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by **JOHN D. MacDONALD**

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YOU?

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THE CHIEF WANTS
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GIVES THE STORY TO
THE PAPERS, CHES



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I DIDN'T HAVE TIME
THIS MORNING

THIN
GILLETTES.
EH? THANKS



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SLICK SHAVE! NO
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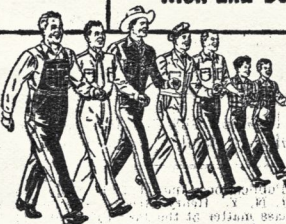
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SEPTEMBER, 1950

NUMBER TWO

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—and, from the grave, she called to the conclave of her ex-lovers—for company!
2. **LET'S BURN US A BLONDE!**.....*Alan Ritner Anderson* 102
—said the cops. We don't want to send just *anybody* to the hot seat!

Gripping Mystery Novelette—An Encore

3. **MR. BINGLER'S TRAIL OF CRIME**.....*Wilbur S. Peacock* 56
—led right to his own bedroom, where reposed Mr. B.'s guest of honor—a headless corpse!
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5. **LEW AND THE DEEP SIX**.....*Dan Gordon* 38
—made a watery combination that only Davy Jones would appreciate.
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—that the finger of violence is pointing at, on this squealer's holiday....
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—brought Sam Ourlic only the kiss of death.
8. **WHEN KILLERS MEET—**.....*Roy W. Cliborn* 80
—Craig Whitaker wanted to be as far away as 100 G's could take him.
9. **MAMMA'S TALKING TULIPS**.....*Prentice A. Burlingham* 89
—spelled out a gay epitaph.
10. **THE RED ROAD BACK**.....*Richard E. Glendinning* 93
—led Sheriff Peters from the dead-end of dishonor to his own waiting, wide-open grave....

Five Special Crime Features

11. **THE LOCKED ROOM**.....*Earl L. Wellersdick* 6
12. **ODDITIES IN CRIME**.....*Mayan and Jakobsson* 37
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The Locked Room

By **EARL L.
WELLERSDICK**

MYSTERY-STORY writers have to dig deep into their secret bags of tricks to place the body of their victim in a locked and bolted room with no obvious ways of his death having been brought about. For added touch, the writers often have the story unfold in a lonely castle, surround the room with mystery, and toss in a disembodied piece of ectoplasm for still more chills. However, in the final chapter our hero is on hand with a simple solution to how the murder was committed. In real life the plot is more eerie and the solution not so simple, as witness the true tale of what happened some time ago in the Old-World castle of Zustadt in Upper Silesia.

The centuries-old mound of grey masonry was the home of a noble family which was inclined towards giving lavish parties and putting their guests up over night following the festivities. On the night our story takes place one of the guests was a dashing young country squire, Anton Holberg by name.

During the course of the dinner, talk came around to the Hooded Monk who made the castle famous. According to legend, this monk was supposed to haunt one room in particular, garroting any sleeper there with a thin belt.

Such a story of course was bound to bring jeers from some of the guests present, and we can just imagine our adventurous friend Anton coming out

(Continued on page 8)

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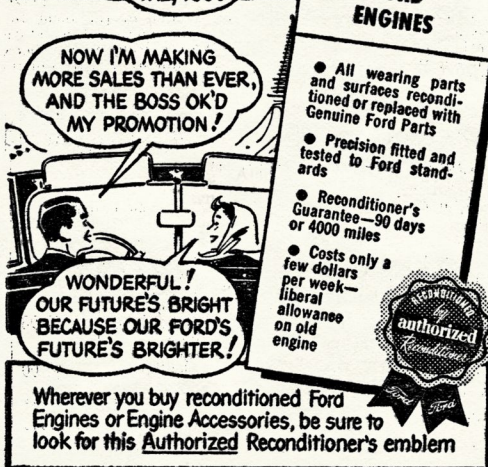
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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 6)

with some such remark as, "Ach, I wouldn't be afraid to sleep in that room."

Challenged to put his scepticism to the test by sleeping alone in the room, which had not been occupied for many years, the young squire accepted and retired there shortly before midnight, locking the door and bolting all the windows from the inside. He was never again seen alive.

In the early morning hours, precisely the time the Hooded Monk was known to start his wonderings, a ghastly cry was heard from the chamber. When the awakened family rushed to the spot and forced the door, Anton was found dead. On his throat was the mark closely resembling that which tradition associated with the visitations of the Hooded Monk. There was no murder weapon in sight. There was no evidence a second person had been in the room.

Because of the locked chamber, murder was ruled out, as was suicide. The only alternative then was that death was caused by a "ghostly agency."

The proponents of this theory contended that the power of good or evil of the ghost was real and that it once more had manifested its powers by visiting with death a man who had scoffed at the legend.

On the other hand, certain specialists suggested that the explanation of the tragedy was simple—that a mind keyed up to the highest point of excitement when left alone in the room would imagine the arrival of the ghost, and the vision would be so strong that it would cause the traditional red mark to appear on the throat. The cry of agony they put down to the fact that in his high-strung state Anton had perhaps awakened from a light sleep, imagined he saw the ghost leaning over him, and screamed.

Whatever the cause of Anton's death, the facts add up to a good mystery story.

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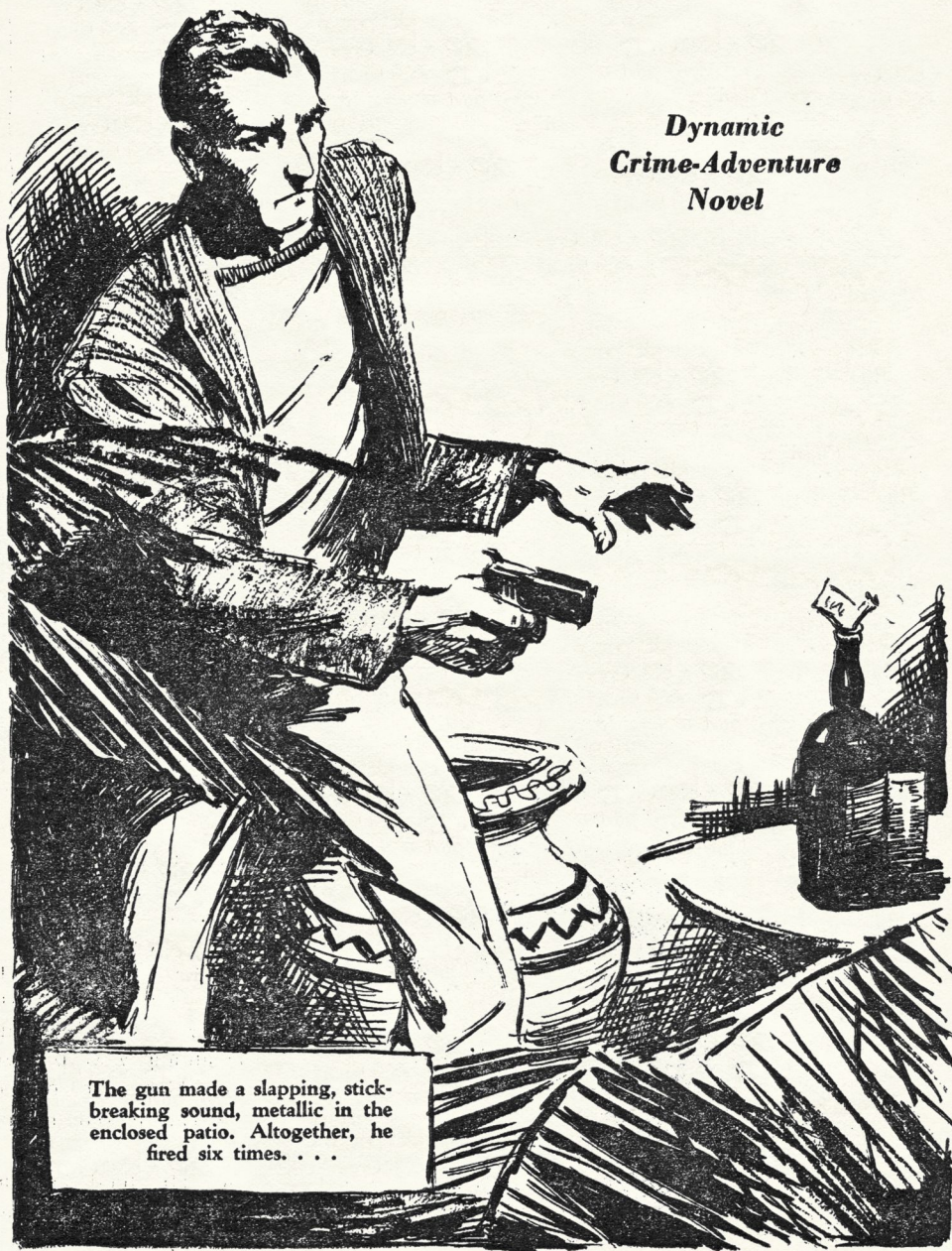


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The gun made a slapping, stick-breaking sound, metallic in the enclosed patio. Altogether, he fired six times. . . .

THE LADY IS A CORPSE!

By JOHN D. MacDONALD



CHAPTER ONE

The Buildup

PARK FALKNER took a deep breath, exhaled half of it, squeezed the trigger slowly. The rifle spat, a sound as vicious as an angry wasp. Far out across the dancing blue water of the gulf the glint of the can jerked, disappeared.

"Enough," he said. He stood the rifle in the corner of the private terrace that

opened off his bedroom, the highest terrace of the vast gleaming-white fortress that dominated the two-mile sand spit called Grouper Island, and sometimes Falkner Island.

He stretched and yawned. He was a tall, spare, rock-hard man in his mid-thirties. A tropical disease had eliminated, forever, hair, eyebrows, lashes. His eyes were a startling pale shade against the sun-glossed mahogany of skin. There was a touch of cruelty in the beaked nose and set of the mouth, and humor as well. He wore a faded Singhalese sarong, knotted at the waist.

"I should think it is enough," Taffy Angus said, in her hoarse gamin's voice.

She stood on her hands, her heels against the wall of the house, her white hair hanging in fluid lines to the terrace tiles. She wore a bandanna as a halter, and the jeans, salt-faded to powder blue, were hacked off raggedly at knee length. The position brought a flush under her tan.

"Does that make you a junior leaguer?" Falkner asked.

"Don't be nasty, darling," she said. She dropped onto hands and toes, came gracefully up onto her feet. "I'm an old, old gal, as you well know, and a daily hand-stand has therapeutic values."

Falkner looked at her admiringly. "Bless you! You're my favorite neighbor. When I forget you're forty-two I feel like a cradle snatcher."

"In my prime I came a little after the Gibson Girl, Park. But just to change the subject, how about those people who are coming?"

Park looked at his watch. "The cocktail hour approacheth. Go prettify thyself, wench."

She bowed low. "Sire!" she breathed. Her lips thinned a little. "Park, just for the record—couldn't we drop the Mussolini edict about living dangerously and grow fat and happy in the sunshine on

your money? These people you ask here . . ."

They had walked to the hallway door. He opened it and gently shoved her through.

"Okay, okay," she sighed. "I never opened my fool mouth."

FALKNER shut the door. His smile faded. Taffy knew as well as he did what had happened those times he had tried stagnation. He had grown restless, irritable. There was no point in trying to add to the fund which was more than he could possibly spend in his lifetime. The company of the equally affluent brought a sickening boredom. And so life had to be spiced by the house parties. An amateur cop or a god of vengeance. Take your choice. Flip a coin. When there's guilt in the air it can be scented, as an animal scents the odor of fear. He looked along the beach to the spot where one of his house guests, Carl Branneck, had killed Laura Hale. For a moment there was revulsion in him and he wanted to call this newest house party off. Then he remembered the report from the New York agency and his interest began to quicken.

He crossed the big room to the built-in record player. He pondered. Atonal stuff would probably help tension along better than anything traditional. He selected two hours of Milhaud, Schonberg and Anthiel, stacked them on the spindle, cut in the amplifiers of the sea-level terrace where they would have cocktails and the amplifiers in the east gardens, and then adjusted the volume down for background.

The only thing in the big room not suitable to a practising Sybarite was the hard, narrow cot on which he slept. There were deep couches, a massive grey-stone fireplace, paintings of a certain freedom in deep niches, softly lighted.

He untied the sarong, dropped it, stepped out of it. The shower stall was

big enough to hold a seven-handed poker game. The dressing room adjoined the bath. As he was toweling himself he heard the descending roar of the amphib. That would be Lew Cherezack flying in the ladies, right on schedule.

He selected a grey casual shirt, trousers of a deeper shade of grey. As he walked from the dressing room into the bedroom he heard Lew's knock at the door.

Lew came in, his boxer pup's face slyly wrinkled. He turned with an expansive gesture. "Look what I got!"

A blonde and a brunette. Both tall and grave, with knowing eyes, sweet, wise mouths. "The blonde," Lew said, "is Georgie Wane. Blackie is called June Luce. Say hello to the boss, girls."

"How do you do, Mr. Falkner," they said gravely, almost in unison.

"Nice to see you. You know what the job is?"

Georgie, the blonde, turned spokesman. "If the job includes anything over and above what Mr. Empiro stated, Mr. Falkner, the deal is off. I want that understood."

Park grinned. "I left out a few details, but nothing either of you will balk at. Four young men are coming to visit me. They should be along any minute now. You are each being paid fifty dollars a day. I want you to be as charming as possible to my guests, and I insist that they be kept in ignorance of the fact that I'm paying you. Now here's the additional instruction. There are two of you and four young men. Both of you are lovely enough to have learned how to handle men. I want them played off against each other. I want their beautiful friendship split up in any way you can manage it. Each night, at twelve, you go off duty, as far as I am concerned. Lew will show you your rooms right now. The doors lock. You have the freedom of the place. We're well equipped for amusement here. Tennis, badminton, swimming—in the

gulf and in the pool. There is only one restriction. I do not want either of you to leave the island until, in my opinion, the job is done."

"Fair enough," June Luce said. "But who are we supposed to be?"

Park grinned. "Call yourselves nieces of mine. That ought to spice their imaginations a little."

WHEN Lew took them out, Falkner went down two flights to the kitchens. Mrs. Mick Rogers, cook and wife of the battered ex-pug who was Park's man of all work, smiled at him. Francie, the doughy little maid, was at one of the work tables finishing the construction of a tray of canapés.

"Set for the deluge, Mrs. Mick?" Falkner asked.

"What's eight people, counting yourself? A nothing. Practise, yet."

Just then Mick drove in across the private causeway from the mainland with the station wagon. Park walked out the side door of the smaller kitchen and across to the parking space. Mick slid neatly to a stop.

The first one got out, looked hesitantly at Falkner. "I—I'm Bill Hewett. Are you the host?"

Hewett was tall, frail, gangly. Physically he seemed barely out of his adolescence, but his pale-blue eyes were knowing and there was a downward sardonic twist about his wide mouth.

"Glad to see you, Hewett. Let me see. You're the copywriter, aren't you?"

"Right. With Lanteen, Saran and Howliss. I write deathless prose for TV commercials. And this is Prine Smith, our newspaperman."

Prine was dark, stocky, muscular, with a square strong jaw and an aggressive handshake. He said, "We're pretty much in the dark about all this, Falkner, and—"

Park smiled. "Let's talk about it over cocktails."

Hewett broke in. "And this is the actor in the group. Guy Darana."

Guy was tall, with a superb body, classic profile, brown, tightly curled hair. But there was a vacant docility about his expression, an aimless, childlike amiability in his eyes.

"Howya," he said softly in the richest of baritones.

The fourth and last was a wiry redhead with pointed features, a jittery hyperthyroid manner. "You hear that?" he said. "The actor in the group he calls Darana. What about me? What about Stacey Brian. I make with the voice on the radio. Character parts. I work at it. All that hunk has to do is revolve slowly to give them a look at both sides of the profile."

"Radio is a dying medium," Darana said languidly.

Falkner sensed that it was an old argument. He shook hands with Stacey Brian. Mick Rogers was taking the luggage from the tailgate.

"We'll take our own stuff up. Don't bother," Hewett said.

"Mick, you show them their rooms," Park said. "As soon as you all freshen up, find your way down to that front terrace. You can see it from here."

Falkner went back up to his room, started the music, went back down to the front terrace. Mick had already changed to white jacket and he was putting the small terrace bar in order.

"Jittery as hell," Mick said. "All of them. And seven thousand questions. I didn't know nothing."

"Make the drinks heavy on the boys, Mick. And lay off our two hired tootsies."

"Festivities about to begin?" Taffy said, close behind him. Park turned. She wore a white blouse pulled down off her deeply tanned shoulders. The gay skirt swung as she walked. A hammered-silver Aztec bracelet looked impossibly heavy on her slim wrist. Her white hair was a

purer form of silver, heavy, thick, molten, alive.

"Jezebel," he whispered. "Lillith! Krithna of the purple seas."

"Don't mind me," Mick said.

"This," said Taffy, "is what you get for inviting little girls who could be my daughters. I have to keep up my morale."

THERE was no more time for talk then because Stacey Brian came out onto the terrace. The sun was slipping toward the grey-blue gulf. The others came, were introduced. Mick was chanting, "Step up and name it and I can make it. They go down like honey and then kick you behind the ear." Taffy sat on the wall and looked smug. She made Georgie and June look awkward, young, and she made the others look. She winked solemnly at Park Falkner.

Conversation was general, polite, aimless. Georgie Wane had inconspicuously drifted to the side of Guy Darana. He looked at her with mild, sleepy approval.

June Luce said in a silky soft voice, "Miss Angus, I *must* tell you. My mother took me to see you in *Time for Play*, oh, ages ago! I think I was six at the time. That was before you became such a successful model, wasn't it?"

Park concealed his grin by taking a drink. June looked with rapt interest at Taffy. Taffy looked puzzled. She said, "My goodness! Now I *know* I'm ancient! I've just forgotten how to make kitty-talk. Why, if you'd said anything like that to me five years ago I'd have thought of some nasty-nice way to call attention to the way you're letting yourself get . . ." She stopped. "Oh, I mustn't be rude. I'm sorry." She beamed at June.

June's eyes narrowed. "What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing, sister," Mick said. "You're a nice dish. You just ain't bright. You challenged the champ. Now shut up or she'll make you so mad you'll be sick to

your stomach and she'll just sit here grinning at you."

Taffy pouted. "He never lets me have any fun."

Prine Smith walked scowling over to Park, planted his feet, his stocky legs spread, his square hand holding the cocktail glass. "Look!" he said. "I don't go for cat-and-mouse games. Maybe I'm not properly civilized. So you're a big enough shot to get strings pulled to get us all off at the same time. So you play on curiosity in a smart enough way to get us all down here, expenses paid. You're out after laughs, Falkner. Let's blow away the smoke screen and talk sense for a minute."

"Glad to," Park said. "I guess I'm just a nosy type. I like mysteries. Nine months ago the four of you lived in a big apartment in the Village, two blocks from Sheridan Square. You've split up now, but that was the status quo. Hewett had a girl friend, lovely from all reports, named Lisa Mann. On a hot afternoon, June fourth to be exact, Lisa Mann, using a key that Hewett had given her, let herself into the apartment. A girl named Alicia French happened to see her. Alicia lived in the next apartment down the hall. All four of you were able to prove that you were out that afternoon. The first one to get back to the apartment was Guy Darana. He returned a little after eleven that night. No one has seen Lisa Mann since. Apparently she never returned to her own apartment. There was an investigation. Her parents are well-to-do. I asked you four down here because things like that intrigue me. I hope that during your stay here one of you will, directly or indirectly, admit to his guilt in the death of Miss Mann. Does that blow away the smoke, Smith?"

PRINE SMITH stared at him. "Are you crazy?"

Hewett said softly, "I know she's dead.

I know it. She would have come back."

"Young girls disappear every day," Stacey Brian said. "That she happened to come to our place was coincidental."

June and Georgie listened with great intentness, their mouths open a bit.

"Are you serious, Falkner?" Prine Smith asked, still scowling. "Do you actually think that just by having us down here you can break open a case that the metropolitan police haven't been able to unravel?"

Park shrugged. "It might work that way."

"I don't get it. If one of us should be guilty, which is silly even to think of, wouldn't you have given him warning by now?"

"Of course."

Prine Smith sighed. "Okay. Have your fun. It's your money and I guess you know what you want to do with it. Me, I'm going to relax and enjoy myself."

"That's what you're all supposed to do," Park said amiably.

Hewett had been drinking steadily and with purpose. He said, "Her eyes were tilted a little, and the black lashes were so long they were absurd. She came up to my shoulder and when she laughed she laughed deep in her throat."

"Knock it off," the red-headed Stacey Brian said sharply. "Drop it, Bill."

"Sure," Bill Hewett said. "Sure."

The dusk was upon them and the music was a wry dirge. Taffy's face was shadowed. A gull swung by, tilting in the wind, laughing with disdain. The soft waves were the tired breath of the water. Death whispered in the thin jacaranda leaves.

Hewett laughed with excessive harshness. "Sure," he said again. "Forget her. We're all nice clean young men, we four. Our best friends don't have to tell us, because we've bought the right products. We have built-in value, four-

way virtue. Remember the brand name. Go to your nearest crematory and ask for our product. That's a joke, son. But forget little dead girls because little dead girls have nothing in common with these four upright, sterling, time-tested, young men of market-proven value. You can't write a commercial about a dead girl. The product will never sell."

"Shut up, Bill," Guy said.

June hugged her elbows though the dusk was warm. Mick's face, behind the bar, was carved of dark stone. Over on the mainland a diesel train bellowed, a distant creature of swamps and prehistory.

"You people can eat any time," Mrs. Mick said.

CHAPTER TWO

The Decoy

Taffy lay on her face in the sun by the pool. Falkner sat crosslegged beside her, rubbing the oil into the long, clean lines of her back.

"Mmmm," she said, with sleepy appreciation.

June came to the edge of the pool, her dark hair plastered wet to her head. She hung on and said, "Hello, people."

"How goes the war of the sexes?" Falkner asked.

June pursed her lips. "Georgie has attracted the big handsome hunk, Guy Darana, and also Mr. Muscles, the newspaper guy. I am left with the agile little redhead, who can sling passes from any off-balance position. Hewett is not interested."

"How is Georgie doing?"

"Reasonable. Guy and Prine Smith are now on the beach showing off."

"Back to the battle, June," Park directed. "Take Stacey Brian down there and see if you can confuse things."

June swam away. Taffy yawned. "Legs," she said.

Park moved down a bit, filled his palm with oil. Taffy sat up suddenly. "No, dearie. I think I do this myself," she said. She took the bottle from him. "An aged creature like me has to be well smeared with this glop or the wrinkles pop out like waste land erosion."

As she worked she looked over at him. "Falkner, my man, this little house party makes me feel physically ill. Why don't you break it up?"

"Just when everybody's having so much fun?"

"Fun! They've all got the jumps."

"Sure they have. Right from the beginning each of them, the three un-guilty ones, whoever they might be, have had a dirty little suspicion. They were trying to forget it. Now I've reawakened the whole thing. They're drinking too much and laughing too loudly and they're all wound up like a three-dollar watch. We just wait and see."

Her brown eyes were suddenly very level, very grave. "But you usually add another ingredient, Park."

"This time, too. Maybe tonight."

"Do you really think one of them killed that girl?"

"I do."

"But why?" Taffy wailed.

"Why do people kill people? Love, money, position, hate, envy, passion, jealousy. Lots of reasons."

"Please be careful, Park. Don't let anything happen to you."

"Am I that valuable?"

"With you gone, what would I do for laughs?"

He leaned his hand tenderly against her bare shoulder and pushed her into the pool.

He had gone apart from the others and now he sat on the sand with his hands locked around his knees and he thought of the small thin sound she had made as he struck her and how he had caught her

as she fell and listened, hearing the pulse thud in his ears, the hard rasp of his own breathing. She had felt so heavy as he had carried her quickly to where he had planned. She was really a small girl. There was no blood.

AGAIN the dusk, and the music and the cocktails. And Mick behind the bar and Taffy in pale green and all of them sun-stunned by the long hot day, tingling from the showers, ravenous, bright eyed.

"I don't want to be a bore, Park," Prine Smith said, "but what are you accomplishing?"

Falkner shrugged. "Nothing, I guess. Maybe we ought to talk. That is, if nobody objects."

"Talk," Bill Hewett said tonelessly.

"Objectivity," Park said, "is often easier at a distance. The police concentrated on the apartment. That, I feel, was a mistake. The fact that the body has not appeared indicates to me that it was a crime carefully planned. Too carefully planned to assume that the murderer would select a city apartment as the scene of the crime and hope to get away with it, to walk out with the body. She was seen going into the apartment. She was not seen coming out. The apartment had a phone. All four of you were able to prove that you could not possibly have gotten back to the apartment before eleven. But you couldn't prove, had you been asked to do so, that Lisa Mann had not come to you. She could have been summoned by phone to the place where she was murdered and where the body was disposed of so successfully."

"Just how do you dispose of a body successfully?" Prine Smith asked.

"Fire, the sea, chemicals. But, best of all, legally. Death certificate and a funeral."

Something deep inside him laughed.

The forest floor had been thick with loam under the needles. He had scraped away the needles, and the edge of the new spade had bitten deeply, easily. The hole was not long enough for her and so he put her in it, curled, on her side, her knees against her chest. Later, after he had patted the earth down, replaced the needles of the pines, he burned the new shovel handle and the old coveralls. He kicked the hot shovel blade over into the brush. No trace. None.

"Why would anyone kill her?" Hewett asked. "Why? She was my girl. There wasn't any question of that. What good would she do anyone dead?"

"Sometimes a man kills," Falkner said, "for the very simple reason that the act of killing gives him pleasure."

"It would be nice to meet him," Hewett said. "Nice." He looked hard, first at Guy, then Prine Smith, then Stacey Brian.

"Off it!" Prine said harshly. "We were over that. You know the three of us, kid. You know we aren't capable of anything like that."

Hewett continued to stare and there was a trace of madness in his eyes. Slowly it faded. He walked over to the bar. Mick filled his glass.

"Hell," said Stacey, "Lisa may be wandering around right now. Amnesia. You can't tell about things like that."

"Sure," Hewett said. "Sure. It could be that." He didn't speak as though he believed it.

On the way to dinner Georgie Wane took Park aside. "Fifty a day," she said, "is nice. I like it. You've got a nice place here. But how about this, Uncle? One of these boys maybe clobbered a girl. It leads one to think. Maybe it's a habit yet."

"Not a habit. Not quite that. Call it a tendency."

"I thought maybe you could tell by looking at hands. I've been looking. No

dice, Uncle. I would say Hewett didn't. Beyond that I cannot go. Shouldn't a murderer look like a murderer?"

"I knew one once who could have been your twin, Georgie."

"I can see now how she got in the killing mood," Georgie said.

AT THREE in the morning Falkner awoke at the sound of the first tap on his door. He came completely awake in a fraction of a second. He pulled his robe on as he went to the door. It was Taffy.

She looked small, young, wan in the lamplight.

"You can't sleep either, eh?" she said.

"What's got you down, Taff?" he asked. "Come on in."

They walked out onto the terrace. The wind was directly out of the west. It had sea fragrance.

She said, "You hear about something like this. I mean it's a problem like filling in a nine-letter blank beginning with G meaning a South African herb. Then you meet the people and it's something else again. Gee, they're nice kids. I don't want it to be one of them."

He put his arm around her. "Old Taff, the world mother. She loves everybody. Maybe I'm wrong this time. The agency checked it out pretty carefully, though. Lisa Mann was one of those rare people who make no enemies. No one profited by her death. She was exceptionally striking. Emotions can get wound up pretty tightly."

"If one of them did it," she said softly, "I wonder if he is sleeping right now. I don't see how he could be, knowing that all this is supposed to make him give himself away. I've been watching them so carefully. It's not Hewett, of course. Darana seems like a big sleepy animal. But he *did* come alive when he did that part out of his last play for us. Stacey Brian is an awful nice little guy. Prine

Smith is a little quarrelsome, but you sense a certain amount of integrity in him. I can't see him murdering anybody. Park, you *must* be wrong. You *must*!"

"The tension is building, Taff. You can feel it."

She moved out of his arm. "And you love it, don't you? It's bread and wine to you. Park, there's a faint streak of evil in you."

"Man is a predatory animal," he said happily.

She sighed. "Too late to change you now. I should have adopted you when you were a baby."

"Foster mother at the age of seven?"

"I matured early."

He lay rigid in the darkness, remembering, remembering. It was Lisa's fault. No one could get around that. He had told her he loved her. He had told her this affair with Hewett had to stop at once. But she laughed, even when he told her she would be very sorry if she continued to torture him this way. He cried and she laughed again and again. Sin must be punished, whenever it is found. There is no wrong in that, and this great clown, Falkner, can do nothing because there will never be any clue. He knew from the way Hewett acted that Lisa had never told him about the scene.

WHEN Falkner came down, Taffy, Georgie, Guy and Stacey Brian were breakfasting on the patio, shielded from the brisk morning wind. He heard them laughing before he saw them. They made room for him. He had touched his bell a few minutes before coming down. Mrs. Mick brought him his breakfast tray.

Georgie said, "I was telling them about home in Scranton when I had a crush on a guy who drove a hearse. We didn't have any place to be alone so we used to go and neck in the room where they stored the coffins. Well this one time

Joey heard the boss coming back unexpected, so what does he do but pop me in a box and shut the lid and then make like he's taking an inventory. My God, I was petrified. It's dusty. I sneeze. The boss says, 'Whassat?' He opens the lid and says, 'Girl, you ain't dead!' Joey, the dope, says, 'Her aunt died. She was looking for a box.' Next time I see Joey, he's driving a bread truck. Terrible kind of breakfast talk, isn't it? But on this house party maybe it isn't so far out of line after all."

"You say you and this Joey had a place where you could be alone," Guy Darana said. "That isn't a question. I'm just thinking out loud."

"Stop making like a detective," Stacey Brian said.

"He's working on our little problem," Taffy said. "Can't you see the look of the hunter?"

"What kind of a detective you want?" Stacey Brian said. "A Jimmy Stewart type? Like this? Wal, I guess all you . . . uh . . . nice people need a . . . uh . . . little detectin' done around here. Or how about an Edward G. Robinson? Like so. Listen to me, sugar. You got to lay it right on the line, see? You're not talking to no small town copper, see? This is the big time, sugar. See?"

They laughed and applauded. The imitations had been uncannily accurate. Hewett came onto the patio and the look of him quenched the high spirits. His eyes appeared to have receded back into his head. His mouth was a thin, bitter line.

"Good-morning, all," he said. "Fun and games?"

"You look rocky, honey," Georgie said. He smiled coldly. "Bad dreams. Copy-writer's dreams. I could see Lisa with her eyes bulging and hands around her throat, but I couldn't tell whose hands."

"Ugh!" Georgie said.

"By the way, Bill," Park said, "I'm

assuming that you would like to find out whether or not one of your friends killed her. I'm assuming you'll help by answering questions. Did you and Lisa have a place where you used to go to be alone?"

"It's not any of your business," Hewett snapped.

"Blunt and to the point."

"We did have. A farmhouse so broken down you couldn't go into it. Just the foundation where the barn had been. But you could drive in there and not be seen from the road. She used to pack lunches and we'd picnic there."

"Did you ever go separately?"

"Sure. We'd meet there. She had a car. You know that already. It was in the newspapers. They found the car five days later in a big parking lot on West Forty-first Street. Nobody could say who'd driven it in there. Maybe she did. I used to take a bus out to Alden Village and walk to the farm."

"Did you tell the police that?" Park asked.

"Why should I? She never went there except when we went together, or when we were going to meet there."

"Her body might be there, Hewett. She could have been decoyed there."

"How do you mean?"

"A faked message from you. It wouldn't be hard. Any of your apartment mates could get their hands on your handwriting."

Bill Hewett looked down at his plate. Suddenly he looked no longer young, as though he had donned the mask he would wear in middle age. "I went back once. Alone. It was like visiting some damnable cemetery. The wind whined. She could be there, all right."

"I'll wire the New York police. Tell me the name of the farm or how to direct them to it."

"About a mile and a half north of the village on the left on a curve. Route 8. They call it the Harmon place."

CHAPTER THREE

Confession

HE SENT the wire after breakfast. At 11:30 they were all out by the pool. Park was nursing a purpling bruise high on his cheek where Mick Rogers had tagged him heavily during the usual morning workout. Mick hummed as he made drinks. He seemed well pleased with himself.

"Gotta remember to keep that left hand higher, boss," he said, grinning.

Taffy swam effortless lengths of the pool, her brown arms lifting slowly from the pale-green water. Stacey Brian, in deference to his red-headed lack of skin pigmentation was the only one in the shade. Stocky Prine Smith was whispering to June Luce. He was propped up on his elbows. She lay on her back with plastic linked cups on her eyes to protect them from the sun glare. From time to time she giggled in a throaty way. Stacey glared over at them. Georgie Wane was trying to teach big Guy Darana how to make a racing turn against the end of the pool.

From the amplifier came muted music, jazz piano by Errol Garner and Mary Lou Williams and Art Tatum. The last record, one by Garner, had played twice. Park thought of sending Mick up to reverse the stack, but suddenly an idea came to him. He went up himself, walking slowly, planning it in detail. It was based on the sensitive mike he had hooked into the set. Once, when it had been left turned on quite inadvertently, during a party, one couple who had sneaked away from the crowd came back to find that every word, every sound, had blared out above the noise of the music. He had had the mike installed to simplify some of the problems of running the household.

He reversed the stack of records, waited for the music to start, clicked on the mike

at the point of a loud remembered chord in the music, hoping that it wouldn't be heard. He picked the table mike up gingerly and carried it away from the set. He set it on the bedside table, picked up the phone and dialed the number of the hotel. Before anyone could answer, he pushed the receiver down with his fingers.

"Give me Mr. Norris' room please. 412 I think it is. . . . Hello. Lieutenant Norris? This is Falkner. I guess your trip hasn't been a waste after all. Yes, I think I know who our man is. Right. He'll crack under the strain and we'll have something definite to go on. Yes, I'll call you just as soon as—"

The door burst open and Mick came running in, panting from the run up the stairs. "Hey, the mike's on! Every word is coming over the—"

Park reached out quickly and clicked the mike off.

He grinned. "Thanks, Mick." He hung up the phone.

Mick's eyes widened with comprehension. "So! A fake, is it?"

"Did you hear what I said?"

"No. I started running when I heard you dial."

Park repeated the conversation. "What do you think?" he asked.

Mick scrubbed his heavy jaw with his knuckles. "It ought to make the guy pretty uneasy. I can't figure which one it could be. Maybe it isn't any one of the three."

"I'm placing my bet that it is one of them."

THEY went back down. The atmosphere had changed. Hewett was the color of watery milk under his two-day tan. He stood with his fists clenched, staring at his friends, one by one. June had sat up, moved a bit away from Prine Smith. Taffy stood near the diving tower, toweling herself. Georgie sat alone on the edge of the pool, her feet in the water.

Guy Darana stood behind her, his eyes slitted against the sunlight, looking half asleep. Stacey Brian looked at Hewett and said, "Easy, boy. Easy."

"I'm terribly sorry that happened," Park said. "It shouldn't have happened. Like a fool I forgot the mike was on. I'm afraid I've forewarned the man who killed Lisa Mann."

Hewett walked over to Park. "Who is it?" he said. "Tell me who it is."

"Not quite yet, Bill," Park said soothingly.

"Tell me, damn you!"

"I don't think I'm wrong, but there's always that chance. I'm not ready to tell you. You're in no emotional condition to handle yourself properly if I should tell you."

Hewett threw his fist full at Falkner's face with an almost girlish ineptitude. Park caught the fist in the palm of his hand and squeezed down on it. Hewett's

mouth changed with the impact of the sudden pain.

"Don't try that again," Park said.

Hewett yanked his hand free, turned without a word and walked across to the house.

Everyone started to make bright, shallow conversation to cover the awkwardness. Taffy came over to Park and lowered her voice so that only he could hear her. "Dirty pool, friend," she said. "Very dirty pool."

"I don't understand, Taff."

"The music suddenly got louder and then faded back again. The mike stands near the set. You should have carried it over to the phone before turning it on."

"You know, you'd be a very difficult type to be married to."

"I don't think I can quite class that as a proposal. You and your mythical lieutenants!"

He grinned with a flash of white teeth



... ..

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"



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IT'S GREAT! Try it! See what a big difference 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic makes in the good looks of your hair. Just a few drops daily check loose dandruff and those other annoying signs of Dry Scalp . . . spruce up your hair quickly and effectively. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients.

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against the deep brown of his face. "That's where I got you, Taff. There is a Lieutenant Norris and he is registered at the hotel and he is from New York. But he's on an extradition case. If I can't give him something to get his teeth into by tomorrow night, he has to start back with his man."

He fell silent and the talk around him was meaningless. It had to be a clever trap. There was nothing Falkner could know. Nothing. But the man was clever. It took cleverness to locate a body sixteen hundred miles away, a body that had been searched for by experts. They might not find it. Probably they would. He hadn't risked going back to see if the dirt had settled. The laboratories would go to work on the body. He had carried the body a short distance. Could some microscopic bit of evidence have been left?

DUSK broke up the badminton doubles. The last set had been Guy Darana and June Luce against Georgie and Stacey Brian. Everyone had played in their swim suits. Brian's wiry quickness had made up for Darana's advantage in height. Georgie was nursing a swollen underlip which, in some strange fashion, she had managed to club with her own racket.

All four were winded. Mick had wheeled the rolling bar out onto the edge of the court, plugging in the ice compartment at the outlet near the tennis court floodlights.

"Sometimes," Stacey said, "it's good to become bushed. When the infantry reluctantly let me go, I swore I'd never get physically tired again for the rest of my life. Here I am, running around in the sun and beating on a cork with feathers sticking out of it."

"Infantry!" Darana said with heavy disgust. "Why didn't you pick yourself a branch?"

"Don't tell me what you were, Guy," Georgie said. "Let me guess. A fly boy. A hot pilot. A tired hat and nine rows of ribbons."

"Not a hot pilot," Guy said. "I pushed tired old C-40's and 47's around for the ATC. I was too big to fit into a fighter with any comfort. But old Prine here had the real deal. Warm food, good bed. All the luxuries. Of course they sank a couple ships under him, but that Navy was it."

"How about Bill?" June asked. "What was he?"

"OWI. Hell, I wish he'd come down out of his room and stop sulking."

Taffy giggled. "You know what our jolly host did for his country?"

"Whatever it was, I bet it was a job smarter than the one Stace picked," Guy said.

Before she could reply Hewett came walking out of the grey darkness. "Sorry I blew my top," he murmured.

"Quite all right," Park said.

"You see," Hewett continued, "if I lose my head I won't get my cracks at whoever killed Lisa. I've got to stay calm. I have it all figured out. As soon as you know for sure, you'll tell that lieutenant. But maybe I can find out for sure before you do, Falkner. And if I do, he might not stand trial, whoever he is. I'm beginning to get an idea."

Stacey Brian stood up and shivered. "That wind's getting cooler. Or have I got a chill just because there's a murderer in the house? Good-bye, you people. I'm off for a shower."

The group slowly split up until only Prine Smith and Park Falkner were left. Mick wheeled the bar inside. Prine Smith's face was in shadow.

He said, "I can almost see your point. A dilettante in crime. Gives you a purpose in life, maybe." His tone was speculative. "But human beings aren't puppets, Falkner. They take over the strings. They make up their own lines."

I've done some checking. You've had considerable violence here on your Grouper Island. Do you sleep well at night?"

"Like a baby."

"I've been in the newspaper game longer than you'd think to look at me, Falkner. I can smell violence in the air. Something is going to bust open here."

"It's possible."

"What precautions are you taking?"

"I think that would be pretty valuable information to someone."

"Don't be a fool! You can't possibly suspect me."

Falkner was surprised at the trace of anger in his own voice. "Don't try to judge me or my methods, Smith. Don't set yourself up as an arbiter of my moral codes or lack of same. A girl died. There's the justification."

In the darkness he could sense Prine Smith's grin as he stood up. "Glad to know you sometimes doubt yourself, Falkner. Maybe I like you better."

He went off to the house. Falkner stayed a few minutes more.

Sometimes there is safety in inaction, he thought. And sometimes it is wise to move quickly. He locked the door, opened the toilet-article kit, took out the small bottle of white powder. It was cool against his palm. They said that later the lips smelled of almonds. He wondered.

BILL HEWETT looked full into the eyes of his friend. The others were by the beach fire. Hewett knew that he had drunk too much. Falkner's room wavered dizzily. He struggled for soberness. He said thickly, "You said you could tell me who killed Lisa."

"I can."

"What's that you've got? A record? What have you been doing here? It seems to be a funny place to meet, the host's room."

"Yes, this is a record. I got here first. I made a record on his machine."

"You mean you say on the record who killed her?" Hewett asked.

"That's right. Here. Have a drink. Then we'll listen to it. Together."

"Can't you just tell me?" Hewett asked plaintively. He tilted the glass high, drained it.

"Now I can tell you. I'll put this record on the spindle. Like this."

"Who is it? Who killed her?"

"You did, Hewett. You killed her. Can't you remember?"

"What kind of a damn fool joke is this?"

His friend went quickly toward the door, opened it, glanced out into the hall. He turned. "Good-bye, Bill. Give my regards to Lisa. My very best regards. I think you might live another ten seconds—after that drink I gave you."

The door shut softly. Hewett stared at the empty glass. It slipped from his hands to the rug, bounced, didn't break. He put both hands to his throat and turned dizzily. The moon was bright on the small private terrace. He saw a brown arm, almost black in the moonlight, reach over the terrace wall, saw a man pull himself up quickly.

Hewett fell to his knees.

* * *

They were all near the fire, the ember glow reddening their faces. Mick was telling them how the lights went out in Round 5 during his bout with John Henry Lewis.

Park came close to them. Mick looked over and stopped talking.

"What is it?" Taffy asked quickly.

"I've just told Norris to come over. The local police will be here too. Our little house party is over, I'm afraid."

Georgie Wane looked around the circle. "Where's Bill?" she demanded.

"Bill is in my room. He's very dead, and not at all pretty. Poison."

He heard the hard intake of breath. Taffy said, "Oh, no!"

"Before he did it he left his confession. I think you might like to hear it. Mick, go on up and play the record that's on the spindle right now. Pipe it onto the front terrace. We'll walk over there to listen."

Mick went across the sand and into the darkness. They stood up slowly, full of the embarrassed gravity with which any group meets the death of one of their number. Taffy came next to Park in the darkness as they walked, her fingers chill on his wrist.

"No, Park. I can't . . . believe it."

They stood on the front terrace, close to the sea. The amplifier made a scratching sound. The voice that came was thin, taut with emotion. There was no need for the voice to identify itself.

"I can't pretend any more. She said she was through with me. She told me she was fed up with neurotics. I had her meet me at the farm. Falkner trapped me about that. I took a shovel and coveralls. I came up behind her, struck her with the flat of the shovel blade. I carried her fifty feet into the woodlot and buried her there. I burned the shovel handle and the coveralls. I drove her car back and put it in the busiest lot I could find and tore up the check. I couldn't face the thought of her going to someone else, someone else's arms around her and lips on hers. I'm not sorry. Not sorry at all. . . ."

There was a dry, rasping sound of needle on empty grooves and then silence as Mick lifted the arm.

"Crazy," June Luce said softly. "Plain crazy. Gee, the poor guy."

Sirens shrilled through the distant night, coming closer. Park said quickly, "Go on into the front living room, all of you. They'll take the body out and then Norris will probably want to talk to you.

I see no reason why it might not be simple routine."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Man From the Dead

IT WAS a full forty-five minutes after the cars had swung across the private causeway and parked that Lieutenant Norris came into the front living room. He was a tall, stooped, sick-looking man, with a face that showed the lean fragility of the bone structure underneath. He wore an incongruous dark suit and his eyes were remote, disinterested.

"Let's get it over," he said. "You're Smith? No? Oh, Darana. And you're Brian. Okay, I got you all straight now, I guess. I can question you all at once. Did Hewett seem depressed since you've been here?"

Several people said yes at the same moment.

Georgie said, "The guy was pretty anti-social. I thought it was because his gal had disappeared. I've been wrong before."

"Now," said Norris, "about this beach party tonight. Anybody see him leave?"

There was silence. Park said, "The sea was warm. About half the group were swimming from time to time. You couldn't really keep track of any individual. I guess that at one time or another every one of us wandered off. I found Hewett, as I told you, when I went up to my room to change to dry clothes. It was getting just a little chilly."

Prine Smith crossed his arms. "Let's drop this patty-cake routine, shall we?"

Norris stared coldly at him. "What's on your mind?"

"Hewett was drinking too much. That record sounds too sober to me. And I knew Hewett inside and out. I say nuts to this suicide angle. Lisa was his gal and she meant every look she gave him. I'm

the only one outside of Bill and Lisa that knew the wedding date was set. I thought Falkner's idea was a bust for a time, but I've felt the tension growing here. And now I think I know the angle." He spun and took two steps toward Stacey Brian. "Come on, kid. Make imitations for the people. Show 'em how you can be Jimmy Stewart, or Edward G. Robinson—or Bill Hewett. Maybe you were Bill Hewett over the phone when you got Lisa to go out there to that farm. Bill never killed himself. He had more guts than any of you know. For my money, Stacey, you got him up there to Falkner's room, made the record yourself and slipped him a drink with the stuff in it."

Stacey Brian turned as white as a human being can turn. He came out of the chair like a coiled spring suddenly released. His fist spat off Prine Smith's mouth before Smith could lift his arms. Park leaped in and grabbed Brian from behind. He struggled and then gave it up.

"Will you be good?" Park asked.

Stacey Brian nodded. Park released him.

Stacey said in a level monotone, "Any guy who can think up that kind of an angle probably did it himself. He was on the make for Lisa ever since the first time Bill brought her around. We all knew that. We didn't tell the cops because we didn't think he was a guy to kill anybody. Sure I make imitations. But if any of you think I did a thing like that, you can all go to hell in a basket."

NORRIS drawled, "You guys can slap each other around until you're tired. It doesn't make no never mind to me. I got my case solved and I like the solution. Hewett smeared his gal and covered it nice. I got the dope today they found the body just like he said in the record."

"But, damn it, man," Prine said, "can't you see that Brian could put that same

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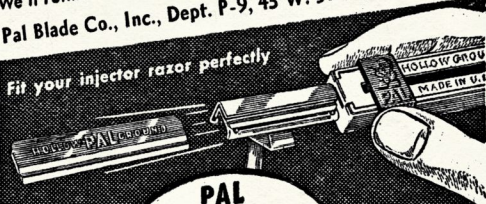
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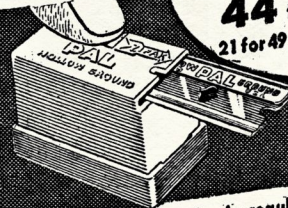


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dope on the record and make it sound just like Hewett?"

Stacey said, "Smith, I don't want to ever see you or talk to you or hear your name again as long as I live. I'm going back to New York just as fast as I can get there and I'm packing my stuff and moving out of that apartment we got two months ago."

"Good!" Smith said.

"You sound like a couple of babies," Guy Darana said.

"He's a slick one, he is," Prine said. "He even did his imitations here for us, because he knew that if he didn't do them somebody would wonder why he'd given up his pet party trick."

Norris sighed. "I'm tired. You people are trying to foul up my case. Sleep on it, will you? Nobody leaves the island. I'll be back in the morning. They've taken the body to town." He looked around with a sudden, surprising, wry amusement. "Have fun," he said. He turned and left the room.

Guy whispered to Georgie and then said to the room at large, "We're taking a walk. The air is fresh out there."

"Be back in half an hour," Park said. "We'll all meet at the enclosed patio at the rear of the house. I think that by then we'll be able to talk calmly and iron out this trouble."

"Never!" Stacey Brian said calmly.

"But you'll give it a try."

"If it'll amuse you. It's your party."

Park walked off the terrace out into the night and sat in the sand, his back against the concrete sea wall. He heard a sound and looked up over his right shoulder. Taffy stood with her elbows on the wall, her head bent, her thick white hair falling toward him, a sheen in the pale moonlight behind her.

"He's right, you know. Smith," she said. There was utter sadness in her voice.

"Don't fret, Taff."

"The poor lost man. Poor Bill. This is a night for losing things. We're lost too, you know."

"How do you mean that?"

"I could go along in your plans before this happened, Park. I told myself you were doing good. But I really didn't believe it. Now a boy is dead, Park. And boys stay dead a long time. It's been nice."

He found her hand. "Trust me."

"I want to. But I can't. Not any more. Because this thing that happened is wrong. Norris is a fool. You're being a fool too."

"I don't want to lose you, Taff."

"But you did. When Bill died you lost me."

"Old Taff. The world mother, the open warm heart for lost dogs and children."

"Don't make bright talk. Just kiss me and say good-bye like a little man."

"You can't go now."

"I'll stay until morning, but this is a good time for good-bye."

WHEN he came in with Taff they were all in the enclosed patio. The wall lights were on, the bulbs of that odd orange that repels insects.

"Post mortem," June Luce said. "A post mortem by my generous uncle who pays me fifty bucks a day to grace his lovely home." She laughed. There was liquor in her laugh.

"Please shut up, dear," Georgie said.

"Well," Park said, "it all seems to be over. And I, for one, am satisfied with Norris' conclusion."

"I'm happy for you," Prine Smith said. "You're easily satisfied."

Guy Darana stood with his big arm around Georgie's slim waist. He rubbed his chin against her sleek golden head.

Taffy wore the look of a lost child. Mick, by the corner bar, was glum.

"He didn't die easy," Park said. "It

was quick, but from the look of his face there wasn't anything easy about it."

"Is this discussion necessary?" June asked. "Even at fifty a day there's a limit."

"I'm switching to bourbon, Mick," Stacey said.

June glanced beyond Falkner to the stone arch that led out into the side garden. She made a sound. It was not a scream. It was harsh and long and came from the deepest part of her lungs.

Park moved to one side.

Guy Darana had his arm around Georgie Wane's waist. With one heave



of his shoulders he flung her to the side. She spun, tripped and fell hard.

Bill Hewett, ghastly pale in the archway, his mouth twisting so that lips were pale worms entwining, said, "I left some unfinished business behind, I think."

Prine Smith stood without a movement, with no expression at all on his face. Stacey Brian stood with the glass in his hand. His hand shut and the glass made a brittle sound. A clot of blood dropped and splattered on the stone.

Guy Darana stood with his hands flattened against the wall behind him.

"No," he whispered. "No!"

His big pale hand flickered in the light, disappeared, reappeared with the glint of metal. Bill Hewett took a slow step toward Guy. The gun spoke, a slapping, stick-breaking sound, metallic in the enclosed patio. He fired pointblank at Bill

Hewett. He fired six times. The hammer clicked three more times. The gun dropped onto the stone. Hewett took another slow step toward Darana, grinning now, grinning in a ghastly fashion.

Darana's big, handsome face lost its human look. The features seemed to grow loose and fluid. Knee bones thudded against the stone. It was as though he were at prayer, worshiping some new and inhuman god. His lips moved and he made sounds, muted little growlings and gobblings that were zoo sounds.

Norris came in from the garden, as though walking into a drugstore for a pack of cigarettes. "Okay," he said, "print that. It ought to do it. On your feet, Darana."

Guy looked up at him and said, the words pasted stickily together, "There's nothing you can do to me because it is part of me to avenge and destroy. There is sin and weakness in the world. Weakness and sin. They have to be punished. I'm an instrument of death. The garden and the word. The time is now. All the rich orchard time of turning and no man is known who can unbend the others." He glared around at them, then slipped down onto his haunches and began idly patting the stone with the palm of his hand, cooing softly, crooning to himself.

"Ain't it the way," Norris said with disgust. "You go to all this trouble and what do you get? He flips the wig just as you grab him. Well, maybe we piled it on a little strong. Help me, you guys. If he's violent he'll be tough to handle."

But Guy Darana let himself be led out placidly. He looked vacantly at Georgie on the way out. She put the back of her hand to her lips and her eyes were wide and terrified.

THEY gathered in Falkner's room. It was two in the morning. The fireplace fire drove back the night chill.

Georgie's burned knee and elbow had

been bandaged. She had lost almost all her casual flippancy.

"What *can* you believe about people?" Prine Smith asked. "I had Darana pretty well evaluated in my own mind. A big handsome hunk with more of a spark of acting talent than he was willing to admit. I had him pegged to go a long way. Hollywood had nibbled once but he didn't like the offer. How do you figure it, Park?"

Falkner shrugged. "Women came running to him. He must have alternated between thinking he was a minor god and feeling a strong sense of guilt, probably the result of a strict childhood home life. Guilt can do odd things. He must have been on the edge when he made a play for Lisa. She turned him down. That was something new. He brooded over it. The one woman he wanted he couldn't have, and Hewett's happiness with her was like a blow in the face. He was an actor. He could do tricks with that voice of his. We'll never know for sure, probably, but I think he phoned her pretending to be you, Bill. I guess you can fill out the rest of the details. He justified himself by saying to himself that he was punishing her for a sin."

Park turned to Prine again. "Our precautions were very simple. Lew and Nick took turns going through your rooms deactivating anything that looked lethal. Lew was the one who found the gun while Guy was swimming. He reloaded it with frangible blanks that look like the McCoy. Mick found the unlabeled bottle. He emptied it on a hunch, washed it, refilled it in the kitchen. While we swam at night, Lew was out beyond the breaker line in the *Nancy* watching with night glasses to see that nothing funny happened. I saw Darana talk to Bill and then leave in the direction of the house. In a little while Bill followed along. I followed him. When I saw him go into my room I went down

onto the terrace below mine and climbed up. Guy left the room as I came over the wall. Poor Bill thought he'd really been poisoned. When I convinced him that he hadn't he was shaken enough to be willing to play ball with us. I called Norris and explained it to him. We needed a little more on Darana than Bill's naked word. Well . . . we got it."

Hewett said, "It's over now, I guess. I knew all along she must be dead. But because I didn't know who or how, I couldn't relax. Now I can start rebuilding."

"Can you use any help?" June asked, smiling.

Hewett grinned. "I'll consider it."

The group broke up. Park promised transportation after breakfast. Taffy and Georgie Wane lingered behind. Georgie gave Taffy a quick look and then she smiled at Park, saying, "Here I am, wounded. Look, does a girl get a chance to stay here for a few days? Recuperation, we could call it, and it won't cost you fifty a day. Only what I can eat."

Park looked expressionlessly at Taffy. "Why, I suppose that it would be—"

Taffy gave Georgie the warmest smile in her book. "Darling, Mr. Falkner intends to give you a little bonus to take care of the scraped knee and elbow. I really think it would be best for all concerned if you went with the others."

Georgie shrugged. "Sorry, boss. I didn't see any sandwich signs on him. 'Night, all.'"

Taffy shut the door firmly. She turned, her hands on her hips. "If you think for one minute I'd let you keep that—that *female* here after the others go . . ."

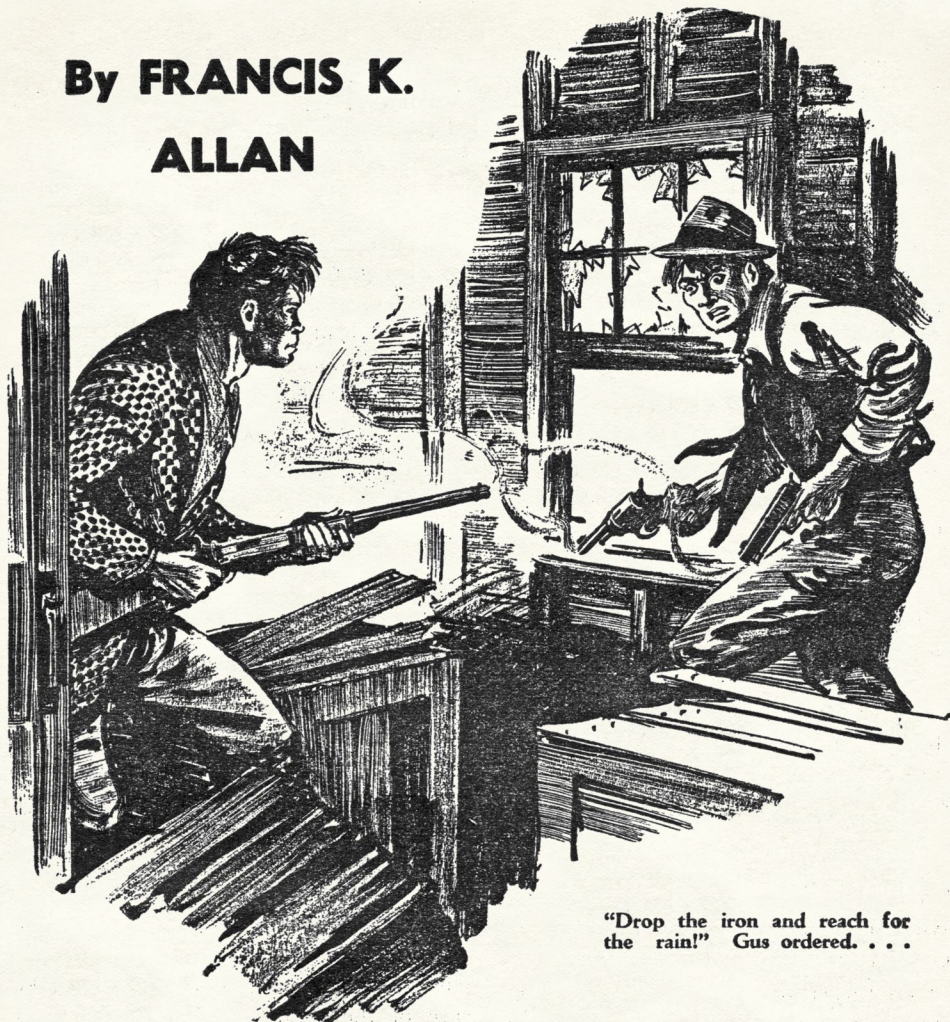
Park gave her a look of outraged innocence. "But you told me we were through!"

"Well, we aren't. Any argument?"

He didn't give her an argument. He was too busy.

THE END

By **FRANCIS K.
ALLAN**



"Drop the iron and reach for the rain!" Gus ordered. . . .

New York didn't know what it was missing before lame-brained Gus Woodson, crime-fighter extraordinary, came to town to solve the mystery of the murder that was never committed. . . .

ON A hot June afternoon, an ancient red trailer clattered into Times Square, drawn by an ancient red coupé. The coupé coughed and halted, and out stepped a large young man, cool of eye and somewhat battered of nose. His dark eyes were clear and fearless. His hair was red. His step was sure. His bow tie was also red. He was conservatively dressed in a brown-

Lame-Brain on the Loose

checked sports jacket and a Hollywood-drape mail-order sport shirt. He spun his lighter, lit his cigar, and strode into the main offices of the International Ajax Detective Agency.

"Woodson from Philly," he told the receptionist. "Tell Ajax I'm here."

"Ajax?" The girl looked closely. "There's not any Ajax. That's just a title."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Woodson returned her look inscrutably. Shifty little chick. Might be conning him, might not, he concluded. "Just tell the boss that Captain Gus Woodson's resting his heels out here, chick. Check?"

"Check," said the girl after a bat of the brows. "He'll be fascinated. He . . . Why, here he is," she said as a door opened and a heavy-set man with bushy hair strode in. "Oh, Mr. Garfield, here at last is Gus Woodson—the captain, you know, from Philly. First he was asking for Mr. Ajax, see?"

Mr. Garfield stopped in his tracks. Gus let him have his look, then moved in. "Well, Garfy, old eye, I guess you've studied my diploma and credentials. Yeah? In my letter, check?"

"Huh? Lett— Oh, that thing—" began the president of the country's largest and most successful detective agency.

"You're right," Gus said genially. "Augustus Cunningham Woodson, graduate with plus-laude only last week from the Hidden Eye Correspondence School Of Criminal Detection. Commissioned a captain due to finishing the course in six weeks instead of ten. I'll show you the Hidden Eye Grip some day. Later, later. But here I am and ready to go."

GARFIELD put on his glasses. "So you're ready to go," he repeated.

"Had myself on the front burner, keeping warm for you all the way from Philly. Mainly you'll want me on murder cases. Maybe sensational diamond thefts, as a

sideline. Got a few ideas to kick around with you, too. New wrinkles in the old game, see? Like to have you step down and nuzzle into my mobile criminal laboratory. One of my modern ideas of—"

"Was that thing down there—" Garfield began explosively. Then he drew a deep breath. "I'm a busy man, but not too busy to miss this. Hey, Nick," he called. "Come take a look at something fancy. Nick's my New York supervisor," he explained. Nick was short, rock shaped and bald. Strictly a low-pressure brain, Gus perceived, and spilled a few cigar ashes on him.

"Sorry, Shorty," Gus said, dusting him off. Nick brushed him away.

"What's this?" he demanded testily. "A dandruff demonstration?"

"Come along, Garfy, old eye." Gus led the way downstairs. "This you're about to see will drive hoods out of town like rats off a sinking ship, see? Say I'm parked here, radio going. Secret wavelength, understand, from your headquarters to me; that's my idea. You send me the code. A murder in Brooklyn ten minutes ago. So I'm over there in nothing minus. I set up shop at the curb, processing evidence, sifting clues. No headquarters red tape, no lost motion. The trail points to Newark, say. I open the siren, and it's Newark in nothing minus, again. I hound the criminals down. They never sleep and never get a breathing space. That way we—" He stopped as they arrived at the sidewalk. A crowd had gathered. Traffic was stalled. One cop was writing a ticket at the front, one at the back. Gus' huge face reddened.

"Break it up, coppers!" he roared. "Can't you read the sign on there?"

They gazed at him. "Yeah. Criminal laboratory, it says," one explained. "It also says No Parking over there. So you know what?" he said sweetly. "First you take this little ticket. You go to the

judge. You tell him all about it. Then you pay your money. Get moving!"

"I think," murmured Garfield, "that our organization is too small for a man of your talents, Captain. I think you should free-lance and get rich."

"Maybe you should tackle the Headless Beauty Case first," whispered Nick. "If you've got the guts, I mean."

"Spill the hush-hush to me, Shorty. What Headless Beauty Case?"

Nick whispered in his ear. "Nobody's talking. Even the police don't know. Last week the most beautiful girl in town was found in Greenwich Village at midnight on—er— Ninth Street. Her head was gone. One of our men found her when he stepped out for a beer. He gave us a ring, then—blotto. His call was busted in the middle. We sent our best men down. The beautiful headless body had vanished. Our man had vanished. The next day we got a mysterious package. *It was our man's head!* We were warned to lay off. Brother, we took the advice. You're crazy to tackle it, but there it is. Biggest secret crime in New York's history! The gal was wearing a fifty-grand diamond necklace. That's a lead for you. Her name was Mary. I can't tell you any more."

"It sounds like it has a love angle," Gus said softly.

"Maybe. You find those bodies, and you can write your own ticket at our joint, huh, Mr. Garfield? But don't mention my name. I want to stay alive."

"And here," said a cop, pushing in, "is another little invitation to the judge. Blocking traffic. Creating a public disturbance. Now, get out!"

"Flatfoot," said Gus coldly, "step around to my office when I'm an inspector." He grabbed the departing Nick. "Just a second," he said. "I don't like your eyes, and something tells me you're souping me. Something tells me this body won't found on Ninth Street at all. Now,

give!" he whispered menacingly. "Break it loose. Was it Tenth?"

"Yes," Nick admitted faintly. "I was lying. It was Tenth, Captain."

"Just remember," said Gus, flecking him with ashes, "when you're dealing with me, you're dealing with triple-A intuition, Egghead."

He climbed into his car and drove away. On Sixth Avenue he paused to throw the traffic tickets away, then he slipped out the "Criminal Laboratory" sign on the trailer, stowed it inside, and replaced it with a sign that said "Knives Sharpened."

He glanced around him warily, then drove swiftly away toward Tenth Street in Greenwich Village. The way he had it figured was that Nick had given him a bunch of bum steers, to keep him from getting ahead too fast. He figured the gal's name wasn't Mary at all. He figured it wasn't a diamond necklace. Probably her name was Kitty and it was a big emerald ring. That fitted a lot better. He didn't trust Nick. Garfy was okay. Slow, but okay. He'd shake the dead wood out of the joint, when he got in there. Check!

HE PARKED in a parking lot on West Tenth and made a deal to plug in on the electric line of the office. Before graduating from the Hidden Eye School, Gus had been a bartender. He knew a bar was the place to hear things. The Blue Penguin on Tenth gave him a hunch; a gal would go for a bar with a name like that, chances were. Also, if it had been a fifty-grand ring, the reward might be five grand, anyway. He could use it, in case the Hidden Eye crowd got nasty about the bum check he'd given for the last set of lessons.

"Beer, with a kick of rye," he ordered. The bartender was fat and sleepy. The joint was quiet in the hot afternoon. Gus fed a nickel into the music box. "Seen Kitty lately?" he wondered, not caring

much, just studying the band on his cigar.

"Not lately," said the bartender. Gus ticked that off to himself.

"Another kick of rye. Where did she move last time?"

"Berton Hotel, somebody said." The bartender yawned. "For all I know, she's maybe dead by now."

"Maybe. Maybe not," Gus said gently. "But if she was, who'd you pin the X on."

The bartender blinked and stared at him. "What'd you say again?"

"Nothing, Jack. I just dealt you a card. You can play it or throw it away. That's life—dealer's choice, see? And I just dealt you a card."

"Hey, what kind of double-talk—"

But Gus knew when to leave something simmering. He sauntered over to the phone, looked up the number and phoned Nick. "Egghead," he said softly, "open up a little wider for me. For instance, was the name actually Kitty, or wasn't it actually Kitty?"

"Woodson," said Nick in amazement, "how do you figure those things out?"

"Intuition, Egghead," he said. "I'll be dropping in again, Jack," he told the bartender. He dropped back by the trailer, changed to a polka-dot bow tie, picked up a briefcase that said "Insurance" on the side, and strolled over toward Seventh Avenue and the Berton Hotel—a not-bad, not-good hotel. A getaway-hideaway nest if ever Gus knew one when he saw it. He paused at the entry and took out the *Hidden Eye Handbook*. In Chapter Six, "Cracking the Case," it said:

When confronted with a wall of silence and uncertainty, the alert Hidden Eye operator will make his own breaks. He will force a wedge, as it were, by bold and courageous tactics which will shatter the criminal's poise, dismantle his veil of lies, and leave him an easy target for . . .

Gus entered the rather shadowy worn

lobby and used the house phone to call Kitty's room. "Kitty," he said easily. "She's expecting this call." He was not surprised when the phone clerk informed him that there was no answer. He wrote a note at the desk: "Sorry I missed you." He sealed it and handed it to the clerk. "Drop this in Kitty's box." It went in Box Number 406.

Gus walked around the block, returned to the side door of the Berton and slid up the stairs. An afternoon quiz program echoed from a radio. The fourth-floor hall smelled of cheap perfume, dust and garlic. He took out the Hidden Eye Key Set and easily opened Kitty's door.

IT WAS a small two-room suite with a bath. The bedroom was tumbled, the bed unmade, underwear thrown around, powder on the rug. The living room was plastered with glossy theatrical pictures of a blond in dancing tights and a big smile. A sugar. Strictly a sexy sugar, Gus perceived. This was going to be a hot-love deal, with maybe blackmail on the side. The ashtrays were overflowing and there was an empty bottle that had held ready-mixed martinis. On the floor, where they had fallen from a small desk, were three letters. Gus picked them up. At that moment the doorknob rattled. He thrust the letters in his pocket and spun around. A squat, gold-toothed man with small, ugly eyes stood there, his arms akimbo. "Looking for something, pal?" he asked slowly.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Gus tried to remember the section from the *Handbook* on Tight Places. "Don't be trapped," it said. "The clever operator will extricate himself from the most puzzling situations by the swift display of wit and force. *Keep the initiative!*"

"I thought you had a funny look when you came into the lobby . . ." began the gold-toothed man.

"Looks, Jack, don't mean a thing in

this life. They're just a front for what goes on in the back room. Check?" And as the man's jaw sagged for a moment and he blinked blankly, Gus swung a short left. The man grunted, and Gus brought across a smashing right into the double row of gold teeth. Teeth sprayed around the room, and the man went down in a lump. Instantly Gus dropped to his knees beside the man and jerked out the pocket-book. The identification card said, "William Gage, Manager, Berton Hotel." It might be something to remember, it might not, Gus concluded. No use hanging around.

He thrust Gage into the bedroom closet, shut and braced the door with a chair, and went quietly down the stairs and out into the warm sunlight. In the Hasty-Tasty Café, he ordered pie and coffee and took a once-over at Kitty's letters. One was a bill from a dress shop that said, "Third And Final Notice Before We Place The Account In The Hands Of Our Attorneys." The second letter announced that Madame Marlene, Seer of the Future, was moving her place of business from Queens to Brooklyn. It gave the address. Gus tapped the letter thoughtfully. That was something to check on, maybe.

The third letter said,

Kitty,

I've got to see you by Friday night. I'm not kidding. The gravy train is over, Baby, and you'll be smart to get that through your head. I'll meet you at the apartment for dinner, and you'd better be sober enough to hear what I say.

Eddie

On the envelope was the return address and name; Edward Stone, Theatrical Building, Broadway, New York. And there Gus learned Kitty's last name, also. It was Stone. *Stone*. Edward Stone to Kitty Stone! Things were opening up, but fast, Eddie was sore at Kitty, check? The gravy train was over, check? He'd

met her Friday, probably. This was Tuesday, right? Probably Eddie had met her and there had been a blow-up. Maybe Eddie hadn't planned to kill her at first. It had just happened in the white-hot rage of fury: husband kills estranged wife! Then Eddie had been forced to kill the Ajax operator to conceal the crime. He had petrified the Ajax office by sending them the head of their operator. Thus his double murder was locked behind the doors of terror. Check and check again!

"Hey, pay for the pie and coffee!" shouted the waiter.

"Emergency!" Gus flashed his Hidden Eye captain's badge and raced out. He sprinted to the parking lot, unhooked the electrical plug-in, and roared up Seventh Avenue toward the Theatrical Building. It was a shabby, drab building, located in the same block of Times Square with the Ajax offices. Gus noted this coincidence and filed it away for future reference. He left the car and trailer on a side street and thumbed through the *Handbook* to the chapter, "Closing in on the Quarry."

When closing in on the quarry, the keen Hidden Eye operator will display ingenuity and resourcefulness of highest caliber. Brute force may sometimes be the order of the day. Under other conditions, a more subtle approach may be called for. The H.E. op may then pose as a clerk, salesman, or even another criminal. But when the crisis is reached, the operator's sixth sense will guide him unerringly. *Act accordingly!*

THE DOOR of Edward Stone's office bore the words: "Publicity and Public Relations . . . Walk in."

Gus obliged. The reception room was small and unoccupied, but the door of an inner office was open and a man's voice was saying monotonously: "No . . . No, damn it, no! I don't give a damn whether you've looked into the future or into a bucket of dead fish, old girl! And stop bothering me!" He banged down the

phone. "To hell with Madame Marlene," he muttered. Then he noticed Gus. "What are *you* looking for?" he demanded testily.

This was strictly a bucket shop, Gus could see, and Stone had a sweaty, hunted look. He was thin, tall, black haired, and he looked as if he'd been hitting the straight gin for days without eating. A bundle of nerves.

"I'll deal a few cards, and you can guess what game we're playing," Gus said easily. He sat down, bit the end off one of Eddie Stone's coronas, then crossed his legs and smiled. "Seen any corpses lately?"

Stone tilted his head and stared. Just stared. Gus knew he had him baited now. It was cat-and-mouse from here on. He blew a smoke ring and gazed at the ceiling. "Heard of any secret double murders, Stoney boy?"

"Who are you? What's your name?" Stone asked uneasily.

"Just call me Gus. Names don't cut the ice in this life, Stoney. They're just like car numbers; they don't say how fast the motor will run." Then he smiled. "Want me to deal a few more cards?"

Stone moved his tongue across his lips. A pale, cautious glaze had come into his eyes. Abruptly Gus reached across the desk and gripped his wrist. "Keep your paws on the top deck, Stoney," he commanded softly. Stone sat absolutely still. Gus heard him swallowing. "I'll shuffle the deck," Gus went on. "Let's see what comes out. What about this? There's a guy and his doll, see? He loves her and hates her. He can't take her, but he can't leave her alone, either. He wants to kill her and kiss her at the same time. You're following me, Stoney?"

"You—you're crazy!" Stone exclaimed in a dry, tight voice. "We— Listen, maybe we better step down and— and have a drink somewhere."

"And let some hush-hush green change hands? Is that it?" Gus supplied.

"What? I mean, yes," Stone agreed. Perspiration beaded his forehead. "I can cash a check and we'll—we'll work it out when we get downstairs."

"Or would you be thinking of trying to waltz away in the crowd?" Gus wondered softly. "Let's nibble it over closer. Where is her head, Stoney?" He gripped Stone's wrist hard. "Where are the bodies?"

"I don't know what— I don't know," Stone gasped. "For God's sake—"

"Cut the squirming," Gus commanded. "I heard you talking to Madame Marlene. What's the score there?" His eyes narrowed warily. "She's looked in her crystal ball and gotten the dope, hasn't she? She's going to play a little blackmail tune on your bank account. Check? Answer me!" Gus thundered.

"Horses!" Stone choked out frantically. "Ruining me! She has ruined me! She picks horses, but they never win, but Kitty won't stop betting on them! I'm ruined and— Let go! You're breaking my arm!"

"So Kitty ruined you betting ponies, and you lowered the boom on her!"

"Yes, yes! I had to!" Stone almost screamed, writhing in pain.

"Where is the head?" Gus roared. Stone's eyes were glazed. He struggled to his feet and Gus dragged him closer and shook him. "Break down and say it!" Gus roared again. He knew Stone was hysterical, on the verge of the final truth. Gus' eyes narrowed. He dealt the killer card. "Suppose I told you, Stoney," he whispered, "that I've found little Kitty's headless body? What would you say then?"

"**YOU**—have—found—Kitty's—headless—" Stone repeated in a whisper. His eyes seemed to swell. His face turned white. He turned limp. "Oh, my God, no!" he screamed. Suddenly his limp body seemed to explode into Gus'

face. With one superhuman effort, he wrenched himself free, leaped around the desk and raced for the door. Gus let out a shout and sped after him. They went down the stairs, through the lobby, and by the time Gus reached the street, Stone was slamming the door of a taxi behind him. The cab lurched away. Gus ran to his car, paused only long enough to snatch out his Criminal Laboratory sign and hook it on the side, then he flipped on his siren and cut into the traffic.

The taxi was momentarily bottled up at the intersection, then it swept down Broadway. Gus bore down on his accelerator and cut the corner close. The swaying trailer smashed against a newsstand, dumping the stand into the street and sending up a cloud of papers. The news vendor screamed in angry Italian. A cop's whistle blasted. Gus righted the trailer. At that moment he glimpsed Nick and Mr. Garfield emerging from the International-Ajax Building. He leaned out the window and shouted, "Follow me! I've got him on the run!"

Their jaws dropped loosely. Gus bent over the wheel and bored through a traffic jam with siren wailing. Stone's taxi continued down Broadway. Gus heard the distant cry of other sirens. He peered into the rear-view mirror. Two prowling cars were on his trail. Just like those yellow coppers! Muscling into the payoff to grab the glory! Okay, but the last card

wasn't dealt yet! He'd show those blue-coated poodles how a Hidden Eye dog could bite.

Stone's taxi skidded to a stop squarely in front of the Berton Hotel and Stone raced toward the entrance. Gus got the picture: Stone had hidden Kitty's body in this very hotel where she'd lived! He was making a last desperate gamble to dispose of the evidence.

Gus set his brakes and jerked to a stop. He reached behind the seat, seized the Hidden Eye automatic rifle from its secret guitar case and bolted into the lobby after Stone. There he came to an abrupt halt.

In the middle of the lobby stood Stone, and his arms were around a lovely blonde girl—Kitty! Beyond any doubt, Kitty! Not only that, but Kitty was strictly alive and with a head. In fact, Stone was kissing her at that very moment, and she was saying, "...I was in Newark, that's all."

"Some maniac—some insane maniac told me you'd been killed," Stone was gasping. "He said he'd seen the body and...Oh, Kitty, Kitty, forgive me for all the things I said," he implored her. "I love you, I love you!"

"Oh, Eddie, I love you, too, and we'll never have any more fights, will we? And I promise never, never to make another bet on the horses! Kiss me again, Eddie!"

Eddie kissed her, and Gus let out a roar of wounded rage and fury. He saw the whole picture now. Nick had triple-

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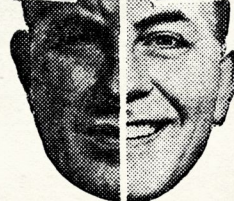
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crossed him! The dead girl's name *had* been Mary, after all! It *had* been a diamond necklace, and it *had* happened on Ninth Street!

STONE turned around as Gus roared.

He saw Gus, and a look of hatred crossed his face. He seized a heavy metal ash stand and threw it. At that same time, the manager's door opened and out came the gold-toothed man whom Gus had slugged. A bandage was around his mouth. He glimpsed Gus and his entire body began to tremble. Stone threw another ash stand. Gus retreated, recalling a line from the Hidden Eye *Handbook*:

The shrewd H. E. op will perceive the need for a skillful withdrawal at certain times. An inconspicuous retreat may often confuse the criminal and leave him an easy prey for a second attack. *Retreat quietly and speedily!*

Gus ran back toward his trailer. He had left the siren blaring, and now the two prowling cars swept in toward the curb, their sirens going, too. Cops leaped out, guns drawn. Traffic snarled. People came running. The cops shouted. There came a shattering of glass at the third-floor window of a vacant warehouse across the street. The glass rained down. In the jagged opening stood a massive unshaven man, an automatic in each hand, his lips drawn back in grim defiance. He sent down a shot. A cop screamed and staggered and fell. The man in the window fired again.

Then Gus got the picture! The empty warehouse probably backed on Ninth Street! The criminal had hidden Mary's body in that warehouse. He realized he was trapped, but he intended to fight it out.

Gus ducked his head and raced across the street. He set himself and plowed into the wooden door. It splintered inward. Ahead of him rose a long flight of dark, dusty stairs. He took them two at a time,

made the second floor turn and raced on toward the third floor. Guns were hammering in the street. He kicked open the door at the front of the hall and pressed himself against the dark wall. A bullet sang through the doorway. He could hear the man breathing in short gasps. Then came a metallic click as the man's gun emptied.

"Okay, hood," Gus ordered, stepping into the room. "Drop the irons and reach for the rain. We're taking that walk, pal."

The guns clattered to the floor. The hands went up, shaking. Suddenly, the face was frightened and beaten and cowering. Gus prodded him with the rifle. They went down the stairs and out into the street. The cops surged forward, led by a sergeant.

"Big Moose Madden!" the sergeant exclaimed, his face red.

"Here's your secret double-murder man," Gus said calmly.

"Secret and double, hell," snarled the sergeant. "There's nothing secret about the jobs that baby pulled. He was sitting in the death row waiting for the hot seat until he broke out, a month ago."

"Huh?"

"All I want to know," said the sergeant bleakly, "is where you got the tip he was hiding here? You can talk. There's a reward and you'll get it, Fat Boy. I just want to know."

"Uh," began Gus. Then he saw Nick and Mr. Garfield staring at him from the crowd at the curb. Their eyes were blank, unbelieving. Their mouths were open, as if they'd been talking to themselves and forgotten what they wanted to say. Gus pulled himself together. He smiled coldly, and remembered the section from the *Handbook* on Special Tactics.

"The inspired Hidden Eye operator," he said calmly and firmly, "may sometimes employ the 'red-herring' technique

(Continued on page 127)

ODDITIES IN CRIME

By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON

1. Greatest failure in the annals of crime was one George Turner of England. After spending half a century at the pursuit of his profession—namely, burglary—George, aged 78, was haled before a British judge. It was recalled that the defendant had spent most of his adult life in jail—and that he had been such a bungling, inept burglar that his upkeep in prison had cost society more than his depredations had cost it during his periods of freedom.

Accordingly, he was denied any further prison term, and sentenced to liberty for the rest of his days.

1



2. One night, more than a hundred years ago, someone stole from an Irish castle a portrait of Lord Nelson as a boy, painted by the artist Romney. There was a hue and cry, for the masterpiece was priceless historically as well as artistically—but no trace of either thief or painting was ever found.

About five years ago, a workman in the old castle discovered the thief's detection-proof hiding place. Behind a rotted panel, he discovered a secret room—and sprawled within it was a nameless skeleton in faded rags, fingers still clasping the famous portrait. Which raises the question—how smart can you get?

3. Probably the toniest thief of his times was Elphinstone Forest Gilmour, a scholarly youth who went to jail for stealing what most people pay to have removed—bugs. He frequented the London Natural History Museum to adore the 15,000,000 specimens there displayed, until temptation overcame him and he stole a stuffed beetle. That was the beginning. Soon he had stolen 5,000, including a prize valued at \$3,000 in beetle-loving circles. The museum, knowing its bugs, bided its time—and sure enough, Gilmour published an article about his stolen *TMESISTERNUS LATERIMACULATUS* in an entomological review, thus identifying himself as the thief.

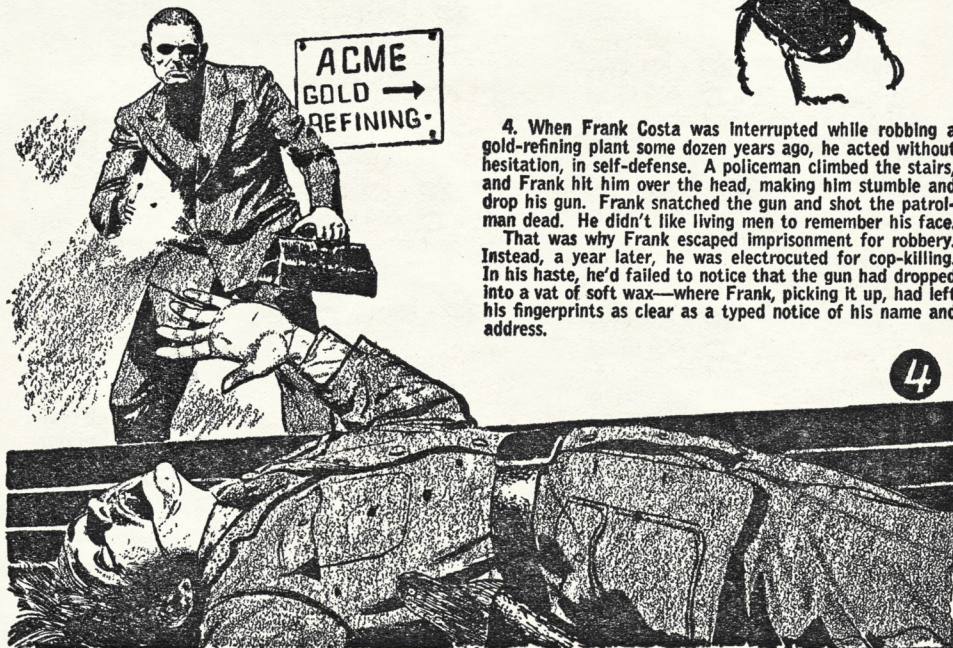
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4. When Frank Costa was interrupted while robbing a gold-refining plant some dozen years ago, he acted without hesitation, in self-defense. A policeman climbed the stairs, and Frank hit him over the head, making him stumble and drop his gun. Frank snatched the gun and shot the patrolman dead. He didn't like living men to remember his face.

That was why Frank escaped imprisonment for robbery. Instead, a year later, he was electrocuted for cop-killing. In his haste, he'd failed to notice that the gun had dropped into a vat of soft wax—where Frank, picking it up, had left his fingerprints as clear as a typed notice of his name and address.

4

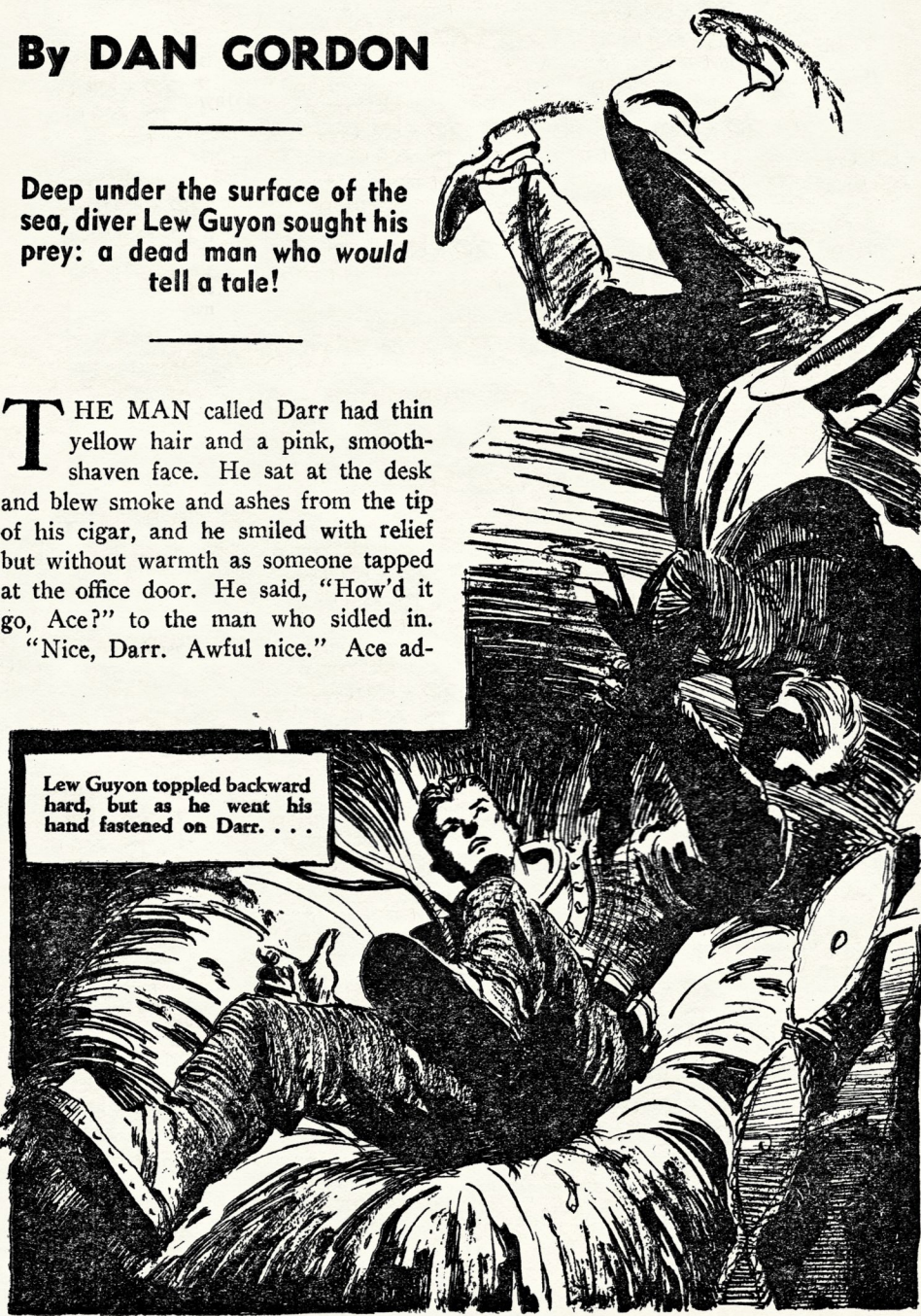


Lew and the Deep Six

By **DAN GORDON**

Deep under the surface of the sea, diver Lew Guyon sought his prey: a dead man who would tell a tale!

THE MAN called Darr had thin yellow hair and a pink, smooth-shaven face. He sat at the desk and blew smoke and ashes from the tip of his cigar, and he smiled with relief but without warmth as someone tapped at the office door. He said, "How'd it go, Ace?" to the man who sidled in. "Nice, Darr. Awful nice." Ace ad-



Lew Guyon toppled backward hard, but as he went his hand fastened on Darr. . . .

vanced to the front of the desk, grinning.

"Anybody see you come in?"

"I passed Frankie out in the hall."

"Got the stuff?" Darr's eyes dusted over Ace as if they were looking right in to his pockets.

"Yeah," Ace said. He took a flat jeweler's case from an inner pocket and slid it across the desk.

He was leaning forward, one hand still on the package, the other steadying him against the edge of the desk. Darr's bullet caught him in the stomach, doubled him up and drove him back. He fell with his fingernails scraping against the polished wood, and his blood ran out quickly in a little pool upon the carpeted floor.

Footsteps sounded from the hall. Darr opened the top drawer of the desk and swept the jewel case into it with a lazy, careless motion. Then he laid the gun on the desk.

He was tapping a cigarette against his thumbnail when they saw him sitting there and put their guns away.

Darr took a baggage check from the side pocket of his coat and flipped the pasteboard toward them. It skimmed the desk top, spinning, and landed on the floor. "South Station," Darr said. "The stuff ought to be down there. Frankie, why don't you pick it up?"

"Can do," Frankie said. He scooped up the claim check, straightened, and jerked his head toward the man on the floor. "What happened?" he asked.

"He came to me," Darr said. "He wanted to make a dicker. He and I to split just two ways—leaving you guys out."

Some faint sound came from the dying man, but it was quickly over, and in the eyes of the men who looked at him there was interest but no compassion.

Frankie said, "Didn't he know we wouldn't like that?"

Darr shrugged. "I guess he figured two of us could swing it some way." He

got up, circled the desk and joined the group. "Get going, Frankie. We'll ditch the louse while you make the trip to the station. Wait for us here if we're late—and don't get lost."

"I never get lost," said Frankie. "I don't cross nobody, and nobody crosses me."

"It's a good system," Darr told him, "and healthy."

Frankie grinned and said so-long. He went out very quietly, and the other men moved forward to do what had to be done about the man on the floor.

THE BOAT was a shadow shape on the dark expanse of water. Darr, in the bow, was a dark silhouette, a portly outline that swayed uncertainly with the motion of the boat. In the stern two other men sat and talked in whispers, speaking now and then to the swaying, grunting form crouched above the oars.

Yet another, the one who lay on the floorboards, cast no shadow and made no silhouette against the even darkness of the bilges. Not one of the men in the boat had been able to see him clearly since they'd loaded him aboard, but all were aware of his presence. He was a threat to them until they dumped him overboard.

The man at the oars paused briefly and said, "Ain't we out far enough, Darr?"

"Keep rowing," Darr answered. "We'll take him out a ways."

The water was very still. There was the clunking rattle of the oarlocks shifting in their worn sockets in time to the regular stroke. There was the sound of their breathing, but no breath came and went in the lungs of the silent passenger. Then the oarsman paused awkwardly in mid-stroke and lifted the blades from the water. "What about one of you guys taking an oar?" he rumbled plaintively. "My hands are getting sore."

"Stick with it," said Darr. "We haven't got far to go." The oarsman

groaned and resumed his work and Darr spoke again, this time to a man in the stern. "Bernie," he called softly, "you tie that weight to his feet?"

"Good and tight," answered Bernie mournfully. "You know, I'm gonna miss old Ace. And I never would have figured him for a guy who would pull a wing-ding."

"Neither would I," his companion said. "I couldn't figure the score at all when I heard the gun in Darr's office."

"The heel," said Darr from his place in the bow. "Think of him coming to me, wanting to cut you guys out."

"He had it coming," said Bernie. "We got a lot of time invested, what with one thing and another."

"It'll pay off," Darr said, "if the necklace is checked at the station."

The man in the stern said timidly, "Maybe you ought to have waited, Darr. Maybe we ought to have him still alive in case he gave us a bum steer."

"Maybe," Darr agreed. "But we've been six months lining up that Sanborne ice, and when I plan a job like that, I want the stuff in my hands right after the boy picks it up. I don't want any stalling around."

The other man said, "You sure he ain't got it on him?"

"Yeah," Darr said irritably, "I'm sure."

The man at the oars said, "I was gonna ask if you frisked him." Then, "How far we got to go, boss?"

"This'll do," Darr answered.

The two men in the stern moved, grunting and straining as they wrestled the body and its heavy weight over the low gunwhale of the boat. It slithered out of their hands, spray geysered into the air, and the splash resounded in the night.

Darr scanned the surrounding darkness, seeing nothing except the dim outline of the land and a pair of radio towers on the beach.

The towers were perfectly aligned as seen from the boat. The red lights that served to warn aircraft were arranged in a vertical line, and to an observer standing offshore in Darr's particular spot, it appeared that the lowest light in the nearest tower rested upon the tip of the most distant tower.

The man at the oars was watching Darr. "What about it?" he said.

Darr said slowly, "Let's go home."

The boat came around, with the oars making little gurgling whirlpools, and headed for the shore.

LEW GUYON awoke with the memory of the ringing phone fuzzy in his mind. It rang again and he grabbed it. "Yeah," he said without warmth.

"Mr. Guyon?"

"Yeah."

"My name is Darr. Sam Darr. I've got a job for you."

Lew Guyon looked at the clock. "It's three A.M." he reminded the voice. "Won't this thing keep till morning?"

Mr. Darr said that it would not. He said so again after Lew had reluctantly agreed to let him come up to the apartment.

"Before we get going," Mr. Darr said, "I'd better tell you my business is not for publication."

Lew Guyon looked sourly at a cup of luke-warm coffee. "You came," he said, "to tell me you can't tell me your business."

"Never mind the humor," said Mr. Darr.

"Get tough," Lew Guyon said. "That's all I need besides getting up at this hour—that you should flex your muscles at me."

Mr. Darr's eyes went bleak, but when he spoke his tone was apologetic. "Sorry," he said. "I just got up myself. As I say, I can't tell you my business. But I do employ several men."

"And?" Lew prompted him.

"An hour ago I got a phone call. One of my men is missing."

Outside the apartment, the city's early-morning noises were beginning. Lew heard them and thought of the bed he had left. "Bureau of Missing Persons," he said. "Or tell the story to any cop."

"I heard," said Mr. Darr, "you do marine investigation. I understand also that you have a tug with diving equipment. What I want to find out is how you'd feel about bringing a body up."

Lew looked at Darr with more interest. "Accident?" he asked.

"Perhaps. Or it could be murder."

"Which is it?"

Mr. Darr's eyes turned cautious, appraising. "Does it make any difference?" he said.

Lew yawned. "Not to me, it doesn't. There's no job in it for me. I take it your boy's in the drink somewhere, or you wouldn't be here now. But you don't have any business with me. My crew and I would cost you a hundred a day and expenses. The police'll fish up your boy for free."

"I know that," said Darr. "Unfortunately, they'd want to know how I found out my man had been knocked off. Now, the guy who phoned me said he was in the boat that took the body out. You know cops. They won't believe that."

Lew sat on the divan, swung his legs up and rested his feet on the arm. Waving one hand toward a chair, he said, "Sit down, Mr. Darr. What makes you think I do?"

"What you believe doesn't matter, as long as you'll take the job."

"Like to oblige you," said Lew. "I always need the dough. But I went legit quite some time ago, and now, any time I fish up a dead one, I've got to tell the police."

"By all means," said Mr. Darr.

"Huh?" Lew Guyon said.

"It's simple," said Mr. Darr. "In my business, which I gather was once your business, whenever someone is killed, reprisals are in order. An eye for an eye, you know."

"I know," Lew said. "I tried it. It's a hell of a way to live."

MR. DARR made an impatient gesture and leaned forward in his chair. "Skip all that. What I'm saying is, all I want to do is make sure my information is correct. There's a bare chance that my man simply left town."

"Double-crossing you," Lew said mildly.

"It's possible. On the other hand, if he was killed I want to know about it. If we make a reasonable search for the body and fail to find it, I'll assume he has lammed. If he's dead, you can turn him over to the police with any story you like."

"As long as I leave you out of the picture?"

"As long as you leave me out."

Lew Guyon considered his customer thoughtfully. The police had been nice about letting him conduct his business as an underwater investigator. They had been, Lew thought, particularly nice in view of his previous record in southern waters. Lieutenant Carver, of Homicide, had been most helpful, and Lew had too much respect and liking for Carver to tamper with Carver's department.

Yet he certainly needed the money. Although his business was growing steadily, and the Marine Insurance companies retained him on a flat-fee basis that covered most of his expenses, still, things had been slow of late. Salaries for a salvage crew and maintenance on a salvage tug—these were the items that served to punish his bank balance.

Lew had no particular liking for his prospective client. Darr was pleasant enough, but there was something about

him that made Lew wonder if he were a rat. But if so, he most certainly was a well-fed rat. "It might take," Lew said, "quite a few days. Some of these search jobs run into time."

"A hundred a day?" said Darr.

"And expenses," Lew said firmly. "If a storm comes up and we lose some gear, that expenses part can be high."

"How long would you estimate?"

Lew grinned at him. "From one to thirty days, depending upon how lucky we are, and how good your information is. Sometimes it's tough, even if you know exactly where the body went down."

"I was always lucky," Darr said.

"Me, too," Lew said. "But it could change."

STANDING on the deck of the tug, watching his mate, Callao Johnson, testing the underwater telephone, Lew had a vague premonition that it had changed. He had agreed to accept the job on the condition that he be allowed to turn the body over to the police as soon as Darr identified it. He had warned Darr that he, Lew Guyon, would be duty bound to hold his client for murder if at any time during the search it became evident that Darr had anything to do with the death of the late departed.

Darr had accepted these conditions calmly, and Lew, who had been among thieves often enough to know that there is little honor among them, had to admire the loyalty of the gang boss. Discovery of a body would cause the police to ask questions—questions that never would be raised if Darr were content to let the matter rest.

Lew mentioned this as they stood on deck together.

Darr thought it over and answered, "It's not only that this dead guy worked for me. He was a pretty good Joe. But everybody gets it sooner or later. It wouldn't make any difference if he'd been

killed on one of our jobs. But this way, I've got my reputation to consider. Me, I never have trouble getting boys, because they know I take care of them. If somebody tossed one of my men to the fish, they've got something coming from me."

It made sense to Lew. Knowing something of the town's underworld, he said, "You competing with Lefty Fallon?"

Darr laughed. "If I told you that," he said, "you'd know what business I'm in." He watched the waves for a moment, then turned back to Lew again. "You going down pretty soon?"

Lew switched his eyes to the row of indicators and spoke above the *chunk-chunk* of the air compressor. "I'm waiting for the air to build up," he answered, and when Darr nodded cheerfully, Lew found himself almost liking the man.

Most clients thought you could find a diamond stickpin lost in mud and silt six feet deep. They thought you ran around on the ocean floor picking up objects as easily as a squirrel gathers nuts. Only a few were able to understand the slow-motion process of underwater search. Apparently Darr was one of these, for he had not yet complained of the lack of progress, and the tug had been out four days.

Now Darr said mildly, "You see those radio towers?"

Lew said he did.

"I been thinking," Darr continued. "I believe the guy who phoned me said those towers were right in line when they dumped the body."

"You just remembered?" Lew said. "Man, you could have saved yourself some money if you'd told me that before. All you said at first was that the guy had noticed the towers. That gave us about ten miles to cover, and not too much chance to find anything."

Darr said, "I'm sorry. You think we'll find him now?"

"We've got a better shake," Lew said. "We'll shift the tug farther out, line up those two towers, then work in toward the shore."

"It might be better," Darr said, "if we waited until tonight."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Darr said. "I work by hunches sometimes, and I'm always sharper at night."

Lew didn't think much of hunches—except the one he was beginning to have about Darr. Something in the man's tone, a hint of authority, warned him that Darr was not as patient as he seemed to be. "Hunches are okay," Lew said pleasantly. "I used to use a crystal ball. It broke."

Laying it on the line, Darr said, "As long as I'm paying the tab, I'm accustomed to running the show."

"Mr. Darr," Lew told him, "I don't care if we wait for the full moon."

Callao Johnson, satisfied that the telephone was in working order, laid the helmet down. "Phones tested and okay, sir," he reported. "Moon," he added helpfully, "be full on the twenty-third."

"Good," Lew said bitterly, "Call me. I'll be in bed."

"You sleep till the twenty-third, sir?"

Lew looked at his huge Panamanian mate. Callao Johnson was the sharpest seaman he'd ever seen, a salvage man without peer. Just once in a while, now,

for example, Lew wondered if it were worth it. Callao was still looking at him in bewilderment.

"No," Lew said. "We'll get underway tonight. Tell the boys to get some sleep."

Callao Johnson said, "Yes, sir." Mr. Darr took a long cigar from his pocket, fumbled with the cellophane and said, "Thank you, Guyon."

THE MOON arrived as if it had been ordered. It hung cold and high in the heavens, flooding the deck of the tug and the surrounding ocean with pale, unearthly light.

Lew Guyon was underwater, just beneath the surface. He held himself there, lightly, with one hand on the descending line. The air was pulsing into his helmet. Everything seemed to be okay. He twisted his head to the left, said, "Going down," into the telephone. Callao Johnson's acknowledgement came clearly as he repeated, "Going down."

Lew hit the chin valve hard and plummeted into the depths.

As the pressure of the water increased, he felt the rubber and canvas diving dress molding itself to the lower part of his body, pressing tightly, hugging his legs. The hugging had started near his feet. It crept up to his hips, and when he felt it across his stomach he reached for the valve and gave himself a shot of air. The air came whistling in, pushing the fabric



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away from his body, cushioning him against the crushing pressure of the sea.

His feet thudded softly against a clean sand bottom. Lew shifted the underwater lamp from his left arm for a better look around.

A small and unafraid fish swam briefly into the circle of soft, glowing radiance, found Lew's bubbles more interesting, and moved up out of sight.

There was a tide, moving like a slow wind along the ocean's floor, and Lew gauged its force by the waving blades of sea grass. He hit the chin valve again, and as the air burbled out, he let himself fall forward. The water was clean, and the white bottom made for greater visibility. Lew crawled all over the area allowed him by his lines, and had found no sign of the body at the end of forty-five minutes.

"Take in the slack," he said at last, and felt the soft tug of Callao Johnson's hands on the other end of his lines.

"Coming up."

"Coming up."

Lew found the descending line, closed the exhaust valve with his lips to hold more air in the dress. Slowly, he became more buoyant, rising upon his toes now, floating toward the surface.

Darr came forward eagerly as they took the helmet off. "Find anything?" he asked.

Lew shook his head.

"Well," said Darr, "you know those hunches I get?"

"You told me."

"No. Not this one." Darr pointed toward the radio tower lights. "You see those red lights in there?"

"I see 'em. What about 'em?" Lew was beginning to dislike Darr, and he had trouble keeping it out of his voice.

"I've got a hunch," Darr said, "that if you were to move the tug in or out until those two red lights came together, we'd be in a better spot."

Lew studied the man for a moment, shook off a growing suspicion. If Darr had been instrumental in planting a body offshore, why should he go to all this trouble to fish it up again?

Thinking of that, Lew looked at the lights on the land, then swung his gaze back to Darr. "You think we'd better try where they line up?"

"Just a hunch," Darr said.

Lew said, "Maybe I'd better explain. When you take a bearing on something to determine your position at sea, it makes quite a difference where you stand. If you're at surface level, that's one thing. If you're up on the bridge of a ship, like this tug, that's something else again. You wind up in two different places. You see what I mean?"

Darr nodded. "Never thought of that."

"Which is it?"

"Which is what?"

"Your hunch about those lights. You see them like you're standing down near the water, or up here on the tug?"

Darr hesitated. Then he said, "I believe we'd do better if we assume we're looking at them from a small boat."

"You still want me to go down?" Lew persisted. "Mind you, I don't know there's been a man killed yet. But if I find a guy, and I figure I know who gave him the business, I'd have to turn the suspect in."

"If you could," Darr said, chuckling.

"I could," Lew said. He grinned at Darr and raised his voice. "Callao! We'll try a little farther in."

Callao shouted something to his men, and went up the ladder that led to the bridge. The anchor windlass rumbled. The tug shuddered as Callao kicked the stern around, then slid in toward the shore.

LEW got up and clumped to the diving stage as the anchor went down. Darr had not spoken again, but his silence was

not like the peaceful stillness of the ocean floor. It was the nervous, stifled wordlessness of a man with a lot on his mind.

Lew thought about that this time as he crawled along the bottom. And when he came to the shape that lay there, dark against the sand, he said nothing to those on the tug above, but went closer to look at the body.

The face was the face of a man who might have been anything. If it had been evil once, its expression of evil had gone. Now it was merely a face, blank and uninteresting, slightly bloated by water.

Feeling nothing in particular, because he had seen other men like this one, and hadn't known this one at all, Lew began to tug at the body. It would not move. He grasped the dead man by the belt and heaved, intending to tow his burden to the descending line. The lifeless arms jerked, then floated weirdly downward. The head bobbed mockingly, and the body stayed where it was.

Lew swore very softly and worked his way down to the feet. There he found that the sinking weight had become entangled with a sharp outcropping of bottom rock, and he settled down to the task of untangling the wire.

Whoever had bound that weight to the dead man's feet had intended that it stay there. Lew fought the wire's contrary springiness until the final loop came free. Then he tucked the feet beneath his left arm, swung his lamp to make sure his lines were clear, and dragged the corpse, feet first, back to the descending line.

There he paused to speak into the mouthpiece on the left side of his helmet. "Got him, Callao. I'll bring him up with me, then come back down for decompression."

"Coming up," said Callao Johnson.

Lew and his burden rode slowly up the manila line, their rise made easy by the air that distended the suit, and by Callao Johnson's gentle hauling on the lifeline.

Lew had one elbow crooked around the line, and it seemed to him that he was losing his grip on the body. When he reached the metal stage, dangling some ten feet below the surface, he said, "Hold it," to Callao Johnson, and slid the body onto the stage in order to rest his arm and get another grip.

The corpse dangled there unprotestingly until Lew was ready to resume the journey, but then the man's clothing caught in the flat metal bars of the stage as if he were reluctant to go on. Having signaled Callao, Lew said, "Come on, boy," and pulled harder. Something ripped free, and diver and body floated up toward the tug.

At the surface, Lew passed the body to Callao, and dropped back down to decompress. His feet touched the stage platform, and he stood there, swinging his arms to work the compressed air out of his bloodstream. He was faintly chilly, and from somewhere at the back of his helmet, cold water was leaking in, soaking his shoulders and trickling down his spine.

Had the dive been deeper, or had he remained down longer, he would have undressed on deck and popped into the tug's recompression chamber. But it seemed simpler to dangle over the side for the brief period of decompression required for so easy a dive.

So he dangled, and was uncomfortable, and listened to the rhythmic hiss of the air and the sounds that came down to him through the phone. He heard a sudden outburst of excited voices, and he said into the phone, "Callao! What's all the yapping about?"

"Mr. Darr, sir," Callao answered. "He goes through the dead man's pockets like he is looking for something. He's finding nothing, and now he is raising hell."

Lew said sharply, "Take me up." He let go the bale of the stage and swung to the descending line. A twist of the valve sent air jetting into his suit, and he rose to

the bottom of the ladder which was bolted to the tug's rail.

SLOWLY he clumped up the ladder, carrying his own weight and two hundred pounds of diving equipment. He was breathing heavily by the time his head came even with the rail, and he waited there, leaning forward, while they took his helmet off.

They had passed a safety line around him, but he was still wearing the weighted belt and the lead-soled shoes when Darr sprang to the rail, chattering and gibbering.

Lew said, "Calm down. Wait'll I get on board."

"I'm asking you now," Darr said. "And you're staying right there, wise boy, until you cough up those rocks."

Lew was tired from the dive and the exertion of climbing the ladder. He gathered that he was supposed to have stolen something from the corpse, and the idea made him laugh. He grinned at the rage-contorted face before him.

The grin seemed to drive Darr mad. He shoved the safety line man aside, planted a hard punch in Lew's face, and followed it with another. Lew's head snapped back as his neck was driven against the metal ring of the breastplate. Before anyone could reach him, he was toppling backward.

His hands shot out, grasping at anything that would keep him from tumbling. They missed the rail, the top ladder rung, grabbed at the safety line and found it slack. Then they fastened on Darr.

Darr grunted as his soft belly slammed against the rail, let out a whimpering scream as the falling diver dragged him over the side.

The two men went down together, and Lew kept his grip on Darr, feeling the water pour in through the open top of his diving dress. He held his breath and went down, sinking rapidly because of the

weight. Sharp pain tore at his eardrums as the water pressure increased.

He felt his body strike something. He let go of Darr and grabbed desperately at the thing he had hit there in the fluid darkness. His hands closed on the diving stage.

He hung on, and his downward motion stopped. He didn't know where Darr was, but he didn't care much because it felt as if his lungs were bursting.

As he shifted his grip on the metal platform, his hand touched something soft and pliable—a chamois or leather bag caught between the metal strips that formed the bottom of the stage. It wasn't anything he cared about. All he wanted to do was to get back to the air, the surface and the air.

The jerk on the manila safety line came as a sudden reprieve from death. Calloa Johnson or somebody was hoisting him with swift and powerful tugs.

"YOU'LL excuse me, sir," said Calloa as he helped Lew up the ladder. "So quick things happen I do not catch the line. I catch it as soon as I can."

Lew gasped, "What about that tramp, that Darr?"

Calloa Johnson shut both eyes tightly. "I look like hell when he comes up, but I have trouble seeing him. He is lying in the bilges now, and he is very full of water."

Lew clung to the ladder, panting. After a moment he said, "Put the helmet on. I'm going to drop down to look at the stage."

Calloa stared at him. "It would be better, sir, if we hoisted the stage on board. Then you may look at it in safety and comfort."

"Put the helmet on," Lew said again. "If that stage is carrying what I think it is, I don't want it jiggled around."

Reluctantly, Calloa slipped the helmet on, locked it with a quarter turn. Lew

caught the descending line, swung off the ladder and let himself sink down to the stage.

In the darkness he ran his hands over the smooth metal until he found the bag. Gently he worked it loose, feeling the firmness of something like pebbles or marbles under the pliable skin.

On the deck of the tug, he still clung to the little bag while the tenders were removing his gear, and when they had finished he stood to one side and let the shimmering stream of jewels pour out into his hand. He had never heard of the Sanborne jewels, but emeralds of this size, in this number, were enough to explain Darr's actions.

"Good?" Calloa said, looking down at the circle of radiance in Lew's hand.

"A boy like Darr," Lew said, "wouldn't chase a string of phonies. It's one of those dog dollars they put on society dames. I'd say worth a hundred grand."

"We couldn't," said Calloa carefully, "lose it overboard?"

Lew moved away in the direction of the recompression chamber. "We could," he said, "but Darr did that. And look what happened to him."

"That fellow," said Calloa. "We could really lose him. He would not float very long."

"We'll see," Lew said. "He owes us some dough, and he might try to duck the bill. Toss him into the air lock

with me. We can talk while I decompress."

Calloa nodded and moved away, and Lew went into the chamber. They threw Darr in behind him, and the chubby man flopped on the cold steel floor and rolled his eyes at the sloping walls. Stark fear showed on his face when Lew opened the valves and let in a rush of compressed air.

Lew sat on the wooden bench that ran along one side of the chamber and eyed the bedraggled Darr. "I wanted you here," he said pleasantly, "so I could make my report. You hired us to find a body. We found it. Counting expenses, you owe us a couple of grand."

Darr made a strangled, gurgling sound. "You'll feel better," Lew said comfortingly. "Just spit out that water and talk."

Darr said, "I . . . saw you with those rocks. Plenty there for two."

"Plenty," Lew said. "Only I told you I was legit when we started. Maybe you didn't hear."

"Don't be a sucker," Darr said.

"It'll hurt me," Lew said. "But as soon as you pay me what you owe, I'm phoning brother Carver, the guy who owns homicide."

Darr sat up suddenly. Apparently he was beginning to recover his health. "If you're so hot for the cops," he said, "then the cops can pay your bill."

(Continued on page 128)

AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

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MARGIE—IT'S YOU!

By DEAN EVANS



She stared at Gomez with
no surprise, no resent-
ment, nothing. . . .

One by one they left him, his girl, his friends, his companions in crime, leaving him now on this lonely night with his one true love—a blazing automatic!

THE BUILDING didn't have the traditional green globes but it did have a green neon sign that spelled out "Police Headquarters, Carson City."

The front doors didn't revolve; they opened silently, automatically, at approach. Inside, rubber tile on the floor kept things quiet. Even the sergeant at the PX—radio mike at his right elbow—spoke in

tones that didn't carry over ten feet.

It was a quiet place of subdued chrome, veneered satin walnut and hush. It was a quiet place—except for the roar of Captain Hart in the homicide office in the east wing.

"You've had twelve long lousy hours, Gomez. You've had fifteen special cars. You've had every other car on the force

alerted. You've had all the approaches to the city covered like bandaid on a wart!" He glared across the desk at Detective Lieutenant Sammy Gomez.

"And what do we get, Gomez? Do we get this flashy killer? Do we get his damned gun with the front sight filed off? Do we get even his stinking yellow Cadillac?"

Gomez' tanned cheeks flushed some deeper color that wasn't quite tan any more. His eyes looked like two black holes in a carnival canvas that somebody throws baseballs at. He laid a department flimsy down in front of Hart, said nothing.

Hart grabbed up the flimsy. He read it, sneered, and glared at Gomez again. "Oh, swell! A minute-by-minute report since a half-hour after Hamil shot the guy this morning. Dandy bookkeeping, Gomez!"

Gomez said softly, "Not quite every minute, Captain. From four till four-ten I took off to get a sandwich since I hadn't eaten lunch." He paused, added, "Nor breakfast."

Slowly the glare disappeared from Hart's eyes. He sat down at his desk, rubbed his thin, greying hair.

"I'm sorry, boy," he said. "Rub every word of it out, will you? It's just that it's been like that all day with me. The commissioner at first. Then a councilman. Then, about six tonight, the mayor himself. It ain't been funny just sitting here taking it, Gomez."

"I know."

"Action!" grunted Hart. "That's all they say. Just because Ernie Hamil burned down the son of five million votes—more or less." He sucked in a deep breath, smiled wanly. "Want to tell me a little about it, boy?"

Gomez smiled. "Not much to tell. Soon, after we've pulled down all the garages in the city, we'll find Hamil's convertible. Then, maybe after we've taken every block in the city apart stone

by stone, stick by stick, we'll get Hamil himself. I doubt if we'll ever get the gun."

"This fast, modern pace," said Hart morosely.

"I know. But the only thing left is the little people."

Hart looked up. "Tell it."

"There might be an informer who'd know something, who'd be willing somehow. After all, Ernie Hamil isn't a racketeer, he's a gambler. He doesn't have a gang."

"He's got two jokers I know of," said Hart. "A Mutt and a Jeff."

"Yes."

Captain Hart sighed with heavy fatigue. "Okay, Gomez. That'll take you up to about four in the morning. After that, how do you plan to spend the night?"

Gomez smiled a little crookedly over that.

THE Queen Bee saloon wasn't too lousy a joint. The warped mahogany bar testified to that. It looked as though it had been scrubbed at least twice since the disappearance of Prohibition.

The Queen Bee herself, her two hundred and fifty pounds stuffed behind the mahogany, looked as though she had been scrubbed, too—or at least she had that pink glow. Right now the pink glow was squeezing out an anxious look at Detective Lieutenant Gomez, who was moving toward the bar.

She said, "Hi, Lieutenant. Good to see you. Something—uh—special on your mind tonight?"

Gomez' brown eyes crinkled slightly. "Nothing at all. I'm only looking for a killer named Ernie Hamil who's still walking around Carson City with a .38 that doesn't have a front sight on it any more."

"Uh, Lieutenant . . ." said the woman. She looked over Gomez' shoulder, raised her small, fat-encased eyes to a tiny band-

shell over in the corner where a group of sport-shirted musicians sat listlessly. She lifted a painted-on eyebrow imperiously and jerked her head. At once the musicians came to life in what could have been somebody's arrangement of *Margie*.

Gomez turned from the bar. A few darkened corner booths disgorged couples who wound between half-occupied tables to a dance floor as slick as a bowling alley, weaving in and out of a purple spotlight as they went.

"Great gang, that band," the fat woman snorted. "A collection of Tony Pastors, Harry Jameses and Claude Thornhills."

"You pay them too much," judged Gomez. "It spoils them."

The fat woman leaned as much of herself as she could over the bar, pretended to wipe up a spot that couldn't be wiped up with anything weaker than lye. She jerked downward the folds in one corner of her mouth, whispered, "Don't turn now. Going out the door. Black hat and fur piece."

Gomez looked into the backbar mirror. Walking with a casualness that could have been anybody's walk was a rather tall woman. She was wearing a hat. She had a fur piece around her neck.

"Ernie Hamil's honey."

Gomez' fingertips gripped the bar. "Hamil doesn't have a woman," he said slowly. "It would have been noised before this."

The fat woman shrugged. "Ernie's got mike fright, they say." Her little eyes stared into the brown eyes of Gomez, watched a growing wonder spread there.

Gomez said, "I don't think I can pay for this round of drinks."

The fat woman smiled faintly.

"I'm homicide," went on Gomez. "Not vice squad."

The smile became fainter. The woman's little eyes still held Gomez, watched Gomez turn from the bar and move

toward the door. As Gomez disappeared she jerked her head around and gave the musicians up on the bandshell a sour look in keeping with the final sour crashing chord they were slamming at *Margie*.

IT WAS as though she had waited deliberately. When Gomez pushed out through the swinging doors of the Queen Bee and looked left on Hidalgo, there she was a few doors down, walking as casually as she had walked from the beer joint. At that rate—in that length of time—she should have been already at the corner of Laurel.

Traffic on the street was negligent at this hour. Gomez thought a little about that, thought a little about the fat bartending pigeon. He crossed the street, stood in the darkened doorway of a beauty parlor and watched.

The woman moved. Still casually. Somehow the fur piece didn't belong. Of course from the rear, at night on a dimly lighted street. . .

Gomez' eyes began to ache. A gambler like Ernie Hamil, a flash gambler. They have women. But a woman? And why didn't the department know about that? His slender hands became suddenly hot. A trap.

The woman had turned into Laurel now. Gomez looked up Hidalgo at the prowler car he'd parked there, took a step in its direction and then stopped dead. He sighed, turned and moved on foot down to Laurel.

The woman was a little distance ahead now. Up beyond, a red neon suspended from what would be about the second floor of a building spelled out in flickering cadence the name "Pachappa Hotel."

Farther down the block was another joint like the Queen Bee. A beer sign hung from that. Across the street were smaller signs here and there. There were no pedestrians on the street, barring the woman up ahead and one solitary man

who leaned against a parking meter.

Gomez stopped, studied, moved on. The man had a sickness—and the meter was directly in front of the dive with the beer sign.

The woman ahead had reached the Pachappa Hotel. She turned, pushed through the swinging doors and didn't look behind.

The lobby was dim; it would have been dim day or night. A long rubber runner ran down the center of the tiled floor, then branched off, leading to a scarred oak desk with a single bulb hanging over it. The other finger of the runner led to a tired-looking elevator cage.

Gomez went to the desk. Somewhere a steam radiator hissed haphazardly. Behind the desk, seated at a littered table was a tallish man with heavy hair. He was studying a newspaper. On the edge of the table a cigarette burned an autograph in the varnish. The man looked up.

"Mr. Stone," said Gomez.

The man stood. "That gives you the drop, Buster."

Gomez said, "Headquarters, homicide." He pulled the flap of his coat to one side and revealed the glint of badge. "You the manager?"

"Night manager." His face showed little expression. He looked, and probably was, all that a night manager of a place like the Pachappa had to be.

"I'm looking for Ernie Hamil," said Gomez.

Stone looked down at his fingernails. "That interests me very damned little. You maybe think a sport like Hamil has the bridal suite here?"

"I think his girl has a buck-a-night flop here," said Gomez.

Stone's face begrudged a smile over that. "Sure," he agreed. "That's about Mr. Hamil's speed. Him with a Cadillac and all. Or maybe you're right at that. Maybe the guy's taste in dames ain't

quite as good as his taste in cars."

Gomez said, "Funny, Mr. Stone." He watched Stone knock the smouldering butt off the table top, crush it out under his heel. "The woman who walked in here immediately before I did," he said.

Stone's eyes suddenly narrowed. He leaned a little over the desk. "Excuse me, copper. Something just occurred to me. You mentioned homicide?"

"Ernie Hamil shot a man dead this morning," said Gomez.

"Oh? That I didn't know. You guys do a nice gagging job on the press."

"Who is she?"

Stone smiled bitterly. "I don't know, but she registered in here tonight under the name of Margie Hall. Room 485."

"Why would she be here?" asked Gomez.

That made Stone sneer. "You're the cops, copper. Me, I'm here just to pull drunks in off the patio and roll 'em for the six bits in their pants."

Gomez sighed, moved to the elevator cage and went up a slow, jolting distance to the fourth floor.

THE CORRIDOR had dark-painted doors on each side, spaced exactly far enough apart to allow thin rooms in between. There were two overhead bulbs that burned yellowishly, one at each end. There were odors, half-muffled voices. A radio behind one of the panels blatted out news flashes.

Room 485 was at the end. Gomez stood before it, studied it. He got down one knee and put his face close to the door. The keyhole was an old-fashioned thing you could throw a shoe through. Light shone inside. He got up, slipped out his service revolver, tried the white porcelain doorknob. It turned. He leaned back a little, laid his foot against the bottom, kicked out. The door went back fast, banged loudly against the wall inside.

It was a room. It had a bed in it. Seated on the bed, facing him, was the woman who had worn the black hat and the fur neckpiece. She was staring at him now with no surprise, no resentment, no nothing.

Gomez stepped inside. The place had no clothes closet, only hooks on one wall alongside a dresser that could have been new fifty years before. There was a small, chipped, near-white basin built into a corner. The basin had two faucets which leaked. In addition to this the room contained one hard-backed chair.

Gomez went to the bed. Beside the woman was the black hat and fur piece. On top of the fur piece was a black-leather handbag. He got that, flipped it open. There was no gun. He put away his service revolver, went back to the chair and sat down.

"I didn't know exactly what to expect," he said softly.

"That's all right." The woman's voice was not ragged. A nice voice, somehow. Her eyes were pinned on Gomez', not asking, not saying, not anything. Just soft brown eyes. Staring. "You're looking for Ernie," she said dully.

Gomez nodded.

"We would be married, Ernie said. And that was swell, wasn't it? Ernie was a gambler, sure. And Ernie was a little crooked, maybe. But we'd be married. I thought maybe I could do something about it if we were married.

Gomez listened to the words. They sounded as though they'd been crying inside before they had had to come out in the open and become things to be heard. The woman's hands were folded in her lap, clutching a white handkerchief between them.

Gomez watched the soft brown eyes drop to the folded hands. He said, "Hamil killed a man."

"Yes." It was a dead word. "And there went everything."

GOMEZ leaned forward on the chair. His eyes became slits as he whispered, "That play back at the Queen Bee. That mysterious hocus-pocus. With the fat woman bartender and the band that didn't know very well how to play *Margie*. And you being registered downstairs as a Miss Hall. A Miss Margie Hall."

The woman looked up from her hands. "No hocus-pocus," she said. "That was to give me the tip the cops were there. Ernie has two men who work for him. They carry guns. He called them bodyguards." She almost smiled. "They'd have shot me before I could even get close to a police station."

Gomez shrugged. "So. But why the Queen Bee? Hamil didn't hang out in places like that."

"No. That's why you'd look in places like that. If you hadn't come looking in there then it would have done no good. I had to chance that the police would come to me."

Gomez nodded. "Where is he?"

The woman's voice became faint now, as though she were very ill or very tired. "I was to meet him tonight with the car at two o'clock on the corner of Laurel and Virginia. We were to drive south to Minden. There he planned to ditch it and steal another. And eventually Los Angeles would be a very large place to be lost in."

Gomez' eyes were slits again. "The car?" he said. "The police are not quite that pleasant. Every road from the city is patrolled since early morning looking for a cream-colored Cadillac convertible with fish-tail fenders."

The girl nodded. She reached in her handbag, got out a little key chain with two keys on it. "But not for a black Chevrolet coupé without fish-tail fenders." She threw the keys over. "My own car."

"Where is the car now?"

"At Laurel and Virginia, where we were to meet."

"And where is Hamil now?"

"I don't know."

Gomez stood up. "All right." He moved to the door. "You're selling him down the river," he said.

The woman didn't answer. Gomez looked back. She had the handkerchief jammed at her mouth now and there was a wildness in her eyes that hadn't been there before.

He closed the door on her sobbing.

LAUREL STREET was lonelier now, if that were possible. A light mist that held more than a hint of rain hung in the air. Gomez went back to Hidalgo, went down past the Queen Bee, crossed the street to the prowler car. He got his hand on the door handle, slid in and under the wheel.

A voice from the back seat said, "Neither one of us figure there's any reason to scream."

Gomez' hands tightened on the steering wheel. He flicked a look at the rear-view mirror. Seated behind him were two men in dark fedoras.

Gomez said slowly, carefully, "We've been more or less thinking about you two—and your boss Ernie Hamil."

The taller of the two said, "Just for the hell of it—we're not rodded, Lieutenant."

"You've got friends," Gomez said. "Maybe they're rodded."

The shorter of the pair seemed to smile. "Friends," he stated. "Rides around the city on buses. A couple movies. Sitting in St. Mary's all afternoon."

"I see," said Gomez.

"Something to show you," said the taller. "And don't get jumpy fingered. Like I say, we're not rodded." He reached over, flicked the dome light switch, then laid something on the seat top beside Gomez' shoulder. "Final pay checks. Ernie canned us."

Gomez looked down at the two one-thousand-dollar bills. When did you get these?"

"This aft," said the shorter. "In the men's room of the Nevada State Theater it was."

"All right," said Gomez softly. "We've been properly introduced. You're not carrying guns, and you're out of work

It was enough to break a private-eye's heart

For Willie Carmody had to turn down the dream-job of nursemaiding a tycoon's wacky daughter—for the charity case of fishing a flatfoot out of the homicide soup!

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now, and a small unemployed idea just slipped into your minds."

The taller one snorted. "That shows how wrong a cop can be. Ernie's a good Joe, Lieutenant. A flash that don't never sweat over a bet."

"Also a killer."

"Yeah. That's a nice word for it, isn't it? All right, so he shot a guy. That proves he was quicker on the draw than the bum that got it, nothing else. But that ain't brewing no tea. Ernie asked us to drive him one last spike. There was this gal—a nice gal, Lieutenant—was supposed to meet him tonight with a car. In about thirty minutes from now."

Gomez' hands curled around the steering wheel again. He sighed gently, said nothing.

"She's disappeared, Lieutenant. The car's sitting on a certain corner where they were to meet, but the gal's gone. And funny thing—she ain't home, either."

Gomez pulled his eyes away from the rear-view mirror, watched three cars go by fast, taking advantage of the green light at the corner, their headlights glowing animal eyes that ate up the night toward Reno to the north. The street seemed very quiet after that. And very dark.

Gomez said, "So what?"

"Nothing much, Lieutenant. If the kid doesn't want to share a seat that's fine. In fact, Ernie didn't want her to in the first place. He figures this is a little something he's got to do alone. But now she's disappeared he's worried."

Gomez remained silent.

"And that's the spike, Lieutenant. Ernie would sure as hell appreciate knowing if she's safe—wherever she is. He worries about that girl."

Gomez grunted, turned around in the seat and looked at the two. He didn't answer.

"You see," the taller one went on, "we all know that sometimes you run across a cop has something under his hat besides hair. And also something under his coat besides a gun."

GOMEZ picked up the two bills, handed them back, flipped off the dome light. He said quietly, "She's all right. She's safe."

"Not been dragged in?"

"No."

The taller of the two shoved on the door handle, got out, waited for his partner.

Then he said, "Maybe you're wondering something. We don't know where Ernie is right now ourselves. All we have is a phone number. A public phone."

The lateness of the hour, the mist and the darkness swallowed them up almost instantly, leaving Gomez staring out at nothing. He brought up his right hand and tried to press back a grinding headache that was prowling painfully between his eyes.

He drove down Laurel. The prowling car's tires made little intimate swishing sounds on the damp pavement. There was no traffic. Three miles to the north he slowed, pulled in to the curb, got out and walked two long blocks to the corner of Virginia Street. There was a cleaning establishment in the corner building, directly across the street from a 1942 Chevrolet coupé that was parked there, its front end headed in the wrong direction for that side of the street.

Gomez stepped into the glass-enclosed vestibule of the cleaner's, his form blending with the darkness of the night and the protective shadowing of the establishment's big overhanging awning. He took out his service revolver and leaned back against the door and waited. It wouldn't be long now.

YOU CAN'T GET AWAY WITH **MURDER!**

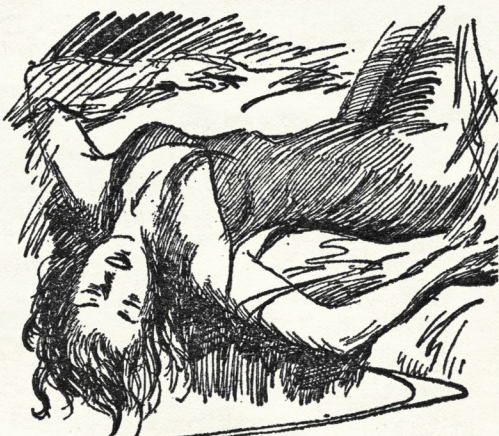


By NELSON and GEER

BLIND JUSTICE

Heinrich Marick, young insurance agent of Innsbruck, Austria, hated women and loved money. His first attempt to reconcile the two emotions brought death to a woman in Graz and considerable profit to himself. So, in 1935, he decided to try a repeat performance.

Turning on the charm, he persuaded his fiancée, pretty Maria Luckini, to sign a will leaving him her savings. Then one night he gave her a powerful sedative. When she fell asleep he filched the apartment key from her purse, connected a length of rubber tubing to a jet in the kitchen stove, stretched it into the adjoining bedroom and shut the door. Then he turned on the gas and left. Next morning he returned, stuffed the tubing in his pocket, opened all the gas jets and hurried down to the janitor's quarters. "My fiancée

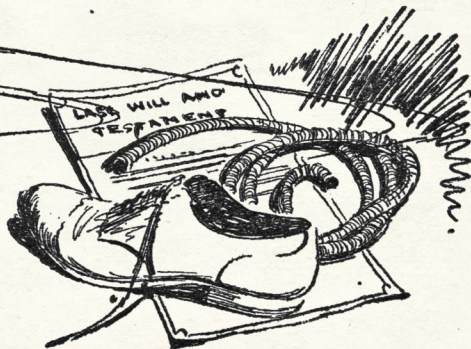


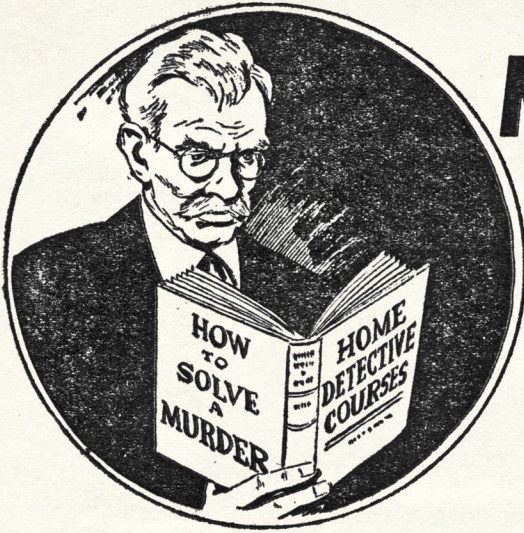
doesn't answer the door—and I smell gas!" he exclaimed. "Come quick!" The janitor admitted them with his passkey, took one look at Maria's still form on the bed and notified police.

Everyone thought it suicide—everyone but old Mrs. Bernhauer, blind charwoman at Marick's boarding house. She'd heard his views on women, and when he went away for the weekend instead of attending Maria's funeral, she grew suspicious. She cleaned his room extra carefully but found nothing amiss. She even probed in bureau drawers with her sensitive fingers. Opening the bottom one, she detected a scarcely discernible odor—gas! Feeling about, she encountered a box. Inside was rubber tubing from which the odor came. Guided by a neighbor, she went to the police.



Shortly after Marick had returned with two companions from his gay weekend, detectives appeared. What about the rubber tubing in his bottom drawer, they wanted to know. There was no tubing, he replied. No? Might they look? But certainly. They looked—and found the box empty. But a search disclosed the tubing hidden in the toe of a shoe. Bit by bit the story came out, and Heinrich Marick was convicted and hanged—because of the sensitivity of a blind sleuth, who wasn't a sleuth at all.





Mr. Bingler's Trail of Crime

CHAPTER ONE

Strange Bed-Fellow

MR J. C. BINGLER trudged sturdily through the evening, the rolled umbrella swinging gently in the crook of his elbow, his neat, shiny rubbers patting an even rhythm on the dry pavement. He was vaguely regretful that the afternoon had been cloudless.

He peered with startled eyes at the blatant poster gracing the front of the neighborhood theater, walked a bit closer to the curb. To his near-sighted gaze, the ferocious, snarling simian seemed to be reaching for him with bloody talons. *The Monkey Murders*, he read, then firmly



Mr. Bingler got all the adventure his timorous heart craved, when that corpse came into his life—and invited Mr. B. to share a slab!

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

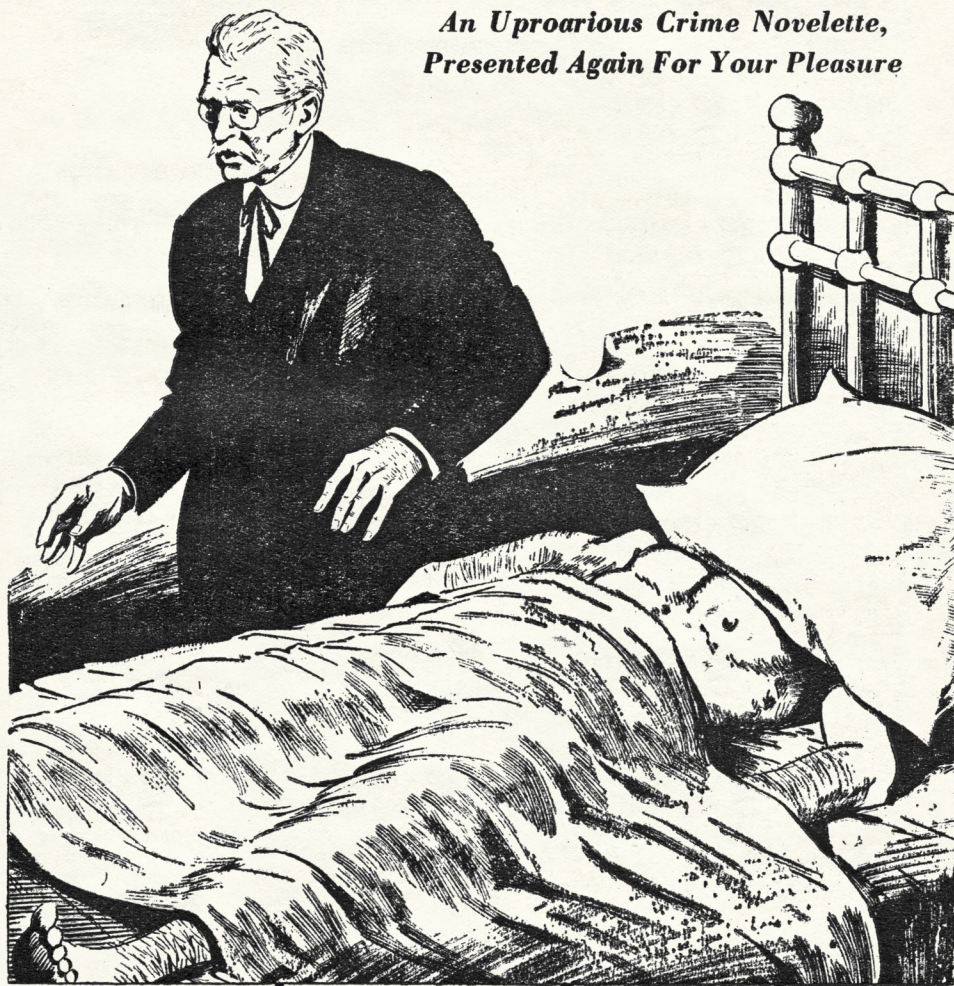
forced his attention away, shivering.

Had it not been for the fact that excitement strained the heart unduly, he would have counted out thirty cents and spent a vicarious hour in steamy jungles with a blonde heroine and a blood-crazed monkey.

Sighing with resignation, he hurried onward.

He glanced cautiously at the late traffic as he approached the intersection, started across at the ruby gleam of the signal. Then, with his heart clambering into his throat, he darted back to safety. A light

*An Uproarious Crime Novelette,
Presented Again For Your Pleasure*



truck, ignoring the signal, had blasted recklessly through the few, scattering pedestrians.

"Oh dear!" Mr. Bingler said unhappily, and swallowed the peppermint he had been enjoying for the past three blocks.

HE peered anxiously around for a patrolman, saw none. The truck driver was to go unpunished. He catalogued the few details of the truck's appearance in his mind, with the meticulousness forty years of bookkeeping had given him, then continued his walking when the traffic light changed once again.

He nodded abstractedly at the stoopsitting neighbors as he walked the last half-block to his apartment house, still shaken by that fifty-foot escape from the truck. Then he strode up the six steps to the brownstone front, unlocked the door with one of the keys in his key-folder, and latched the door carefully behind him.

Two minutes of climbing and walking brought him into the neat, clean apartment that had been his home for fifteen years. He hung his clothes on the ancient hall-tree, stood his umbrella in the rack and placed his rubbers in their usual place. He brushed his derby carefully, set it inside the hat box.

Humming a snatch of melody, he entered his small bedroom, switched on the light and crossed to the dresser. He loosened the string tie from his celluloid-collar, hung it on the tie rack. He rummaged in the second drawer, found a clean shirt, carried it over and laid it on the bed. Suddenly he straightened. He coughed politely.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Bingler, "but you must be in the wrong apartment. That is my bed."

Receiving no answer to his words, he leaned over and peered closer at the man whose body bulged beneath the sheet. He cleared his throat again, his myopic eyes flicking around the bedroom to make

certain that this was his own apartment and that he was not the intruder.

Satisfied that the man on the bed did not belong there, he reached out a steady hand, lightly shook the bare shoulder a few times.

"Oh dear!" Mr. Bingler said wretchedly. A chair caught the back of his knees and received his body as his strength failed him.

He popped another peppermint into his mouth with palsied fingers, shaking with nervous excitement, his round eyes bulging as they watched the man on the bed. The bedroom seemed incredibly tiny. The man must be dead!

In a few moments Mr. Bingler screwed up enough courage to investigate closer. He drew back the covers, discovered that the body was entirely unclad. Another touch of the corpse made him absolutely certain that the man was a corpse. He winced visibly at the coldness of the body, scrubbed his hand on a sheet corner. The flesh was cold and hard, as though it had been kept refrigerated for some time.

And that was strange; for more than a week, the temperature had been crowding the hundred-degree mark!

MR. BINGLER noted automatically that the man must have died from an injury to the head, for surgical stitching showed plainly in the waxen scalp through the neatly combed hair.

Mr. Bingler yanked the covers back so violently that the corpse's feet popped into view. Mr. Bingler quickly removed his glance. Whirling with unaccustomed speed, he darted for the bathroom, retched miserably for a few seconds.

At last, seated in the living room, the floor settling to its usual stability, he tried to make sense out of the affair. His thoughts were confused. But gradually, as the pounding of his heart subsided, his habitual orderliness of mind prevailed.

The man had been placed in the bed

already dead, for Mr. Bingler had been gone for less than an hour, taking his evening meal six blocks down the street. And the man had been nude when he had arrived, or else his clothes had been taken away by whomever had placed the corpse in the bed. Mr. Bingler smiled humorlessly at the thought of a naked man traveling through the city. Then he tried several peppermints at one time. It had to be some sort of practical joke, macabre as the sense of humor must have been. He perspired nervously at the thought.

And of course that brought up the question of who had access to dead bodies? Mr. J. C. Bingler's list of acquaintances was small, and he could recall no one person whose work entailed the handling of cadavers. Unless—Mr. Bingler frowned—could it be the intern who lived directly overhead?

Mr. Bingler shook his head at that; he and the intern merely exchanged casual greetings when they met. They were not intimate enough to warrant the prankish placing of a corpse in Mr. Bingler's own bed.

Mr. Bingler shrugged in bewilderment, ran his veined hands through the sparse white hair on his small head. He knew that he should put in a call for the police. But deep in his heart, oddly at variance with his puckish appearance, lay the urge to be a valiant adventurer. He did not want to call the police. Never in his orderly existence had such a thing happened before, and he hated to relinquish his grasp on what might prove to be a very intriguing adventure.

He lifted himself from his chair with sudden determination. His chin became firm and his eyes glowed with reckless resolve. To hell—he shivered ecstatically at the unaccustomed profanity—to hell with the police! This was Mr. J. C. Bingler's private mystery, and he alone should have the dubious honor of solving it!

CHAPTER TWO

Don't Go 'Way, Corpse!

DUST floated lazily in the still air as Mr. Bingler lifted the bulky envelope from the top shelf or the closet. He smiled grimly to himself, remembering that the envelope had not been touched for five years. Carefully avoiding the unnerving sight of the dead feet at the bottom of the bed, he climbed down from the chair, carried the envelope into the living room.

Mr. Bingler's rabbit face softened a bit when he dumped the envelope's contents onto the desk. He picked up the handcuffs, slightly rusty now, and tried them with the key. They still worked as perfectly as when he had first bought them from the Home Detective School more than six years before.

He fondled the fountain-pen tear-gas gun for a moment, regretting the fact that he had never had a chance to use it, although he had carried it painstakingly for months in the vain hope that he could foil a master criminal some day. He caressed the firing stud gently, aiming the pen indiscriminately at a lamp, a chair and a gilded mirror.

He reluctantly placed the pen and handcuffs to one side, lifted a small red book from the litter of papers and books. He scooted a lamp closer to the desk, leaned back and opened the booklet to the first chapter. The title of Chapter One read: "Bodies and Their Part in Crime".

Mr. Bingler flipped the page, inserted two peppermints into his mouth, used his tongue to worry one into either cheek, and read the words avidly.

Bodies are a necessary part of every murder, since without a body there is no proof of the crime, and no conviction can be made in court.

Taking it for granted that the victim has been murdered, the first step is to identify the body. Usually this is easily accomplished, identification being made by either a relative or an acquaintance. But if the

victim is not identified by the usual methods, the following is a tried and very excellent routine.

Mr. Bingler touched the page with a wet forefinger, lit and puffed his fifth cigarette of the day, something he had not done since he had heard a lecture on the bodily evils of too much smoking.

Make a complete study of the clothes, determining the victim's occupation. Ink stains, shiny spots on the apparel in relation to a seated body may indicate an office worker. Dirt, oil stains, cement dust, and the like, usually indicate some form of specialized or manual labor.

A scowl of annoyance created Mr. Bingler's pink cheeks for a moment. Drat it! There were no clothes from which to make pertinent deductions! He flipped pages rapidly, then stopped in the middle of a chapter.

... by the condition of the hands and feet. Office workers, and those engaged in like work, have softer skin on their extremities than those engaged in physical toil...

Mr. Bingler snapped the book shut, placed it on the desk. He girded up mental loins and walked directly into the bedroom. A snap of the switch, and extra bulbs gave a brilliant light for the task he was about to perform.

Mr. Bingler pulled back the covers.

His stomach's inherent stability was threatened several times as he leaned over the corpse to better see the dead hands. He touched the body as little as possible, conscious that a fine moisture—due to condensation—covered the warming body. Contact was extremely unpleasant.

He nodded his head several times as he investigated, tucking away several facts in his mind. He noted that the man was past middle age. He was satisfied that the man had been a laborer, for the hands were scarred and grimy. A small smile of pardonable pride flickered over Mr. Bingler's face.

He turned his attention to the feet, covering the rest of the body. He looked first at the left one, his face very serious as he made prompt deductions. Then he switched to the right foot.

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Bingler, and then broke the string that tied the identification tag to the big toe of the right foot.

He scowled at the small card, deep chagrin replacing the pride he had taken in his work so far. He held the card closer to his eyes, made out the inked words and numerals.

"Charles Devon, 50," he read on one side, then turned the card. "Red. 7/15/40. Skull fracture. Unclaimed. Tompkins."

Mr. Bingler clucked his tongue disappointedly. He took the card into the front room of the apartment and sat staring blankly into space. His mild eyes clouded a bit as he felt his little house of cards come tumbling down about his ears. He was a trifle discouraged; for the first thing he had tried to do in unraveling the mystery of the chilly corpse had been done for him in a ridiculously easy manner. He lit and puffed furiously at his sixth cigarette of the day out of sheer annoyance.

But the first disappointment did not thwart Mr. J. C. Bingler; he was made of sterner stuff. He would make a mystery out of the corpse—and solve it. The fates be damned.

MR. BINGLER flipped the pages of the red book, endeavoring to find a new approach. He sucked absentmindedly on a couple of peppermints, lit another cigarette from the glowing butt of the sixth. Then a section of type caught his attention, and he began reading again.

Having identified the corpse as to occupation, the next step is to find where the job was held. The best way to do this is to cull the newspapers for any items about missing persons.

If you find nothing that you think pertinent to the case in hand, then read the items

that have to do with crime. It is possible that the dead person may have been either a participant in a robbery, an accident, or even another murder. Then again, the dead person may have been slain because he was a witness to certain criminal activities. . . .

Mr. Bingler crushed his cigarette into an ashtray, laid the book aside and retrieved the pile of newspapers from the basket in the kitchenette. He felt a tiny quiver of excitement now that he had something definite to work on. With admirable fortitude, he brushed aside the recurring thought that he should inform the police or the Tompkins hospital.

He scanned the newspaper columns for a good ten minutes, perusing every crime item for a week back. There had been a score of small crimes in the past few days, but the only big crime had been on the fourteenth, the day before. The loot had totaled more than a hundred thousand dollars.

Mr. Bingler felt pretty cheerful when he read it. This was the perfect crime for his corpse to have engineered! He reread the item avidly, nodding his head over each detail. Then he caught sight of a small item tucked away at the bottom of the page:

Charles Devon, a transient, who was the victim of a hit-and-run driver fifteen miles south of the city three days ago, died today in a local hospital.

"Drat it!" said Mr. Bingler petulantly, and tossed the paper to one side.

He sat motionless, fuming inwardly, wondering if ever a man had been so beset with trouble. Here he had a perfect mystery to work upon, and the blasted thing kept proving it wasn't in the least mysterious! In fact, now that he thought of it, the only mysterious circumstances about the whole affair was: why was the corpse an involuntary guest of J. C. Bingler?

Mr. Bingler scowled truculently around the room, his thin fingers tenting and untenting themselves on his skinny knees.

Then, catching up the handcuffs, he reentered the bedroom. He clamped one cuff around the right ankle of the corpse, clamped the other cuff around the bed post.

Comparatively certain that the corpse would remain until he returned, and that if the entire affair was some monstrous joke the jokers were going to be fooled, he switched out the bedroom lights and closed the door behind him.

He thrust all the papers and books back into the large envelope, clipped the penlike gas gun into his vest pocket. Churning thoughts washboarded his forehead, but decision was in his every movement as he stacked the newspapers and switched off the living-room lights. He slipped into his raincoat and rubbers, hung the umbrella in the crook of his elbow and fitted the bowler squarely atop his head. He locked the apartment behind him, went down to the street.

A CRUISING taxi squealed to a halt at Mr. Bingler's imperious waving of the rolled umbrella. He clambered inside, wondering at his temerity and extravagance in riding anything but the elevated and subways.

"Tompkins Hospital, driver," Mr. Bingler said bravely. "And—er—don't spare the horses!"

The driver took in the bowler, the raincoat and the umbrella. He grinned broadly.

"Okay, Mac," he said, and shifted gears.

Mr. Bingler thought for a minute that the taxi was going to leave him behind. It went from low into second and second into high with scarcely a pause, gathering speed with incredible swiftness. He clung to his hat with both hands and wished he had not been so reckless.

Ten minutes later, a bit disheveled of body, but glowing of mind, Mr. Bingler paid the driver for the ride, and for the

hell of it added a twenty-five-cent tip. He wobbled a bit as he walked up the steps to the hospital, his nerves still tight.

"My name," Mr. Bingler lied complacently at the information desk, "is Frank Devon."

"Yes, Mr. Devon?" the girl at the desk asked.

Mr. Bingler firmly crossed his fingers behind his back, plunged ahead. "I understand," he went on, "that you have a patient here by the name of Charles Devon. I thought it possible that he might be my long-lost brother." He paused expectantly.

A look of pity crossed the girl's face. "I'm so sorry," she said gently, "but Charles Devon passed on yesterday afternoon."

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Bingler.

"However, if you wish," the girl said sympathetically, "You may talk to Dr. Swope, who had charge of the case."

"Thank you. I would appreciate it very much."

A few seconds later, in answer to the operator's call, Dr. Swope appeared. He and Mr. Bingler withdrew to one corner of the reception room, away from other hospital visitors.

"My apologies for bothering you, Doctor," Mr. Bingler said humbly, "but I am trying to locate a long-lost brother, Charles Devon, and I thought it possible that the patient registered here under that name might be he?"

Dr. Swope assumed his professional attitude. "I'll be glad to help in any way I can," he said sincerely, "but I can tell you very little."

"Would you give me the facts, the few you do know?"

"Well, Charles Devon was admitted four days ago. He was suffering from multiple fractures of the skull, caused by a hit-and-run driver. I operated in an effort to save his life, but his injuries were too severe. He died yesterday."

"How did you identify him?" Mr. Bingler asked.

The doctor considered for a moment. "Well," he said finally, "there was absolutely nothing in his apparel to identify him, but I managed to get his name and age from his few mumbled words."

"And that is all he said?"

"Well, with his cleft palate, his speaking was so blurred that I could make out nothing more."

Mr. Bingler allowed excitement to flare a trifle in his face. "Oh, dear," he said. "Charley had a cleft palate."

"I'm sorry," Dr. Swope said gently. "Everything possible was done to save his life."

Mr. Bingler's face lightened in gratefulness. "Of course," he said steadily. "Just two more things: Were you the only doctor on the case, and where is the body being made ready for burial?"

"Dr. Foster assisted, although it was my case," Dr. Swope answered. "The Jackson Funeral Home has charge of the burial. It was to be a county burial, you know, since your brother was without funds."

"Thank you very much!" Mr. Bingler wrung the doctor's hand in mute gratitude. "I shall go there at once."

He hurried through the swinging doors, leaving the doctor staring wordlessly after his small figure. Outside, he debated a moment as to whether to risk his life in another taxi ride, then straightened his narrow shoulders determinedly. He hailed a taxi.

CHAPTER THREE

Heads—It's Yours!

MR. BINGLER considered the situation, mentally applauding his histrionic ability. True, he had gained but little, but he had actually accomplished a deception!

He was not certain just what a cleft palate had to do with the case, but he felt that there must be something wrong there. Even if only to make the mystery more mysterious by not allowing the accident victim to tell more details of something before he died.

He arranged and rearranged his pitiful clues, trying to fit them into some sort of pattern, but without success. He had a chilly corpse lying in his bed at home, a corpse with a cleft plate that made his few words very intriguing. He also had—sudden light pierced Mr. Bingler's thoughts—a recklessly driven truck, in which, in all probability, the body had been delivered. He had a dozen minor crimes happening within the past few days, and a major robbery at the Research Laboratories, which were within a hundred yards of the hospital where Charles Devon had died.

But—the thought bothered Mr. Bingler—Charles Devon had been injured fifteen miles out of town, and three days before the big robbery. He could not have had anything to do with the robbery.

Mr. Bingler popped several peppermints into his mouth, sucked at them, hardly tasting their cool flavor. He might make a mystery out of this case yet! How, he didn't know, for everything seemed to be open and aboveboard. But there was no law against his trying.

He was still thinking, when the taxi stopped at the white-fronted funeral home. He paid the driver absent-mindedly, wondering what the police car was doing parked before the building. He brightened a bit; maybe the police were investigating his own private mystery.

He walked up the short flight of steps, opened the door into the dim coolness of the home. Carrying his bowler in hand, he approached the young man behind the single desk, wincing inwardly under the sharp scrutiny of several officers in the room.

"The body's in there," the young man said wearily, gesturing toward a side door, from which came a low mutter of voices.

"Er, I didn't think I was expected," Mr. Bingler said.

The young man looked up from the tabloid, noted the sedate clothes, the umbrella and the general appearance of the small man before him. His face grew apologetic.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I thought you were someone else to see Gat Benson."

"Gat Benson?" Mr. Bingler blinked myopically. "Who is he?"

"You don't know?" The young man gaped, then smiled understandingly. "Well, he was Public Enemy Number Three, and his body is on display. Frankly, it's a nuisance; cops have been in my hair for two days."

"That is very interesting," Mr. Bingler observed. "But I came to identify a certain Charles Devon, my long-lost brother."

"Charles Devon!" A film crept over the attendant's eyes. He stood up, then ushered Mr. Bingler into a small office. "I shall see if he has been interred," he said abruptly, and pulled the door shut behind him.

Mr. Bingler pondered the other's actions for a moment; somehow, there seemed to be something wrong in them. The attendant had seemed to be startled by the request to see Devon, as though... Mr. Bingler lifted the receiver of the telephone automatically, at its insistent ring.

"Hello," he said softly.

"Jim?"

Some imp of perversity made Mr. Bingler say, "Yes."

"Well, listen. Maybe you hadn't better send Devon's body over until the cops are gone. After all, there's no sense in taking chances."

"I suppose not," Mr. Bingler agreed.

"And look. I can't work on the body

at your place while the cops are there. And I can't afford to have it sent to me yet. Some guy has been to the hospital asking about Devon. Claims to be his brother. If he shows up there, stall him off, will you? It'll mean another hundred."

"Okay!" Mr. Bingler pronged the receiver, wondering where he had picked up that word, his eyes glowing at the significance of the conversation.

HE wished that he could have found out who was speaking, but he hadn't dared try. He mentally hugged himself; by the gods, there was some mystery about that damned corpse!

"This way, Mr. Devon." The attendant was back, opening the door quietly.

Mr. Bingler started a bit at the soundless arrival of the man, his eyes searching the other's face to detect any sign that would indicate the conversation had been heard. Satisfied that it had gone unheard, he followed the attendant into a large room that smelled of chemicals.

"This is Charles Devon," the attendant said. He rolled out one of the drawer-slabs from the refrigerator that filled one end of the room.

Mr. Bingler forced back the queasiness in his stomach, took a good look at the body on the slab. He forced himself to touch the bare shoulder, discovered that the cadaver was icy cold. He went through the motions of examining the features, feeling the growing wave-like motion of his stomach as it rebelled.

"I am afraid," he said weakly, "that this is not my brother." He fingered the identification tag on the corpse's foot, his eyes widening when the ink blurred beneath his finger tip.

"I didn't think it would be," the attendant said obscurely, then swallowed heavily at Mr. Bingler's quick glance. "That is, I was hoping it wouldn't be."

"Thank you," Mr. Bingler said. He watched as the slab was rolled back into its icy niche.

A few more words, and Mr. Bingler took his leave. He paused outside for a short time, drawing fresh air into his lungs, feeling the sickness slowly passing. He tried not to appear too interested in the light truck parked at the curb.

Deciding not to overdo his taxi cab extravagance at the present, he set out at a brisk pace on the two-mile walk to his apartment. He swung his umbrella jauntily, his thoughts moving with quicksilver speed. He had gained another fact or two, and several new conjectures.

He knew definitely that the corpse had come from the refrigerated vaults of the funeral home. Why it had been delivered to his apartment was still a mystery, although a faint idea was stirring in his mind. And he knew that someone else had been expecting the body to be delivered at a certain place. Who, he did not know. Mr. Bingler shivered a bit. It was evident that the funeral-home attendant was an accomplice in delivering the body; the phone call proved that. But why a body would be wanted by anyone was beyond Mr. Bingler's comprehension. Unless Mr. Bingler snapped his fingers—the person was studying dissection!

Mr. Bingler mopped his forehead, not noticing that a tiny white card fell from his pocket with his handkerchief and dropped to the ground. He rejected his last line of reasoning. Such a prosaic explanation was not going to spoil the mystery he was trying to solve!

MR. BINGLER walked more slowly as he came in sight of the staid apartment house in which he lived. Somehow, the closer he came to his rooms, the more ridiculous the events of the entire evening became. Slowly, some of his elation trickled away.

He knew in the back of his mind that

there was a logical explanation for everything, but he hated to admit it. The presence of several circumstances possessing the tang of the unknown had jarred his sensibilities. But he was intelligent enough to know that he had retired so much into himself that everything happening in the outside world held a queer meaning when he interpreted it. He flipped a couple of peppermints into his mouth, munched them in mild disgust.

The thing to do, and what he should have done in the first place was to call the police and let them take charge. He had recklessly spent several dollars on taxi fares, had upset his usual routine, had missed an evening concert, and had not even seen the slightest sign of a master villain.

"Drat it!" said Mr. Bingler angrily.

He knew that he had been acting like a callow school boy, expecting to find romantic adventure in wait for him, so that he might prove his mettle. Somehow, the thought raised irritation in his heart.

Well, he would have one last fling at his mystery of the chilly corpse and then let the law make sense out of the tangled muddle. There was one lead that he hadn't followed; and he would try to clear it up before the police were notified.

He let himself into his apartment house but, contrary to his usual routine, he followed the dim hall to the back, knocked on a rear door. The door opened slowly.

"Well, what is it, what is it?" The janitor was decidedly surly. "Oh, it's you Mr. Bingler. Is something wrong?"

Mr. Bingler tried to appear nonchalant by leaning casually on his umbrella. "Nothing special," he said. "I just wanted to know what time the delivery was made this evening?"

"Delivery?" The janitor scratched his head perplexedly. "Oh, you mean those guys with the rugs? Well, I should say about six o'clock. Why, wasn't they what you ordered?"

"Well, er," Mr. Bingler said grimly, "not exactly. They delivered too much! I thought that if you had recognized them I could return the extra bod—er, bundle, I mean."

The janitor shook his head. "Sorry, Mr. Bingler, but I didn't notice. They said they had a delivery for 318-C, and I let them go up."

Mr. Bingler considered briefly, noticed the janitor pawing at his pockets. "Have you lost something?" he asked.

"My master key. I must have mislaid it."

A premonition flickered into Mr. Bingler's mind. With a muttered thanks he turned and walked swiftly to the front of the hall, darted silently up the stairs. A cold finger of dread touched his spine.

He paused a moment outside his door, trying to hear any sound within. Breathing a sigh of relief, he unlocked the door



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and shoved it open. He slid cautiously into the short hall, closed the door behind him. Then he turned on the lights and disposed of his outer apparel. He switched on the living-room lights, moved tiredly toward the bedroom to take one final look at the corpse. He reached around the doorway, his fingers searching for the light switch.

THEN Mr. Bingle uttered a startled squawk, as an arm reached out of the darkness and encircled his thin neck. His mind tried to recall the jujitsu lesson of his detective course, but he had no time to think. He was fighting for his life against an adversary who seemed to be entirely muscle.

Little streaks of pain tore at his body each time he was struck, the little streaks coalescing into one great blast of agony. His flailing arms seemed to hit only the air, their strength evaporating as the seconds passed. A chair crashed beneath the plunging bodies, and then a savage fist draped Mr. Bingle against the wall. He sagged slowly into a blackness that grew deeper and deeper.

The assailant turned on a light, searched Mr. Bingle quite thoroughly, swore briefly at the results.

Then the assailant got to his feet, breathing hard. He moved to the bed, bent over the body. He worked with frenzied speed, as the dim echo of a siren came through the night. Then he switched out the light and the outer door slammed shut behind him.

Mr. Bingle came back to consciousness slowly, dreaming that he was dreadfully seasick on a boat against which monster waves pounded. Then memory came flooding back, and he struggled to his feet. He could still hear the pounding. Finally he realized it came from the apartment door.

He staggered into the front room, went into the entrance hall. He opened the

door, gazed blankly at the patrolman who was in the act of knocking again.

"Yes?" Mr. Bingle said blearily.

"What's going on here?" the cop said suspiciously, blinking a bit at Mr. Bingle's disheveled person. "Somebody called and said it was a drunken brawl."

"Drunken brawl!" Mr. Bingle steadied. "Oh, no, sir—nothing like that. I tripped over a chair while walking in my sleep."

If there was one person in the world he had no desire to see at that particular time, it was an officer with a prying nose. He smiled weakly at the cop, nodding his head in confirmation of his own words.

"Yeah, well, I'll take a look around." The cop herded the terrified Mr. Bingle before him into the apartment.

Mr. Bingle's heart bounced up into his throat, where it settled into a choking, pulsing mass. His hands made vague movements in the air, mutely trying to dissuade the cop from the intended search.

"But really, Officer . . ." he began, then bounded into the bedroom a step ahead of the cop. The cop switched on the bedroom light and looked directly at the bed.

Mr. Bingle winced at the startled gasp, hardly daring to look at the corpse. A gigantic gun had sprouted from the cop's hand.

"Sleep-walking, huh?" The cop's face was white. "You dirty killer!"

"Look, Officer," Mr. Bingle said rapidly, almost tearfully, "I can explain. You see, somebody delivered the body to this place by mistake this evening. I was just getting ready to call the police."

"Don't move or I'll plug you." The cop's eyes searched for a phone. "I'll save you the trouble of calling headquarters."

"Please." Mr. Bingle's voice scaled a full octave. "I didn't kill him. I've got a mortuary tag that'll prove he died from an accident."

"Yeah? Let's see it."

Mr. Bingler moaned brokenly when his frantic fingers discovered that most of his pockets had been rifled.

"The man who attacked me," he wailed, "must have got it. But you can see for yourself that the man died of skull fractures. See the stitches in the scalp?"

"Skull fractures, is it?" The cop's voice was utterly without emotion. "Why, you rotten fiend, there isn't any head on that corpse!"

Mr. Bingler turned and stared at the corpse, then he collapsed weakly to the floor.

CHAPTER FOUR

Showdown for Mr. Bingler

"**D**AMN all mysteries," Mr. Bingler told himself. "Damn them to perdition! Give me the old, sane life I've lived for so long!"

He closed his eyes, hoping that when he opened them he would find that the entire evening had been but a nightmare. But no, the stony-faced cop still stood there in the doorway.

"Well," the cop snapped, "where's the phone?"

Mr. Bingler roused himself. "I haven't one," he said heavily. "You'll have to call from some other apartment. But please, won't you even listen to my explanation?"

"I'll listen," the cop said unpleasantly, "but don't think for one moment you aren't going to headquarters with me."

Mr. Bingler told his story with the inspired genius of a man pleading for his life, his mounting terror painting his words with a glowing fire. But talk as he did, he could see the mounting skepticism on the cop's face. Gradually the words slowed, blurring to a stop before the other's disbelief.

"Okay," said the cop. "I've listened. Now let's get going."

Mr. Bingler got slowly to his feet, cringing like a whipped puppy. He knew that his longing to solve a mystery had tied him up in a snarl that might mean years behind bars, innocent though he was. Why, for all he knew, he might not be able to prove anything he had said, now that the mortuary tag was gone!

"Well, look, Officer," he said, his eyes brightening a bit with sudden thought, "I didn't murder that man in there; I don't know anything about it." He paused briefly. "But I would like to take one last look."

"Okay, but no tricks." The cop moved slightly to one side, feeling a bit nauseated at the monster's request to take one final glimpse at his handiwork.

Mr. Bingler turned slowly. His face paled at the ghastly sight of the truncated body lying so quietly on the bed. He clutched at the wall for a second, then forced his gaze around the room, seeing the signs of his struggle with the unknown assailant. His gaze sharpened as he caught sight of an object on the floor by the near wall.

For a moment the object didn't register on his tortured mind, then recognition came with a rush.

He knew suddenly, or thought he knew, what the entire thing was about. The theft of the mortuary tag had been the clinching clue. But as to what he could do with the solution, now that he was under arrest, he hadn't the faintest idea.

Then Mr. J. C. Bingler made a final gamble, proving conclusively that he was of the mettle of heroes. "All right, let's go," he said brokenly, and turned slowly from the bedroom. He moved slowly, his narrow shoulders slumping dejectedly.

Then he smashed his neat shoe down on the cop's right foot.

"Ouch!" The cop doubled in stabbing agony.

The next instant, Mr. Bingler had the gun and was waving the cop into a chair.

The revolver trembled in his thin hands, for he was holding it tightly in both of them, but the muzzle covered the cop.

"All right, shoot, you dirty little murderer," the cop said briefly. "But you'll never get out of town alive!"

"Now you listen to me," Mr. Bingler said testily, severely. "I never murdered that man in there, all evidence to the contrary. I told you the truth, and if you'll give me the chance, I'll prove it."

"Baloney!" The cop snorted. "I suppose you'll hand me the real murderer."

"There hasn't been any murder." Mr. Bingler was amazed at his own calmness.

"Ha! I suppose I've been seeing things!"

Mr. Bingler tossed the service gun into the cop's lap. "There," he said triumphantly, "that should prove I'm speaking the truth!"

The cop's hand closed automatically around the gun butt, but his face was alive with incredulous surprise. He looked from the gun to Mr. Bingler, then centered the gun on Mr. Bingler's scrawny chest.

"I don't understand this play," he said, "but I'll see it through."

"Very well. This is the solution I've reasoned out." Mr. Bingler's voice dropped to an excited whisper, his words tumbling over each other in frantic haste. Slowly, oh so slowly, belief crept into the cop's face, his dark gaze lightening.

"Can you prove any of that?" he asked eagerly, not lowering the gun.

MR. BINGLER unfolded a newspaper, indicated one of the items. Then he retrieved the slender object he had seen on the bedroom floor. He explained his deduction succinctly.

"Okay," the cop said, half convinced. "How do you prove it?"

Mr. Bingler explained that too, plotting with a strategy that surprised himself. The cop nodded his head as Mr. Bingler talked, finally holstered his gun.

"Okay," he said, "we'll try it your way."

"I hope it works," Mr. Bingler said apprehensively, and popped three peppermints in his mouth.

Then, followed by the cop, Mr. Bingler led the way from the apartment and up the stairs to the next floor. He waited until the officer was hidden from sight, then rapped lightly on the door of 318-D.

"Who is it?" The voice was muffled by the door.

"I'm Mr. Bingler from downstairs. May I speak to you for a moment?"

Dr. Foster, intern from Tompkins Hospital, cautiously opened the door, glanced suspiciously up and down the hall. "Come in," he said, shut the door carefully after Mr. Bingler had entered.

"Well, what is it?" the doctor said impatiently.

"There's a dead man in my bedroom," Mr. Bingler said excitedly. "I wondered if you could tell me what to do?"

"A body?" Dr. Foster frowned in surprise, his narrow eyes suddenly bleak and chill. "Surely you're joking."

"Not in the least," said Mr. Bingler, and he went cold as he saw the doctor's hand twist the key in the door lock. He knew as surely as if he had been told that he was not destined to leave the apartment alive.

"Well, how did it get there? Did you kill someone? And how does it concern me?"

"It's very easily explained." Mr. Bingler sat down in a straight chair, knowing that in another moment his legs would have collapsed. "You see, it was delivered there by mistake. The man from Jackson's Funeral Home thought it was your apartment."

"Go on." There was suddenly a gun in Dr. Foster's hand.

Mr. Bingler went even paler at the sight of the small revolver, but he forced a certain calmness into his voice.

"You stole a hundred thousand dollars worth of radium from Research Laboratories yesterday afternoon. You knew that special instruments would locate it if you kept it in the hospital, so you hid it in the cleft palate of Charles Devon's mouth. Without its lead shield, it was little larger than a match and was easily hidden there. Charles Devon was already dead, and since his body was to be removed immediately to the funeral home, you figured the police would not be able to trace the radium."

"You're pretty smart, aren't you?" A fine perspiration beaded the doctor's forehead; his thin lips writhed back from his teeth. "What else do you know?"

"I know this," Mr. Bingler said. "You contacted a man named Jim at the funeral home, and told him that you wanted the body for dissection studies, and ordered it delivered here. You had to do that, instead of recovering the radium at the funeral home, because cops were guarding the body of a slain ganster there."

"And?" Dr. Foster prompted.

"Well, you gave them your key so that they could get in, but they made a mistake and delivered the body to my apartment

directly below. Our keys are evidently interchangeable. Later, you heard at the hospital that I was investigating Charles Devon, and called the funeral home to tell Jim to cancel delivery of the body for a while. I answered that call."

"Plenty smart, plenty smart!" A knuckle whitened on the gun hand.

"I KNEW there was more than met the eye when fresh ink smudged on the tag tied to the toe of the corpse shown me in the funeral home." Mr. Bingler drew a large breath. "Then when I got back to this house, I found Jim still had your key. I surprised you in my apartment before you could recover the radium, and you knocked me unconscious, and escaped. But you didn't have time to take off the rigid jaw to get the radium; you had to slash off the head. I had the body cuffed to the bed, so you couldn't take it."

"Granted that I found out delivery had been made at a wrong place, and did as you said, how did you figure I had anything to do with it?"

"That was comparatively simple. I found your clinical thermometer on the floor of the bedroom. It had your name



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on the tube-case. And the fact that you searched my pockets for the mortuary tag made the evidence conclusive; you didn't want the corpse connected with the hospital."

"But I didn't find the tag," the doctor said grimly.

"No?" Mr. Bingler blinked myopically. "Well, no matter, I thought you had, and used the fact as a clue." He paused a moment, collecting his thoughts, then finished, "You see, the robber had to be you. You worked in the hospital, treated Devon, and the radium was less than a hundred yards away. You thought that you would be unsuspected, and that you could retrieve the radium at your leisure here, undetected. But a wrong delivery was made and upset all of your plans."

"Shrewd reasoning," the doctor said slowly. He went across the room and lifted the grisly head from behind a chair. "I heard sirens and had to hurry. I was about to remove the lower jaw when you knocked."

Mr. Bingler felt his body sagging now that his work was almost done. His eyes flickered toward the door, wondering why the cop didn't burst in and make the arrest. Hadn't he heard enough of the confession?

"You know, of course," the intern said softly, "that you're going to die."

Mr. Bingler swallowed his heart again. "You can't get away with it; the police will know that it was murder."

The intern smiled rather horribly. "Not necessarily," he said. "I'll make it look like suicide. I'll say that you came here to ask me to help you dispose of the body—that I refused, and that you did the dutch."

Sudden hope flared in Mr. Bingler's eyes. "But a suicide usually leaves a note."

"All right." Dr. Foster dropped the head behind the chair, came toward Mr. Bingler. "You write one."

"I won't do—" Mr. Bingler began, then shrugged in despair as the gun came up.

He fumbled at his vest pocket, drew forth a slim, black tube. He scooted a tablet closer to him on the table, fumbled with the cap of the pen.

Then, as the doctor leaned forward a bit, the better to watch, Mr. Bingler went into action.

He tilted the muzzle of the tiny tear-gas gun, pressed the firing stud. The gun popped softly and Mr. Bingler went sideways to the floor. Dr. Foster gasped in surprise and agony as the tear gas struck him squarely in his eyes. His finger tightened on the trigger of the gun, sent a slug blasting through the spot Mr. Bingler had just vacated.

Then he screamed in pain, dropped the gun, clawed desperately at his blinded eyes. Mr. Bingler swooped down upon the gun, circled a moment, then chopped down with all of his strength. There was a solid *clunk*, and the doctor crumpled.

Mr. Bingler staggered weakly to the door, turned the key with palsied fingers and motioned for the cop to come in.

"Why didn't you break in and arrest him after you heard his confession?" Mr. Bingler said indignantly.

"Hell," the cop said, "you didn't give no signal!"

Mr. Bingler shook his head weakly.

For once—and he swore a solemn oath—he felt that he had had his fill of mysteries. He pulled out his huge watch, checked the time.

"Can this be cleared up pretty quick?" he asked. "I've got something to do."

"Why, I guess so." The cop looked up from the telephone. "Why?"

Mr. Bingler grinned weakly.

"I thought," he said modestly, "that I'd see the last showing of *The Monkey Murders* at the Bijou. I need something to quiet my nerves."



Sam watched as the hand moved slowly over him, and still he waited. . . .

Her lips were soft and clinging, and the alcohol had set his blood on fire, and tomorrow was far, far away—so far, indeed, that for him it might never come. . . .

PICKUP

THE NOTICES were posted Saturday morning. They were anticlimax. Everyone on the line knew that the plant was going down. There was buyers' resistance to high prices and automobile sales had dwindled to a small trickle. When sales went low enough, they shut down the plant. That was obvious.

By **DON JAMES**

Sam Ourlic read the notice and turned to Happy Brian.

"This will fix me up just right with Laura," he said. "Put me right in the doghouse."

"You're always in the doghouse."

"You can say *that* again!"

Sam Ourlic was a medium-sized man of twenty-seven. He had served overseas and returned to the Midwest and Detroit to make a life with Laura. He worked on the trim line in the plant. Happy Brian, taller, broader, older, worked beside him.

Brian said, "You guys that get tied to a dame."

"It's okay most of the time. It's just sometimes. Things come up and you get in a beef and there's hell to pay."

The line was operating and noise swelled through the huge plant in a strange symphony of bedlam. The noise mingled with the odors of paints, welding, upholsteries, oil.

"We had a hell of a fight last night," Sam said. "I got home late. This morning she was still sore. She said she didn't care if I came home or not. She gets that way."

"Women," Brian said.

"I'm going to stay out tonight. Let's stop off and have a couple after work."

"Sure. At Wayne?"

"Why not?"

"Once you let a dame get you on the run, you keep runnin'."

"It wasn't like that once, Happy. I don't know. . . ."

SOME TIME during the night he lost Happy and he was in a '39 Ford with a broad-shouldered young man at the wheel and they were driving through the night over a crossroad between Expressway and Michigan Avenue. The upholstery smelled of dust where Sam's face was pressed against the back seat. He lay huddled on one side, his legs bent. The car swayed because the broad-should-

ered man was driving too fast. He was singing. Two girls were in the front seat with him and sang with him. One of them had a soft, plaintive Southern voice.

Sam kept his eyes shut and listened to the singing, but his mind was on the merry-go-round again and he kept hearing the girl's voice with the Southern accent and remembering Laura's Midwestern tang, only he didn't identify it as a Midwestern tang, but as the kind of voice he'd known most of his life, like his mother's and his grandmother's and Aunt Claire's.

Then he was remembering the French girl's voice the night in Paris and trying to know what she said, but not understanding and not caring because there was the understanding of soft lips and her arms around his neck.

The car swerved violently from the highway and tires skidded on dirt. It bounced and jolted over a rough road that was scarred from the winter. The car stopped.

He wondered if he should raise his head. The engine was still running and the man and the two girls were talking. The man kept saying, "That's up to you, Clara. We're goin' home. You do what you like, Clara. That's up to you."

The cessation of motion seemed to concentrate all the whiskey taste in Sam's mouth and he thought he would be sick. It had been all right while they were moving. Now he was sick. The beer and whiskey and the two drinks of gin. He couldn't remember where he had been.

He struggled to push himself up and one of the girls looked around, the one called Clara who sat next to the door.

"Want to get out, big boy?"

Sam opened the door and stumbled to the ground. They were in front of a small, dark house. Clara got out of the car and said something to the others.

"That's up to you," the man said again. The girl beside him giggled.

Clara closed the door and watched the

Ford turn and go back toward the highway. Sam swayed uncertainly, feeling sick. He was grateful for the cold night air.

"You better come with me," Clara said.

He felt her arm around him.

"I'll fix some coffee," she said. "You come with me."

The coffee was hot and strong. Sam opened his eyes and drank some more as he looked at the girl. She sat across a kitchen table from him. She wore a purple robe that looked like a man's. She was young and dark haired.

"Feel better now?" she asked.

"Wife said not to come back," Sam said.

Clara laughed softly. "You feel better now, honey?"

"Hell with her!"

"You can sleep here, big boy."

She got up and went into a room. He followed her and she stood beside a bed in the light that came through the open doorway from the kitchen. He reached for her. She came against him and her lips were soft and clinging. He shut his eyes and forced Laura away from his mind.

Suddenly the girl squirmed away. He reached for her again, but the room was whirling and he was dizzy. He fell to the bed and clutched at the spread to stop the whirling. It was no use. The whirling was too great. He gave away his consciousness to it and his breathing became heavy in deep sleep.

SOMEONE was shaking him. He fought up through sleep and the heavy dullness that was with him.

"You've got to get up! Quick! Get up!"

She was slapping his face now. He grabbed her hands and held them and for a few seconds they struggled until she became quiet and talked in a low, tense voice.

"You've got to get out of here. Through

the window. Mick's come home and has somebody with him. He's outside right now. Getting out of the car."

The door opened behind them and light flooded the room. He felt her push away and sit on the edge of the bed, her back to him. Beyond her a man stood in the doorway. Behind him another face appeared.

The man in the doorway said, "You tramp!"

"Please, Mick! Don't . . ."

The heavy slaps sounded loud in the room. The girl screamed and swayed from side to side with the blows.

"Shut up! Stop that screamin'!"

She huddled over into a small figure, moaning and rocking back and forth. The man wiped the back of a hand across his mouth and looked at Sam Ourlic.

"Okay . . . get off that bed. I'm gonna beat hell outa you."

Sam got off the bed on the other side and shook his head. Maybe that would clear away the fog. The movement made him dizzy and he leaned back against the wall and took a deep breath. The man hadn't moved.

"Listen . . ." Sam's voice sounded hoarse. "Listen, don't blame me. She brought me here. I don't know her. All I've done is sleep."

"I'm not blamin' you. She's a tramp. I just don't like your face. I'm gonna change it."

The other man came into the room. "Take it easy, Mick. We don't want trouble. We don't want nobody callin' the cops."

"Keep out of this, Joe."

"Not while I'm in a spot with you. I got to look out for myself. Lay off the guy. Clara's screamin's bad enough." He held the other's arm in a tight grip.

The man called Mick tore away from the grasp. He went over the bed after Sam, swinging hard, staggering in the softness of the bed. His fist glanced off

Sam's head and slammed into the wall.

The shock of the glancing blow somehow cleared Sam's head. He began to hit. Hard, frantic blows while he tried to remember the things he'd learned in basic training in the Army. He stopped using doubled fists and chopped down with the sides of his hands. He hit again and again. Mick butted him with his head. They went down behind the bed and fingers gouged, knees jerked up. Sam got his hand in Mick's hair and pulled back. Mick grasped at Sam's throat.

The bed rolled away from them and the man called Joe reached down and got his fingers hooked in the back of Mick's collar. He dragged him away and sat on him, fighting to catch his thrashing arms and twisting away from the kicking feet.

"Cut it, Mick! Cut it! I'll knock you cold!"

After a few seconds Mick was quiet. They stayed like that for a moment with Joe straddling the shorter, heavier man, clamping the arms down to the floor, putting his weight into it.

Mick breathed heavily and turned his head to spit blood. "Okay, okay. Let me up."

Sam had struggled to his feet and leaned back against the wall again. He tried to fight down nausea. Blood was salty in his mouth. He looked at the two men and then at the girl crouched in the doorway.

He was trembling inside and his knees felt weak. He took another deep breath and began to walk toward the door. The girl watched him. Her face was red and swollen. She stepped away from the door and he put a hand on the door frame to steady himself. Behind him Joe said, "Where *you* goin'?"

SAM spoke without turning. "Home."
"You're goin' nowhere."

Sam looked around. Joe had a gun in his hand and the small dark roundness

of the gun muzzle looked like a black button.

Joe was standing and Mick was on his hands and knees, slowly getting up. Blood trickled from his mouth.

Joe said again, "You're goin' nowhere."

"My wife's waiting up for me. I got to—"

Joe laughed without humor. "Your wife? Quite a guy with the dames, ain't you? What's the matter? Want to go home and tell her about Clara? In a hurry to tell her what a guy you are with the dames? Well, you ain't goin' home, bud. Not yet, you ain't. You're goin' in and sit at that table...slow and easy."

The girl shook her head. "Let him go. It isn't his fault. Nobody's got reason to be excited. He just brought me home from Wayne and he got sick and passed out. I thought Mick was at work and—"

"How'd he bring you home?" Joe smiled. "Walk? It's a long walk, Clara. Come again."

"Well, what's it to you! You're not—"

"Shut up." Mick was walking toward her again. "Tramp!"

"Leave me alone, Mick. You're going to say that once too often. You're going to push me around one too many times. *You* don't own me, either. I can walk out any time. I can walk out with *him*, if I want." She backed away from Mick, through the doorway toward Sam at the table. He hoped she wouldn't say any more. He didn't want her to go with him. He didn't want anything to do with her, with any of them. He just wanted to get out of there and breathe cold air and get rid of the sickness and trembling. He wanted to get home and lock the doors and take a long, hot bath and then go to sleep. Maybe it would be a dream. Maybe he'd wake up and . . .

Mick lunged for the girl and Joe put out a foot and tripped him. The house shook with the heavy thud of Mick's body on the kitchen floor. The girl ran to a

cabinet drawer and jerked it open. She turned with a paring knife in her hand. She didn't say a word—just stared at them, her shoulders hunched up a little, one hand against her throat, the other low with the knife clasped in her fingers.

Joe was angry. The half smile was gone and his eyes narrowed.

"Listen to me," he said. "Both of you. Cut it. All this malarkey while the cops are lookin' for Mick and me. They might be on their way here now. We don't know. Maybe we shouldn't even be here." He looked down at Mick and prodded him with a toe. "Get up and leave her alone. She's only a dame—a dime a dozen. We got to talk and we got to figure."

Mick got up and rubbed an elbow. He glared at Clara. "Put the knife away and start packin'. We're gettin' outa here."

Clara hesitated and the anger left her face. The knife hand dropped to her side. "What's wrong, Mick?"

"We ain't got time. It'll wait. We ain't got time for nothin' but gettin' the hell outa here here. Start packin', Clara. An' put some clothes on."

She hesitated and then put the knife in the drawer and hurried into the bedroom. She began to open drawers and throw clothing on the bed. She went to a closet and brought out two battered suitcases. From the kitchen the three men watched her.

Mick looked at Joe. "What's with the punk here?"

"What's with any punk who noses in where he ain't asked? You think I stopped you because I cared what happens to glamor-puss? The guy who makes with the dames. Nuts. I didn't want you wreckin' the house with him and havin' neighbors call the cops. They'll be here soon enough without an invitation."

MICK scowled. "Okay...so you're smart. You figure the angles. You're so smart, why didn't you know there'd

be two guys workin' that gas station to-night? That they kept a gun over in the lube shed? You're so damn smart you'd be on a slab if I hadn't dropped that guy at the lube shed. So where do you get off needlin' me?"

"Go ahead. Tell glamor-puss the rest of it. He's listenin'."

"Who shot his mouth off about cops lookin' for us? Me? *You* did. Why didn't you let the punk go?"

"I got an idea.."

"Sure! You got an idea. You know a guy. You got a tip. You're nothin' but trouble, Joe. You loused things tonight. But plenty."

"You haven't asked me how the cops got us spotted for the job."

"All right. I'm askin'. How?"

"You were drivin'. You couldn't look back. I did. The guy you creased at the lube shed wasn't dead. He was movin'. He was usin' a pencil on the concrete where he was layin'. *My* guy was out. I fixed *his* wagon. But yours wasn't. You know what he was doin'? With a pencil? Maybe you can figure that one out, bright eyes!"

Mick scowled. "Yeah."

"Yeah," Joe mocked. "Writin' down your license number. So they check and they get the address of that dump you lived in at Ypsi. It'll take 'em a while to trace you here from there. You told me you didn't leave no forwardin' address around, skippin' the rent as you did. But they'll trace you here. You hadda get lights and water turned on. They got records."

Mick wet thick lips. "Listen, Joe, you think that guy at the lube shed would know us?"

"With handkerchiefs over our faces? Be your age. But the license number is plenty." Joe paused and looked into the bedroom. "Clara, don't pack none of your stuff with Mick's. We may have to split up."

"Okay, Joe." She resumed her task of folding a skirt. "I got them separate."

Mick glanced at Joe and Joe winked at him.

"What's the pitch, Joe?" Mick asked softly.

Joe lowered his voice. "It figures. You call the cops and tell 'em your car is stolen. And the cops are gonna find your stolen car smashed to hell-an-gone at the feeder road that comes into Expressway toward Detroit outa the airport. It goes under Expressway. You know the place. A car runnin' off Expressway and hittin' the shoulder would flop down off the viaduct on that road. It just takes a little timin' to see no cars are comin' when it happens."

Mick looked at him. "What does that buy us?"

"It buys us plenty. Glamor-puss is goin' to be the dead guy in that car. I know a way to break a guy's neck. He gets a broken neck before the car takes off, but they tag it to the wreck."

Mick smiled. "Nice. What else?"

"I drop you near Ypsi. You hoof it in and make the call. Tell 'em you left your car parked there and it was stolen. I'll take care of the wreck."

"How about Clara?"

Joe studied Mick's face. "Look, Mick, you're fed up on that tramp, ain't you? Washed up with her?"

"Maybe."

"You gotta be. She can talk too much now. She knows about this guy. We gotta take our only out."

His voice had dropped to a low thread of sound that hardly carried beyond Mick's ears.

Sam had tensed his legs. He bit his teeth together until his jaws ached. He swore at the dizziness and hangover. He centered his eyes on Joe's knees. If he hit hard enough and fast enough . . .

He took a short breath and threw himself forward. His arms reached for Joe's

legs. Then the legs moved like a half-back's in an evading pivot. Something smashed down on the back of Sam's head and it was dark.

THE sharp lance of pain seared the back of his eyes. It echoed the beat of his heart so that he wanted to pull his head down, away from each beat and throb of pain.

Laura was talking. "You can't do this to me...you can't...you can't..."

He had come home late and he'd been feeling good, like laughing and telling her what a good time he'd had with the boys. When you are happy you want to share it with someone. He had those good stories Bill Slevin had told. And the game. There were two pairs, jacks and sevens, and over eight bucks in the pot. He'd drawn another jack. A full house and he took the pot. Even as he raked it in he thought he'd smile nonchalantly and give Laura the whole eight bucks.

But she'd been waiting up for him and her eyes were red. She'd turned her lips from his kiss and stiffened in his arms.

"You can't do this to me, Sam. Staying out half the night. It's after two. Do you hear me? You can't do this to me!"

The pain pulsed its steady beat. He clenched his fists and moved his head a little. He opened his eyes and stared down at linoleum.

"You can't do this to me . . ." It wasn't Laura's voice now. It was Clara's. He wasn't home. He was in this kitchen in a strange house. They were going to kill him! He'd never go home to Laura again. She'd be waiting. Or maybe she had left. Maybe she had packed the plastic overnighter she'd bought for the honeymoon. Maybe she'd taken a bus for Detroit. She'd get another bus there for Indiana.

Her folks lived at Berne. It wasn't much of a place and the house was old. He'd been there twice. She'd shown him

her room and the doll clothes she had packed in the attic, and he'd fallen in love with her all over again thinking of her as a little girl growing up in the old, rambling house so that she could some day marry him.

She showed him the church and they'd gone there the Sunday they visited. That was before they were married. The wedding had been in New York when he'd had leave before he went overseas. She'd come there to meet him, looking frightened and very young. She'd cried before the quiet ceremony, and afterwards. It was so lonesome, she said. But she was happy, too, she said.

The shows had been wonderful, and the Italian place where they had the red wine, and the hotel where the room was better than either of them had ever had, and a name band downstairs.

Only it hadn't worked out as they said it would when he returned. She went alone to church in Dearborn. She cried when he didn't get excited about the knife, forks and spoon of sterling silver she'd bought. She called them a place setting. How could he know that you got excited about knives and forks? The stuff they'd bought at the variety store looked good. Afterwards he told her the silver was wonderful and suddenly she laughed and held him hard.

"You're a boy," she said. "I guess you don't know what's in a girl's heart. The crazy things that mean a lot to her. Maybe that's why I love you so much."

He carefully remembered the pattern name she said the silver was and bought her another place setting. She'd cried again that time, only it was happiness.

She didn't always cry. She had nerve. There was the time the car ahead of them piled up and she knew how to press a cut artery to stop the blood and save a woman's life. And she knew how to give him hell. Only he didn't understand exactly why she was angry sometimes, ex-

cept it might be something about him, the way he was. The war and the things he'd seen and gone through... Well, if he ever got out of this, things would be different.

He lay perfectly still and concentrated on the smell of the linoleum and the enlarged coarseness of the print so close to his eyes.

Clara was talking. "I heard. I know what you plan to do. You can't..."

She screamed once. A short scream interrupted by the solid sound of a blow and then a soft slumping sound as she fell to the floor. Sam could see her. Her dress was above her knees and she looked awkward and uncomfortable. One arm was twisted beneath her. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing through her mouth. She was pretty even then. It didn't make any difference. He had to stop thinking things like that. Everything had to be about what he was going to do. How he could stop them. Joe. Mick.

"WHAT'S the deal now?" Mick said. "I'll take care of 'em here. I'm not takin' chances with 'em out there before I ditch the car."

"Joe, you're sure this is...?"

"Listen, Mick, if you want to wait outside until I finish, say so. If you can't take it, get the hell out. Only you can help me pack 'em to the car."

"But what if—"

"You want to take a murder rap for the station job? Is that it, Mick? You don't give a damn?"

"Okay. I'll wait outside."

Abruptly Sam realized that he had not been unconscious long, and that they didn't know he'd come out of it. He shut his eyes and let limpness flow through him. He fought to keep his breathing soft and steady.

He heard a door open and close. Footsteps approached him. He opened his eyes enough to see the feet. Joe's feet.

They were by his face and he saw the thickness of the soles, the thin scratch on one polished toe, and the trouser cuffs that broke at the instep. You always told the tailor at a store that you wanted them to just break at the instep. Laura had gone with him when he'd bought the grey flannel....

The voice of the instructor was far away in his memory. He frantically fought to clear his mind and bring the memory into sharp focus so that he could hear the words.

"...then he bends over you—if you're that lucky and don't get a shot in the back of the head to make sure you're dead before he takes your watch and what-have-you. Wait until he has his hands on you. Got it? Now watch this. Okay, soldier, I'm the guy and you're the man bending over..."

Sam saw the hand and felt it. He waited. Now! He grasped hard, twisted, rolled. He didn't do it exactly right, he knew, but it was enough. Joe sprawled on him and suddenly the strength of fear was in Sam, the desire to live. He felt his fingers sink into the softness of a throat. He pumped his knees hard, butted his head against smashed lips. Joe gasped in his face, and then a hoarse, croaking noise came from the man's mouth. Sam rolled and straddled him. He rocked forward so that all his weight was in his hands. After a while the croaking noise stopped and the man between his legs was still.

Slowly he released his hands from the throat. Joe choked a breath into his lungs and coughed. He was alive. Deliberately Sam brought a fist back and slugged it against the man's jaw. The head snapped over. He listened. Joe was still alive. But he was out.

Sam crawled across the floor and looked through a corner of a window. Ten yards from the house a cigarette glowed in the dark of the back yard. Mick was waiting.

He crawled back across the floor until he bent over the girl. He got an arm under her waist and dragged her through the doorway into the living room. It was dark in there. He stood and took several deep breaths before he stooped and picked her up. He was careful with the front door, remembering to put his weight down on the knob as he opened it so there would be no hinge creak.

Then he was staggering across the front yard with the girl in his arms. He opened the car door quietly. The key was not in the lock. He put the girl on the seat and squirmed on his back so that his head was under the dashboard and he looked up at the back-panel wiring. The wiring was familiar to his touch. This was something from the job. The panel of a car. The wiring he'd seen so often.

He jerked wires loose and twisted two together. The switch had been bypassed.

There was a second of suspense when he stepped on the starter. The engine took immediately and the tires skidded as he let out the clutch pedal. He snapped the lights on. The girl rolled with the swaying car and he dropped an arm around her to steady her. She moaned and instinctively he patted her shoulder, as he would have patted Laura's shoulder if she were in pain.

The lights were strong in the night and the highway was clear. In Wayne he found a state police car and two officers. They knew exactly what to do.

LAURA waited until he had stopped talking. She looked small and cold in her housecoat. The kitchen light threw a glint into her hair. The first paleness of dawn crept around the edges of the kitchen blind.

"That's all, Laura," he said. "It's everything. I haven't held anything out, and—and there isn't any more than that. I mean the girl..."

(Continued on page 129)



WE hope the mother of Camilio Leyra, Jr., is smiling in heaven these days. She should be, after the consideration shown for her by her son. Of course, Camilio has just been convicted of her murder, but you can't let a little thing like that keep the sentimental tears from rolling down your face, in view of the fine filial emotion displayed by the murderer.

Kings County (Brooklyn, that is, son) Judge Samuel S. Liebowitz had a choice when he sentenced Camilio to the chair from which there is no arising. It seems that Camilio had been convicted not only of doing away with his mother, but his father, too. Apparently some people just can't wait to become orphans. Anyway, Judge Liebowitz had the choice of sentencing Camilio to the chair for either of the murders, and, as the mother had died first, the customary thing would have been to sentence Junior for that murder.

But then came the sentimental touch. The day before sentencing, Camilio Leyra's attorney, Leo Healy, made a request of the court. He asked that Camilio be sentenced for his father's death—so that "Leyra's mother in heaven should never know that her son was sentenced for killing her."

And in Manhattan County (New York) Mrs. Emma Tom was committed to Bellevue Hospital for mental observation after shooting her little daughter, Toy Tom. Explained Mrs. Tom: "I didn't want my little daughter to suffer and be pushed around the way I have been."

Happy Mother's Day, everyone!

Well, for you mothers and fathers whose children haven't yet reached the age where they can lift a gun and forever eliminate you from the reading public, next month's *DETECTIVE TALES* is going to be loaded with just the kind of thrills and excitement you know you can rely on good old DT to supply. We don't specialize in knocking off hard-working parents, or even little children, but if you like your blondes beautiful and dead, your killers cold and lethal, and the pursuit tense and spine-tingling, come right to murder headquarters here at *DETECTIVE TALES*.

And just to show you that we mean every word we say, take a look at the lineup of these masters of fictional murder: Alan Ritner Anderson; William Rough, Dan Gordon, Francis K. Allan, Ben Nelson and many others. How's that sound, readers?

If you're still around, we'll see you August 25th.—*The Editor*



In the hotel room, Schwartz shoved a pistol into Craig's belly. "Frisk him, Thaddeus," he ordered. . . .

When Killers Meet—

By ROY W. CLIBORN

Craig Whitaker made a hundred-thousand-dollar date with the Grim Reaper—but could he stand up that impatient specter?

OUT of the corner of his eye Craig Whitaker saw the bailiff slip the note in front of him. Not missing a beat in his relentless cross-examination of the policeman on the witness stand, Craig absorbed its contents: "Call

office immediately. Urgent. Virginia."

Craig cut short his blistering interrogation, with a mental note to call the witness back later for another round. As the surprised and relieved officer left the stand, Craig whispered to his admiring junior associate, "You handle the next witness. I've got to make a phone call."

Jerry Cordovan nodded eagerly, his face beaming at the responsibility suddenly thrust upon him.

Craig used the phone in the clerk's office to call his pretty secretary, Virginia Owens.

"Mrs. Whitaker just called," Virginia told him.

"So what?" Craig demanded. He hadn't thought about Joyce in weeks. Didn't even know she was in town.

"She's at the Park Regal and wants to see you immediately," Virginia continued.

Craig blew his top. "You mean you called me out of a trial to tell me my drunken ex-wife wants to talk to me?"

A deputy clerk was eyeing Craig oddly. He'd have to calm it down.

"I'm sorry if I did wrong, Mr. Whitaker," Virginia said unsteadily. "But Mrs. Whitaker was almost hysterical. Said it was a matter of life and death. I didn't want to call you—and I was afraid not to."

"Tell her I'll come by after court adjourns," Craig said, his anger ebbing. "And, Virginia," he added, almost seeing the tears in her large, dark eyes, "it's all right about calling me. You used your best judgment—and that's what I want."

Virginia was becoming something of a problem. She was young and impressionable, and it was painfully apparent that she had worked herself into the notion that she was in love with him. She was a clean, sweet kid, about the right age for Jerry Cordovan. Perhaps he could shunt her over to Jerry. Have to work on that.

Craig returned to the courtroom, to

resume at the first opportunity his merciless grilling of the witness who had thought he was through. There wasn't a policeman on the force who wouldn't rather enter a building in the night time to bring out an armed prowler than face the tall, harsh-featured attorney on cross-examination.

HAVING himself announced at the Park Regal desk, Craig was told that Mrs. Whitaker was expecting him. In Suite 16-A. That raised his eyebrows. Usually when Joyce came breezing into town unexpectedly it was to put the bite on him. Suite 16-A hardly sounded as if she were broke.

The sight of her gave his heart the same old jump it always had. He had long ago admitted to himself he was still in love with the Joyce he had married. Or at least the Joyce that he thought she was. But that sweet creature was as dead as if she were in her grave. The live Joyce in the doorway had the same wonderful body and the perfect features. It was the soul that was dead. But no need to bury it. It was adequately preserved in alcohol.

Joyce, in a flimsy dressing gown, her jet-black hair flowing around her shoulders, threw her arms around his neck and fastened her lips to his. It would have been easy to return the kiss. Too easy.

She was such a magnificent animal. Tall as Craig was, she stood inch for inch with him. Another woman would have been considered too tall for beauty. Joyce didn't seem tall—just beautiful, vibrant, desirable. The liquor she drank like water had not visibly affected her looks.

Craig let himself be tempted for a moment and then shook himself loose.

"What's the trouble this time?" he demanded. "You don't look as broke as usual. And sober—almost!"

"Don't be nasty, darling," Joyce said.

"I was sorry to bother you in court, but I'm in awful trouble."

"When aren't you?" Craig said. But he couldn't keep his eyes off her. How it was possible to love and hate a woman at the same time, he couldn't explain. He just did.

"This is serious," Joyce went on. "I've been in Miami for the winter season, and I had the most wonderful luck at a gambling place. I won an awful lot of money, but they claimed I was cheating. They want it back. They threatened to kill me if I didn't return it. That's why I came to you. I know you can protect me and tell me what to do."

"How much did you win?" Craig asked.

Joyce hesitated. "A little over a hundred thousand."

Craig whistled. "You won over a hundred thousand dollars in a gambling joint. They paid the loss, then claimed you cheated and wanted it back?"

"That's right," Joyce said.

Craig shook his head angrily. "Your lying gets worse all the time—like everything else about you."

"Don't be so mean, Craig darling," she whimpered. The fold of her robe slipped back, exposing her slim white knee.

"Keep your clothes on," Craig growled. "I'm trying to think."

Joyce petulantly jerked the robe into place.

"Look," Craig said. "I can't help you unless I know the truth. Do you actually have the hundred thousand dollars?"

Joyce nodded. "In my traveling bag." She motioned toward the bedroom.

Craig whistled again. "Whose is it and how did you get it?"

"It doesn't really belong to anyone," Joyce replied. "It was in their safe, but it was gambling money. They got it illegally, they hadn't paid any income tax on it, so it wasn't their money really. I happened to discover the combination, and

I decided it was just as much mine as theirs."

Craig frowned. "Strip down the fancy yak-yak and it adds up that you were playing around with some gambler and you managed to steal a hundred thousand dollars of his money."

"That's a nasty way to put it," Joyce complained.

"And now your boy friend wants his money back," Craig continued. "Who is he?"

"Vincent Schwartz."

Craig nodded. "Yeah. I know a little about him. Not one of the really big boys down there, but big enough to have that kind of dough around. I wouldn't have thought he was your type, but that's hardly any of my business now. What do you want me to do?"

"You're smart, Craig. You know I always thought that. Figure out some way to keep Vince away from me and half the money's yours. He won't complain to the law. He'd be in too much trouble if he did."

"No doubt that's true," Craig agreed. "But it's still stealing, and I don't propose to make myself an accessory to larceny—petty, grand, or otherwise. There's only one of two things you can do: Get it back to Schwartz and hope he won't be too mad—or turn it over to the Internal Revenue boys and hope they can hide you where Schwartz can't find you. Keeping you out of jail is the least of your troubles. Keeping you in one piece may be more difficult."

That didn't suit Joyce one little bit. She'd grabbed the money and she intended to hang on to it. On that she was positive and vociferous. It was only after patient and repeated explanations that Craig convinced her the price of maintaining her beautiful carcass in one piece was getting rid of the money. Convinced, it still didn't please her. "Damned if I will," she howled. "I'll die first."

"That's exactly right, baby," Craig said grimly, and grabbed his hat. "Include me out, as another distinguished gentleman once said. You take it from here."

Joyce had her arms around him before he could make the door. "Don't go, Craig. I'll do whatever you say. Just don't let Schwartz get to me."

"All right," Craig said. For a moment he felt sorry for her. He wondered, as he had many times before, if she had wanted to, could she have conquered that weakness in her makeup that had let her degenerate from his sweet bride of years ago to become this tramp? He went through that torture every time he saw her.

"I'll take the money along and get it into safekeeping," Craig told her. "Then I'll start some feelers. If Schwartz will deal with us by taking the money back and forgetting the whole thing, that's the way it had better be done. Does he know where you are?"

Joyce shook her head. "I never told him anything about myself or about you. Besides, he was out of town when I left. It'll be a while before he figures it out. I'm safe right now, but I can't stay in this one room forever."

CRAIG deposited the money in his office safe, wondering whether it would delay an expert cracksman more than ten minutes, if word got out how much was in it. Then he went home to bed, but not to sleep. He had just drifted off when his phone rang.

It was Charlie Murphy at police headquarters. Charlie had pulled a boner once with one of Craig's clients. The boner didn't particularly help his client, although the consequences of it could have broken Murphy. Craig had laid off and Murphy had been properly grateful.

"Got some bad news for you," Murphy told him, when Craig was sufficiently awake to comprehend. "You knew Mrs.

Whitaker, your ex-wife, was in town?"

"Yes," Craig replied cautiously. "I saw her this afternoon."

"I know," Murphy replied. "Here it is, Craig: She was killed this afternoon in her hotel suite. They discovered her body just a little while after you had left there."

Craig was amazed that he felt no emotion. Only relief. He had considered the real Joyce as dead long ago, but he'd supposed he'd feel something more than this.

Murphy was still talking. "The homicide boys are on their way to pick you up, Mr. Whitaker, on suspicion of murder. I'm letting you know—for old time's sake," he said significantly.

"I understand, Charlie," Craig said. "Thanks a lot. How was she killed?"

"Bullet in her head."

"Anybody hear shots?"

"Nobody. Homicide figures a silencer or that the noise was smothered in something. Maybe a pillow."

"One more question," Craig said. "Was her suite messed up any, as if somebody was looking for something?"

The pause was ominous. "How did you know that?" Murphy asked. "I thought the boys were just trying to get even with you for all the cases you've won. I don't want to help anybody beat a rap."

"Relax, Charlie," Craig said. "I didn't kill her. But I think I know who did. Good-night, Charlie—and thanks."

Craig replaced the phone and dressed rapidly. He had places to go and things to do, and he couldn't be held up by any revenge-seeking homicide crew. He was barely a half-block from the entrance to his apartment house when he saw the police cruiser slide silently to the curb. He faded into a doorway and waited until they had gone in.

His car was known. He'd have to find a cab.

Obviously, Schwartz or his boys, or both, had slipped in and out of the Park Regal without being seen. Perhaps by way of the service elevator and a few greased palms. But they must have killed Joyce before discovering she didn't have the money. She wouldn't have held out against any pressure and would have told them Craig had the money. If she had, they would have been at his apartment looking for him several hours before the police.

But the word would quickly get out that the police were hunting him as the last person seen at her suite. The Miami hoodlums would instantly guess that he had the money. So he'd soon have both the police and the Miami boys looking for him. Nice! He might have an hour or two in which to do something to help himself.

An ordinary citizen could use the nearest telephone, recount to the police what Joyce had told him, and the hue-and-cry would immediately be transferred to the gentleman from Miami. But not Craig Whitaker. Not the man who made the police department and the prosecuting attorney froth at the mouth when he showed up defending a case. If he wanted to get clear of this rap, he'd have to do it himself. Also, there was a score to settle for Joyce—the Joyce who used to be.

The first move was to get that hundred grand out of his office safe. If the cops got a court order in the morning and found it there, it would be difficult to explain. Besides, he'd need a lot of money tonight. He couldn't think of any he'd rather use than Vincent Schwartz'. But he'd have to move fast. The police would soon be checking his office when they failed to find him anywhere else.

AT HIS office, he peeled off several large bills from the sizeable roll Joyce had given him. The remainder he wrapped in a packet addressed to himself care of

general delivery in a nearby city. It would get the money out of the way for the time being and he was running little risk of its not being at the post office when he called for it. Putting on plenty of postage, he dropped the package in the nearest mailbox.

The Newberg Hotel, a rundown flea-bag, had a pair of connecting rooms on the third floor. The greasy-haired clerk smirked when he saw the "John Jones" with which Craig signed the register. It became a respectful smile when Craig shoved over a five.

From the hotel, Craig took a cab to the north side, where everything was cheaper—whiskey, women and life itself. In the second saloon he hit the jackpot. Upon inquiry of the bartender, he jerked his head toward the back room. "Send him out here," Craig said. "I'll take a bourbon and soda while I'm waiting."

Myron Rouse, one of Craig's most regular clients, shambled out of the back room and sat down on the stool beside him.

"Got a job for you, Myron," Craig said. "Pays good money."

"I'm pretty hot, Mr. Whitaker," Rouse replied doubtfully. "I don't think even you could beat another rap for me right now."

"You mean you tried to stick up a cop again?" Craig asked, grinning.

"Anybody could have made that mistake," Rouse replied unhappily. "The boys all rib me about it, but just wait until one of them does it too."

"This one is strictly legal, Myron," Craig said. "I'm going to meet some boys pretty soon. Some real tough guys. Your job is to see they don't get too tough."

"That's two-bit stuff," Rouse said disgustedly. "We got a pretty good game going in the back room."

"This says you'll do it," Craig replied, opening his hand and letting a crumpled

five-hundred-dollar bill fall on the counter.

It was Schwartz' money. Craig got a perverse pleasure from being generous with it.

Rouse's eyes bugged and he swallowed hard. "Okay?" Craig asked. Rouse nodded mutely.

INSTALLING Rouse in one of the connecting rooms at the hotel, Craig used the room telephone to call several of the more glittering night spots, where he was reasonably well known. In each he left word that if Vincent Schwartz from Miami came around inquiring about him, he could be found at Room 305 in the Newberg Hotel. If any coppers asked, they didn't know nothing from nobody.

His hook baited, Craig sat down to wait for a bite. His fishing expedition was based upon the premise that Schwartz' first thought would be to inquire about Craig in joints such as he himself ran.

The wait seemed forever, although a glance at his watch showed it was only a little more than an hour when the knock came at his door. Putting his mouth close to the connecting door, he said softly, "Heads up, Myron. This is it," and opened the hall door.

Both of the men standing there had cannon-sized guns pointing at his belly. Craig recognized the short, slight one as Schwartz. With his thinning hair, the wispy, dirty-blond mustache and the baggy clothes, it obviously wasn't his looks that had captured the fancy of the lusty, man-sized Joyce.

Schwartz, jamming his gun into Craig's belly, pushed him backward into the hotel room. "Frisk him, Thaddeus," he said over his shoulder to his companion.

Thaddeus, medium height by most standards, seemed tall beside Schwartz. His left hand deftly patted and probed Craig's cloths, while he kept his gun out of Craig's reach at all times. His face was alert but completely devoid of expression.

Thaddeus knew his trade, and his trade was murder.

"You were smart to send for us, Whitaker," Schwartz said. "Maybe we'll let you live."

"I like living," Craig said. "I wanted to make a dead with you. I had persuaded Joyce to return your money. If you hadn't been so impatient, you could have had it without killing her."

Schwartz's thin, angular face went through the motions of smiling, but there was no amusement in it. "How you shy-sters worry about killings," he said sarcastically. "She didn't get killed because she stole my money. I got lots of money. It was something personal."

"She called him a little shrimp," Thaddeus said. "Nobody calls Mr. Schwartz a little shrimp and lives."

Schwartz flicked a look at him, obviously searching for signs of ridicule. But Thaddeus' voice was flat and his face expressionless.

"Yeah, that's right," he told Craig. "I understand she was your ex-wife. You want to make something of it?"

"Not me," Craig said. "She gave me the money to return to you. All I want is to give you the money, so you'll leave me alone."

"You're smart," Schwartz said, his voice dripping contempt. "Hand it over and maybe we'll talk."

"I don't have it here," Craig said. "I'll have to get it for you."

"Where is it?" Schwartz demanded.

"It's in a safe place," Craig replied. "I'll get it when I'm satisfied you'll keep your promise."

"Teach him some manners, Thaddeus," Schwartz ordered.

Thaddeus cautiously approached, raising his gun slightly to clip Craig across the cheek with the barrel.

"Hold it!" Craig yelled, loud enough for Rouse to hear, if he had any doubt it was time to join the party. The gun kept

coming. Craig sidestepped, catching Thaddeus' gun hand as it went by. With a twist of his arm, Thaddeus went off balance and sat down on the floor, hard.

"Stand still, Whitaker," Schwartz said angrily, "or I'll drill you."

Thaddeus picked himself off the floor, his face registering no emotion. "Big guy, you're going to get a real plastering," he said softly. He was advancing toward Craig when Myron Rouse pushed the connecting door open and jumped into the room. "Freeze, you guys." Rouse shouted, his .38 swinging to cover the room.

CRAIG opened his mouth to shout a warning. It didn't come in time. Schwartz had been standing near the connecting door. When Rouse thrust the door open, it left him standing on one side and Schwartz on the other, except that Rouse obviously didn't know Schwartz was there.

Acting as if by reflex, Schwartz threw his weight against the door and swung it in a mighty heave against Rouse. Caught completely by surprise, Rouse was catapulted across the room, his gun clattering to the floor. Schwartz, unable to halt the momentum of his body, went flying after him.

It was up to Craig to retrieve the ball Rouse had fumbled. Thaddeus' eyes had shifted momentarily to the whirling arms and legs in the corner. Craig, seizing the opportunity, slammed a hard right into his jaw and followed it with a left to his belly that brought a surprised and outraged grunt. Thaddeus went backward. Craig grabbed the gun with both hands. In a moment he would twist it out of his hands. But Thaddeus had a hard left fist. It was savagely jabbed into Craig's face in a rapid tattoo that bloodied Craig's nose, ripped his right cheek and cut under the right eye. But one hand can't out-twist two.

Craig stepped back triumphantly with Thaddeus' gun, just in time to feel Thaddeus' desperate kick land in his belly. Craig slumped to the floor in a sitting position, but the gun remained fixed on Thaddeus.

It was moments before he could see clearly. Rouse had won his battle by sheer weight. Schwartz was lying prone, with Rouse's big bulk sitting astride his back. Each time Schwartz raised his head to look around, Rouse tapped it lightly with his revolver. Schwartz would groan and drop his head back.

Craig climbed slowly and painfully to his feet, keeping a wary eye on Thaddeus. That fellow was dangerous.

"Now we'll take up where we left off when the rough stuff started." Craig said, wiping the blood from his cheek and nose with his handkerchief. "I still want to deal with you. It's your money and I don't want to go through any more deals like this one. Are you ready to take your money and call it quits?"

"All right," Schwartz said, from his prone position. "Give us the money and we'll blow. But get this gorilla off me first."

"Let him up, Myron," Craig directed. "I'll have the money here at ten o'clock tomorrow—that is, today."

"Why don't you send him for it?" Schwartz asked, nodding toward Rouse. "We'll all wait here."

Craig grinned painfully. "Nothing doing. We'll leave first, and if you stir out of here for ten minutes after we leave, you won't know whether Myron is waiting outside or not."

"All right," Schwartz agreed. "See you here at ten—and no tricks."

"No tricks," Craig echoed. They both left, backing cautiously out of the room.

At Craig's suggestion, they headed for an all-night restaurant. Craig needed at least a cup of coffee, after the mauling he had received.

"Can you get hold of a tommy gun real quick like?" he asked Rouse.

Myron gave him a cool, calculating look. "Maybe so, maybe not. What if I can?"

"Just as it breaks daylight I want you to drive by Mark Trent's house and spray it good with a tommy gun."

"You're crazy," Rouse said firmly but without rancor. "He's top dog. Nobody crosses him. All the flatfeet in town couldn't help you if you rubbed him out. His men would have you in the morgue before night."

"I very definitely don't want him killed or even hurt. I just want a lot of noise—and be sure you don't hit anybody."

Rouse shook his head. "Nothing doing. Too risky."

Craig pulled out the roll of currency and began counting out five-hundred-dollar bills. When he got to four, he laid them out on the table.

"Damn! Get those out of sight," Rouse said. "You'll get us killed." He looked furtively around to see if anyone was watching.

"Okay, get them out of sight then," Craig said, shoving the bills toward Rouse.

Myron swallowed convulsively and then pocketed them. "I'll risk my neck any day for two grand. But I don't think I'm smart."

"Wait until it's barely light," Craig instructed. "You've got about an hour to get your tools and a car. Is that enough time?" Rouse nodded.

"Call me here when you're through. I'll stick around."

THE SUN was peeping over the downtown buildings when the phone in the public booth rang. Craig caught it on the first ring. "Who's this?" Rouse's voice demanded.

"It's Whitaker," Craig replied. "Go ahead. You can talk."

"Everything's fine. I did that ventilat-

ing job just the way you wanted it."

"Any trouble?" Craig asked.

"Not yet," Myron replied. "But I got to leave town sudden. I just got a telegram. My grandmaw out in L.A. is real sick. I'm catching the first train. See you around, Mr. Whitaker."

"That's all right," Craig said, chuckling. "I'll handle it from here on. Give my regards to your grandmother."

Craig had two more calls to make. The first was to the Mark Trent residence. A half-hysterical maid answered the phone. After some parleying with her, Trent came on the wire.

He was running some risk that Trent would recognize his voice. In years past, when Craig had been not long out of law school and Trent was on the lower rungs of the ladder he had since climbed to become the overlord of vice and gambling, Craig had defended Trent and his men in a few cases. The connection hadn't lasted.

A lawyer can ethically and with a clear conscience defend a man that he suspects or even knows is guilty, on the theory that only a jury has the right to convict a man, and everyone has a right to proper legal counsel in defending himself. Trent wasn't willing to let it stop there. He wanted legal advice and assistance before the crimes were committed. There Craig drew the line, and he and Trent had parted.

Trent had a rather simple creed. Either you were with him and a part of his mob or you were against him. From then on Trent had been his bitter enemy. Craig hadn't especially worried about it, but ever since he had a nagging feeling that some day Trent might decide to dispose of him, for his lack of "gratitude."

Holding his voice as deep as he could, Craig said, "This is Vincent Schwartz, from Miami. Understand you had a little excitement at your house a few minutes ago."

"Vincent Schwartz," Trent exclaimed.

"Yeah," he added, his voice suddenly hostile. "I know you. What is it?"

"Don't get nasty," Craig purred. "That little serenade we just gave you was simply an alarm clock. You were sleeping too late. You've got an early appointment with us."

"The hell I have!" Trent exclaimed.

"Oh, yes you have, at ten o'clock. That's when we'll tell you the percentage of your operation we're willing to let you keep. We're moving in, Trent," he added harshly. "Don't make us get tough. That was just a very mild sample this morning. Be at Room 305 at the Newberg Hotel at ten o'clock. If you aren't . . ." Craig let his voice trail off ominously.

"All right," Trent said, suddenly amiable. "I'll see you there."

Craig hung up and, whistling cheerfully, strolled out to the street.

Checking in at another obscure hotel, as far removed from the Newberg as possible, Craig hung out a "Do Not Disturb" sign and slept late, waking only once to make a telephone call.

WHEN he walked into his reception room about four that afternoon he had an early edition of the evening paper in his hand. The usually crowded reception room was empty. Most of his clients were quite clever about not being around any place where the police might be.

Virginia started up in alarm. "The police have been trying to find you all day, Mr. Whitaker," she exclaimed. "They think you killed Joyce. They want to arrest you."

Craig grinned. "I believe they've changed their minds, honey-chile. Here's the story in the afternoon paper. I brought an extra along for you. Tell your boy friend to see me as soon as he gets back from the courthouse."

He thought he saw a slight coloring in Virginia's cheeks. Feeling rather pleased

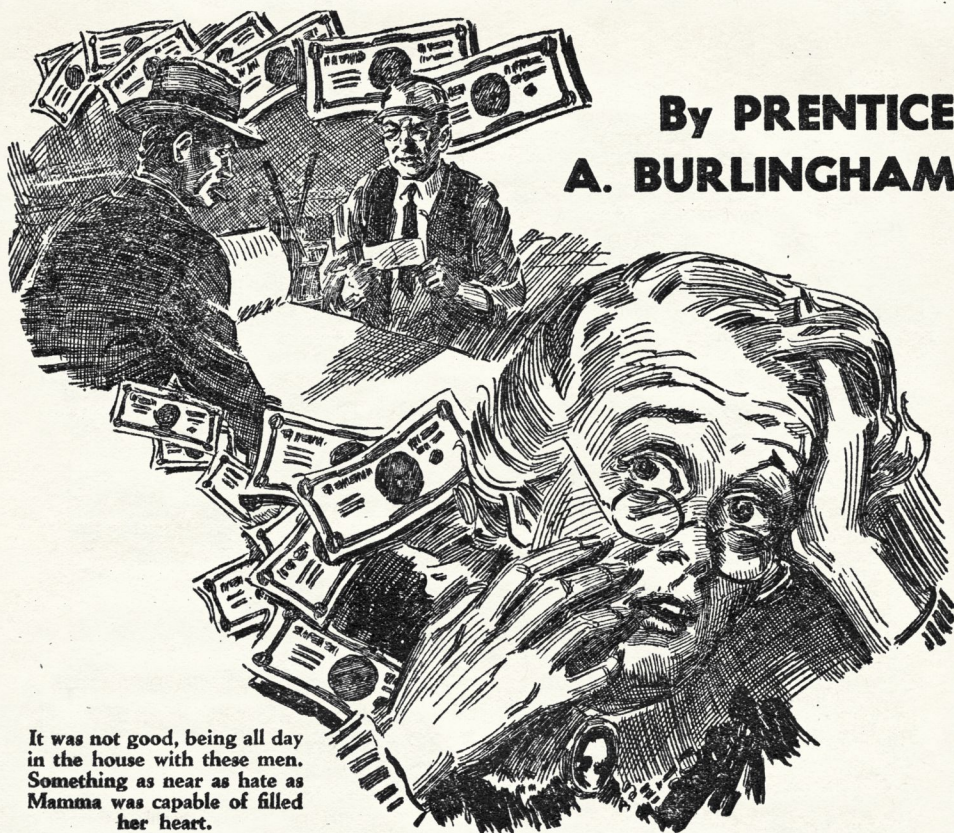
with himself, he went on into his private office. Elevating his feet to the top of his desk, he carefully reread the newspaper story.

The headlines were glaring. "Gang War In Bay City." Two men, known to be gamblers and gansters from Miami, so the story said, had been killed in a gun battle with unknown persons at the Newberg Hotel. It was rumored that they had tried to muscle in on the local gambling syndicate and had been killed for their presumption. Mark Trent and some of his men had been arrested and were being held for investigation.

A box headed "Bulletin" interested Craig most. On an anonymous tip, the bulletin said, the police had made ballistics tests and found that the gun of one of the slain gamblers was the same one used to kill the ex-wife of a prominent criminal attorney the night before. The police were abandoning their search for the attorney, who had been under suspicion because he was the last one seen by the hotel employees to leave her room.

Craig swung his feet down and dialed the number of a lawyer friend who specialized in income-tax law. "Doug," he said when he had identified himself, "a client of mine has a problem. He's paid out a hell of a lot of money the last few years to his ex-wife for her support and to get her out of one jam and another. Of course, he couldn't take any deduction for it, because they were voluntary payments. That ex-wife just recently got her hands on a nice hunk of money and gave it to my client. Now the problem is: Does my client have to report that as taxable income?"

Listening for a moment, Craig grinned. "Yes, I said a client. Sure. A couple days will be plenty of time. I'll be busy anyway. I've got to make arrangements to bury a woman who's been dead for five years."



By PRENTICE
A. BURLINGHAM

It was not good, being all day
in the house with these men.
Something as near as hate as
Mamma was capable of filled
her heart.

Mamma's Talking Tulips

Leave it to Mamma Van Groot to have
the last word—even when her lips were
forever silenced. . . .

IT ALL started with the mention of tulips. Tulips were Mamma Van Groot's joy. And how was she to know the man was a criminal?

All her life Mamma had longed to grow tulips. And all her life, since coming to America, she had lived in crowded dark tenements where the only green shoots were found in markets.

When Papa Heinrich lived they had gone by bus each spring to the city park. There they would sit all day among the

tulips and remember their childhood in Holland. At night they would return home, refreshed and happy, to look forward to Tulip Day again next spring.

But Heinrich was gone now and all Mamma had left was the flower box in the dark window. On this she lavished all her care, but in it nothing would grow. And soon she must give it up.

Mamma was very sad the morning the man called. He was a persistent little man who rudely planted his foot against the

door jamb and leaned against the door.

"Name's Twiss, ma'am. Jake down at the poolroom says you're wanting work, now your husband's dead."

Mamma frowned. The poolroom was a bad place. Heinrich had not liked Jake.

The man talked fast, out of the side of his mouth. "A nice home in a nice suburb. All you got to do is cook." He spied the box in the widow. "Jake says it's flowers you like. You can have flowers. Tulips, maybe . . ."

Despite herself, Mamma brightened. "Tulips, you say?"

"Sure—tulips, geraniums, daffodils. Any kind you like."

AND SO Mamma Van Groot moved to the suburbs, a little hesitantly but not actually suspecting.

The man Twiss had spoken truth. All she had to do was cook, for him and three other men. This suited her, because she had not been feeling too well since Heinrich died.

Mr. Twiss was the chauffeur. The other three never left the house. There were a dark, chunky man called Brisco, a sallow-faced fellow named Finch, and Mr. Wicks who never spoke. They spent their days in the attic and never came downstairs except for the meals Mamma prepared. Their clothes were expensive but uncared for. They were a little too polite.

Mamma's room was a wing off the kitchen and she soon learned she was not to go upstairs. But the lawn and the flowers were hers to enjoy and here she was in her glory. Almost it was like the park, only there were no tulips. This was a great disappointment and Mamma immediately set about remedying it.

All the flower beds had been neglected before Mamma came. One large one was completely bare. It, she decided, would be her tulip bed. It was fall and too late for blooms this year, but she could pre-

pare the soil and plant the bulbs for next season.

The garden was a lovely place to work. The house sat well back from the street, with a high stone wall between. Terraces rose from the street to the dwelling, and because Mamma's tulip bed was on the high slope of one of these, there was an unobstructed view of the street.

Mamma could see the cars go by and the people in the cars could see Mamma down on her knees working. But there was not very much sociability in this because there were not a great many cars passing and the distance was too great to call back and forth.

Mamma did not think of this at first. She was too busy getting the bed ready for bulbs. Twiss had forgotten his promise of tulips. But at her urging he reluctantly brought her the bulbs, each color twisted separately in a cornucopia of old newspaper.

How Mamma learned she was never to go upstairs was like this. Dinner was to be served promptly at noon. One noon she waited and waited and waited and no one came down to eat it. So very innocently she climbed the stairs to remind them of the time.

To her surprise she found that the entire second floor was unfurnished except for four Army cots and a broken dresser, all crowded into one room. Horrified at the dust and neglect, she hurried on to the attic.

It happened that Mamma was wearing her soft slippers that noon, to rest her feet after gardening all morning, so she reached the top step without being heard.

There was a great skylight overhead and directly under it Mr. Finch sat at a table, examining a steel plate, with a magnifying glass screwed into his eye.

Otherwise there were several work benches, some machines Mamma didn't understand, some bales of paper, and—Mamma's eyes popped—three huge stacks

of crisp new twenty-dollar bank notes.

MAMMA sucked in her breath so hard that Mr. Finch heard her. Instantly a canvas was thrown over the machines, the bank notes were swept into a drawer, and Mr. Finch and Mr. Brisco grabbed Mamma by the arms and rushed her back downstairs.

Dinner that day was eaten in ominous silence. After the meal Mamma was called into the dining room. Mr. Brisco drew an automatic pistol from his pocket and laid it on the white table cloth beside his plate.

Then, while Mamma trembled, he slowly explained what would happen if she ever ascended the stairs again. If she ever spoke to a living soul of what she had seen nor if she ever attempted to leave the house.

Tears filled Mamma's eyes. "My tulips! You mean I can't plant my tulip bulbs?"

Again there was silence while the four men looked at each other.

"Aw, let her plant her bulbs if it'll keep her quiet," said Mr. Finch. "What can it hurt? She won't be near the street."

But for days after that Mamma almost forgot her tulips. Not in years had she thought so little about tulips. For Mamma was not so simple that she did not know now what went on in the attic.

Though it had not impressed her at the time, she remembered something she had seen in the newspaper wrapped around the bulbs. She found it and read it again, an article in the Sunday supplement of the Star:

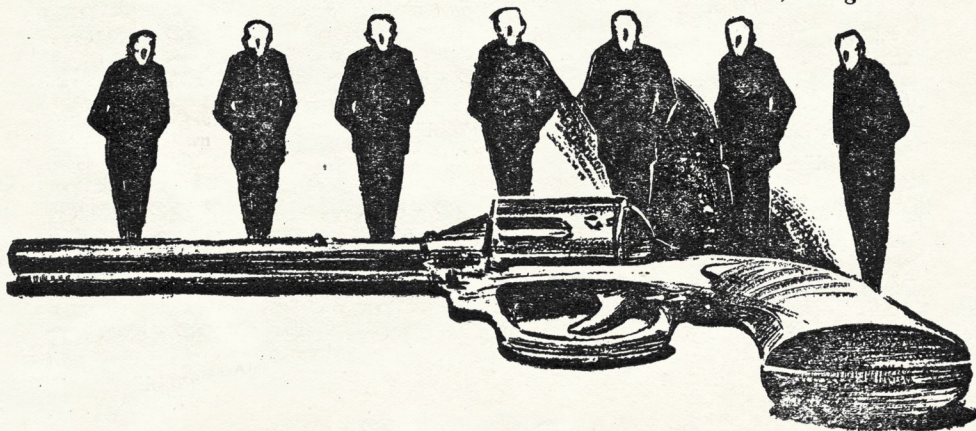
BIG 4 COUNTERFEIT GANG COMPETES WITH U. S. MINT

While the Secret Service continues its months-old search for this elusive band of four veteran counterfeiters, bogus money continues to be pumped into the city's arteries of trade. Citizens are warned that these are no ordinary hoodlums. They may be operating from your neighborhood. Where is the Big 4's private "mint"?

Mamma noticed that she was never left alone any more. Always one of the four men was watching. If she was in the kitchen, Twiss would idle out by the garage where he could see in through the window. If she was in the garden—for she was again working with the bulbs—Mr. Wicks or Mr. Brisco would watch from the attic window. Shrubbery gave her some privacy from this angle, but it was not dense enough to hide her figure.

It was now that Mamma realized she was too far from the street to be heard even if she shouted. That there was no telephone in the house, not even a radio. That the only newspaper she had seen in weeks and weeks was the one the bulbs came wrapped in. That she was really a prisoner.

It was about this time, though Mamma



was not sure exactly when, that she commenced to realize she was never going to leave here alive. That after she had served their purpose, these men would quietly dispose of her.

Gloom cast its heavy shadow over these days. Often her feet faltered as she went about her work. She discovered new aches and pains, but with them a new stubbornness. Gradually the old firmness returned to her step and she muttered, "In the spring there will be tulips."

Mamma Van Groot still expected to die. "Must we not all die once?" she asked. But until her time came she determined to *live*.

She spent even more time in the garden, with her back to the street, setting out each bulb with loving care, perhaps with a prayer. In the spring there would be tulips!

This renewed vigor lasted until cold weather drove her in from the garden. Then the depressed spells returned. Christmas came and after that she was quite ill.

She wondered if it was because she was too much inside, away from the garden. It was not good, being all day in the house with these men. Something as near hate as she was capable of filled her heart. She did not like to feel that way.

MANY thoughts flooded her mind that winter, as the depressed spells came and went, as the strength drained from her once-strong body. This America, it had been good to her and to Heinrich. Though they had never had much else, yet they had had each other, and they had had the opportunity to live their lives in freedom and dignity.

It was not so in many parts of the old world now. When she thought of this, her bitterness toward these four enemies of America was sharpest.

Mamma Van Groot no longer feared the men, for she knew she was going to die soon anyway. Some days she was not able to stir from her room. She marvelled that they did not dispose of her without further delay, she had become so useless.

She would lie on her bed and look out through the window. The birds were coming north again. There was the feel once more of spring in the air.

She could see one end of the tulip bed from where she lay, and this she watched for the first signs of bloom. Sick as she, was, a quickening went through her as the time approached, and again and again her old lips formed the words, "There will be tulips any day now. . . ."

There were tulips one morning. First came bright yellow ones, then snowy white ones, and finally red. Perhaps only the four men were too busy to notice them. Or perhaps the shrubbery partially hid them from view from the attic window.

Mamma Van Groot saw her tulips and for a long while her dimming eyes rested peacefully upon them. Then her eyes turned upward and a mist filled them and death came.

But Mamma's tulips only burst out stronger in glowing brightness against the morning sun. A couple passing in a car, saw them and stopped. After a while another car stopped, then another.

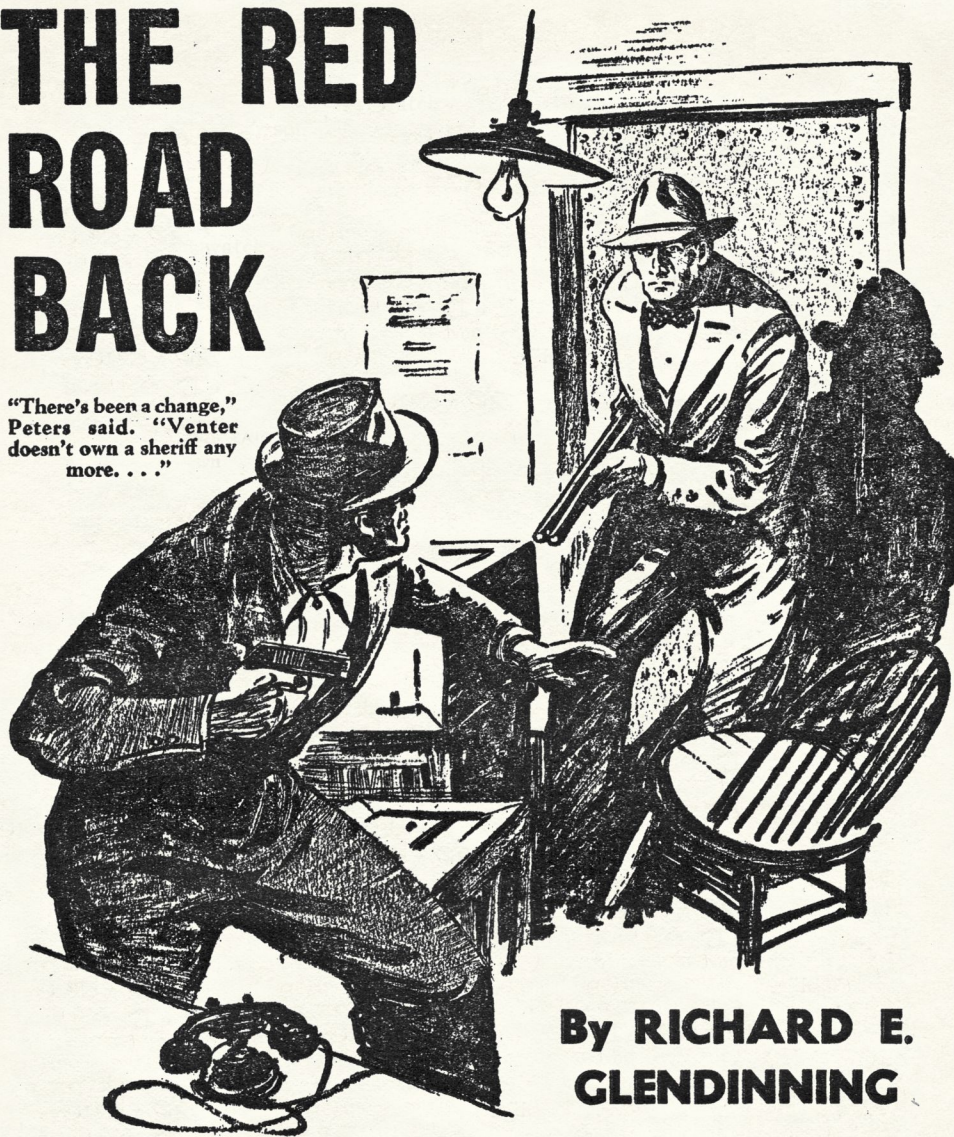
A telephone reached the police station, converting it to a bedlam of excitement. Somewhat later, three squad cars pulled up in the street in front of the tulip bed. Detectives and officers in uniform surrounded the house where Mamma Van Groot slept.

As the four counterfeiters were led out, one of them saw Mamma's tulips. Against a background of yellow and dazzling white was traced in bold red:

B-I-G 4 M-I-N-T

THE RED ROAD BACK

"There's been a change," Peters said. "Venter doesn't own a sheriff any more. . . ."



By **RICHARD E. GLENDINNING**

It was Peters' problem—the same problem of every cop who has dipped his hands in blood-money: Could he redeem his lost honor with the bodies of the men who had bought him?

THE PHONE in the hall rang shrilly, insistently, and John Peters heard Mary come from the kitchen to answer it.

"Let it ring," he called to her.

She came to the door of the living room, drying her hands on her apron,

and looked in at him. "It may be important." She cast a worried glance over her shoulder at the strident phone.

"I know what it is," Peters said. "The papers. The morning papers."

"But don't you think you should—"

"Let it ring, I said." He stared down

at his big hands, hating himself for having taken his nervous irritation out on Mary. She was a good wife and had always given him love and understanding when he needed it most—but this time it was different.

The phone continued to ring.

"Oh, hell," he muttered. He stood up slowly and went to the hall. Wiping his sweaty hands on the seat of his trousers, he picked up the phone. "Hello."

"Sheriff?"

"Yes, this is Sheriff Peters."

"Vincent's of the *Tribune* here," a deep voice said. "Is there anything new on the O'Brien killing?"

"Nothing new."

"It's been a week now." The reporter's voice was sharp edged.

"Still nothing new."

"How about a statement on O'Brien, then?"

The sheriff hesitated a moment and his face fell into grim lines. "O'Brien was a good man, the best deputy I ever had," he said finally, wondering if the reporter knew anything at all about O'Brien, hoping not. "They don't come any better than O'Brien, Vincent's."

"Sheriff," Vincent's said, "I'm going to give you a tip. The Trib's going to blast you editorially tomorrow morning."

"I've been expecting it. It's overdue."

"And every other paper in town is going to fall in line. O'Brien was shot down a week ago this morning. Since then, you haven't even turned up a mysterious tramp."

"Don't you think I know that? Don't you think I've been trying to—"

"The public doesn't like cop-killers. You've had a week to make an arrest. Don't you have any leads? Was O'Brien working on something when he—"

"Yes," the sheriff said, and he swallowed hard because lying had never come easily to him. "He was shot in line of duty."

"What was he working on?"

"I can't tell you that. It was—it was pretty important." He hung up slowly and returned to the living room.

MARY WAS waiting for him. "That O'Brien thing?"

"Yes," he said. "The papers have made a hero of him."

"I never liked him."

Peters looked at her sharply. "Why not?"

"I don't know. His manner, I guess. He looked so honest and gentle that I never trusted him."

Peters turned his eyes away. Mary was a better judge of character than he had thought. "He was a louse."

"But he was one of your deputies, John, and he was murdered. You've got to do something about that."

He looked at her imploringly. "I can't. I can't do anything, Mary."

"Of course you can," she said, smiling confidently. "You must have some idea who killed him."

Peters nodded. "I could put my hands on the killer in ten minutes."

Mary stepped back and stared at him in wide-eyed amazement. "Then why don't you?"

He didn't know how to explain. Mary had always trusted him implicitly. But all her trust and faith in him would burst like a pricked bubble if the truth of the O'Brien killing came out.

An investigation into the murder would soon reveal that O'Brien had not been the hero the public now believed him to have been. And it would be just as apparent that he had not been killed in line of duty but had, in fact, been shot down by bootleggers whose patience with O'Brien's demands for more protection money had at last run out.

John Peters was the sheriff of a dry county, elected to the post when a reform wave had swept the former sheriff out of

office. Peters, having served as deputy under the old sheriff for five years, had been made sheriff because no one could connect him with graft and corruption. But—and his face flushed with guilt when he thought of it—his skirts had been far from clean. As a deputy who had seen no chance of ever becoming sheriff, he had taken his cut.

The bootleggers, headed by Harry Venter, had smiled behind their hands when John Peters became a candidate for office. He was their man, they thought, and they had quietly worked to help elect him, but he had fooled them all. He had been sheriff for two years; from the start, he had made it clear to Harry Venter that they had come to a parting of the ways.

So Venter had turned to O'Brien, knowing that the sheriff wouldn't dare fire O'Brien lest his own sins as a deputy be aired.

For the same reason, Sheriff Peters found it impossible to press the investigation into O'Brien's murder.

PETERS turned to his wife now. "The public thinks he was a hero. All right, let it go at that."

"You can't let a murderer go free," she said.

"It would only involve others, Mary."
"Who?"

He hesitated a moment. "Me."

"You?" She laughed, then patted his hand. "Not you. They don't call you Honest John for nothing."

"Mary, I—I—" He couldn't tell her the truth about himself. He covered his confusion by telling her a half-truth. "O'Brien was a crook, taking graft from Venter's mob. All that would come out in any investigation and it would boomerang at me. Why did Peters let him get away with it?" people will ask."

"You could tell the truth and say you didn't know about it."

"But I did know, Mary. Anyway, that wouldn't be any excuse. A good sheriff should know everything that goes on in his office. He's responsible for his deputies."

"And if they're killed," she said tersely, "he's responsible for that too."

"I still can't do anything." He stood up and walked to the front window, his back to her to hide the shame in his eyes. "It will die down in another week. The papers will have something else to yell about by then."

"Harry Venter killed O'Brien, didn't he?"

John nodded slowly. "I think so—or one of his boys."

"I just don't know what to think, John. I never knew you to be afraid of anyone, but now . . ." Her voice was filled with baffled disappointment.

"It's not that," he said impatiently. "I'm afraid of what the public will say."

"So you'd let the public down? Listen, John—" she came to him swiftly and clutched his arm— "you've been a good sheriff for two years. You can't stop now. It's going to take a lot of courage to face Venter, to bring him in, but I never knew you to lack courage until now."

He pulled away from her hand and scowled at her fiercely. "I tell you I—" he began hotly, but he broke off abruptly and strode toward the door. "I'm going out. I want to think without having you and that phone jangling in my ears."

HE WENT out to the car at the curb and sat in it for a moment, staring at his house. It was a good house in a quiet neighborhood and Mary, whose taste was excellent, had furnished it nicely. The house had cost twelve thousand three years ago, the furniture had cost another three thousand. Fifteen thousand all told and he had paid cash. How much of that had come from

Venter's pocket? Peters could find little satisfaction in remembering that he and Mary had lived frugally, saving all they could from a deputy's meager pay, and that some of the fifteen thousand had been honestly earned.

He was as big a crook as O'Brien had been, he thought. Bigger, perhaps. O'Brien's account had been settled, but the sheriff still held a high office, a position of trust of which he was not worthy.

He started the car and drove slowly down the street. He had no destination in mind and he drove aimlessly for a while, criss-crossing the streets in the residential district. Suddenly, he made a sharp left turn and headed south toward the warehouse section. On First Street, he came to a stop in the middle of the block in front of a large auto-repair shop and garage.

He got out of the car and went into the front office. A pimply-faced youngster was sitting in a chair, his heels on a scarred desk.

"Is Venter around?" the sheriff asked.

"An official call, Sheriff?"

Peters' mouth tightened. His hand shot out and slapped the youth's feet from the desk. "Is Venter around?"

Pimples stood up hastily. "Upstairs."

The sheriff nodded curtly and walked through the drafty, dimly lighted garage to the stairs, which led up to the loft. At the top of the stairs, he knocked at the heavy iron door and it swung open immediately. One of Venter's boys stepped aside and let Peters enter.

Harry Venter was sitting on a table at the far end of the long room. He grinned coldly as Peters walked toward him. Venter was about the sheriff's size, tall with broad shoulders and heavy jaw, but there the resemblance stopped. Peters was fair skinned with sandy hair and direct blue eyes; Venter's hair was as black as tar and his hard grey eyes were shift.

"Maybe I should roll out the red carpet," Venter said. "It's been two years since you were around last."

"I wish to God I didn't have to come now." The sheriff looked around the loft, knowing that he would find no evidence of Venter's bootlegging activities. Venter was too smart for that. His two henchmen, who stood behind their boss now, wary eyes on the sheriff, drove the cars that brought the liquor into the county after dark, taking it direct to the consumer.

"Take a good look," Venter said. "You won't find anything."

"I know that." Peters squared his shoulders and faced Venter. "I want someone I can tag for the O'Brien killing."

"Who?"

Peters' eyes shifted to the two men behind Venter. They were all the men that Venter had in his setup; they were all he needed. Both were rugged, stiff-faced punks who had learned their trade in a tougher league than this one and they had nothing but disdain for a sheriff of a small, obscure county. The larger of the two was Chink Bruger. The other, the redhead, was Red Stanley.

"Either one of them will do," Sheriff Peters said, turning back to Venter. "Bruger."

Bruger laughed harshly. "Don't be a chump, Peters. Stick with speeding tickets. It's safer."

PETERS ignored him. "I want a fall guy, Venter."

Venter smiled guilelessly. "Why look for him around here?"

"O'Brien was hitting you for plenty. He wanted more and you gave it to him—with a shotgun."

"I read about it in the papers and it strikes me you haven't played it very smart."

"Maybe you'd like to give a theory,"

Peters said slowly. "As an interested citizen, of course."

"O'Brien was found on the highway about two miles out of town," Venter said. "His car was parked on the shoulder of the road and he was found in the drainage ditch, his chest full of slugs. I'll tell you how I see it—and how you ought to see it. O'Brien was a real hero and he—"

"A crooked louse," the sheriff snorted.

"You don't want to disillusion the public, do you? He was a hero. You had this tip that someone was going to bring a load over the county line, so you sent the hero out to keep an eye on things. Well, maybe he saw this car coming with its lights out and he stopped it. Wham! and he takes a load of shot in the chest. How was he supposed to know the car was a getaway from a stickup, see?"

"Not bootleggers but bandits?" the sheriff said thoughtfully.

"Sure," Venter said. "Play it smart."

Peters' mouth tightened. "No. I still want a fall guy."

"You've got one," Venter snapped. "Yourself. You've been acting like a saint for two years, Peters, but if you open up this case, I'll see to it that you're painted as black as midnight."

"What difference would it make? If I don't do something, I'll be out of office anyway."

"Sure," Venter said, grinning, "and I've got your successor all picked out. But you've got a nice wife. She doesn't know how you were before you turned reformer. You don't want to break her heart, do you? Not only that. Folks call you Honest John and they think you bought your house by the sweat of your brow. That's real nice. It'd be a shame to have them think different."

John Peters stared down at the floor. Venter was right. It would be better for him to leave office as an incompetent than to be kicked out for accepting bribes as a deputy. And it was true that his dis-

graceful conduct might be enough shock to kill Mary. Certainly she would never look at him with the same trusting, confident eyes again.

He turned slowly and started toward the door.

"Still want a fall guy?" Venter called.

"No," the sheriff said, shaking his head dumbly.

"I thought you'd get smart if I explained it to you. If you hurry, you can tell the morning papers all about the bandits."

"All right." The sheriff tugged open the heavy door and stumbled down the stairs. Out on the sidewalk, he stopped to breathe deep of the clean night air, then he climbed wearily into his car and drove to the *Tribune* building.

He stepped into the city room and, looking around, saw Vincents at his desk in the corner. He crossed the room and tapped the reporter on the shoulder.

Vincents turned from his typewriter and looked up. "Sheriff! What's the matter? You look like death warmed over."

"I feel that way." Peters sat in the chair next to Vincents' desk. "I think I've got something for you on the O'Brien killing."

Vincents' eyes sparkled eagerly. He rolled the story he had been working on out of his machine, then inserted a fresh sheet of paper upon which to take notes. "Shoot."

"Just as you said," Peters began, "O'Brien was a hero, and as you guessed, I had him working on something risky. I guess you know my administration has been pretty rough on bootleggers. O'Brien was my best man and he was as tough on them as I was, so—"

"I haven't gone thirsty," Vincents said crisply. "Plenty gets through."

Peters smiled wanly. "We've done our best, but a lot of roads come into the county, you know."

"I didn't mean any reflection on you,"

Vincents said hastily. "You've done a good job."

"Thanks. Well, I sent O'Brien out to stop suspicious cars because I'd had a tip. He did his duty. He stopped a car and got shot."

"Bootleggers?" Vincents said quickly, looking up from his typewriter.

"No. The way I figure it, the car was a getaway car from a gas-station stickup over in Lyles County. I could show you the report from the Lyles authorities, telling me the car was headed . . ." His voice trailed off.

"You ought to be in bed, Sheriff," Vincents said anxiously. "You're sick."

HE WAS SICK, all right, but it wasn't physical. He was sick at heart and of mind. He was sickened by his lies and his guilt. He was sick because he was letting lawless murderers go free to prey upon the innocent in order to protect himself. But he knew now that he would never be able to protect himself from himself.

"Damn it," he muttered. He reached out suddenly and jerked the sheet of copy from Vincents' typewriter. He ripped it up and threw the pieces into the waste basket. "Forget all that. I'm going to start over."

Vincents stared at him a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and put a fresh sheet in his mill. "Go ahead, Sheriff."

"O'Brien was a cheap crook, taking money from Harry Venter in exchange for protection. O'Brien would tell Venter where I would be on a certain night and Venter's cars would come into the county on a different road. Every once in a while, O'Brien would stop a car and search it just to make it look good, but he never stopped Venter's cars."

Vincents had stopped writing. He looked at the sheriff strangely. "Did you know about this all the time?"

"I did," Peters said grimly, "I might

as well tell you everything while I'm at it. When I was a deputy like O'Brien, I took my cut. I was never as greedy as O'Brien, but I did it."

"What about since you've been sheriff?"

"Not a cent!"

"Put you let O'Brien get away with it."

The sheriff rubbed his eyes. "Yes," he said dully. "I couldn't fire him, couldn't blow the lid off the whole stinking mess, because I was afraid of what would happen to me. I suppose it doesn't make much sense under the circumstances, but I've tried to be a good sheriff. I worked twice as hard as I normally should have, because I was working to make up for the damage that O'Brien was doing. But that doesn't make me innocent, either."

"About O'Brien's murder—do you figure that Venter did it?"

"Yes, but you can't print that. I don't have a shred of evidence. I'm just positive he was responsible. All you can say is that O'Brien wasn't the hero the public thought him to be and that he was in cahoots with bootleggers."

"Uh-huh, and what can I say about you?"

"How soon will this story come out?"

"Not for another hour."

"Then you can say anything you want about me. All I need is time to break it to my wife. She doesn't know."

MARY was waiting up for him in the living room when he got home. She was sitting in a chair by the window, a housecoat hugged tight to her slim body.

Smiling tenderly, she said, "You look tired, John. Sit down and let me make you a cup of tea."

"I don't want any tea."

"A glass of hot milk, then," she said, and she started to get up.

"No, Mary. Sit down. I have something to tell you."

She sat back in her chair and watched him with worried eyes, waiting for him to

“speak, but he didn’t know where to begin. There was so much to tell.

“Mary, I . . .” he began falteringly. “You know I said I—I couldn’t do anything about this O’Brien thing? I can now. I just came from the *Tribune* office and, in a little while, everyone will know I— But I wanted you to know before it—”

“About you and Venter, John? About what you did as a deputy, John? I know about it. I’ve known a long time.”

He stared at her speechlessly, unable to find words to express his astonishment.

She came to his rescue. “You can’t be married to a man for ten years without knowing something about him. It’s hard for you to lie or cheat, John. You show it in your face and manner. You and O’Brien aren’t cut from the same cloth.”

“But all these years you’ve—”

“I’ve waited for you to break away from Venter in your own way. You did it two years ago when you became sheriff. I’ve been proud of you, John—doubly proud because I knew what a hard thing it was for you to do.”

He fell into a chair. “But the money I took from Venter is—”

“I’ve always budgeted carefully. I know to the penny how much we’ve spent. I know to the penny how much of what we’ve saved came from your pay and how much from Venter.” She stood up and went to her desk and came back with her budget book. She flipped it open and pointed to an item marked *H. V.* “That’s Harry Venter. You took forty-two hundred dollars from him—and Venter has an account in the bank that he knows nothing about. It has forty-two hundred dollars in it.”

“Mary, Mary, Mary. I don’t know what to say. Of course, this doesn’t make me any the less guilty but—”

“You’ve been a good sheriff, an honest one. You’ve done a lot to pay for your

crime. It’s not yet too late to do more.”

“But what can I do?”

“The paper won’t be out for another half-hour. Get Venter.”

The sheriff grinned suddenly. “Damned if you shouldn’t have been elected to this job.” He went out to the kitchen and got his shotgun. He checked its load and dropped extra shells in his pocket, then he put a full clip in his .45 and went back to the living room. “It’s going to be dangerous, Mary.”

“I know that, but there isn’t any easy way to square yourself.”

“If anything happens to me, I want you to know I—”

“Nothing will happen to you.” She went up on her toes and kissed him, clinging tightly to his arms. She released him reluctantly. “Good luck, John.”

HE DROVE swiftly through the quiet streets and turned into the deserted warehouse district, stopping the car a half-block from Harry Venter’s garage. Hugging the deep shadows, he moved cautiously toward the building and peered in through the dusty window. The pimply-faced youth, no older than nineteen, was still sitting in the office, his feet on the desk. There was a button under the desk, within easy reach of the boy’s hand, which would ring an alarm in the loft.

Smiling disarmingly, Peters stepped into the office. “Hi, son,” he said gently. He walked toward the desk, holding the shotgun behind his hip.

The boy looked at him suspiciously. “What are you doing back again?”

“I just went off to do a job for Venter.” He kept his eyes on the boy’s hands.

“Yeah? Great sheriff you are.” He sneered disdainfully and raised his hands to thumb his nose.

Peters was on him in an instant, slamming him backwards in the chair. The boy went down with a heavy thud and

Peters hit him once on the point of the jaw. The boy's head snapped back and he went out cold.

Peters eyed him dispassionately. He should be out for a good ten minutes, long enough for what the sheriff had to do.

He walked swiftly across the big garage and went up the concrete fire stairs to the heavy door at the top. This was the only way into the loft and it was locked. Peters frowned thoughtfully, then grinned, remembering that Venter believed he had the sheriff under his thumb.

Peters scratched on the door.

Inside, a muffled voice said, "Venter?"

Peters grinned again. Venter wasn't here but obviously he was expected. "Yeah," he replied in a passable imitation of Venter's voice.

"Okay."

The door swung open and Peters slid into the vault, shotgun at his hip. Except for Bruger, who had opened the door, the loft was deserted.

"Where's Venter?" Peters said softly.

Chink Bruger seemed aware of the gun for the first time. He stepped back nervously. "What's the matter with you?"

"Where's Venter?" Peters kicked the heavy door closed behind him.

"Put down that gun. This ain't no Keystone comedy. Venter decided to drive the other car himself tonight. Him and Red are out."

"Get back against the wall."

Bruger's eyes narrowed. "If this is some kind of a crazy joke—"

"You heard me. Get back. There's been a change in plans. Venter doesn't have a sheriff any more."

Bruger's face turned white. Moving with deliberate slowness, he turned around and started toward the wall, but suddenly his right hand dipped under his jacket and came up with a gun. Going down to one knee, he aimed at Peters.

The room was filled with a deafening roar and Peters glared through the smoke

at Bruger's riddled body. One down and two to go, he thought. He reloaded the gun and stepped over Bruger to face the door. Venter was due any minute, and when he came, he would step into the damndest surprise party he had ever attended—or would ever attend again.

The minutes dragged by. One . . . two . . . three . . . At the end of five minutes, he suddenly remembered the boy in the downstairs office. He would be regaining consciousness soon, if he had not already, and when Venter came, the boy would be there to tell him that the sheriff was waiting. No longer would the element of surprise be on Peters' side.

He cursed himself for not having gagged the youth and hidden him in one of the cars in the garage. But at the time, he had expected Venter to be up here in the loft.

There was only one thing to do. He would have to go down to the office and get the watcher out of sight before Venter arrived.

He went cautiously to the door and pressed his ear against it. No sound came from the stairway outside. He unlatched the door and it swung open noiselessly on oiled hinges. Breathing lightly, he stepped out and made for the stairs.

"Leaving so soon, Sheriff?" a voice said behind him.

Peters wheeled and peered into the darkness, knowing that Venter stood there beside the door.

A sound came from the foot of the stairs. A shuffling sound of feet scraping the cement floor as someone—Red Stanley—stood down there in the darkness and waited for the sheriff to make a break for it.

He was trapped. Only the darkness of the stairway was in his favor, but it also worked for Venter and Stanley.

"You aren't smart, Peters," Venter said. "You didn't get those bandits like I told you to."

PETERS held his breath and remained silent. Thinking hard, he tried to picture the landing. The stairs came up against the wall of the building and the door to the loft was on his left. The landing was really a short hall about fifteen feet long and eight feet wide. If Venter were next to the door, as Peters was sure he was, that would put him about ten feet from the head of the stairs.

Theoretically, Peters could open fire on Venter now, but if he missed in the deep darkness, Venter would be on him immediately and would have the flash of the shotgun to help him direct his aim. Then too, there was always Stanley at the foot of the stairs.

It was Stanley's presence that finally gave Peters the idea for a possible chance out of the trap. The odds were all against its working, but the odds were already against him anyway and he had nothing to lose.

Moving back to the corner of the landing, he took a shotgun shell from his pocket and tossed it underhand toward the stairs. The shell hit about three steps down from the top and rolled over the edge to the next step, then another.

"Red!" Venter hissed.

"I hear him."

Peters felt a slight stir of air as Venter went past him to the head of the stairs. Everything depended upon what Venter did next. Waiting tensely, he heard Venter's foot scrape on the top step. Venter was going down! Believing Peters to be on the stairs, Venter and Stanley were closing in from top and bottom. Soon they would collide. . . .

A stab of red, a booming gun. Then another shot and a body tumbled down the steps.

"Red," Venter cried, "I got him!"

"Red groaned once from the foot of the stairs, then lay still.

"Damn it, Red, answer me!"

"He can't, Venter," Peters said coldly. "You killed him."

Venter fired into the darkness, shooting at the sound of the sheriff's voice, and a streak of blazing pain coursed upward through Peters' thigh. He brought up the shotgun. There was no need to take aim. He couldn't miss at this range. He fired once, heard Venter cry out, fired again and reloaded.

There was no sound from the stairs. It could be a trick, he thought.

Blinding light flashed on overhead as someone switched on the lights. Vincents, the reporter from the *Tribune*, came down the hall on the lower floor, grinning.

"Cleaning house, Sheriff?"

"Yes." The pain in his right thigh was intense and blood streamed down his trouser leg. "Is Venter dead?"

"Very." Vincents glanced at his watch. "Thanks, Sheriff. I can still make a deadline."

"Maybe this will make up for that other story I gave you."

"What other story?" Vincents asked innocently. "Oh—you mean about O'Brien being a heel? That's all I took notes on." The reporter pointed at Venter. "Dead men tell no tales."

Gripping the banister, Peters came down the stairs slowly and stopped in front of Vincents. "Thanks. I don't know what else to—just thanks, that's all."

"Forget it."

"How did you know I'd be here?"

"I got a tip." Vincents turned toward the door to the garage. "All right, Mrs. Peters."

Mary came through the doorway, a smile lighting her face. She took Peters' arm and looked at him proudly. "Hello, Sheriff."

"It's all right now," he said. He put his arm around her shoulders and leaned on her for support. "Let's go home."

Let's Burn Us a Blonde!



CHAPTER ONE

Blonde Stakeout

THE Pennsylvania State Police can be gentlemen. Corporal Dross, a lanky blond, drove my station wagon back to the barracks outside Erie.

I sat beside him with my feet on the dash and cleaned the blood off my new boardhide oxfords with a cleansing tissue. I did it for no reason at all except maybe



*Gripping Novel
of Sudden Death*

**By
ALAN RITNER
ANDERSON**

In the silence, only his voice could be heard; in the dark, only the glint of light on his .45 showed. "I've been waiting for you," he told Kurt.
"I've been waiting a long time. . . ."

it gave me something to occupy my hands.

The police car that trailed us was driven by a chunky trooper named Zysk. We got to the barracks. Dross followed me up the walk. My knees were wobbly. I wasn't drunk. In fact, I hadn't even touched the Scotch and soda. It was back on the bar at The Pines and the change from my five-spot was probably still beside it.

The office was shabby. I sank down into the chair beside the desk. Dross eased himself into the armchair. His mouth was tight. Zysk came in and gave me a worried look. He went into a rear room and came out with a water glass a quarter filled with an amber liquid.

"Moonshine," he said. "I shouldn't do this. It's potent."

It was an understatement. It tasted like kerosene spiced with lye. When I got through gagging and sucking air, I had to dry my eyes. Dross was going through the cards from my wallet. I didn't even know he had it. There were a raft of cards. I belong to a lot of dollar-a-year drinking clubs. We went through it for the record.

"Kurt Strasser?"

"That's me," I said.

"Age?"

"Thirty-three."

He wrote it down. "What's the Faber Novelty Company?"

"Costume jewelry. Woman stuff. I sell for them. I've got six counties. It's a good deal."

The phone rang. Dross answered. He carried the "yes-no" end of the conversation. He put the handset back in its cradle as if it were a light bulb. "Dead," he said. "All three dead on arrival."

He picked up my company identification card. "Five foot eleven," he muttered. "One-eighty pounds. Brown eyes." His eyes worked from me to the card as he checked each item. "Red hair," he said. His brows went up and he stared at my

hair. "It looks black to me," he said.

"You've got to see it in daylight," I explained. "It's red like an Irish Setter." I felt foolish. From a back room I heard the clatter of a teletype and a man's voice talking. Zysk looked at his wrist watch. I looked at mine. It was 1:12 A.M. It began to rain outside. Big drops hit a tin roof and sounded like buckshot poured into a bucket.

I HAD to talk or go nuts. I said, "I left Buffalo about nine. I had dinner with a customer. We don't have a big line. I can show the new stuff over coffee and brandy. The guy was mellow. He bought quick. Usually I get dinged for a circuit of the night spots. This guy was..." I shut up when a trooper came in from a back room. He was older. He wore pants and a shirt and his shoes were off. Black silk socks were tight across big feet that looked hot and sore. A lot of pencils stuck out of his left shirt pocket.

"Still at large," said the trooper. "The blood spoor ended. The area's ringed. Roadblocks are up. Cotterman and his hounds are downstate. They took the blonde down to the courthouse."

The phone rang. Dross answered and again carried the short end of the conversation. He slammed the handset down hard. Then he wrote something on something with a four-color mechanical pencil, a gold-plated one. He loved the pencil. His mouth got soft when he looked at it.

Zysk asked me, "Married?"

"Not married," I apologized. "I can't latch on to anyone special. I'm always in love with two women at the same time, seems like. I like nice, respectable girls. But I like tramps, too. The hard-hearted dames. The money-hungry females with cash-register brains. That's why I stopped at The Pines. They got a glitter blonde named Sabra Fox waiting tables and—"

Zysk flagged me. "I just thought you should phone your wife," he explained.

The bell on the teletype clanged. The older trooper went back fast. We waited for something to happen. Nothing did. Dross opened a desk drawer and put the pencil away like a mother salting baby in the crib. He loved the pencil so much he didn't risk carrying it around for fear of losing it. The sound of the rain on the roof was boring a hole in the top of my skull.

Suddenly Dross asked, "You drove up from Buffalo alone?"

"Yes."

"What time did you hit The Pines?" He had a plain wooden pencil in his hand, a yellow one.

"Before twelve," I said. "I don't know exactly."

He said, "You were parked two cars from the road. You had backed into the space. All the other cars were in head first. Why'd you back in?"

"Habit," I said.

It wasn't good enough. "Why habit?" he asked. "Do you always back into parking spaces?"

"Yes. I back into the garage too," I said. "It's like this. I was raised in a hick town. My father was a volunteer fireman. He made everybody in the family back into the garage so he could get out quick when the siren blasted."

DROSS nodded. It made sense. He probably had figured to get a lot of distance out of the way I was parked—like my black station wagon being the getaway car. His voice got sulky. "You went in?"

"I went in," I agreed.

"Who was at the bar?"

"The man in the blue suit. He was at the far end. The bar runs front to rear. There's an archway in the left wall as you enter. It leads to the dance floor and the tables."

"I saw it," he said. "Are you sure the man wore a blue suit?"

I wasn't. The multicolored neons on the backbar made for confusion. I said, "It was a dark suit. Double-breasted."

"You said he was nervous. How was he nervous?"

"He looked up quick and jerky. He grabbed the knot of his tie with his right hand. His hat had a big brim. His face looked pale."

"Then what?"

"I went to the pinball machine. It's up front next to the window. I tossed a five-spot on the bar and called for a Scotch and soda. The bartender brought the drink and got my change. I had six nickels in my pocket. I hit twelve games on my third play. I was excited. The game is a stinker."

Dross squirmed impatiently. He said, "Why didn't you look up Sabra Fox? She was why you stopped, wasn't she?"

"The room with the tables is couples only," I explained. "She'd have to show at the bar for drinks. She'd spot me and come over to yak if she wasn't busy."

"How well do you know her?"

"Hardly at all. I haven't even held her hand. No dates. Just yaking down at the end of the bar."

"I see," he said. Then: "How come she wore slacks and a turtle-neck sweater?"

"She got stranded there dressed like that," I said. "No dough. No clothes. They needed a waitress and had a couple of white uniforms on tap. They fit too tightly. The dame is built. I guess the tight uniforms caused trouble." I added, "Anyway, I didn't see her until it was all over."

Dross pounced on that. "She said she saw it from the archway. Just inside the archway. That'd put her in your line of sight?"

I said, "I had a gun shoved in my belly. All I could see was the face of the woman holding the gun. Her eyes were yellow."

"Hold it. Who came in first?"

"The tall man. He wore a hat with the brim snapped down all around. The birthmark was on his right cheek down toward the chin. It was purple and it was about the size and shape of an ace of spades. I'd twisted my head around to the right. The tall man had a big S&W held against his right hip bone. He fired. The report slapped my ears. I turned around and leaned back against the end of the machine. The guy at the end of the bar was falling. His right hand was inside his coat."

"You didn't see the Fox girl?"

"I wasn't looking," I said. "The bartender reached for a drawer in the back bar with his left hand. The bullet slapped his left chest sort of low. He fell. I couldn't see the man in the blue suit. The bar was in the way."

"Who showed next?"

"The woman."

"How about the porch door. Was it open?"

"Wide open. So somebody was outside holding it. The woman came in. The tall man just pointed the index finger of his left hand at me. The woman came up to me and rammed the muzzle of a little gun in my stomach. I put my hands on the nape of my neck."

"Did she tell you to?"

"I don't know, I really don't know. We were snug. I leaned back and her knees touched mine. She was a big redhead and her eyes were yellow. She had a lot of freckles. All over her face. They went down the front of her dress. Her eyes were hot. They were burning. That gun was deep in my stomach and it was rock steady." My face was sweaty. I took a cautious sip of the moonshine. They waited, eyes intent on my face.

THE little guy showed then. He was built like a jockey, short and scrawny. He went down to the end of the bar and bent over. He came back and handed

the tall man a big fat wallet that made noise."

"Made noise? What kind of a noise?"

"I don't know. It just made noise when he passed it over." I took a deep breath. "The big gun went off again. It must have been a .45. The slug packed shock power. The little guy spun half around. He dove toward the archway like he was after a fumbled football. He hit on his face and didn't move. Half of him was in the room with the tables."

"Then what?"

"They went out. The redhead went out frontward. The tall man backed out swinging his gun right and left. The door closed. I stood there with my hands behind my head. Then all of a sudden I saw the man in the dark suit. He was crawling on the floor. He had a revolver. He squatted in front of the glass window of the door and got off two shots. Then he slumped back. There was a crash outside, a big crash. I turned my head. The venetian blinds were closed but somebody had leveled a couple at eye level. I looked out. The big convertible was socked up against the tree. Steam was pouring out of the hood."

"Did you see anyone?"

"Not a soul. When I turned around Sabra Fox was over the guy in the archway. She'd turned him over and was yelling for towels. The cook came in with a lot of napkins. I got my brains together. Sabra Fox took over. She had me and a fat man cart the bartender out from behind the bar. She was cool and collected. When the chips went down a dizzy blonde was the only one who didn't fly apart."

Dross looked pleased. That baffled me. Then I got a shock when I realized that he was tying Sabra Fox into the picture as an accomplice, as the stakeout. She hadn't been heroic at all, to his way of thinking. She'd pitched in because she was on the team and wasn't going to get chopped down. On the other hand, the

little guy had been on the team and was now a dead duck. My brains were scrambled.

Dross said to Zysk, "I didn't go upstairs. Who are the owners, the Frankels?"

"An old couple. She has heart trouble. They work it days. The bartender is a relative—*was* a relative. He and the blonde carried it nights."

The phone rang. Dross answered and got through the conversation with three "yesses." He hung up and asked me, "All right if I drive your station wagon down to the courthouse? I'll park it on Sixth. Private Zysk can drive you down."

"Sure," I said. "The suitcases are unlocked. I've got a pint of brandy I bought in New York, and there's a rap for that."

"I'm not State Liquor Board," he said frostily.

I shrugged. I was unhappy. Sabra Fox had been elected as a possible accomplice. Now I was a candidate. Dross had a suspicious mind. It occurred to me that you have to get to The Pines by car. Dross was probably thinking that I'd trailed the guy in the blue suit and fingered him.

Zysk asked, "Ready?"

Dross had already taken off in my black station wagon. Zysk drove the way old-maid school teachers are reputed to drive. The only one I know drives like a midget racer. The rain had stopped and everything had a rinsed look. I didn't say a word. I sat and felt sorry for myself. Zysk parked in the rear of the courthouse off Fifth Street. We walked over to Peach and up to Sixth, turned right and approached the building from the front.

CHAPTER TWO

Lethal Earful

ERIE COUNTY COURTHOUSE is U-shaped. It was wide awake and a lot of cars were parked out front. I saw

the glint of my black station wagon. Zysk and I went up on the east porch. A man opened the door, said, "Wait outside a minute." The door closed.

I said, "I don't think this building likes me. In fact, I don't think it likes people. I always wipe my feet before I go in."

Zysk said, "I shouldn't have given you that moonshine."

I shut up. We killed a cigarette apiece. Corporal Dross came out and beckoned. He led the way. I followed. Zysk brought up the rear.

Sabra Fox was in the corridor, leaning against the wall to my left. The woman beside her was brawny and had grey hair—a production-line police matron. Sabra had lost her glitter. Her makeup had done her dirt. Her face was geared for the soft orange radiance of The Pines, not the naked lighting of the courthouse corridor. Against her waxy face the garish makeup seemed suspended in the air. The brick-red slacks and the wine-colored, turtle-necked sweater didn't help either. The top of the slacks were tight around her wasp-waist and accented the broadness of her shoulders and hips. She looked soft and lush. The corners of her gooey red mouth jerked when she saw me—like a smile stopped in midstride.

I stopped abreast her, asked anxiously, "You all right?"

She nodded. Her upswept hair-do was a solid mass of tight curls that looked like brittle brass springs. The hair-do shivered and exploded a lot of tiny yellow sparks.

Behind me Zysk said, "Let's go." I stood fast. My hands made fists beside my thighs.

Sabra Fox said one word. "Please," she said. Her voice was hushed and without hope. They'd given her a bad time.

"I'm on your team," I said.

Something flickered in the blue of her eyes. I walked on. Dross was waiting for me. He was vastly annoyed. Larry Bryce, a reporter I drink beer with, lounged

against the rear wall looking provoked.

They sat me across the desk from the district attorney. Roger Courtney is in his fifties, a lean, handsome man with salt-and-pepper hair and a trim black mustache. He's society and he's in the chips. His ancestors hit Erie two hundred years ago to do some sharp fur trading with the ignorant Indians. They did okay. The Courtneys are still on deck. Now and then a guy digging a well will come across one of the Indians. Roger Courtney is handsome enough to have been approached by a booze company for their upper-crust full-page ads. He turned them down.

This was great. The D.A. in person! Courtney didn't like me. Now and then I squire his daughter Inez around to social affairs. He doesn't like it. My blood lines are wrong. I fit into Erie society like a king-sized mongrel at a dog show. I'd run away from home, got kicked out of college, and during a year's bumming around the country I got down on a few police blotters for vagrancy. Roger Courtney was Princeton, then Harvard Law School. It's a bad combination.

COURTNEY'S face said, I told you so. Inez would get an earful. If Dross wanted to sell the idea that I was an accomplice, he'd get a ready buyer in Roger Courtney.

He showed me the picture of Purple Birthmark.

"That's him," I said. "Who is he?"

"Ralph Posner. Will you swear he's the man?"

"Sure."

Courtney rubbed his hands. "Two witnesses," he said. "Strasser and the blonde woman."

I suggested, "Maybe a guy stuck a purple birthmark on his face."

Courtney didn't say a word. He skidded another picture across the desk. It was the redhead. I had to study it. Makeup

almost concealed the freckles and she looked sleepy-eyed—not like a tigress ready to pounce.

"That's her," I said. "Who is she?"

"Dolly Posner, the wife. You'll swear to it?"

"Sure. Where do I sign?"

Dross' mouth was somewhere over my head and I was too pooped to look up. He asked, "Did you know the dead man? The first man to get shot. The man at the end of the bar."

"No," I said. "Who was he?"

"A Hugo Sarles."

"I never heard of him."

"You didn't recognize him as someone you'd seen before?"

"Not that I remember," I said. I got cagey. "The light was bad and his hat brim shaded his face. Why do you ask?"

"You had something in common—Sabra Fox. He was nutty about the blonde."

"Who said I was nutty about her?" I asked. "And how do you know that's why he stopped? Did he tell you?"

"No, she did."

It was a jolt. Sabra Fox and I belonged on the same team, all right. We'd both talked too much. "Why'd he get killed?" I asked.

"For what he was carrying. The wallet that made noise. Have you identified the noise yet?"

"No. Look, I'm pooped. What is it, home or jail?"

Courtney asked, "Where do you live?"

I gave him a quick look. His face was bland. I never had a sister. I don't know what daughters tell their fathers. Inez had been to my apartment on double dates and I was vain enough about my place to think she'd talk about my South American motif.

I said, "I live on lower State Street over an all-night restaurant run by a Greek named Nick Plotosockos. I have the only apartment. A sign painter has

a little one-room workshop in back."

Courtney said, "I understand you're a traveling salesman. What are your plans?"

"I'm here for five days," I said. "I just rode my circuit. I've got a lot of paper-work to do."

"You may go home," he said. "But don't leave town."

"I said I was due to stay five days," I told him.

A trace of color came to his cheeks. "You may go home now."

He'd thrown me a bone. I took it and went out. The corridor was clear. Larry Bryce was on the porch. I gave him what I knew in simple English. I asked, "Just what happened and why?"

Bryce said, "They don't know or they're holding out. I've got to sweat it out here a while."

"I'm going home," I said. "I'm sure as hell going home."

The rain had stopped but a frisky wind shook big drops of water from the trees in front of the building. Erie has more trees than people. By and large, the trees are in better shape. I dashed out to my car wondering if Dross had the keys under his hat. I opened the door and was about to slide into the seat when the horn on the car parked behind me almost blasted me out of my clothes.

I went back with fire in my eyes, working my shoulders to loosen my coat in case I had to punch somebody. I swaggered up to the big black sedan.

Inez Courtney cranked down the window and said, "Take the chip off your shoulder!"

I DID. She looked terrific. Her hair is cropped rather short and always looks as if it has been sprayed with black lacquer. Her oval face had been Florida sunbaked to an exciting coppery hue and she was using a new shade of lipstick slightly on the pale side, a pinkish sheen an artist might tag flamingo, strawberry,

Tuscan, or salmon. On her mouth it looked sensational. I take most society women with a chill. Not Inez. I like her. For what I am and what she is, that's a big item. Inez is Bryn Mawr. Quite a lot rubbed off on her. But she can turn it off and on. About five society guys are pitching for her dainty hand. Going with me off and on is a mild form of slumming, I guess. The black glint of her hair against the tawny gloss of her face was something to look at, it really was. I looked. Her eyes are pale grey and fringed with long black lashes. She never plays cute with her eyes, like peeking up through those long lashes.

She said, "Ah, I heard father on the phone. I slipped on a coat and slippers and was down in the car when he got there. Look." She opened her coat. She wore slinky pajamas that were evidently dark blue but looked indigo in the street light. Her cheeks ruddied. She was living dangerously, but didn't know the seamy side of that catch phrase—like digging coal in a bootleg hole or riding the blinds of a fast passenger train in zero weather.

"A midnight saga of blood and violence," I said. "I was there. The innocent bystander."

"What's she like?" Inez asked.

"Who?"

"The blonde," she said. "Father said that there was a triple killing at a roadhouse and you and a flashy blonde were the key witnesses."

I would have traded five years in jail for a chance at Roger Courtney. I explained with a lot of words. "She's a hard-luck kid," I added. "She hitched a ride with a couple driving from Chicago to New York. They stopped at The Pines to eat. While Sabra Fox was in the rest room the couple drove off with all her clothes and money."

"How ghastly!" Inez cried. "It happened to me in New York. Someone stole my suitcase at Grand Central and my

purse was in it. I thought I'd perish until the family wired money."

The Bryn Mawr damosel was riding high and I decided to knock her down. I said, "Sabra Fox doesn't have a home. She doesn't know what one is. She's an orphan out of a state institution and I bet they let her pick a name out of a hat."

Inez said, "Oh!" Her eyes got big, then they filmed with tears. "I'm sorry," she said, voice choked. "I'm terribly sorry, I really am, Kurt."

She meant it. I was on the hook and I didn't know how to get off. "You look great," I said. "You look terrific."

"How old is she?"

"Who knows? Maybe your age, maybe mine. She's a natural for the cops to hang a rap on. A stranger in a strange town with no one back of her."

"You're going to bat for her, aren't you? You'll polish your armor and charge a few windmills. And get yourself in trouble."

I glowered. I said, "Shut up and let me look at you!" She looked good. Anger had sparked her eyes and between her lips her teeth gleamed shiny wet and white. I said brusquely, "Well, so-long! I'll give you a ring. If they jug me send cigarettes by messenger."

I GOT in my car. The keys were in the lock. I drove slapdash down to Second Street and up State. The street was open. I parked in the blue-whiteness pouring out through Nick's big front windows. I pocketed the keys and got out. I didn't lock the doors and I was too tired to cart my luggage upstairs. It wasn't likely the stuff would be stolen with the car standing in the bright lights of Nick's.

Inside the restaurant two drunks sat at the counter drinking coffee through straws. Nick Plotosockos was polishing the coffee urn. He's a barrel-chested Greek with a bald head and a thick neck. He cries easy. He was polishing the urn

because someone had hurt his feelings.

I was about to take off when I saw the feet sticking out from under a table. The shoes needed resoling but the grey spats with pearl-like buttons were immaculate. This was rare good luck. Under the table slept Jake Masterman, the black sheep of the legal profession. I wanted him. Normally locating Jake would have taken days.

I went in. Nick turned around and his weepy eyes got big. "You need money, huh?" he asked.

"No," I said. Nick always offers money to characters in distress. Money he doesn't have. He'd probably heard the news on the radio.

I didn't fool with Jake. I dragged him out from under the table and pulled him erect. A grey-haired man of sixty-one, he is small and scrawny with a sharp face and bloodshot eyes. Jake smiled foolishly and bobbed his head.

"I'll buy a drink," I said.

He came thirstily alive, "Ha!" he gloated.

"Know a police matron at the county jail?" I asked. "About fifty. Grey hair. A beefy red face."

"Kate Loski," he said. "I know her well. I defended the man who killed her husband."

Jake's voice doesn't fit. It's deep, like the blast of a steamboat whistle, and rightly belongs on a lusty six-footer.

I said, "It doesn't sound so good."

"Why not? The man was her brother. Hubby was a rat. He was a lush who played women, horses, cards and punch boards. He beat Kate, to boot. Her brother shot him through the brisket. I got him off light. He's down working at the nut house at North Warren."

I looked at Nick, said, "Four hamburgers to go. With everything. And two Cokes. With an opener. Put all of it in a bag."

"You want I make them now, huh?"

I looked at the clock. It was 2:56. "In five minutes," I said. "Put them on in five minutes."

CHAPTER THREE

Two Corpses to Go!

I TOOK Jake up to my five-room hope chest. As always, the place gave me a lift. It was the first real home I ever had. Back in the small town I shared a dinky room with two kid brothers. My father was a plumber in a town that needed only half a plumber. They're all gone now, mother and dad, the kid brothers knocked off in the war.

I dote on splashy colors. The place is a riot of reds and greens squared off against greys and yellows. I got the furniture from a store in Pittsburgh that had gotten a trial order from a factory in Brazil. People were afraid of the splashy colors. I got it cheap. The store had displayed the furniture in too much light. I toned it down by putting low-watt bulbs in the table lamps. I'd broken the tropical motif with a few bentwood pieces and a Swedish-modern armchair as graceful as a swan's neck.

The kitchen and dining space are in one narrow room and divided by chest-high shelves painted dove-grey. I steered Jake there and sat him down at the table. He stared at the split-bamboo mat I'd gotten mail order from Frisco. It makes a handsome table decoration. He said, "I'll have chow mein."

I went around and turned on the lamps. The apartment came alive, warm and friendly, and the splashy colors seemed to blend and push the walls back. I had planned a party. I opened a bottle of Scotch, a bottle of rye, a bottle of bourbon. I arrayed them in front of Jake. He blinked. I gave him a glass and filled a little copper tub with ice cubes. It's the best way to confront his thirst. Give him

variety and he doesn't know what to do.

Jake stared at the bottles. He liked them all. He patted the Scotch on the cork, then leaned forward and studied the labels on the other two bottles. It was bonded stuff and Jake drinks bar whiskey. "Ha!" he gloated. "Ha!"

I said, "There's a girl in jail. Take her the stuff Nick's getting ready. Tell her that you're her lawyer."

"Highbrow or lowbrow? You never hit anybody in between. Either the lady of the manor or the scullery maid. Don't you know any middle-class females? Like typists or salesgirls? And what's her name?"

"Sabra Fox."

Jake dragged his eyes off the bottles long enough to stare at me. "The tasty blonde at The Pines? She lent me fifty cents bus fare when she found me sleeping on the porch one morning."

I felt good. I felt wonderful and I wasn't pooped any more. I went into the kitchen and filled a leather-bound flask with a half-pint of cheap whiskey a character had left at the last party. It would provide Jake fuel to and from the jail and would be raw enough to make him hunger for the bonded stuff on the table.

I gave him the bottle and a dollar bill to pay Nick. Then I took him down to the street because I didn't want him to fall down the stairs. He could crawl back up if need be. He tucked the flask into the top of his pants and held the dollar bill between his teeth like a dog with a bone. A lake wind creaked the sign that stuck out over the sidewalk in front of Nick's. The dry wind had evaporated the fall of rain from the pavements. I watched Jake bank a turn into the restaurant.

I went up to the apartment and phoned Larry Bryce at the newspaper.

I asked him, "Got anything?"

"Yes." His voice was on guard.

"So you can't talk?"

"Not now."

"Look, Larry! I've got whiskey and I can make coffee."

"No. I want home. We were having a party. Maybe it's still going. Look, I have to go downstairs."

"You'll phone from there?"

"Yes."

I HUNG up. He called back in forty seconds. Larry said, "Hugo Sarles was carrying diamonds. He deals in them on a modest scale. He was acting as messenger on this batch. A hundred and fifty thousand bucks worth, nothing over five carats. Here's a queer angle. He was supposed to fly to Chicago. If the planes were grounded, he was to go by train. Driving was out. Driving was no go. Too risky."

"Oh," I said. I keep a pencil and scratch pad on the desk beside the phone. I made notes.

Larry said. "They figure Sabra Fox as the finger lady, as the lure, as the stake-out. The Posners get a line on the deal. Sarles is nutty for the blonde. She maybe phones him and says she's sick of The Pines and can't he take her away from it all. He risks driving Buffalo to Erie. Maybe he plans to pick up Sabra and fly out of Erie. Who knows?"

"Farfetched," I said.

"That's not for you to decide," Larry pointed out. "The little man was a Creepy Yates. He had a police record for driving getaway cars from bank stickups and such. An artist at it. He auto-raced the dirt tracks years ago. Big cars."

"Why kill him?"

"The fewer the shares the bigger the shares. Now, get hold of yourself, Kurt!"

"Okay," I said.

"You can fit," he said. "You could be in on it. You could have trailed Sarles from Buffalo."

"Nuts!" I said. "I can't fit. I'd be one too many."

"Wake up! Your job! Who'd make a better fence than a man selling jewelers in

six counties? Real diamonds as a side line. Just a shade under the market price. You know, a lady in distress who doesn't want it known she's broke. Stuff like that."

I felt sick. "I guess I could," I had to admit.

Larry said, "Throw the blonde overboard. You can't back her. It's too, too good. The accomplices stick because the whole crime went haywire when Sarles came to life and pulled off two shots that wrecked the car."

"No," I said. "They're dead wrong on me. They could be dead wrong on her. I'm already at bat for her."

"I'm not listening. Somebody's asking about you and your yen for backing cars into slots."

I was really dense. "Why?" I asked.

"Just suppose," he said. "Just suppose the stickup was pulled neat and clean with no gunplay. There's a lot of ways your car could fit into the picture. Try speculating about that."

"Backing into the space wouldn't matter one way or another," I said. "I could go in forward."

"Don't argue. You backed in and it's not a natural thing to do. That's the point."

He hung up. So did I. I wrote it out for Jake and my hand was shaky. Afterthoughts can do you dirt. I remembered that I carry an expensive first-aid kit in the glove compartment of the station wagon. Faber requires it of all salesmen because the odds are that sooner or later you'll come across an accident. If I had remembered I could have gotten the kit and maybe saved a life. It was a dismal thought. I had been to war and I should have been casehardened.

JAKE came back at 3:41. He didn't crawl up, but his right shoulder rubbed a streak up the north wall of the staircase. The flask stuck out of his left coat pocket, so I knew it was empty. He had

catsup on his chin. There was a black hat on his head and the crushed crown bore tire marks. "Found it in the street," he explained. "A fine hat." He made the table handily and drank Scotch from the bottle.

"How'd it go?" My voice came from a distance.

"Somebody beat you on the grub angle. I ate three hamburgers and gave one to a dog. I had to wipe off the catsup. Dogs don't like catsup."

"Who beat me on the food angle? The Frankels?"

"Inez Courtney," Jake said.

I sat beside him with a jolt. "No!" I cried. "Oh, no! She wouldn't dare. It'll be all over town."

"Of a certainty," he agreed. "Kate Loski has a big yap."

"What happened?"

"Inez fetched steak sandwiches. And me with nothing but beat up hamburgers."

I warned, "If you want to drink hearty, open up!"

"They were talking. Sabra was cleaning her face with some little pads Inez brought. She looks naked without makeup. But good. Younger and fresher. The chit-chat was brief. I got the score. Hell, I thought maybe she'd hawked numbers tickets or something. You should have told me. It was a shock."

"There wasn't time. Did she take you as her lawyer?"

"Yes, and gladly."

I gave Jake the notes I'd taken. He read them fast and snorted. "Bah!" he said. "What do I care? First things first. We've got to spring the blonde. I should worry what the cops deduce. It doesn't count until it gets talked in front of a jury. They've got nothing."

I felt better. Juries love Jake. He's a ham actor at heart and women jurors feel sorry for him.

There was a knock at the door. I said, "Larry Bryce. He gave me the dope. He's

on his way home. It must be him."

I opened the door. Inez Courtney stood there. The blue trench coat was belted snugly around her slim figure. The cuffs of the pajamas draped blue slippers with open toes. She wore red socks, woolly ones. In the soft light of the living room the silky pajamas were still indigo. Her face was tight.

"May I come in?" she asked. Her voice was tight too.

My feet were nailed to the floor. Inez walked around me and went out into the kitchen. I heard the rattle of a cup and saucer. I closed the door and went to the table. Inez sat across from Jake with her coffee. She eyed the room disapprovingly. Inez goes for pastels of cool colors. Their house is done in Empire, oyster white with thin gold stripes.

She said, "Father sent a policeman out with word for me to go home. He thinks I'm there. I've met Mrs. Loski."

Jake said, "Bah!" He got an ice cube out of the copper tub and chewed it up with relish. The glassy crunch put my teeth on edge.

"You shouldn't have done it," I told Inez.

"They haven't caught the killer," she said. "I'm worried."

"Bah!" Jake said. "They won't catch him for a long, long time."

"Why not?" I asked.

"What if they'd pulled it neat and clean? What if they'd gotten away with a simple stickup? The flash would go out for the convertible, wouldn't it? Think they'd try to make Cleveland? Of course not. They had a hideout close at hand. Maybe right here in Erie. They could hit Erie before the flash got rolling."

THE HAIR at the nape of my neck stiffened. "I could send him to the chair," I said. "Sabra Fox and I could send him to the chair. Three dead. Why not two more?"

Inez' eyes were enormous and the coppery hue of her shiny face sort of bleached out for a moment.

Jake yawned, then snagged a drink of Scotch. "Not yet," he said, "You've got a few days' grace. Posner stirred up a hornet's nest. He'll wait for the law to simmer down and cool off. Take it from me, he's holed up solid. He and his wife."

"Oh, no!" Inez cried. "His wife's dead, didn't you know? They found her in a culvert a mile from The Pines. A bullet in her lungs. There was a blood trail away from the spot. So he's wounded too. The policeman told me. The one father sent out."

Jake mulled it over. "He's still got a hideout. There's been time to make it on foot if he isn't too badly wounded. So if he makes it, he's still wounded and you get more time."

Inez asked, "What are you going to do about the girl?"

I asked Jake, "Can we bail her out?"

"Could be," he said cautiously. "Have you got what it takes?"

"I can hypothecate some Faber stock and a couple of government bonds," I said.

"A fine word," Jake cried. "Much fancier than hock."

I asked Inez, "How'd it go with Sabra Fox?"

Inez said, "She cried. I—I never heard a woman cry like that." Inez' lower lip went up under her teeth and her grey eyes welled tears. I sat spellbound.

Jake said, "Don't be a slob! Go get her a hanky!"

I went to the bedroom and got her a big blue silk handkerchief I'd picked up overseas. But when I got back she was boo-hooing into a dish towel Jake had gotten her. I'd never heard her cry before. She did it well, with a certain refinement. Maybe Bryn Mawr has a course in lady-like weeping.

I told her, "I better bounce you. Larry

Bryce may stop by. You know reporters. They're frustrated. There are too many local tidbits the big advertisers keep out of the paper. So they talk about it. Like Inez Courtney up here in pajamas and stuff."

Inez was docile. She got up and asked, "May I take the towel?"

"I guess I can trust you with it," I said.

I trailed her out. She stopped in the hall and gave me a wet-eyed look. She said, "Sabra Fox doesn't like men. She doesn't like them even a little bit. Am I being catty?"

"No," I said. "I know she doesn't like men. I saw it in her eyes."

"She has a reason, I guess," Inez said.

"Naturally. Men gave her a bad time. She's the kind of woman men give a bad time from the age of fourteen on."

"Good-bye," said Inez.

I said good-bye and watched her go down the steps in the Bryn Mawr glide. On her it looked good. She had long, slim legs and knew how to handle them—like pointing the top toe at the floor when she crossed her legs.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sabra Fox

I CLOSED the door and joined Jake, who was getting sodden. He said, "You're a cheapskate. You didn't give me enough dough to pay Sabra the half a buck I owed her."

"What would she have done with it?"

"Left it for the chambermaid," Jake said. "I owe the landlady six weeks rent and she's got me locked out again. Frankly, I've been bunking in the clink. The city clink. It has more character and stronger smells and the drunk tank's better than a floor show. I hate to mention such a sordid thing as money."

"You stay here," I said. "I'll take you

off the hook and stake you to new clothes."

"Fine. I got Sabra Fox's sizes. We've got to get her out of that red outfit."

"I'll buy," I said. "Or you. Something black and demure."

"I'm hungry. Got any cold saurkraut?"

"A Polish mix," I said. "Kraut, pickles and tomatoes in brine." He nodded. I opened a quart of the mix and served it with a fork and plate. He ate it out of the jar.

I asked, "Am I in danger?"

"Not yet. For all he knows the cops got a stakeout on the place here. The dust has to settle."

We discussed it at length while Jake ate half the Polish mix. It took time. He finally went to the bathroom. He didn't come out. I was worried. He'd hit the Scotch along with the mix. I heard the hiss and roar of the shower. I went in to check. Jake stood in the tub fully dressed waiting for something to happen. The shower stall is six feet away. I yanked him out of the tub and he began to undress.

Out in the living room the phone began to ring. I hurried out. The travel clock on the desk said: 4:56.

It was Inez. Her voice had tears in it, yet was thick with rage. She said, "Father found out."

"Oh," I said. "How?"

"The police matron."

"Oh," I said in relief. If the cops had a stakeout on the house the man might have called the D.A. and reported Inez' visit. That would have been worse.

Inez said, "We had an ugly scene. Father has prohibited me from seeing you."

"That's okay," I said, "I'll get smeared. You're better off out of it."

She got wacky. "Mother's in New York, you know."

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, I mean, mother can keep father in line. She's a sort of moderator."

"Don't let it get you down," I said. "It'll all come out in the wash."

"You don't understand," she said. "I've left home, Kurt."

I turned into a slab of granite. I heard faraway music at the end of the line, then the gabby voice of a disk jockey. My brains soared.

She asked anxiously, "Kurt! Kurt! Are you there?"

"I guess," I admitted.

"I'm at the all-night gas station on West Twelfth," she said. "Meet me in front of Nick's. I'll be right down."

"Hold it!" I cried.

She hung up.

I hurried back to the bathroom. Jake sat naked in the tub with water up to his armpits. He was washing his socks with vast enjoyment.

"Inez left home," I said.

"Who's Inez?"

I groaned. The hot water had kicked up the whiskey and with nothing to occupy his mind his brains were frying. I tried again.

"Inez Courtney, the D.A.'s daughter."

"Never heard of her," he said. "A white girl?"

I WENT down to the street in a huff. Fat-bellied clouds, low and black, scuttled in from the lake bearing the stench of the bay where Mother Nature doesn't change the water often enough. I leaned against the brick wall where the shadows were deepest. At the curb, my station wagon glittered sleek and black, like an economy-sized hearse. I have a garage nearby, but the three parking meters outside of Nick's are always out of order, why I don't know. The department store clock gonged out five mournful peels and the horns of a Diesel gave a Bronx cheer in reply.

I'd expected Inez to swoop down in her big fat convertible. The soggy atmosphere picked up the rhythmic click-clock of high

heels hitting the pavement with smart precision. She came from the north wearing a tweed suit and carrying a tan suitcase. Her normal long-legged lope was throttled down to short, choppy strides and an invisible balloon seemed to support half her weight as she was elaborately careful not to step on any cracks. I watched with growing horror.

"Oh, no!" I heard myself say.

Inez arrived. Inez was drunk. Inez had a new pair of eyes, grey eyes interspersed with tiny chips of black diamonds. The handsome pale mouth had been replaced by a gaudy scarlet creation that looked as if it had been put on with a trowel after being scraped off a fire engine. She smiled. The edge of her teeth were red. "Hello!" she said. The word covered a sultry octave. She parked the suitcase beside her right shoe. Bryn Wawr still registered as she bent her knees to lower the bag. But she came up like off a diving board.

"Not you!" I cried, "Not you! You're loaded."

"Gin and coke," she confessed. "I read it in a book. The book said it was like TNT. I stole a bottle of gin from home and got the coke at the gas station. The coke was warm. Only six cents, too." She leered. She spoke with great deliberation.

I shuddered. I said, "Look, this is crazy."

She was solemn and logical. "You're being unreasonable," she said. "What does one do when one leaves one's home except to hie oneself to the source of one's trouble?" She leered again.

"Hell!" I said. Then I picked up her suitcase, grabbed her right elbow, and steered her upstairs. Her left shoulder made a mark on the side wall to match the one Jake had furrowed on the other side.

Jake wore the flannel pajamas I'd given him. He was crawling around the floor on his hands and knees. He heard us, said, "I lost my watch. It's a family heirloom."

"You hocked it," I said.

"That was yesterday," Jake said. "This is today."

"It is not," said Inez. She stuck her chin out.

Jake got to his bare feet. "Ha!" he chortled. "Inez Courtney, the number one daughter of my old college chum and fellow lodge brother."

"I WANT a drink," Inez said. "Gin and coke. Or maybe just whiskey."

Jake obligingly poured her a drink. I took it away from him and drank it myself.

I opened her suitcase. The pajamas were the lounging kind, pale yellow and slinky. The robe was a richer hue of yellow. The material was thick and rich. I ran my fingers through it and rubbed the fabric against my cheek. It was cool and slippery. I found a pair of slippers in a zipper pouch.

I took the stuff back and put it on the laundry hamper in the bathroom. Then I grabbed Inez and shoved her in the bathroom too. I got her three big turkish towels and closed the door.

Jake yawned, "I'm going to bed. Four hours sleep will help. Give me some dough!"

I handed him my wallet. I was surprised. I thought Dross had the wallet. I asked, "What are you going to do?"

He got huffy, "Do you tell me how to sell fake jewelry?"

"How about Inez?"

"I'll think of something."

I said, "Look, Jake. I can sleep outside the apartment I just remembered. Should I sleep outside?"

"Maybe you better, and don't tell me where."

Jake went in and got the travel alarm off the desk. Then he disappeared into the guest bedroom. I had an out. The sign painter in back often forgets his key. I have a copy and Nick has a copy downstairs. There was a cot in back and a

wash stand. Sleeping under the same roof with Inez Courtney didn't seem like a good idea. Jake Masterman's lack of interest in the fair sex was known by one and all. My brain was dead. The zany didos of Jake and Inez had thrown me off the beam. Maybe it was all to the good. At least it kept me from brooding about the triple kill at The Pines and the dismal dimness of my immediate future. The killings now seemed like three chapters out of a bad novel.

INEZ came out of the bathroom an extravagant in yellow. She floated. I guess the towel rub had sparked the liquor in her system. The red gook was off her mouth.

I said kindly, "You better go to bed."

"Okay," she said. "I'll have a drink and sleep on the davenport."

"You can have the master bedroom."

"The davenport," she insisted.

"Why?"

"It's more respectable."

"Go ahead. I'll get pillows and a blanket." I went into the master bedroom and got the new sponge-rubber pillow. I went to the closet and took out a blanket. Inez was just downing about five ounces of whiskey when I got back. She drank it like water. Her hair looked like hard coal washed clean of rock dust.

She stretched out on the davenport and wormed her slippers off. I put them on the floor. I snuggled the pillow under her head. Her eyes closed. I draped her with the blanket which I folded under her bare feet and tucked in at the sides. Her breathing was slow and shallow. From the bedroom in back came the rasp of Jake's snoring. It sounded like a saw hitting a knot. I went around and turned off all the lights.

I got the key to the workshop. I backed out and closed the door. I tried it twice to make sure it was locked. The hall was dark. I felt my way back to the workshop

and entered. I gave my lighter a twirl and found the lights. The painter is a frustrated artist. He was having a go at a nude with water colors. The flesh tones were more coral than pink and it was jarring.

The cot creaked. Somewhere far away a siren shrieked. It didn't register. My nervous system was short-circuited.

* * *

I came alive. My watch said 8:18. It was evening, I knew by the way I felt. My brain was waterlogged. The sign painter hadn't come up. That was normal. Half his work is outside the workshop, painting barroom walls and stuff. He's a specialist. He works taverns because he doesn't drink and the owners can leave him on his own.

I got up. My memory began to stir and worry pecked at my brain. My nerves woke up and began to flutter.

The hallway was deserted. The glass in the sidewalk door was wet and grey. I rapped at my apartment door. There was a lull. My heart hammered. The door opened and Jake peered out. He wore a new blue suit with a vertical chalk stripe, a snow-white shirt and a dark-blue bow tie.

"We don't want any," he said sourly.

"It's me, Kurt Strasser."

"Well, come in!" he growled.

I entered. Sabra Fox was curled up on the end of the sofa. The black dress was too loose, if anything, and the neckline was high and maidenly. The metallic glitter was out of her hair. Her face was soft and tranquil. It was a new face with a new makeup assembly on the conservative side. Her blue eyes didn't look haunted any more.

Jake closed the door.

She said, "I love your apartment."

I glowed. Her voice had changed. The sexiness was shoved down deep.

"It's gaudy," I said.

"Oh, no! I love rich colors. It's, well,

the kind of a place I'd have for myself if I had what it takes."

I WENT over and sat in the Swedish-modern armchair. I was six years old and I had five hands. She fitted. Sabra Fox fitted. Everything in the room seemed to be there just to highlight her blondeness. My heart sputtered, then kicked into overdrive and shot some bubbles into my blood stream.

She said, "Thanks for everything." There was gratitude in her voice and I couldn't get enough air into my lungs.

"You married?" I asked.

Her eyes registered surprise. "No," she said. "No."

Jake said, "Bah!" He was surly. I saw a drink in his hands. It was watered down and I knew he was taking just enough to flatten his nerves.

"Did you spring her without bail?"

Jake said, "Shut up!" He took out a notebook. He said, "I phoned your boss in Pittsburgh. Send in your orders and skip the rest for the time being."

"They get Posner?"

"No. They found heroin in the wrecked car. It's hard to come by, heroin. Posner's at large. They're looking." Jake was nervous. "You'll have to identify Dolly Posner at the morgue later on. There's no rush. She'll keep."

"Oh," I said.

Sabra Fox got up and went back to the kitchenette. She brought me a cup of black coffee spiked with brandy. I sipped it. She looked wonderful. She wasn't afraid of the apartment.

Jake said, "I phoned a pal in Cleveland. He had his secretary send Courtney a wire and signed Inez' name. Just that's she's visiting friends up there. She got a slew of friends in Cleveland."

"Where is she?"

Jake heaved a big sigh. "She got up early and tidied the joint. I was back at ten. She was sober. I got Sabra and we

came here at once. Inez was tanked solid. She's sleeping it off in the upper bunk."

I sat stolidly. The world was upside down. The lady was a tramp and the tramp was a lady. I eyed Sabra Fox with a mellow sort of relish. I started to get up to go look at Inez.

"Sit down!" Jake said.

I sank back.

Jake said, "I brought your luggage up from the car. Four pieces?"

"Four pieces," I said.

Jake said, "The cops have a stakeout on Sabra."

I looked at her. She was looking around the room with a faint smile curling her lips. I said, "You do black noble, or rather it does you noble. The dress, I mean."

Jake said, "Shut up! Look, I want you should take Sabra for a ride down to the dock. I want those stakeouts pulled off."

I nodded. "I'll clean up and shave and change—"

"No!" His voice was explosive. Jake was keyed up. He said, "Right now!"

Sabra walked out back and came back wearing a dark cloth coat. I polished off the spiked coffee. Jake was surly mean and I left him alone. I steered Sabra out into the hall. Jake closed the door.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Man Behind the Gun

WE WENT down to the street. A soft drizzle formed yellow halos around street lamps and a grey mist oozed out of the sidewalk. It was spooky. My heart hammered. I rushed her to the car and helped her in. I climbed in over her.

I sat behind the wheel and pawed for the keys. I found them. I said, "I'm scared. I just didn't want to walk around the car."

"I understand." Her voice was firm.

A chill went up my spine and I turned to look into the back of the car.

"I looked," she said. "I looked through the side window before we got in."

I started the car. I drove up State Street and made the circuit of Perry Square. Visibility was bad. We went down State. As soon as we passed the hospital the stench of the bay hit us a blend of stagnant water and dead fish. Strangely, it isn't a bad smell at all. You get used to it quick.

The Public Dock is officially and grandly tagged the Public Steamboat Landing. It's a double-deck affair of steel, brick and concrete. You go there for a lot of reasons or you go there for no reason at all except the place has a magnetic something that drags you down. There's no privacy. Strange characters walk around looking into car windows to see what's cooking. You park facing the bay and maybe pretend you're in a cabin cruiser headed for the South Seas, or if you don't have a car you climb to the upper deck and pretend your docking the Queen Mary. Somewhere close at hand a baby is always crying and you can depend on a dame to blat out a shrill giggle from a car.

I parked at the end. There were a lot of cars around. Suddenly rain pelted down in fat drops and made soft thunder on the car roof. I leaned against the door. Sabra slouched down in the seat with the back of her head resting against the top of it.

It was a love scene Hollywood wouldn't have touched with an eleven-foot pole.

"I'm thirty-three," I said. "How old are you?"

"Twenty . . . thirty-one."

"It's about time I found me a wife," I said. She didn't reply, didn't indicate she'd heard. I listened to the rain splatter on the roof. "I need a wife," I repeated in a stronger voice.

"How about Miss Courtney?" The respect in her voice was real.

"Oh, her!" I said. "She's upper crust. It's like this. Erie society is small and

cozy. They get sick of looking at each other. Now and then they open the back door and let in a character to break the monotony."

"Like you?"

"Like me. You keep your ears and eyes open and your big gab closed. You're not comfortable because you don't fit. So you stay out of their way. You talk when you're spoken to. But you don't push. That's the way I play it. If it's a dinner with a big bunch of silver at each plate you play follow-the-leader on a guy you know will tag the right tool. But let's talk about us."

"I hate men," she said without rancor. "All men. They never gave me a break."

I was affable. "Okay. So we toss love and romance out the window. Can't marriage be a cash-and-carry deal?"

"Sure," she said. "The chorus cutie snares the—"

"I didn't mean it that way," I said, "I mean that love is something you can't slice and put in a sandwich. I need a wife because I'm lonesome. You need a husband because you need an anchor. And I've got one thing you want."

She turned her head and looked at me with blue eyes big and luminous. "What?"

"The apartment."

SHE leaned her head back and closed her eyes. "It floored me," she said. "From the outside it was like a hundred other dumps I've seen. I couldn't believe it. Jake went to shave. I went around touching everything just to make sure it was real."

I didn't push. Her face was soft and relaxed and I let her dream it out. A faint smile curled the corners of her mouth. I said softly, "It's yours. But with a string attached. I go with it."

Her eyes opened. "I can't rate marriage," she said. "Not to a white guy like you. I haven't got anything on the ball.

Not a lousy thing. I always miss the boat. Like Hollywood. I got a screen test. It cost a lot. It cost me a hell of a lot. It didn't take. I can dance. But just chorus. I got a chance at a solo. I muffed it. I beat my brains out trying. I wasn't good enough. The only thing I ever passed was a course for a waitress a chain restaurant gave. They had a hell of a time stopping me from saying 'ain't.' Her voice got thick.

I didn't say anything.

She said dreamily. "You're a nice guy. You didn't get fresh. Out at The Pines you didn't grab and you didn't say fresh things. Most men throw a tackle at me quick. You and Jake treated me like I was a lady."

I said, "Don't blame guys too much. You're a sexy woman."

"Yes, I always was." She sighed. "I couldn't push it down. Sloppy clothes and no make-up didn't help. Guys still wanted to take me apart. Like the tomato cannery where I worked in Jersey. Mostly girls. There was a guy . . ." Her voice cracked.

"Skip it," I said. "Why do you have to yak about the past? I don't care what you did."

She said miserably, "I wish I'd been born with a hairlip or an ugly birthmark . . ." She tried to bite off the word but it was too late.

The spirit of Ralph Posner slipped into the car and wouldn't get out.

I said bitterly, "You wrecked the train."

She was contrite. "I wasn't even thinking of him, honest I wasn't."

"I was going to ask you to marry me when this mess blows over," I said. "We can do a lot for each other, we really can."

She said, "Ask me when it's all over. You're keyed up. I don't rate marriage. That apartment and what it stands for adds up big to a woman like me. But you'll be getting the dirty end of the deal."

"I'll be good to you," I promised.

"We'll start like we'd just been born. What you were before I met you doesn't matter a damn. I'm all alone too. I haven't any family. We can make a go of it . . ." I shut up.

She was crying. Or maybe I should say weeping. But it wasn't even that. Her head was erect and her eyes were flooded with tears that made shiny zig-zags down her cheeks. She didn't boo-hoo or sniffle or screw up her face. Tears just went down her cheeks in a steady stream and began to drip into the neck of her black dress. I sat like a dunce. I didn't know what to do or say. I did the right thing, I guess. I didn't do anything.

The tears ran down into the valley of her breasts and she shivered her shoulders. "You got a hanky?" Her voice was hushed and husky. I gave her my handkerchief. My hands shook. She lifted it out of my hands and blotted her chest and face.

"We better go," she said. "I figure Jake wanted to get Miss Courtney out of the apartment."

"Where do we stand on the marriage business?"

"Ask me when things get back to normal," she said. "I like you. I like you fine. Maybe I'll like you so much I'll say no."

"Look," I said, "just one thing. Don't run away. Please promise to stay on deck and let me pop the question."

"I promise."

We shook hands. We shook hands as if we'd decided to go into partnership on a roller-skating rink. She had a good grip. Her hand was soft but seemed to have a certain toughness that was hard to define.

I backed around and started up State Street. The rain belted down in big drops that exploded into spray when they hit the pavement. Sabra came over to the center of the seat, close to me. She sat with her hands in her lap with fingers interlocked. We didn't say a word. It wasn't necessary.

THE BARS on lower State Street were popping. The curbs were solid with cars and a shabby coupé had latched on to my space in front of Nick's. I double-parked and escorted Sabra up to the door as I'd been taught to do with women passengers when I drove a hack in Philly. I watched the nylon flash of her ankles go up the steps. Jake appeared and the two of them disappeared into the apartment.

I went back to my station wagon. A cop car was parked in back of me and a dick was getting out the right front door. I drove to Perry Square with headlights riding my tail. I had to tilt the mirror out of the way. I went down French Street. The curbs were solid with cars.

There aren't many alleys in Erie. My garage is in one. I turned in it. The cop car slowed at the mouth of the alley to park. Habit is a funny thing. My garage is the old-style narrow type built before cars got spread. Backing in is a chore. I always do. It takes a lot of jockeying because I have to snuggle the right side against the wall so I can get out.

I docked the car, turned off the engine and lights. I pocketed the keys and rested a moment. I wondered if Sabra could cook. It was a big item. I like to eat and I eat a lot. Every time I think of the German prison camp I was in during the war I could eat a horse.

I got out. My knees were wobbly. I decided to borrow a steak from Nick. I hadn't eaten in a long time.

I stepped out of the garage. The cop was a dark silhouette in the falling rain. He startled the wits out of me. Then I got sore.

"Cops are fools," I snapped. "What if I packed a gun and you were Posner?"

The voice had a rasp. "I *am* Posner. The stakeout is on the girl. Just on the girl. The cop car was just looking for a place to park. I was there. I've been waiting. I've been waiting a long time."

A CAR went by the mouth of the alley and there was a brief flicker of light. The birthmark glowed with a purplish sheen and his eyes were on fire. He held his left hand to his stomach and it was wrapped in a blood-soaked bandage. The .45 automatic in his right fist was dressed against his right hip.

He asked, "Did you read the papers?"

I hadn't even thought about newspapers. "No," I said.

"A good story. In detail. They even mentioned your black station wagon. I had the license number. But it would have taken time."

The station wagon? He wasn't making sense. Why the station wagon? I said, "The guy who wrote the story is a friend of mine."

"Not any more. Get in. We go places. You were in the war. The paper said so. Trigger-happy. You know what it means. That's me. Catch?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"I've had a bad time," he said. "Get in."

I got behind the wheel. Posner climbed in back.

He said, "No tricks. I'll be handy. I need the car. Not you. The car. But you can help. Drive slow. Drive careful. A show of speed and a bullet through the brain."

"Yes, sir," I said when he stopped talking. I didn't know why I was respectful all of a sudden.

"Over to Parade," he ordered. "South on Parade Street."

"Yes, sir," I said.

I started the car and drove out. There was no traffic. I went over to Parade and turned south. I drove as if I was trucking a batch of TNT. I had a hunch he was kneeling right behind me so he could reach over and drill me if I tried to hit the seat.

The red light stopped us at Twenty-sixth.

"Take Old French Road," he ordered.
"Yes, sir," I said. He knew the town cold. The light changed and I drove on Old French Road to Thirty-eighth.

"Left," he ordered.

"Yes, sir," I said. I couldn't shake the title. I spoke it with respect. In the Army I could make "sir" a slap in the face.

"Mercyhurst College," he said. "Drive in and come around the out drive."

The girl's college was ablaze with lights and the drives were solid with cars. There wasn't much passageway and it worried me. The .45 hung above my right shoulder. I started down the out drive.

"Park ahead of the last car and douse the lights!" he ordered. "I want we should see the boulevard." I parked and doused the lights. I wiped my sweaty hands on my jacket front. The muzzle on the .45 cracked the back of my head hard enough to tear the scalp and bring blood. He said, "Keep your hands on the wheel!"

"Yes, sir," I said.

He had to talk, I guess. It had been bottled up too long. He'd been on his lonesome with a hurt hand that had probably given him hell. He'd lost his anchor when his wife had cashed in her chips. If he had had a hideout, he was far too hot to rate company from any local connections he had.

He said, "Sarles went for a gun. You saw it. Reflex, I guess. You can't messenger ice without a gun. Dolly made the fix with Sarles. A fake stickup. He was moon-eyed over the blonde. That was an out. He disobeyed orders and drove because he was wild for the blonde. They can't jail you for that. But he went for the gun. You saw him go for the gun."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Shut up! The barkeep was too brave. He must have been boozed. Creepy Yates was on the docket all along. He chiseled in on the deal. It was blackmail. I had

him on the docket. Why wait? The gun was hot."

"They figured the blonde and I were in on it because—"

"Shut up! Shut up! Look straight ahead! I don't want to kill you. We've got to kill time. I need you. I've got to have this car, see. The car's everything."

I said, "The town's lousy with cars. Look, I can get you a big fat convertible. A hundred-sixty-horsepower job."

"Shut up," he said.

"I got mileage on this hack," I gabbed. "Why this hack? I tell you for sure I can grab a big fat convertible. It belongs to a dame. She's drunk. A big fat convertible!"

He asked, "Has it got a hundred and fifty grand worth of diamonds in the gas tank?"

CHAPTER SIX

This Way to the Morgue!

THERE was a lot of silence. Now I knew why I had rated such top priority. The car. He couldn't touch it in front of Nick's.

"Dolly drove off," he said. "I had my hand on her shoulder. The bullet drilled my hand and went into her. The car crashed. We ducked back of the parked cars. Your hack was backed in, see? We were hurt. We were loused up. We had to ditch the ice. With the ice stashed we had something to dicker with. So we dumped the diamonds into your gas tank."

"How are you going to get them out?" I asked. "You can't just reach in and pull them out. A gas tank's got baffles and stuff. This one's got a fuel filter so the line can't get clogged."

Posner chuckled. "Thanks," he said. "I was worried the gas line would get plugged."

I'd pulled a blooper and I tried to pull the fat out of the fire. "You can't crack

a gas tank with a torch," I said. "She'll blow you to hell and gone. A can opener is no dice. It'll take time. It's a cinch the flash was out as soon as I didn't show at the apartment. Time you ain't got." Absurdly I thought of Sabra Fox and her waitress course and I added grandly, "Time you do not have."

Posner laughed. He laughed maybe the way death was going to laugh at me when he rode up on his black horse.

"Time I got plenty of," he said. "I got local connections. That's why we fixed on The Pines. We wait. We wait for the cops to dash out for the roadblocks. At the airport. At Waterford and Kearsarge. Then all I got to risk is the flatfeet pounding the pavement."

"You don't make sense," I said. "You need the car, so you let them bottle you up."

"I take the hack to Cleveland," he said "I get this hack through the roadblocks easy."

"How? A new paint job and maybe saw off the top and make like a convertible?"

He had dreamed up a nifty. He was proud of the gimmick and he had to pop off about it. "A truck!" he gloated. "A big van. I got one with a driver, see. It's in town. The tail gate lets down and makes a ramp. We drive this hack smack inside. We up the gate and drive through the roadblock like we're carrying a lot of furniture."

I got quiet. I got real quiet. He'd given me the blueprint of my death—the approximate time and place.

POSNER knew that he'd talked too much. He said, "You go. You go along. We need a hostage if we hit the roadblock. You go to Cleveland."

He was a liar. There wasn't going to be any trouble at the roadblock. The gimmick was too brainy to miss fire. I was quiet. He didn't like it.

"I'm coming up front," he said.

I didn't reply. He could use me. He didn't want to risk driving through traffic with one hand. A scraped fender and a hundred and fifty thousand was down the sewer. I was good until we rendezvoused with the truck. But one false move and I was a dead duck. After all, he *could* drive with one hand. He was coming up front where he couldn't miss with that big .45.

"I'm coming up," he said. "Turn off the engine."

I didn't know it was running. I turned it off. I heard the right rear door open. The gals at Mercyhurst were having themselves a dance. The music was sweet and far away.

The car trembled as he stepped out. He said, "Open the door. Like this. Left hand on the wheel. Stretch the right."

I reached over in slow motion and unlatched the door. He kneed the rear door closed and slid in. My hands were on the steering wheel. The door was open. Posner only had one good hand and the gun was in it. The door wasn't wide open, but it had to be closed. It posed a problem. It worried him. It's funny how a little thing like an open door can loom so big and mighty. It did. I was good. The .45 covered me and the hammer was cocked. Posner snuggled the gun under his left armpit and crossed his wounded hand over. He hooked the thumb in the door catch. I tensed. He was psychic. "Relax," he warned. "Want some cute college girl should trip over your body?" He got the door closed. It hurt him bad. His face got white and sweat dripped from the point of his chin. But his eyes stayed alive. The hurt made him deadly. He lowered the muzzle lazily. He hoped I'd bite. He wanted to kill me then and there. I didn't move a muscle. He seemed to feel better and his breathing didn't sob any more.

I asked softly, "The blonde wasn't in

on it, was she? Sabra Fox, I mean."

He was surprised. "No," he said. "She didn't figure except as an alibi for Sarles stopping. For him driving."

"I'm glad," I said. "She's for me."

He looked at me as if I was nuts. I guess I was.

He said, "I'm hot. Crank my window down."

I reached out in slow motion and opened the window. Music came in with the fresh air. It had stopped raining. I hoped some college gal would come out with her date for some smooching.

I'll swear Posner could read my thought. He said, "The teachers at the college ride a close herd on the girls at these dances. That's one reason we're here."

"It ain't right," I said. "It is not right. They teach biology up there, don't they?"

Posner said, "Let's roll."

"Where?"

He said it between his teeth. "Roll! I'll tell where."

I got the car started. I turned the lights on. I drove off with a lot of jerks and jolts, like a teen-age beginner.

"Smooth it out or you're a dead duck!" he cried.

"Yes, sir," I said, went into second and smoothed it out.

I WAS a disembodied spirit driving a ghost car. He used five words. Stop. Go. Right. Left. Slower. I got lost. We sneaked down side streets and almost all of the houses were dark. It was Saturday night. I knew it was Saturday night but I didn't know what month it was. Posner was on edge. He made me float up to each intersection and come to a full stop. He didn't want even to scare another motorist.

He gabbed. "You're a nice guy," he said. "You'll like Cleveland. We'll sit here in the car inside the van and have us

some beer. I got connections in Cleveland. Girls. Chorus cuties like Hollywood cheesecake. I got a grand. We'll blow it on the girlyies. Five hundred apiece. On fancy blondes. Or do you go for brunettes?"

"Blondes," I said, and my teeth chattered. "Just one. I got her staked out."

The right door wasn't closed solid. It began to rattle. "Stop!" he cried. I stopped. We were in the center of a side street. Posner breathed hard. The door had unnerved him. Me too. I shook my head and sweat flew off of my face. He could close the door with his bum hand or risk falling out. He suffered a hellish indecision.

He slid to the center of the seat and our hips touched. He rammed the muzzle of the .45 into the soft flesh between my lower right rib and my hip bone. His left arm covered the gun and the elbow pressed my ribs.

He said, "You know how it is. You make left turns slow. Slower than slow. Don't try to pitch me through the door. We're close. I can chill you and make it on my own. Catch?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Roll off slow and easy. You're carrying eggs."

I always use low gear. Cars last longer that way. I fed it some gas and went down on the clutch. We floated up to the next intersection. I nosed out. Two cars were coming, from right and left. The nearer was two blocks away. He cried, "Stop!" I stopped. The flat across the street to my right was a new two-story structure of buff brick. It crowded the corner and the walls almost touched the sidewalk. The place was dark. All the houses around were dark. Didn't anybody stay home Saturday night?

The first car passed. Then the second, a sedan loaded with couples. A girl giggled shrilly. We sat there. The sounds of the cars faded away. Posner said,

LET'S BURN US A BLONDE!

"Get going!" I let out the clutch and my foot socked the accelerator down to the floor boards. The car tried to jump out from under us. I twisted the wheel. We hit the curb just as Posner fired. A fire-ball went across my stomach and left sticky wetness. I didn't even hear the report. We hit the house. The crash was mighty. The hood peeled up and I surged forward to meet it. I felt my ribs break on the steering wheel. Posner's head hit the windshield and cracked it solid, like fine white lace. Steam poured out of the hood and I smelled hot oil.

I got the door open. I fell out. I got up and staggered around on the sidewalk. I couldn't see. Everything was black. I was bleeding from my nose and mouth, and every breath I took was sheer agony. I grabbed my shirt collar and yanked. The bosom ripped down and I stuffed it into my pants over the bullet wound. I ran into a brick wall. Someone was yelling. I stopped to listen. Someone was yelling, "Inez! Inez!" It was me. I fell on a wooden staircase. I crawled up on a concrete porch. My head hit a door. I dragged myself erect. I began to beat the door with my fists. "Inez!" I cried. "Inez! I love you. Let me in! Please let me in! It's Kurt. I love you, Inez."

Somebody stepped out on the porch. Her scream was shrill with horror and it dropped me into a black whirlpool.

IT WAS a long time ago. I was in the hospital nine weeks and I guess the docs had quite a tug-of-war with death. Little things annoyed me. Like Dross' fancy pencil. I made the nurse call up and get the score on the pencil. His daughter had bought it for him with money saved by skimping on school lunches. I slept better after that.

Sabra Fox got my flamboyant apartment and everything in it. Only Jake Masterman was attached. Everybody

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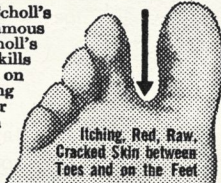
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DETECTIVE TALES

laughed like crazy when they got married. Nobody laughs any more. Jake is a weekend lush. At three every Saturday afternoon Sabra hauls him out of a State Street dump and takes him home to continue his spree, with just beer on Sunday. Beer makes Jake sleepy. He's buying the apartment on the installment plan because he's a character who can't do a lick of work until he's in hock to his ears. Actually Sabra has four hundred hidden away from her allowance that Jake doesn't know about. You can't figure women. Sabra says she married Jake because he was the only man in the world who ever needed her. I haven't sorted that one out yet.

Our apartment is on the seventh floor, a corner location where two big picture windows make a glassy right angle. I've learned a lot. Such as how dramatic you can get with pastel shades of grey in a living room without cooling the place off. The furniture is massive modern in solid colors with pale woods.

The father-in-law is a judge now. I'll never get dragged up before him. We live in Pittsburgh. I'm sales manager for Faber and when I hit the road once in a while Inez tags along. We're better off away from the lake. You hit a strange town and the citizens have to take you as you size up to them then and there. Up Erie way everybody knows my blood lines and my lurid past. Being sales manager makes me a brass hat. I never thought I could wear one.

Every once in a while Ralph Posner and I take a dream ride. He died in the crash but the dream doesn't go that far. His dream face just leers at me and I wake up 'feeling Inez' hand on my brow. It must be the Bryn Mawr touch. I won't fight it. If we have a girl I'll mail Bryn Mawr a photostat of the birth certificate and they can put her on the docket for 1968.

THE END

LAME-BRAIN ON THE LOOSE

(Continued from page 36)

to crack a particularly stubborn case. This delicate method involves masking the true purpose, or drawing the red herring of a false case into the picture, thus giving the real criminal an illusion of safety. When the precise moment arrives, the H. E. op will cast aside the masquerade and strike to the heart." Gus paused and smiled bleakly at Big Moose Madden, then he added, "That's about all I can tell you, Sergeant. I've got to keep my own pipelines private, you know. Take him away, men."

GUS walked over to Mr. Garfield and Nick. "Well, what about it?" he asked. Mr. Garfield was mopping his brow.

"Gus," he said rather breathlessly, "in all fairness to yourself, I don't think you should tie yourself down with a small-time outfit like ours. We couldn't hold you. You stay on your own. You're terrific."

"Thanks, Garfy, old eye," Gus said. He turned to Nick. "But for you, Egghead, don't think you've conned me," he whispered coldly. He gripped Nick's lapels. "The gal's name *was* Mary, wasn't it?"

Nick seemed speechless. He barely managed to nod.

"Okay," said Gus. "Just remember. From now on, I'm trusting you like I'd trust a six-dollar bill."

The reporters swarmed around Gus. "When did the first break come in the case?" they demanded. The photographers yelled, "Turn this way! Hold it!" The reporters said, "Are you working on any other cases?"

"I can't discuss that now, but the answer might be yes," Gus said, and he smiled as he heard Nick choking under his collar.

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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 47)

"They wouldn't," Lew said. "They don't work that way. And so I'm collecting from you."

"Go to hell," said Mr. Darr.

"Let me tell you," Lew said, "about compressed air. Right now we're both under pressure. We build it to where we want it, then we bring it down very slow. Now if a guy was to leave this tank suddenly—say somebody had him thrown out—the air wouldn't have time to work out of his system. He'd wind up with the bends. Now, would you," Lew went on politely, "prefer to pay me for the job you ordered, or would you rather be crippled for life?"

"The stuff is insured," Darr said sullenly. "You'll pick up a few grand reward."

"That'll be a bonus," Lew said dreamily, "for the wear and tear on my nerves."

Darr slowly drew a wallet from inside his coat, opened it, and extended four limp bills. "Two grand," he said.

"Thank you," Lew murmured politely. He shoved the money into his pocket, feeling no particular anger toward his client now that the bill had been paid. "You mind telling me," he asked presently, "why the body was dumped before somebody got the rocks?"

"The louse double-crossed me," Darr said wearily. "Double-crossed me in my own office. He hands me an empty package and keeps the emeralds in his pocket."

"Waiting," Lew suggested, "until he was paid for delivering?"

"That," said Darr, "or else he was just holding out."

Lew nodded, for he was familiar with the workings of lust and greed and attendant sudden death. And he thought of these things, but vaguely, as he sat in the decompression chamber, lulled by the whistling air.

PICKUP

(Continued from page 78)

She wiped away a tear and looked away from him. Her hair was braided and he remembered her room in the big house and that she had been a little girl there. A little girl with pigtails who had grown up to marry a guy like him.

How did you explain that it had been a great restlessness? That you had come home, but you hadn't come home? That you hadn't caught up with the world, or it hadn't caught up with you? But that it was all right now. Only it would never be all right after this night....

"I guess you'll want to go back to Berne," he said. "You take the money we've got. The car. I don't blame you. You didn't buy this in New York that day. You bought something else—only you never got it. You got this instead. It wasn't much of a deal for you, Laura. It's okay for you to go. I guess it's what you ought to do."

After a while she looked at him. He couldn't stand her eyes. He looked down and knew how she felt when she had to cry. When she stood he watched her from lowered eyes, the neat smallness of her figure, the way her housecoat looked good like an evening gown over her slim hips, and he wanted to put his arms around her.

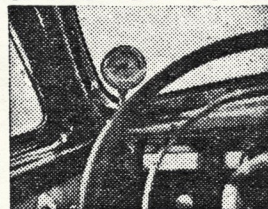
He waited for her to go to the bedroom to pack, for the slow turn and the walking away and closing of the door.

She didn't turn. She moved by him to the cupboard. He heard a cupboard door open. She came back and gently put down her two place settings of sterling silver, taking them from the small flannel jackets they were kept in. She arranged them neatly, one set before him and one on the other side of the table.

Then she spoke. "Let's have breakfast in style. It's—it's kind of like a home-coming, isn't it?"

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UP THE RIVER

By DAVE SANDS

The husband of a twenty-one-year-old girl didn't think much about her saying she was going to poison him, but "when she hit me on the head with an axe and tried to chop off my leg after I had fallen to the floor, I decided it was serious."

It's a breach of orderly conduct to belittle a woman's housekeeping, was the ruling of a Massachusetts judge in sentencing a man to thirty days in the house of correction for saying to his estranged wife in her new home: "Get the baby out of this pig pen."

Women are in greater danger of being murdered by their husbands than by their lovers, according to an Indiana University sociologist.

Some time ago a Fall River, Mass., jewelry shop was swindled out of a \$350 diamond ring by a thief who left a fake ring in its place. The real diamond was recently returned by mail and the store owner figures he's ahead \$30 on the deal, as the fake is worth that much.

An English cattle dealer was sentenced to a year in jail on five counts of fitting false teeth to cows to make them look like young and tender heifers.

A pet monkey was accused of being a pickpocket by a Cleveland woman, who said the animal sneaked ten dollars from her pocket, then bit her.

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