb cop like you ever made it."

"Let's say I was lucky. Yeah, Latting, you've changed. You're thinner. You didn't have that mustache a year ago, and you've changed your hair, but I'd recognize you anywhere." The grin came back. "Like this morning on the street, when I spotted you and tailed you here."

Latting looked long and hard at him.

"What are you after, Penger? A medal for bringing me in?"

Penger didn't answer at once. His hand came out holding a Police Positive, and he placed it on the arm of the chair within easy reach. He brought out a pipe, tamped it with tobacco and got it going. His eyes never left Latting's face.

He said, "For bringing you in? Maybe not. Maybe I won't have to." He hunched his bulk forward. "Tell me something, Latting. How does it feel to be on the other side of the law?"

Latting watched this man, trying to figure the angle. He said slowly, "How do you think? With a murder rap hanging over me, and a phony one at that!"

"Uh-huh. But boy, what I can't figure is why you came back here. If it's to see your wife—I could tell you something about that, too."

"Leave her out of this! All right, she was no good, she was a two-timing dame—but leave her out!"

"You wouldn't want to see her now, Latting. You sure wouldn't. She's really hit the skids. The bottom."

"I said leave her out!" Latting's body went taut—and then he relaxed. Was Penger needling him, trying to get him to make a try for the gun? He gave a short laugh.

Why bother? As he'd said, Lora was no good. It had taken him some time to find it out, and even then he had tried to understand, to give her the benefit. Maybe that had been the trouble. But his wife, a cop's wife, mixed up with a grubby little gambler like Joe Morrow, and maybe others; and worst of all, flaunting it, not caring—that sort of stuff soon gets around. As the saying goes, a man is always the last one to know. It had become pretty bad by the time Latting got around to knowing, and it had gotten to the sordid stage when he'd decided to do something about it. . . .

Latting felt Penger's eyes upon him now. Sweat broke out along his jaw, and he passed a hand across his face as he remembered that night a year before. . . .

He had used his key to come into the house. The gun was in his right hand, and purpose was hot in his brain. He went to the living room and Lora was lying there. At first he thought she was dead, and he was glad. He dropped the gun back into his pocket.

She wasn't dead. She was breathing. There was an ugly bruise above her left ear, that was all. Then he saw Morrow, huddled in a far corner, and there wasn't any doubt about Morrow. Whoever had shot him had done so at very close range, and several times, straight in the face. Latting got a little sick.

But it hadn't been Lora, because no gun was there. Latting searched the room and failed to find one. Two glasses and a bottle were on a side table. A couple of cigarette butts in an ash tray.

That was when he heard the police siren.

It was easy enough to rationalize—afterward. But just then he'd had enough of humiliation, of talk and grins behind his back, enough of Lora, enough of everything. He wasn't taking any more—especially this. Let her face it, he thought. She deserved worse.

The siren wailed again, much nearer, and panic suddenly hit him.

He ran.

There had been a year of running after that. A year of running and watching the papers and knowing the net was still out. A year in which to think. He'd done plenty of that.

The coming back was even harder. Maybe it was too late, but he had taken the chance. He had come back and holed up here. And now Penger.

HE SAW Penger hunch forward, drawing on his pipe, watching him from narrowed eyes.

Penger was saying, "You know something, Latting? I can't say that I blame you for the killing—considering everything. That's why I don't *want* to take you in."

"Yeah, I love you, too." Then he saw that Penger meant it. He said slowly. "Go on, Penger."

"Well, look at it. Crime of passion. they called it. There was your wife in your own home, and Joe Morrow—everyone knew about them." He waved a hand. "If only you hadn't run! You'd have got off light."

"Sure, sure," Latting said.

"That story is good except for one point! I didn't kill him!"

Penger shook his head, but Latting went on.

"And Lora doesn't know who killed him. I read her account of it in the papers. She was in the other room, changing; they were going to step out. She thought only Morrow was there, until she heard the shots. And when she came running out the killer slugged her from behind—to prevent her getting a glimpse of him." Latting's gaze flicked to the gun and back to Penger's face. "She thought it was me, of course; she said so afterward."

"Like I said, you never should have



Clay-pigeon for a woozie cutie's gun-pals, dick Johnny Rock tried to turn the target practice—into a free-for-all . . . Johnny Rock style!

DREAMER WITH A GUN

by Mel Colton

Plus Hellbent for Homicide by Frank Huepper, and crime-adventures by John D. MacDonald and others.

In the December issue—on sale Nov. 4th

**DIME
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run. They pinned it right on you. If only you had stayed."

"Yes?"

Penger waited a long moment. "Give yourself up, Latting. Now. Walk in and face it. You'll get a better break than if I bring you in. What do you say?"

It was crystal clear now. Latting sank back in the chair and looked at Penger and tried to keep his voice calm. "I don't know. Maybe you're right. It would take more evidence than they've got now . . ."

"Evidence? Hell, it's evidence in your favor! There's the picture of Lora that was in Morrow's pocket, and one of the letters she'd sent him. And anyway, Morrow was in your home. The old unwritten law! Face it now and you stand a damn good chance. You were a cop. The entire force will be behind you. But the longer you wait, the tougher it'll be!"

"Uh-huh," Latting sat up. "It sounds right. You've just about convinced me." He reached for a cigarette pack on the table and shook one loose. His hand trembled a little. The cigarette fell to the cushioned seat beside him, he fumbled for it—and his hand came up holding a .38. "Careful, Penger, I'm pretty good with this!"

"Latting . . ."

"Shut up! All right, Penger—slide your gun across to me. That's the way."

Penger's face went the color of lard, but he tried to bluster it through. "You're crazy, Latting. Just what do you think this is going to get you?"

"Morrow's killer for one thing. Sure, I was there that night. Maybe I was out for a kill—I don't know. I knew Morrow was there. Only someone beat me to him. Want me to go on, Penger?"

The big man nodded, watching Latting warily.

"There was another man in the picture," Latting said. "I knew that too, but I didn't know who. I know now. It was you, Penger. You were making a play for Lora!"

"Prove some of this, boy. Prove it. Prove any of it!"

Latting smiled. "You pinned it on yourself a minute ago when you mentioned Lora's picture and the letter that were on Morrow. You went through his pockets, I guess, and you left those items

there, thinking it would help point the finger at me. What you didn't know was that I found them there too—and when I ran, I took them with me!" Latting smiled but not too certainly. "Only the killer could know about that picture and letter."

"Me a killer—on evidence like that? You know better, Latting." Penger was confident now. He leaned forward, reached out a hand. "All right, you've played your card. Now why don't you give me the gun and I'll still give you a break. You can walk in and face it, like I said."

Latting whipped the gun around in a slashing arc. It took Penger across the knuckles—and that did it. The man pulled back, lifted his bruised hand to his lips. His eyes went dark with hate.

"Okay, Latting. Sure I killed him, but try and prove any of this! My word against yours, and you're a fugitive, remember? I'll give you odds! You're going to take the rap, boy—and now I hope they throw the book at you!"

LATTING sat there for a single moment. Then he came up slowly with the gun in readiness.

"You didn't let me finish, Penger. There's still more. You wondered why I came back? I came back to give myself up, and I did—two days ago! But I begged Captain Cheney to let me have forty-eight hours. He listened to me. And you know why you spotted me this morning? Because I made sure that you did! I wanted you to tail me here!"

Penger's face was again the color of lard. "You made a deal—"

"And I still say you're dumb, Penger. Dumb, right down the line! You stepped into the oldest one in the books! Take a look, Penger. See that radio over there? It's more than a radio."

"Latting, what are you—"

"You look kind of pale, Penger. See that floor lamp beside you? There's a microphone in it. Everything we've said since you came in this room is on record."

"Latting, will you listen—"

"No! No deals!" Latting came forward grimly. "We'll go downtown now, but watch yourself. I've been away a year, but I still know how to use this gun!"



TIMES have changed since, some three-quarters of a century ago, Sir William S. Gilbert, librettist of the famous Gilbert and Sullivan team, had his character in *The Pirates of Penzance* sing, "A policeman's life is not a happy one." Maybe today's cops are not exactly caroling with joy, but still, things are better. The pay has improved, the boys are on three shifts, and when things get dull there's always the police-car radio to listen to, with the latest baseball scores and maybe even a little of Bob Hope.

No, the gents who have it tough today are the gangsters. Ever since the cops developed fingerprinting, and the mobile police lab came into being, the knights of the brass knucks have been weeping king-sized tears into their brews. And then, as if that wasn't enough, along came the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, of all people, to make life even tougher.

It all started when Charles Yanowsky, a gent with a police record longer than your Aunt Mamie's bathing suit, was found dead of numerous icepick wounds in a vacant lot in Clifton, New Jersey. Yanowsky, evidently a provident sort of guy, had left \$25,000 insurance for his wife. The Metropolitan didn't quarrel with that. The guy had paid for his insurance and he was dead. Okay.

But it seems as if there was a little matter of a double-indemnity clause in Yanowsky's insurance. This provided that Yanowsky's heirs be paid double in the event of accidental death. Wasn't, Mrs. Yanowsky's attorney inquired, being ice-picked to death violent enough?

The Metropolitan agreed that it was. But there was another point to be con-

sidered, they said. "Where a person pursues a course of conduct which may reasonably be expected to lead to death," said Attorney John P. Nugent, "death is not considered accidental."

Anyway, that's the argument Attorney Nugent has advanced before the New Jersey Superior Court.

While we're on the subject of insurance, we'd like to bring up the subject of insurance against boredom. Not that we have to tell DETECTIVE TALES readers about that—they've found out for themselves. But next month's issue of good old DT is going to be just like signing up with Lloyd's of London against those winter blues. Because we're loading the issue with just the kind of yarns we know you go for—plenty of fast action, plenty of dames, and plenty of that hard-boiled, hard-to-put-down realism. And, Brother, the names we've got! Dan Gordon . . . Charles Larson . . . Donn Mullally . . . William Campbell Gault . . . and many other masters of crime-adventure writing. How about that? Think you're man enough to take all those thrills we've got in store? Find out November 25th!

—The Editor



Gripping Murder Novel

KILL ONCE —KILL TWICE!

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS



"I don't want to muss you up, Jeff," Pete said softly. "All I want is an explanation of what you were doing out on Bear Creek Road."

CHAPTER ONE

Graveyard Wait

IT WAS perfectly simple. All he had to do was to reach the telephone on the south wall of the kitchen, turn the crank and raise the receiver. Then,

It took a long time for Sheriff Pete Kells to solve that murder, but now he had it all wrapped up. Now—with the telephone lines down. Now—unarmed and helpless in his lonely cabin. Now—as he waited for the stealthy footsteps of the killer who would soon close his mouth forever.

when Mabel said hello from the switchboard down in the valley town of Nashville, he'd say, "Mabel, it's the sheriff. Pete Kells, up on Freeman Ridge. Can you locate Dr. Martin and send him up here? I've been shot. . . . That's what I said. Somebody just now tried to kill me."

That was the procedure. The blueprint his mind had drawn. His mind could do that. While Pete Kells lay flat on the braided rug before the kitchen door and tried to get a good breath down past the aching lump within his throat, his mind could struggle up from the smothering, feathery burden of the dark and reach the phone unerringly. His mind could scream blue murder and at the same time tell him he wasn't going to die. Not from a scratch like this, he wouldn't die. A scalp wound. The killer's second shot had creased his head and knocked him cold. Or he'd hit his head on something when he fell.

He raised his head a little, listening to the tick of the antique clock against the log wall. There was no other sound within the cabin or in the night outside except the lonesome cry of a whippoorwill and the distant bugle voices of fox hounds down toward Greasy Creek. Those hounds, Kells remembered, had crossed his land, had been in the dooryard when he'd stepped into the cabin to meet his would-be murderer.

The murderer. Someone who had waited patiently in the dark behind the door connecting living room and kitchen, gun braced against the jamb. Someone who had fired two shots. Why only two? Why not a third, the clincher?

But let that go, he thought. Right now the phone is the thing. Get moving, fellah. Remember Sam Pietro, and how far you traveled on your belly through the slime in a single night. Across half of Italy, it had seemed. And this is just across Tassie's kitchen.

He still thought of it as Tassie's kitchen although it was nearly two months since she'd left him to go back to the Bainter farm in the hollow. A soft day in April, Kells remembered, before the dogwood spread its random lace across the hills. Kells had stood before the cabin to watch Tassie go down the steep side of Free-

man with all the dignity that brambles and the law of gravity would allow. Pete Kells had told her that if she was bound to go back to her folks he'd take her in the car, around through Nashville and up the valley road.

"You're likely to run across a copperhead that way," he'd shouted in desperation. But Tassie kept right on going. She was having nothing of him except the dress she had on. She'd not spend another night beneath the same roof with a man who'd jail her pa because he happened to have a drink or two.

A drink or two? Rufe Bainter had been blind, roaring drunk and apt to kill somebody, barreling around those hairpin curves in that old truck of his. Pete Kells had tried to explain to Tassie, but she'd turned on him, not fawn-eyed then, but so obviously the female of the species defending her kin against a monster—brute, was what she'd called him—and looking so lovely in the role, that she'd caught Pete open-mouthed and wordless. Oh, he'd had his say eventually, most of it addressed to Tassie's back as she'd left the cabin, skirt switching angrily above smooth brown ankles.

"I'm leaving you, Pete" she'd said, her voice low and trembling. "I won't spend another hour here."

SHE HADN'T, either. Yet he still thought of this as Tassie's kitchen, and in his mind the floor had shrunk to the proportions of a raft that a boy might have made. His man's weight against it seemed to make it tip and skew as he raised himself, drew up his left knee and balanced there a moment, lips compressed. There was something wrong with the other leg. That trick hip-socket of his again, no doubt. He recognized that special jabbing pain, ordinarily reserved for aching teeth, that extended from pelvis to ankle. He wavered and fell jarringly onto his left hip. Left forearm against the floor, right leg useless, he dragged himself as far as the dim patch of night glow that entered through the open casement above the sink. He flattened there, aware of the warm crawl of blood down his cheek and along the lean edge of his jaw.

Suppose that when he reached the phone he found that the storm had

wrecked the frail web of the antiquated communication system as it had the electric power lines. You could bleed to death up here alone. You know that, don't you?

"Hell!" he said and hauled himself into the corner between the cabinet on the east wall and the Boston rocker. The phone was just above him on the partitioning wall, four and a half feet from the floor. He sat up and squirmed around to face the cabinet, got hold of its edge, and drew himself onto his left knee. Then his hands followed around the edge of the cabinet to gain more purchase. He stood slowly on his left foot, and pain from his dislocated hip thrust agonizingly through him. He folded across the cabinet and for a moment thought he was going to pass out again.

When the pain had abated slightly, Kells straightened, pivoted carefully on his left heel and leaned against the cabinet. His right hand went up, groping for the phone, fumbled down the side of its box to the handle of the crank.

Now . . . now, give the crank a good hard turn. . . .

The bell tinkled faintly—not an encouraging sound at all. Kells took the receiver from its hook, pressed it to his left ear and listened. A seashell would have been more communicative. The damned think was dead as . . . No, wait.

Kells had heard a distinct click within the receiver. That meant somebody on the party line was listening. Kells took a breath. Now he was all right. It didn't matter if the wires were down between the ridge and Nashville as long as the party line was still intact. He had got through to somebody.

"Hello," he said anxiously. "Hello—is that you, Jeff?" It might be Jeff Pearson or his wife in Bean Blossom. It might be Wade Norris at his mother's place next door to the Pearsons. Or Peg Lewis who worked for Kells at the Brown County *Chronicle*. It might be someone at the Bainter farm. Tassie . . . ? Some shy eavesdropper, anyway.

"This is Pete Kells," he tried again. Was that a sharp intake of breath from the listener? Kells made sounds like laughter. "All right. Be coy, whoever you are, but get me a doctor. Did you hear that?"

No answer.

"Say something, for God's sake! Let me know—" Kells broke off, his trembling lips apart, his mind tight. The murderer. Sure. That was whom he'd been talking to. Somebody on the party line was the murderer. That explained the silence. And Kells had said, in effect, "You didn't get me the first time. Come up and try again."

And I'll be right here, he thought. I'm stuck. I can't hope to drag this leg three-quarters of a mile down the ridge to where I left the car. . . .

KELLS fumbled the receiver back onto the hook but still clung to it and the idea that he had another chance. If he could ring through to somebody else on the line. To Peg Lewis, maybe. . . .

Peg's ring was two longs, but Kells got no further than one complete turn of the crank. This time the bell didn't ring at all. The line was dead. It would be—especially if the murderer had left the receiver down to sap whatever current trickled through.

Kells turned slowly, painfully, to the right and leaned back against the cabinet. He felt gone, devoid of strength. His breathing was shallow. His left hand clutched the cabinet edge behind him and he tipped forward, right hand out and groping for the back of the Boston rocker. He got it, drew the chair nearer, maneuvered it around so that it faced the cabinet. Then he accomplished a labored about-face and lowered himself carefully into the chair.

How much time before the killer would come again? The tick of the clock seemed louder now, echoing against the log wall, insistent about being heard. It wouldn't be long now.

"If I had a gun," he whispered. But then he didn't have. Rufe Bainter, Tassie's pa, had borrowed Kells' shotgun last fall and Kells hadn't seen it since and the revolver that had been issued him when he'd taken the sheriff's post was in his desk at the *Chronicle* in Nashville.

I guess I just wait here, he thought. In the dark. . . .

For the first time since he'd regained consciousness the dark seemed unfriendly. It crawled with fears. It seethed with

small, secretive, menacing night sounds.

He thought of the flashlight, over near the door where he'd dropped it when the killer had fired that first shot. The flashlight was probably broken. But wasn't there an oil lamp somewhere in the cabin? Tassie had always produced one from somewhere when the electric power failed.

Kells gripped the rocker arms and hitched himself forward. He opened the door of the cabinet with one hand while the other got out his lighter and thumbed the spark wheel. Flame shone on the lamp base that stood on the top shelf. Beside it was the polished chimney. He was reminded of other things within his immediate grasp. There'd be tea towels he could rip into some sort of bandage for his scalp wound. At least he could stop the blood from seeping into his eyes. And the drawer above contained cutlery. A knife would be a puny, short-ranged weapon against a gun, but it was better than empty hands. First, though, he would get the lamp.

He brought the base out carefully, placed it on the cabinet top and lighted the wick. When he had the chimney in place, he tilted back in the chair and glanced at the old square clock. 9:43. How long before the killer would return? Fifteen minutes? Twenty at the outside, considering that the last three-quarters of a mile would have to be covered on foot from any direction, for Pete Kells' car blocked the dead-end road at its mouth.

The killer. Someone on the party line. Not just anybody now, but someone Pete Kells knew. . . . My God, he thought as he opened the cutlery drawer, it's probably somebody I've known most of my life. It ought to be easy to narrow this down to some one person among a little group like that. Think, damn it! This isn't the beginning of anything—it's a possible, an even probable, end.

Where was the beginning, then? Yesterday? The day before—that Tuesday when the sleepy hills first stirred at the cry of murder?

* * *

Tuesday morning had impressed Pete Kells only with its hollowness, a quality it had in common with all the mornings

since Tassie had left him. As he went out to his car he left the kitchen door hopefully unlocked, as usual. Tassie might just take a notion to come home today and be here when he returned this evening.

Pete Kells paused on the flat brown stones that paved the approach to the road, looked southward and down along the vista he had cleared through tall white oak and tulip poplar. A frail plume of smoke lifted above lush green woods that choked a pocket between two lesser ridges and held his moody, grey-eyed stare.

"Hi, Tassie," he murmured softly. She might be getting breakfast for the old folks down there. He sighed and turned back toward the road.

Pete Kells' road snaked along the spine of Freeman and then plunged headlong to join the state highway to Indianapolis. He turned west and climbed in second gear to the Overlook. From there to Nashville, three miles to the south, you could almost coast. He slowed at the mouth of Grandma Barns' Road where he frequently picked up Peg Lewis. Apparently she'd already caught the early bus, and he felt a little nudge of disappointment which he tried to analyze on the way into town. He liked Peg, even admired her. He was proud of her ability; it wasn't every one-horse weekly that could boast a college graduate who had majored in journalism on its staff. He had come to depend heavily on Peg since he had taken up his duties as county sheriff. But he only liked Peg, and he couldn't make anything more of it than that even if he tried. And there had been despondent moments in the past seven weeks when he had tried desperately.

CHAPTER TWO

The Hills of Homicide

THE CHRONICLE, a grey, two-room building, boxlike with its false front, was situated back from the oil-surfaced street in Nashville, between the bank and hardware store. Pete Kells had inherited it from his father—business, building, the presses, and even old Joe Anderson, the crabby and exacting printer. Joe's tuneless whistle was audible above

the clatter of the Gordon jobber as Pete opened the screen and entered the front room.

Peg Lewis had just finished dusting the two desks that faced the big window. She flirted her cloth at him and said, "Hi, Pete," in her thin, sweet voice. She was wearing a demure white blouse, a long black skirt that nipped her tiny waist. Her short bobbed hair, the color of pulled taffy, was carefully arranged to achieve the effect of not having been arranged at all. She'd spent Monday in Indianapolis. The skirt was new.

"It swirls," Peg said and swirled it for Pete Kells, pirouetting gracefully on the toes of slim-heeled pumps.

He smiled appreciatively, then went to his desk to scan his personal mail. He was vaguely conscious of what he was looking for—an envelope addressed in Tassie's school-girlish hand. But then she wouldn't write; if she had anything to say she'd telephone or come up the ridge some evening.

He dumped his lank body into the swivel chair and lighted a cigarette. Peg had mounted a pair of harlequin glasses on her ridiculous nose to become a solemn pixy as she sorted the news briefs that had come in from all parts of the county.

"The Burdrough family reunion will be held at Gnaw Bone next Sunday," Peg announced, "and there's a parenthetical reminder here which I quote: 'Git that name spelt right this time.'" Her laughter pattered in cool derision which Pete Kells found himself resenting. Peg had lived the greater part of her twenty-two years in the hill country, yet she never seemed to have delved beyond its obvious periphery to discover the warm and generous heart of its proudly self-sufficient people. Pete Kells wondered what Peg's reaction would be if one of her neighbors asked her and her mother to share a mess of beans and jowl. He smiled whimsically. It could come to that, the way Peg's mother had been going through the few thousand dollars life insurance left her by her artist husband.

Peg flattened the Burdrough item into a wire basket and picked up a folded piece of blue notepaper from which she read: "Mr. Wade Norris of Indianapolis is visiting his mother, Lottie Hollander of

Bean Blossom.' And she sends along something we might use as a filler. 'If you pull the stamens off lilies when you pick them, they won't stain . . .'" She broke off, turned in her chair to face Pete Kells. There was an innocent frown above her blue eyes.

"What's wrong with her, Pete?"

"Who?" He'd been only half listening. "Oh, you mean Lottie, Herb's wife." Lottie Hollander was generally referred to as "the widow" by those persons who felt that Herb Hollander needn't have gone outside Brown County to find someone to share his declining years and possibly inherit the small fortune Herb had accumulated in the indiscriminate manner of a pack rat.

"She's diabetic," Pete Kells replied.

"No, I mean why can't she get along with Herb?"

"She's diabetic," Pete repeated, grinning. "She tried to impose her diet on Herb, who likes rich food." There was, he thought, much more to the Hollander family trouble than that. Lottie was everything that Herb wasn't. She was small, pin-neat and methodical. Herb, an inherently slovenly man, could see no earthly reason for Lottie's meticulously kept flower gardens. Herb liked to fish, to fool around the creeks and pan out the trace of gold that spring freshets washed down from the hills. He liked fox hunting, and his hound was no respecter of Lottie's flowers. Which finally tore it, the day that Lottie caught Old Trumpet snoozing peacefully in the middle of her prize perennial bed.

"An hour after Lottie took after Trumpet with a hoe handle," Pete told Peg Lewis, "Herb was tossing a few things into the back of his jeep. All I could get out of him was that he'd heard Bear Creek pans out as much as five dollars' worth of gold a day this time of year. He's been living in a little shanty on the Bear Creek Road since then."

"But isn't it ridiculous?" Peg persisted. "The two of them living apart like that, though still married. Why don't they get a divorce?"

Pete Kells didn't answer. He tipped back in the chair and stared through the big window at the shimmering street. Had Peg deliberately tried to draw a

parallel between Herb and Lottie Hollander, and himself and Tassie? It seemed unworthy of Peg—unless she considered him as naive as she did the rest of the native population.

Joe Anderson slammed through the pressroom door and Pete Kells looked around to meet Joe's disapproving stare.

"If that's all you got to do, Pete," Joe said crossly, "there's a grocery flyer you could set up back here."

Pete Kells stood up muttering something about it being difficult to tell who worked for whom around here and went to get his long bib apron from the hook.

BETWEEN setting type and waiting on townsfolk and valley farmers who came in with carefully considered want ads to be inserted in the *Chronicle*, Pete Kells' day wore on. Toward four P.M., when Joe Anderson told the boss he could go back to counting fly specks if he had a mind to, Pete returned to the office to find Peg Lewis just entering with cokes she'd brought from the drugstore. Peg was as effervescent as the soda pop.

"Pete, have you heard about Lottie Hollander?"

He stared at Peg, his eyes narrowing. "This is where I came in, isn't it?"

Peg pushed a bottle into his hand, not quite looking at him. "They found Lottie on the floor of her kitchen. Dead for hours and hours."

"No!" He was genuinely shocked.

Peg nodded. "Arteriosclerosis, they said. Her sister-in-law, Meridy Pearson, came over for something or other and found Lottie on the floor. She'd been gone for hours. Since morning."

"But I thought her son was visiting her."

"Meridy called for help, and the son—what's his name?"

"Wade Norris."

"... and Wade Norris came down from that upstairs bedroom in his pajamas. He'd been sleeping all day."

Pete Kells sat down on his desk top and drank a little from his bottle. "How's Herb taking it—did anybody say?"

"I guess Jeff Pearson went out to Bear Creek to tell him about it," Peg said. Jeff Pearson was Meridy's husband, and brother-in-law to Herb Hollander.

"I don't suppose Herb has a phone. But just think, Pete, of that poor little old thing lying there. She'd been out picking flowers this morning—"

The *Chronicle* phone rang. Pete Kells put the coke bottle down, twisted around on the desk, and picked up the phone. It was Mabel at the telephone office switchboard.

"Pete," she said, "I just placed a call from Jeff Pearson out at the Marsh place on Bear Creek Road. Jeff wanted Dr. Martin. Herb Hollander has been shot. Murder, Jeff thinks. I told Jeff I'd get in touch with you right away."

"Murder?" Pete said incredulously.

"That's what Jeff said."

"Thanks, Mabel." Pete Kells put the phone down, conscious of a slow, inner trembling. He slid off the desk and went around to open the top drawer. The revolver was there and his sheriff's badge. He picked up the badge.

"Pete, for heaven's sake, will you answer me!" Peg jerked at his shirt sleeve.

He was vaguely aware that Peg had asked him who had been murdered. He'd been thinking of Tassie, oddly, and how this might effect her. Thinking of Tassie, and the black hate her father had had for Herb Hollander, and what Rufe had always said he'd do to Herb some day.

"Herb," he replied belatedly. "Herb Hollander."

"No! Herb, too?"

He closed the drawer. He wouldn't need the gun. Out of the ends of his eyes he saw Peg swoop to her desk to get her purse.

"I'm going with you."

"No," he said. He didn't want her tagging along. Not dressed like that. Not the way things stood between him and Tassie.

"Oh, yes." She turned, eyebrows coolly arched. "I'm a newspaper woman, remember? We only have three days before deadline!"

ALL the way up the ridge and down toward the quiet crossroads settlement of Bean Blossom, Pete Kells maintained glum silence, half listening to Peg Lewis as she speculated about a possible motive for Herb Hollander's murder—his money, which rumor estimated as high

as a hundred thousand dollars. Whether it was through dumb luck or native shrewdness, Pete Kells didn't know, but Herb had managed to acquire a number of small businesses scattered across the county which had shown unexpected profits for a while under Herb's Midas touch. Then two years ago he had liquidated most of his holdings and had retired to Bean Blossom with his bride of sixty winters.

"What's Wade Norris like?" Peg was saying. "You've met him, haven't you, Pete?"

Pete Kells' somewhat startled glance caught what had prompted her question in the rear-view mirror as he turned west at Bean Blossom; at least he noticed a small maroon sedan with Indianapolis license plates parked in front of Lottie Hollander's neat brown cottage.

"Oh, I don't know exactly. I met Wade at a party the Pearsons gave for Herb and Lottie right after their marriage." Pete remembered talking to Wade Norris about the copperheads and timber rattlers, about the ticks and mountain fever—all the unpleasant things you always told the city man. Wade had said very little. He had not been oblivious to Tassie's charms as she helped Meridy Pearson serve the ice cream, Pete remembered.

"Wade is a good deal like his mother," Pete Kells said. "Small and dark—the darkest eyes. About my age. He's got a little fringe of mustache." Right there he ran out of things specific and had to resort to abstractions. "He seems nice enough. The quiet sort. Not much to say."

They drove along the corkscrew stretch of blacktop through Helmsburg and then turned north on a county road of red clay meandering between ridges of low hills. After a mile and a half of that Pete pulled the car to the side of the road to park behind Jeff Pearson's rattletrap.

"Don't tell me that's where Herb has been living!" Eyes wide in disbelief, Peg Lewis sat forward on the cushions as Pete Kells set the hand brake. Herb's shanty, in the long shadow of a wooded hill, didn't look like any part of a hundred thousand dollars. Grey weathered boards, badly curled oak shakes, a crumbling

bracket chimney, a broken window stuffed with feed sacking—this was Herb's sanctuary from a driving woman. The tin roof of the hen coup had rusted through. And, except that they were laz- ing in the warm dust, the dog run wouldn't have kept the two fox hounds from going anywhere.

As they approached across the barren dooryard they could hear voices inside the shanty. Pete Kells paused on the rotting wood step and gave Peg a thoughtful glance. Her smile was nervous. Pallor edged her rouge.

"Shall I stay out here, Pete?" she whispered.

"I was just thinking that."

He went in alone to stand empty-handedly and wonder what would be expected of him. There'd been no serious crime since he'd taken office the previous fall. He couldn't remember that the county had had a murder since Art Smugger had killed his wife and then made matters simple by running to the preacher with a full confession.

The single room of the shanty was oppressively hot and crowded. That was Pete's first impression. His second had to do with cumulative disorder—heaps of soiled clothes on the floor, a heating stove that bulged with trash, a cot that hadn't been made for a week, unwashed pots and pans on the drainboard, old newspapers that overflowed a lopsided patent rocker. Jeff Pearson occupied a section of wall-space between a window and an old farm machinery calendar, leaning pensively backward. He was a thin, dour man, small-eyed beneath shaggy, grizzled brows. Light from the window limned high cheekbones but left the cheeks themselves in hollowed despondency. His glance flicked toward Pete Kells.

"Howdy, Pete," Jeff said, but this did not interrupt the rumbling soliloquy of Dr. Martin who knelt beside the body.

"... Looks that way. As though Herb got out of bed, waded through all this trash—a wonder he didn't die of a broken neck—and opened the door. Somebody was waiting there—he'd knocked—and cut loose with a gun. Maybe held a flash on Herb like you'd spotlight a deer. ... Hmm. Of course Jeff turned Herb over."

"I had to." Jeff Pearson pushed out

from the wall to defend himself. "How was I to know what ailed him?"

"Yes, how otherwise," Dr. Martin mumbled. The doctor, immaculate in white-duck pants and cotton T-shirt, discovered Pete Kells beyond the lenses of steel-rimmed glasses. "You find the gun, boy. I'll have the bullet that goes with it half an hour after we get Herb to the mortuary. Fair enough?"

PETE KELLS nodded vaguely, his eyes on the huge, paunchy body of Herb Hollander dressed only in a grey-white union suit. The big face was loose-mouthed in death as it had been in life. Herb's eyes were open, caught in startled concentration by the small-caliber bullet that had entered the precise center of the broad forehead. A little blood had long since dried to rust-brown in the matted grey hair.

"You didn't think to stop off and tell Meridy about Herb, did you, Pete?" Jeff Pearson asked. Meridy Pearson was Herb Hollander's sister.

Pete said, "No. This'll hit Meridy pretty hard, I guess, coming right on top of the other shock. Too bad about the widow, wasn't it?"

Jeff wagged his head sadly. "Ain't it a sight? What gets me, she was all right this morning, early. I seen her across the fence when I went out to the barn. She looked as usual. Had on that big sun-hat of her'n and was pickin' them lilies she's so sot on. I hailed her, and she waved back. It goes to show, don't it? Feller just never knows."

Pete Kells picked his way to the back of the room where his gaze traveled along a rough shelf laden with canned goods as well as several glass jars containing bits of line and fishing tackle. He wondered what a clue looked like.

"You don't suppose this attack that killed Mrs. Hollander this morning could have been brought about by excitement or emotional strain, do you, Doctor?" Pete asked, turning.

The little coroner-physician returned Pete's stare for a moment. "Humph! It would be nice if it came to that. Nice for everybody." He stood up, glanced through the open door and toward the road. "Where's Lonny and that ambulance?"

he complained. "I'm a busy man. I've got a baby on the way."

"How long since Herb died?" Pete asked.

"Oh, ten to fifteen hours. Hard to tell exactly. But not as hard as the other one—the wife. A diabetic can fool you. Rigor can set in right now. Not," the doctor added, "that it makes any difference in this instance."

Jeff Pearson said, "Fifteen hours is closer to it, Doc. The Marsh boy went to town last night and didn't get home till half-past one. He heard the shot from up there on the hill." Jeff nodded toward the west. "Miz Marsh was tellin' me when I went up there to phone. The Marsh boy didn't investigate none. Figured old Herb likely got that weazel that's been thievin' his hen coop."

Dr. Martin pulled out his big gold watch and appeared pleased. "I didn't miss it far, did I? Fifteen hours and twenty minutes. And yonder's Lonny with the ambulance."

As Pete Kells followed Dr. Martin from the shanty, Jeff Pearson caught the sheriff by the arm. "You ain't leavin', are you, Pete? How do you know nothin' ain't stole?"

Pete paused. How could he tell in a mess like this? He said, "I'll look in again after Lonny gets Herb out." And he went out of the shanty to join Peg Lewis, who was much on the fringe of things. They exchanged deep looks. Peg shivered in spite of the steaming heat locked within the valley.

"Awful isn't it?" she said and turned her back as the mortician's ambulance maneuvered to the door of the shanty. And then she was digging in her purse to bring out a bit of cleansing tissue wrapped about something. "I picked this up in the dust just outside the door," she whispered. "Is it anything? It's a bullet, I know, but is it important?"

It was not properly a bullet. It was the empty copper case of a .22-caliber long or long-rifle cartridge. Pete rewrapped the empty, put it into his wallet, looked up as Jeff Pearson passed on the way to the dog run.

"Might as well take them hounds back home with me, hadn't I, Pete? No sense to them starvin' out here, is there?"

Pete agreed and, as the ambulance pulled away, once more entered the door. Dr. Martin had already returned to his grey coupé. Pete kicked aside some of the dirty clothing, picked up some newspapers which had fallen from the pile on the chair. He approached the cot, glanced around as Peg Lewis stepped daintily over the sill. Her eyes peered distainfully at the litter. Her nose crinkled.

"I can't believe it," she said. "Herb never impressed me as being miserly."

Pete Kells didn't think Herb had been a miser. He had been a man satisfied with the barest essentials of living. What came to him above those essentials he could take or leave alone.

Pete turned back some of the bedding, lifted a stuffed feed-sack pillow. Beneath was a wallet which Pete picked up and opened. It contained two tens and a five.

Peg said, "There's a strong box under the bed, I think."

Pete got down on his hands and knees beside the cot. The box was of black japanned metal without a lock. He opened it. Inside were four savings account pass books issued from banks in Nashville, Morgantown, Columbus, and Bloomington, together with a thick sheaf of government bonds. Peg Lewis forgot the risk of contamination to come forward and peer over Pete's shoulder as he opened one of the bank books. She whistled in astonishment.

"Ten thousand, one hundred forty-nine dollars and sixty-seven cents! How much are in the others, Pete? How much in bonds?"

He dropped the pass book into the box, which he closed. "I don't suppose it's any of our business. I'll just take this along and lock it up in the safe at the courthouse." He stood and looked dazedly about.

"What were you and the doctor talking about a while ago when he said something would be nice for everybody? I couldn't help overhearing."

Pete Kells frowned slightly. "You mean when I asked if emotional strain could have brought on Lottie Hollander's attack this morning." He took the padlock and key for the door off a nail. "Just an idea I had. It wouldn't be the first time a wife killed a husband, and it seems

reasonable to suppose she might feel a little unnerved afterwards." He stepped out over the rotting step and pulled the door shut after Peg. Jeff Pearson was standing at the corner of the shanty, the two hounds on leash.

"I heerd that just now, Pete," Jeff said reproachfully. He nodded his grizzled head as though what he had heard he intended not to forget. "I figured you'd beat about the bush, tryin' to find a way out for a certain party I could mention. Kinfolk of your'n. A certain party that was all likkered up last night and talkin' big about what he'd do to Herb one of these days for the skinnin' Herb give him on that saw mill deal."

Pete Kells' eyes narrowed. "Rufe Bainter, you mean."

"I ain't namin' names. You know who."

Pete Kells stared off toward the smoke-blue hills. He spoke softly. "Rufe has been talking like that about four times annually over the past five years, whenever he gets into town and to the tavern. Nobody pays any attention to old Rufe."

"Maybe somebody should've paid some heed," Jeff persisted. "A pot can bile and bile, and then one day"—he shrugged thin shoulders—"it biles plumb over."

Pete Kells didn't argue. He'd known it would come around to Rufe. He'd known it from the minute he'd heard that Herb Hollander had been murdered. As he slipped the padlock into place above the hasp he was thinking of Tassie and what this could do to her. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Brass Clue

THEY were something over half a mile south of Herb Hollander's shanty and well behind the moving cloud of red dust that represented Jeff Pearson's rattletrap. Peg Lewis turned wondering blue eyes on Pete Kells. He had applied the brakes suddenly and was now halfway out of the car.

"Something in the weeds back there," he said in answer to Peg's unspoken question. He started back along the right side of the road, and when he'd gone perhaps twenty yards he stopped, picked up one of those rubberlike composition splash-

guards that he'd often noticed flapping from the fenders of old jalopies. It was about nine inches square and centered by a "jewel" reflector of ruby-colored glass. About an inch from the lower right-hand corner was a small ragged hole. A bullet puncture . . . ?

He carried the splash-guard back to the car and tossed it into the back seat. "Maybe I'll find the owner," he said to Peg as he got in under the wheel.

It was after six when they approached Bean Blossom from the west, and the lowering sun struck pure gold from the shiny panes of glass in Lottie Hollander's cottage in contrast with the alloyed stuff it found on the windows of the Pearson bungalow next door. Wade Norris' maroon sedan was still in front of the Hollander place with Jeff's car parked behind it.

Pete Kells pulled off the road on the opposite side of the highway, told Peg he'd not be long, got out and crossed the road. He went a few steps out of his way to glimpse the rear of Jeff Pearson's jalopy, noticed that it sported a single splash-guard, and that on the left rear fender. He paused, looked toward the Pearson house, but saw no one around. From the Hollander place next door came the sound of a woman sobbing. Meridy Pearson, Pete thought. Apparently she'd gone next door to do what she could toward comforting Wade Norris after the shocking death of his mother, and that was where Jeff had found Meridy when he'd returned with the news about her brother Herb.

Pete Kells sauntered up onto the porch of the brown cottage. He could hear Jeff Pearson saying, "Now, set and don't take on so, Meridy. The Lord giveth and taketh, and there's ary nothin' a-body can do—'ceptin' get the varmint what done it."

Pete Kells tapped on the screen and looked into the coolly shaded parlor. Jeff Pearson, small eyes shiny and aware, came away from the shapeless, slatternly dressed woman in the easy chair.

"Come in, Pete."

Pete stepped into the room, his eyes on Meridy. He'd never noticed before how much she resembled Herb. The same heavy face, but mottled now from crying.

A few strands of yellowish grey hair plastered against her damp cheek.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am, Meridy," Pete said with effortless sincerity.

"Oh, Pete. Pete!" Meridy started to sob again, covering her face with puffy red hands. Her husband passed a hand distractedly over beard stubble.

"She's all tore up."

"Where's Wade Norris?" Pete asked.

"Upstairs. We was fixin' to go down to the funeral parlor tonight."

Pete Kells moved back into a little hallway and climbed the enclosed stairway on his left. The door at the top was closed. He called Wade Norris softly by name.

"What do you want?" Norris' voice was tight, peevish. "Can't you leave me alone for a little while?"

Pete Kells grasped the knob and turned it. Bed springs creaked. He pushed the door back and saw Wade Norris on the edge of the bed, facing the door. He was dressing and had got as far as blue broadcloth shorts, undershirt, and dark brown rayon socks. His lips were compressed, his little black mustache drawn out thin. His knobby chin trembled.

He said, "You're the newspaper man, Kells."

Pete nodded. "Also the sheriff."

Wade Norris' lips parted showing bright teeth; it was not a smile. "It's always 'also' something else down here. Nobody seems to be able to make a living out of just one occupation in this damned county." As though the county was somehow to blame for his mother's death.

Pete Kells stepped in, uninvited. He noticed the impeccable neatness of the half-story room, the smell of soap and wax and starch. Only one thing struck him as being out of place—a piece of heavy brown wrapping paper partially spread out on the dresser. He noticed the creases in Wade Norris' shorts and how the dark brown suit was carefully folded on the bed. Wade Norris was his mother's son, all right—a small and very neat edition of a good-looking young man.

"Out pretty late last night?" Pete asked no more amiably than the city man's open resentment warranted.

Eyes like thin slices of ripe olive met Pete's steadily. "Not especially. I came down here for a rest. That's what I've

been trying to do, although if I'd known that Mother . . ." He rocked forward on the bed, elbows on bare knees, hands crossed at the wrists, the fingers dangling. He stared at nothing and his lips trembled.

Pete Kells said, "You know, you're apt to find yourself a pretty rich man, Mr. Norris, what with Herb preceding your mother by a few hours." There was no visible reaction to that. "Unless Herb left a will somewhere that cut your mother out. And that doesn't seem likely. Careless as he was, I doubt if Herb bothered with a will at all."

Still no reaction, and Pete moved to the dresser. Centering the piece of heavy brown paper was a new-looking, long-barreled automatic pistol. A .22 for target work, though Pete guessed you could kill a man with it if luck rode the bullet. He took out his handkerchief, which he draped over his hand before picking up the gun. The slide worked stiffly. He brought out the empty cartridge which Peg had found in front of Herb's door and compared the indentation on the primer cap with the firing pin of the automatic. They didn't match. He hadn't supposed they would. He couldn't see that Wade Norris had sufficient motive, unless Wade had known that his mother was going to die a few hours after he'd killed Herb. And he couldn't have known unless his mother's death was murder. Which it was not. Which was inconceivable anyway.

Pete put the gun down and said, "Nice little gun for plinking."

The small dark man said nothing. He hadn't moved.

"If there's anything I can do," Pete offered as he returned to the door, "you let me know."

"Thank, Kells. Sorry I was so crusty. I"—Wade Norris took a weary breath—"just don't feel like seeing anybody. But I know how it is—you've got a job to do."

Pete said, "That's about it."

The Pearsons had gone home and the front room downstairs was empty. But in the dining room that adjoined, where the heavy blinds had been pulled to ward off the rays of the sun, something caught Pete Kells' eye as he approached the front door—a movement, or was it simply a whiteness against contrasting gloom? He

paused. Peg Lewis was bending over a bouquet of white Madonna lilies that centered the dining table. There was an odd, strained look about her tilted eyes, and her lower lip was partially nipped in her teeth. She straightened, aware of Pete Kells, and her quick smile covered that other expression which he hadn't understood and which, for some reason, he hadn't liked.

"Lovely, aren't they?" She touched a petal with her fingertips as she moved away from the table and toward him. "Pete, that car of yours is like an oven. I was slowly melting away."

She didn't look melted. She looked cool and crisp and undisturbed. . . .

WEDNESDAY morning the alarm clock had not gone off and it was 9:30 when Pete Kells came out into the kitchen, dull-eyed with sleep. When he reached the back stoop he paused to listen to the cough and sputter of some old car as it labored up that first steep climb near the mouth of the dead-end road. The car made the grade, and Pete Kells went on out to the road-side.

"'Mornin', Mr. Sheriff!" Jeff Pearson shouted when he'd killed the engine. He leaned across the lumpy cushions of the jalopy to get a better view of Pete. Jeff's smile was small and mean. "Got your murder weapon for you, Mr. Sheriff."

Pete Kells hung an elbow on the top of Jeff's car. So that was it: Jeff had been out to Herb's shanty doing a little detective work that could scarcely be more amateurish than Pete Kells' own.

"You didn't bring it with you?" Pete asked. "You shouldn't have."

Jeff's small eyes blinked. "Well, now," he bridled, "Judd Marsh'll witness where I picked it up. He was with me. It was right in the weeds along Herb's truck patch south of the shanty where it was thrown after the varmint shot Herb." Jeff reached the cranky latch on the right rear door. "I slung it on my handkerchief thataway so's not to spile the prints."

The gun on the floor of the car was a Mossberg .22 carbine-type automatic. Pete Kells stared at it. His tongue and teeth collaborated on displeased smacking sounds.

"Rufe's, I guess."

Jeff chuckled. "Well, I guess!"

Pete Kells picked up the gun by the improvised sling Jeff had made from a blue bandanna, levered the walnut stock up under his right arm, and turned from the car. The barrel braced across his knee, he triggered the gun with the back of his thumbnail and fired into the ground. Jeff uttered a startled sound.

Pete followed the ejected empty with his eye. He leaned the gun against the car, stepped to the spot where the cartridge case had fallen, picked it up. From his wallet he removed the empty that Peg had found on the day before. As near as he could tell by superficial examination the primer cap of each had been nicked by the same firing pin.

Pete Kells met Jeff's expectant glance and reluctantly nodded.

"You want I should go down into the holler with you to get Rufe?" Jeff offered.

"I do not." Pete Kells' jaw muscles were tight as he pocketed the empties and again raised the gun by the handkerchief sling. He nodded at Jeff's right rear fender. "I notice you've dropped a mud-flapper. I picked one up yesterday evening on the Bear Creek Road about half a mile south of Herb's shanty."

Jeff nodded. "I must have drapped it on the way out to tell old Herb about Lottie dyin'."

Pete Kells kicked at Jeff's tire, squinted at the puff of red-brown dust that rose from the rim. "The one I picked up has a bullet hole in it," he said carelessly and looked at Jeff.

"A bul—" Jeff left his mouth ajar.

Pete Kells turned and started toward the shed. Let Jeff have some of the worry. There was plenty to go around.

IT WAS about a mile from the crest of Freeman to the Bainter farmhouse in the hollow if you went on foot. But Pete Kells had to take the car, which meant driving into Nashville to strike the valley road beyond the eastern limit of the town, then go almost three miles north again. He parked in front of the log porch of the house, then went around to the whitewashed lean-to kitchen at the rear and knocked formally at the screen door. He heard a light scurrying of steps

away from the kitchen and, approaching the door, Ma Bainter's heavier tread.

"Well, Pete!" Ma Bainter said kindly and beamed at him as she held the screen door open. "Lands, if I'm not tickled pink to see you, honey!"

Ma Bainter's face always reminded Pete Kells that Tassie's loveliness would grow through the years. He stumbled across the sill into a stifling-hot kitchen where fat brown loaves of new-baked bread were turned out on the table. Ma Bainter, following Pete's glance, gave his arm a sly pinch.

"How'd you like a nice thick heel of one of them, hot out of the oven and butter meltin' on it? You set and let me fix it."

"No, no," he protested quickly. "No, thanks. I couldn't eat a thing. Some other time." Not that there was going to be another time—not after he got through doing what he had to do. He sat on the straight chair and hung his canvas hat on his knee. "Tassie around?"

Ma Bainter nodded and smiled. "She'll be in directly she gets prettied up some. She saw you comin'."

Pete Kells swallowed. "And . . . Rufe?"

A fleeting shadow of worry crossed the woman's face. "Out in the barn, late with the milkin'. Night afore last he was out somewheres till the small hours and he's not got his sleep catched up. You can guess where, I reckon."

Pete winced. He nodded gravely. Ma Bainter drew a long breath and assumed her usual cheerful expression. "Of course, he don't often, Rufe don't. Not like he used to. But anytime he *does* get to the likker, Pete, you got my permission to lock him up like you did this spring . . ."

She let that trickle off because obviously he was listening to Tassie's quick, eager step as it approached the connecting door, then slowed and finally stopped altogether. Pete Kells' heart began to pound. The first time he'd come to call on Tassie she'd paused beyond that same door in exactly that same way, maybe wondering if she looked all right for him. And his pulse had quickened as it quickened now. It was exactly the same, except this time he hadn't come for Tassie.

Then she was standing in the door, her hands behind her on the white porcelain knob. His gaze hungered over her. The

same blue cotton dress with yellow stripes that she'd worn the day she left—she wore it now as though she loved it. Her fine dark hair was drawn back loosely and simply knotted at the back with a bit of yellow ribbon. He met her fawn-eyed glance and saw her smile trembling about her sweet mouth. He stood on caving knees. His throat ached.

"Tassie . . ."

"Hello, Pete." Her quiet, gentle voice.

The awkward silence was inevitable. Ma Bainter's happy if nervous laugh came in to fill it.

"I'll just leave you two young folks. I know you got a-plenty to talk over and straighten out."

"No." He got that out around the ache in his throat and turned to Ma Bainter with a stiff gesture that involved his crumpled hat. "Herb Hollander was murdered night before last."

"No!" Ma Bainter gasped. And Tassie's dark eyes widened.

Pete Kells looked miserably from Tassie to her mother. "I thought you'd better get it straight just why I'm here." Because it was pretty evident they both thought he was here to attempt reconciliation. "They found Rufe's gun near Herb's shanty."

That was enough. Ma Bainter reeled back against the kitchen table and covered her eyes with her apron. Not Tassie, though. Tassie didn't cry. Her lips thinned and there was a whiteness at their corners. Her dark eyes flashed defiance. She stepped quickly to her mother's side, glared at Pete Kells over Ma Bainter's bowed head.

"Pete, that's the cruelest— You're the—" She hadn't a word that would measure her contempt.

"Maybe." He sidled toward the door. "But I'm also the sheriff." He went out and closed the screen so quietly he might as well have slammed it.

PETE KELLS strode toward the weather barn, which for many decades had leaned away from the winds that came whooping up the valley. Rufe Bainter, a big man, stooped and shaggy, mild-eyed when sober, came through the open door with a foaming pail of milk. Seeing Pete there at the stone well curb,

Rufe grinned broadly, scrubbed his right hand on the seat of his jeans as he advanced. Pete Kells stood squarely facing the older man, feet widely spaced.

"Now, Rufe," he said stonily, "before you get set to shake hands, I can outrun you and, if it comes to where I've got to hit a man your age, I can outfight you. You got that?"

Rufe's grin left slowly and a puzzled expression took its place. "Now, what?" He scowled at the badge pinned to Pete Kells' shirt, turned his head and spat a brown stream at a mullen weed.

"Somebody shot Herb Hollander. It's murder."

Rufe's mouth fell open. Then he started to chuckle.

"Gol darn it, Pete, that's the best I ever heerd! I wished I done it. I purely do. But last night—"

"Night before last," Pete Kells said. "We've got your carbine. We can get plenty of witnesses who'll testify you've threatened to kill Herb. And you were tighter than aspen bark that night."

Rufe put the pail on the well curb, reached up under his hat to scratch. "What'd I do with that gun, Pete? That's what's been a-worryin' me. I recollect Varney Kleeper give it back to me that night. He'd been a-holdin' it on account of a bill I run up at the tavern. I recollect a-puttin' it in the truck and a-havin' it there when I drove north that night." His frown tightened. "I must've. I recollect I stopped on the road and took a potshot at some critter that was eyin' me from the ditch—"

"Was this on the Bear Creek Road?" Pete broke in coldly.

Rufe nodded slowly. "I reckon. I recollect I shot at this critter with the shiny red eyes. I recollect that clear—but gol darn it if I can recollect what I did with the gun."

"You tossed it into Herb's truck patch after you shot Herb," Pete said.

The old man's face crumpled with worry. "Did I now? That don't sound like me—drunk *nor* sober. I set a heap by that gun. . . . I maybe did, though," he concluded quietly and then sat in sudden weariness on the well curb.

Pete Kells pulled a leaf from the glory vine that netted the crumbling rock and

mortar of the curb. He watched Rufe take out a plug of tobacco and gnaw the corner of it.

"I got my reasons," Rufe admitted. "All my life, man and boy, I farmed this valley. Year after year I seen the rains come and water pour down them hills and flood up from old Greasy. Take the corn, it would. Take the 'baccy. Year after year. Yet by scrimpin' and scrapin' I got a few hundred dollars together and went in with Herb on that there saw mill deal. He knowed there wun't nothin' left but tie timber. He knowed he'd skimmed the cream, and yet he let me in—big-hearted like!—and peeled me of my savin's."

Rufe bent over, picked up a stick and marked with it in the dust. "Got my reasons, but got durn it if I recollect whuther I done it or not." He made another mark. "I came to on the Bear Creek Road, my head down on the steerin' wheel of the truck. I'd went to sleep after I took that shot at the critter."

"Was that anywhere near Herb's place?"

"South a piece." Rufe squinted up at the white mare's-tail clouds against the pale blue sky. Pete Kells had picked up the milk pail with one hand and now the other dropped to the old man's arm. Rufe sighed and stood.

When they came abreast of the house, Pete opened the gate and set the pail down inside the yard. He could hear Ma Bainter sobbing in the kitchen. Then, as he went on with Rufe, the screen door slammed and Tassie came rushing out. The two men paused, and Tassie flung herself into her father's arms.

"Now, Tassie . . ." Rufe gently broke her hold. His eyes were moist. "I maybe didn't do it, honey. I don't know, though. I purely don't."

Pete Kells cleared his throat. "I'll be down this evening to help with the chores," he offered.

Tassie flung about to stand between Rufe and Pete. "You just dare! You just set foot in this holler, and I'll—"

She swallowed, and Pete said, "You've done about all to me a woman can, I guess."

He walked around her as if she were a tree, got hold of Rufe and steered him toward the car.

CHAPTER FOUR

Footsteps in the Night

THURSDAY, today, they'd buried Herb and Lottie Hollander in the same grave. The whole town of Nashville closed its doors, put on Sunday best, and went to the funeral that was somewhat hurried by the rain storm that broke late forenoon.

Pete Kells didn't go to the cemetery. As the fury of the storm increased, stragglers from the funeral sought shelter in the *Chronicle* office. Pete retired sulkily to the pressroom and half wished the frowning hills about the town would crumble and bury Nashville and everybody in it, but especially himself.

Around two o'clock, after the storm had rolled on south, the front door of the *Chronicle* was opened by Jeff Pearson, closely followed by Wade Norris neatly dressed in brown—suit, tie and shoes. Jeff, in his shiny blue serge, lingered beside the door while Wade Norris came to the counter, put down his straw hat and gently blew his nose. Dark eyes that smarted with pent-up tears sought Pete Kells at the desk.

"I'd like to put something in the paper."

Pete got up, went to the counter where he overshadowed the little man by a good ten inches. "An ad? You're going to sell the place in Bean Blossom?"

"No-o-o." Wade Norris said in soft and slow. "I may want to live there." He smiled faintly. "Everybody has been so damned decent. I think I'd like to settle down here. That would at least keep poor old Herb's money near its source." He gestured vaguely. "What I had in mind is a card of thanks to be inserted in the *Chronicle*. I see you have a typewriter. I'd like to compose the message myself. No stock phrases—want it to come from the heart."

Pete Kells nodded toward Peg's vacant desk. "Help yourself."

Wade Norris came briskly around the counter. Pete went back to his swivel chair, sat and tilted back. He studied Jeff Pearson's sharp profile against the light from the door. Jeff looked pale without the usual stubble. As Wade Norris started to type haltingly, Jeff came around the

counter to Pete's desk. Jeff's smile was tentative.

"You done your duty, Pete, right and proper like I knowed you would when you was put to it."

Pete hooked his thumbs into belt loops. He stared at nothing, chin on chest. Nearby, Wade Norris ripped a sheet of paper out of the typewriter and got off to a fresh start.

Pete said, "I don't know how right I am."

"Why, shore you do. Rufe confessed, I heerd."

"He confessed to shooting at some sort of an animal with blazing eyes along the edge of the Bear Creek Road." Pete smiled slightly and looked up at Jeff Pearson. "Know what that was—that critter with the blazing eyes? That damned mud-flapper off your jalopy. He got it, too, just below that jeweled reflector which, if a man was drunk enough to see double, might look like a pair of eyes."

A shadow touched the big front window and drew Pete's glance. Peg Lewis was peering into the office. Though the rain had stopped she still wore her hooded grey raincoat. She turned quickly, almost furtively, hurried past the door and disappeared. Pete returned to Jeff Pearson, with the thought that Jeff's pallor was not entirely due to lather and straight-edged razor.

Jeff said, "That proves Rufe wun't so drunk he couldn't've shot Herb smack between the eyes."

"Maybe. It also suggests you were out on Bear Creek Road that night *before* Rufe got there. Here, where're you going?" With a seemingly lazy movement Pete Kells reached out and caught Jeff Pearson by a handful of blue-serge coat tail. Jeff wheeled savagely, showing crooked yellow teeth, and slammed his right fist into Pete Kells' face. There was a startled exclamation from Wade Norris that was lost in the yelp from the spring of the swivel chair as Pete bounced to his feet and caught Jeff Pearson by his coat lapels.

"Kells, let go of him, do you hear?"

Pete, the flat taste of blood in his mouth, ignored Wade Norris' protest and yanked Jeff Pearson up onto the tips of new black shoes. Jeff's eyes rolled.

"I don't want to muss you up, Jeff," Pete said softly. "All I want is an explanation of what you were doing out on the Bear Creek Road Tuesday night."

Jeff squirmed inside the tight fit of his suitcoat. He sniffed. "All right. I was out there. But no later'n ten o'clock. I wanted to hif Herb for a loan. You know Meridy's got to have an operation."

Pete said, "Herb refused, so you maybe killed him."

"That ain't so, damn it!" Jeff appealed to Wade Norris. "Don't you listen to him, Wade. Fact is, Herb said he'd get me the money at the bank. But"—Jeff's lip quivered—"he never lived to."

PETE KELLS let go of Jeff's coat. Jeff dug down into his trouser pocket and came up with an old-fashioned clasp purse, from which he took a thick wad of bills. "There. There's every last cent 'ceptin' five dollars I spent for flowers for Herb and Lottie's funeral. I took that out'n Herb's wallet when I found him dead. It ain't stealin', now." This in red-eyed defiance of the sheriff. "Herb meant for me to have it as a loan."

Jeff unfurled a tattered flag of a smile and said with unfounded optimism, "I'll get the money somewheres, if'n I have to work my fingers to the bone. I can't hold still and see my woman suffer."

Pete Kells put the wad of bills into an envelope which he sealed, aware that Wade Norris' dark eyes were watching him.

"This will have to go with the rest of Herb's stuff until the probate judge turns it over to you," Pete said.

Wade Norris nodded. "I understand." He turned to Jeff. "Don't worry about the loan. If Herb meant you to have the money, you'll get it." He stepped to Peg's desk, picked up a piece of scrap paper, which he folded carefully and put into his pocket. Neat like his mother, Pete Kells thought. Wade Norris then brought the final draft of the item he wanted inserted in the paper to Pete and asked coldly, "How much?"

"I'll bill you later."

Wade nodded curtly, turned, clapped Jeff Pearson on the shoulder as the two of them went out the door.

Pete sat down slowly, looked at the

piece of copy Wade Norris had composed. It was headed CARD OF THANKS and included all of the stock phrases, after all.

Ten minutes later Peg Lewis came in, humming softly in her thin, sweet voice. She smiled at Pete.

"Need I make the obvious crack about Herb and Lottie having gone out together for the first time in years?"

"You need not," he said brusquely. "But you might explain why you were so coy about meeting Wade Norris."

Peg appeared puzzled. Then, "Was that who it was in here? Nice looking, isn't he?"

"In a small way—yes." Pete watched the girl hang up her raincoat and move to her desk. Then he straightened with an effort and began assorting tentative copy for the current *Chronicle*. After a few minutes he glanced across at Peg and frowned.

"Didn't you say you had a filler item we could work in somewhere?"

Peg rested polished fingertips on the typewriter. Above her harlequin glasses her slim eyebrows drew into a slight, annoyed frown.

"Not I."

"Yes, you did," he insisted. "Yesterday. Maybe the day before." He felt unreasonably irritated about something. About everything, maybe.

"I don't remember." Peg went back to work. "You'll probably find it on your desk somewhere."

He looked without knowing what he was looking for. Something. And it seemed important. . . .

Pete Kells ate his supper in town and alone, returned to the office afterward to check on the advertising layouts for page four. It was made work, all of it, but for some reason he dreaded the emptiness of the cabin up on Freeman more than he ever had before. An emptiness he could scarcely hope to fill, after what he'd done to Tassie's pa. Grey twilight faded into dark before he left the desk, turned out the light, and slipped out to his car.

North of Nashville, where the state highway began its corkscrew descent to Bean Blossom, Pete Kells pulled onto the edge and set the handbrake, but left the lights and engine on. He got out, walked

ahead and stood there half listening to the yelp of fox hounds off somewhere to the east.

His road was badly washed. The deep ruts looked mean. He'd better lock the car and leave it where it was, he finally decided.

As he plodded up the spine of Freeman, he thought of Tassie and her mother down there in the hollow. He thought of old Rufe in the county jail, wondering, maybe, how he'd finally got around to killing Herb after all these years.

When he reached the dooryard, Pete Kells did not immediately enter the cabin but went around the side to look at the hounds. His flashlight beam pushed into undergrowth, brought golden luminosity from a pair of eyes, and broke up a chorus of yelps into distracted whimperings. He turned off the flashlight. His gaze shifted southward down into the vista he had cleared. A distant pin-prick of light gleamed faintly through the valley mist. That would be Tassie. Swallowing, he turned and stumbled toward the kitchen door.

The storm had crippled the electric power line—he'd expected that—and as Pete's hand dropped from the wall switch in the kitchen he thought he heard a stir of sound. Not the hounds in the dooryard. Something right here, or maybe in the next room. He turned his flashlight toward the other room, and the metallic glint through the narrow crack, between the door and frame, was beyond his understanding until that first shot split the silence. . . .

WHY only two shots? Why not a third, the clincher? Who was it among the people on the party line who had waited there to kill him? Wade Norris? Jeff or Meridy Pearson? Peg Lewis? Or someone from the Bainter place? Six persons, at the outside. One of them had crouched here in the dark for perhaps an hour and then had fled in panic and left the job half done. Why? There were no close neighbors who might have heard the shots. No possibility that anyone could have driven up the dead-end road. Why had the killer fled? Pete Kells always came back to that, and even now, as the square clock on the kitchen wall

KILL ONCE—KILL TWICE!

struck ten, he didn't have the answer.

He sat motionless in the Boston rocker, weight on his left hip, right leg extended. His head still throbbed, though the linen bandage he had made from a towel had checked the bleeding. His right hand clutched the knife, the blade between forearm and thigh.

He allowed his mind to drift and remembered the first time he'd gone fox hunting with his dad. Fall, it had been, the maples and the gumwoods scarlet leafed, and he was a kid of twelve in a red plaid shirt. He thought of the smell of coffee pleasantly blending with hickory, sassafras, and spicewood smoke on the frosty air atop Bear Wallow. Beans and thick chunks of jowl bubbling in the iron pot on the open fire. And as the hunters stood around, bragging about their hounds and listening to the distant and continuous *yowp-yowp-yowp*, young Pete Kells had wondered how a man could tell his dog's voice from any other. . . .

Pete Kells straightened suddenly in the rocker, eyes wide open, and nearly dropped the knife in his excitement of discovery.

"My God!" he said. Could anybody be that stupid?

Somebody could. Some one person. And there were other things—he saw them now as in a photo-montage, thinly lapped, rotating dizzily. The missing filler item. A straw hat big as a wagon wheel. A card of thanks. Peg Lewis, always on the fringes, superior, omniscient, her oddly tilted eyes looking up from a bouquet of lilies. A truck parked on the Bear Creek Road, an old man drunk and sleeping across the wheel. Peg Lewis, an opportunist, contrasted with inept Jeff Pearson, who was not. . . .

All that from the past, and it was suddenly the terrifying past of time that is right now.

Footsteps sounded outside the cabin, not from the dead-end road but from the precipitous lip of the ridge. Small branches snapped. A light flickered up across the screen on the open window above the sink.

Pete Kells slumped back in the rocker. He clutched the knife—but why? He wouldn't, he couldn't, use it. The slow,

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DETECTIVE TALES

leaden beat of his heart told him he couldn't. His aching throat told him. . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Quick-Change Artist

A BOARD on the floor of the stoop creaked under a careful step. A voice called softly as one would call a sleeper.

"Pete? Oh, Pete, I saw your light. . ."

And maybe heard my voice on the party line a while ago, he thought dully.

The doorlatch rattled.

What conceivable motive? The ancient one of feuds? A life for a life?

The door opened. She tracked yellow clay across the sill—he saw that through his lashes. He saw her standing there, her hands behind her. . . What were her hands hiding? Drops of rain that had fallen from the trees glistened in her dark, dark hair. He saw how bedraggled was the dress with its yellow stripes from the steep climb up Freeman.

Her eyes—bewildered, they seemed—left his face, touched the floor and saw the bloodstains there. Then sprang again to him and saw the bandages.

"Pete!" That in agony as she swooped toward him, her brown eyes wild. He saw her hands, her beautiful, empty hands, and felt them clutch his shoulders. "Pete, my darling!"

Tassie was crying. He'd never known her to cry before. He dropped the knife somewhere, caught her in his arms and held her tightly. If only his heart would stop that crazy, joyous bounding so that he could speak—but why say anything, when he could kiss Tassie's face, her mouth?

"Forgive me." Forgive my thoughts, was what he meant.

And she was saying, "No, Pete, you were right. Always. Always just and fair. But you're hurt. Your head—what happened?"

Which reminded him of other things. He cupped Tassie's shoulders in his big palms and held her off.

"You've got to get out of here." His voice was husky. She didn't understand. "The killer. Coming back here." He laughed. Now he could laugh. "Not your

KILL ONCE—KILL TWICE!

pa. Rufe didn't do it. Someone else. Someone who thinks I know too much. There's been blackmail, I think. And the killer is on the way up here to finish the job."

Tassie straightened away from him. She stared at the knife several feet away where he must have flung it.

"Pete, where's your gun?"

"The shotgun? Your dad borrowed it."

"And brought it back. Months ago. It's in the shed." She whirled and ran toward the kitchen door.

"Tassie—no. Not that way."

She paused, nodded, understanding that the killer might be coming up the road right now. The killer mustn't see her, mustn't know she was there. She came back, moved behind him and through the door connecting the kitchen with the living room. He heard her cross the living room, didn't hear the front door open because of another sound from outside the cabin and toward the road. A small scuffing sound, as though a foot had slipped into a rut.

Hurry, Tassie, he thought. Hurry.

Then on the stones outside, there was a single, well-defined footstep before the killer reached the mossy carpet near the door. Then a listening hush.

Pete Kells rolled his eyes to the right and down. He couldn't possibly reach the knife. Not now.

Footsteps approached across the kitchen floor. Then, "All right, Kells."

Pete Kells opened his eyes.

The killer. The only person dumb enough to think that fox hounds in a doorway meant that hunters were close by. The only person on the party line who wouldn't know that hunters followed their dogs through the sense of hearing alone. That was what had alarmed the killer—the fancied proximity of the hunters who must actually have been miles away.

And now the killer stood scarcely more than a yard from Pete Kells. Stood jauntily, automatic pistol held low against his right hip.

And where was Tassie? Pete Kells' eyes flicked toward the door. It stood wide open, and beyond, the night yawned black. Pete Kells' gaze shifted to Wade



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DETECTIVE TALES

Norris—such a little man, but big enough with that gun he had. A small edition of a handsome man—even a small smirk under his little black mustache.

Pete Kells said, "She died late Monday night, didn't she—your mother? And you realized you'd missed your chance at Herb's money unless you killed Herb right away."

"You've got it figured, chum," Wade Norris admitted. "I read somewhere that coroners sometimes have difficulty determining the time of death of a diabetic. I thought I had a chance to get the sequence mixed up some way. I managed it, all right, didn't I?"

"You did." Pete Kells glanced at the door—but then he mustn't do that, mustn't suggest that Tassie was close by. He had to stall for time. "You did all right," he said to Norris. "You hopped in your car and went out the Bear Creek Road. You had that target pistol with you, but on the way you saw a truck pulled up about half a mile this side of Herb's with somebody asleep across the wheel. You found Rufe Bainter in a drunken stupor in the truck cab, his carbine beside him. You decided to use Rufe's gun instead, because you'd heard of the feud between Rufe and Herb.

"But you couldn't let it go at that. You couldn't risk investigation by experts which might prove that Herb and Lottie died within the same hour; that might conceivably prove that Lottie died first. You had to have a witness who would testify he'd seen Lottie early Tuesday morning, after sunrise. So you put on your mother's clothes—you're small enough—and that big straw hat that would hide your face, and went out into the flower garden. You picked those lilies, and Jeff Pearson saw you, thinking it was Lottie. Then you went into the house, put the lilies in a vase on the dining table. You took off the female garb and dressed your mother." Pete Kells' mouth curled distastefully. "My God, what kind of a man are you anyway?"

WADE NORRIS winced slightly. "She didn't know anything about it. What you've got to do, you've got to do. Undertakers do it all the time."

KILL ONCE—KILL TWICE!

"Your own mother, though."

"Shut up, damn you!" Wade Norris took half a step toward the Boston rocker. The gun came up. "She was a thing. Like a dummy. Already stiff. You could dress a dummy, couldn't you?"

"Then you left her on the kitchen floor and went upstairs. Somebody else would find her later. You were confident that Jeff Pearson was either dumb enough or honest enough to say he'd seen Lottie in the garden that morning and thus rook himself out of any chance at Herb's money. Jeff told all that and a little more. He mentioned that he saw Lottie picking lilies—"

Pete broke off, swallowing. Was that a sound beyond the open door? Tassie...? He didn't look in that direction but tried to keep the flat, dark eyes of the killer tied to his own.

"It wasn't Lottie who picked the lilies," he said. Now he was coming to what Peg Lewis must have learned, what she had seen when she'd bent over that bouquet on Lottie's dining table. But he mustn't mention Peg. Mustn't involve her, black-mailer though she undoubtedly was. "Lottie would have pulled the stamens to prevent the lilies from staining themselves. I know that, because she sent a filler item on the subject to the paper."

"And you figured from there, chum," Wade Norris said. "Too bad, isn't it? You want to know where I figured from? From the clipped peak on that letter N on your typewriter. It showed up in that cute little note you sent me demanding half of Herb's estate for your silence..."

The note Peg had sent, but Pete did not correct the killer.

"... It showed up again when I wrote that card of thanks on your machine," Wade concluded.

And Peg hadn't come into the *Chronicle* office while Wade Norris was there. She hadn't wanted him to know she worked there lest he conclude she was the black-mailer. She needed money desperately, Pete knew, the way her mother had gone through the insurance left by Peg's father.

Pete Kells' thoughts were interrupted by the snick of the safety catch on Wade Norris' gun. Pete's left hand came up—a gesture too impotent to be defensive.

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DETECTIVE TALES

Then Tassie was there. In the doorway. Pete Kells saw her mistily without looking. Saw the shotgun raised to her shoulder. His mind screamed, *Shoot Tassie! Don't take a chance. Shoot!*

But Tassie said, "Drop that—" and got no further before Wade Norris turned. Then everything became a blur to Pete as he lunged desperately sideways, toppling the chair and himself to the left, turning in the air to lash out at Wade as Wade fired. Pete hit Wade low with arm and shoulder, and as Pete came down to the floor, Wade came with him. As he fought for a better hold on the squirming little man, Pete was aware of a flurry of skirts. Something pounded the floor. That was Tassie with the shotgun, pounding at Norris's gun wrist with the shoulder plate the way she would have killed a copperhead. Wade screamed. And Pete scrambled onto his left knee, got a handful of dark hair, bounced Wade's forehead against the floor. Kept bouncing it . . . and bouncing it until he heard, as from a vast distance, Tassie's voice.

"Pete, stop! You'll kill him!"

Pete rolled to the left and sat down hard on the floor beside the limp little man. Wade Norris wasn't dead. "Out," Kells panted. "Just out to lunch. Tassie, kick that gun over here."

"It isn't loaded. I couldn't find the shells. Oh, Pete, I thought I'd go mad out there, searching in the dark."

"You thought you'd go mad . . ." He looked up, grinning. "Not the shotgun, sweetheart. Wade's automatic. That's loaded."

She brought the hand gun to him. He traded car keys for it. "You go for help, Tassie. The car's at the end of the road. I can't walk. No, no," as he saw the look that spread across her face, "it's just this trick hip of mine. I fell over the doorstep, I think, when Wade made his first try tonight. You get the car and drive like hell to Nashville."

Tassie nodded slowly. "Just this once, Pete." Then she got down on her knees beside him, which was awfully considerate. "Just this once, I'll leave you. Then I'm coming back here and stay. Forever."

A sometimes beautiful word—forever.

THE END

DEATH IS MY BUSINESS

(Continued from page 53)

"Yes, sir, thanks."

They sat in back of the squad car, he and the lieutenant. He recognized the red neck of Murphy, the driver, who turned around and said, "Hi, Sheldon. Hear you got sapped."

"Sapped is the word for it."

He sat back and the car sped north with the satisfying feeling you get as a passenger when a competent hand is at the wheel.

"Forgot to tell you," Bascom said casually. "Your promotion came through. You're a third grader now."

"Oh," Pete said. "Thanks." What can you say? He wanted to apologize to the lieutenant, but he wouldn't know what it was for. Pete said, "Even after the dumb stunt I just pulled?"

"Happens," Bascom said. He seemed to be thinking about it. "Sheldon, why did you go after that character? Without a gun. You knew he was a killer, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir, I knew that. I—I'm not the hero type . . ." he said lamely.

Bascom nodded, turned to look at him. "I really want to know. What made you go after him?"

Pete wanted, suddenly, to put his head against the back of the seat and close his eyes; the throbbing in his head had settled into familiarity. He heard himself speaking as if the words were coming from far away, without his help.

"It's just that there were all those people in the store and here was one guy and he had a gun. And none of the people could do anything because—well, violence freezes the ordinary guy. He's not used to it, he can't cope with it at all. So that makes the whole world a cinch for the man who makes violence his personal buddy. And there I was and—that's what cops are for, aren't they?"

"That's what cops are for," Bascom echoed softly. "Yeah."

And then Pete thought of Barker, who was eager and wanted to learn everything in a hurry. I won't tell him, Pete thought drowsily. He'll find this out for himself.



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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 85)

"You think I need you now?" he sneered. "We got an organization now. Smooth guys, like you. And not so finicky. They're driving big cars. They own houses. It's a cinch these days. The suckers are rolling in money. Black market money, inflation money. Everybody is greedy. They want to get rich fast. What if you *do* take it from, they—"

"No," said Joe, loathing in his voice. "Those boys are smart. They're crooks themselves. You aren't fooling me. It's little guys you take it from. White-collar men and old ladies. That's why you need salesmen like me."

Joe looked Mark up and down with so contemptuous a look that Mark reddened.

"Okay," said Mark with a quiet that was more menacing than his fury. "I'm not getting sore. Why should I? Look at me. Look at you."

Joe realized the truth of it. It showed in the tired lines of his face as he got up and started turning away.

"Go ahead, honest John," sneered Mark. "Go ahead, go back to your wife. Listen to her cough. Watch her get sick and die, because your being honest is more important than her. Love!" Mark leaned over and spat contemptuously. "Love. Well, you had me wondering for a while. I thought maybe there was something in the way you felt about things. But this does it. Yeah, well, let your wife die, kid. But be honest. It'll keep you company afterwards, after she dies."

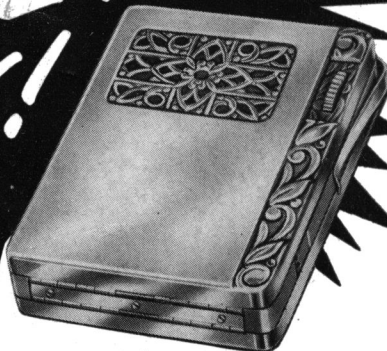
Joe, white as a sheet, turned and walked unsteadily out the door. Mark stared after him with grim amusement on his face.

AFTER a while, Mark got up too, and went out. He walked down the cold, dark street and from an alleyway a figure slipped out behind him, swung viciously, and Mark fell limply. Swiftly Joe dropped the chunk of brick and breathing heavily took a well-filled wallet from Mark's pocket.

"For just this one time," whispered Joe, before he fled into the night, "you've convinced me, pal."

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