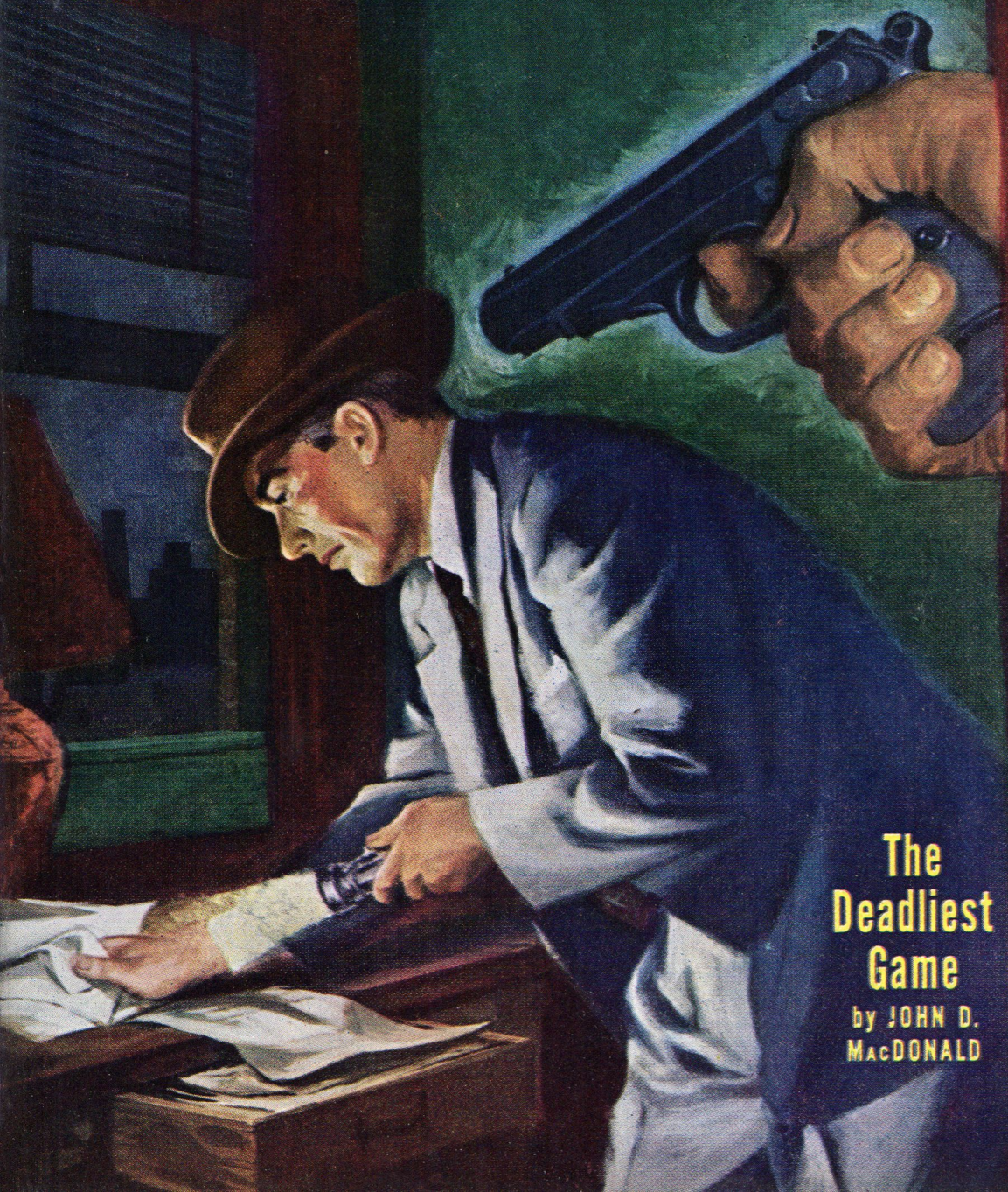


Detective Tales

APRIL 25¢



The Deadliest Game

by JOHN D.
MACDONALD



Detective Tales

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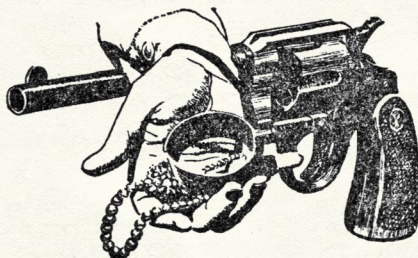
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Once, clad in shining armor, they fought in the Crusades, under any banner, under any princeling who would pay them sufficient silver and gold to furnish the panoply and women such men like to become accustomed to. Later, as machine-gun experts, they hired out to the makers of hot-country revolutions, and they flew in the Lafayette Escadrille over France, or with the Flying Tigers over China. They're the boys who can't sit still, the gents who carry permanent ants in their pants, the men with a love of money, women and excitement that only armed combat and international intrigues can give them. If you've got a revolution going, they'll fight it for you. If you've got a girl, they'll make love to her. And if you've got a couple of murders in the offing—well, anything can happen in—

The Deadliest Game

By JOHN D. MACDONALD



I HADN'T SEEN BAKER in seven years. It was funny to run into him in the old neighborhood. I remembered my last look at him. Over France. 1944. His 51 took a rocket in the tail section. The rocket had been aimed at one of the Forts, a straggler from the formation. I whip-turned and dropped until I saw the bloom of the chute. He was into me for fifty.

But in our league you keep up with what the other lads are doing. I got to Amman three days after Baker washed out a Spit bringing it into an emergency strip at Gaza. Next I heard about him he was barreling an old P-39 for the Chinese Nationalists, a crate held together with spit and hope. When I ran into Renetti in Panama, he said he'd heard rumor that Baker was organizing a

fly-boy group for the banana republic of Yavero.

He was at the end of Tobey Mike's bar, back in the old neighborhood, leaning against the wall, looking, as always, like a Harvard lad at a Yale smoker. Tall, frail, with languid hands, thinnish blond hair, pink girl-ish cheeks. He wore a heavy Shetland-tweed jacket, baggy and beautifully cut flannel slacks, cordovan moccasins with a luster the shade of old Burgundy.

As I moved into the bar beside him he gave me a look of mock astonishment. "Mr. Spann, I believe. The man who walks like a bear."

"No visible scars?"

"Only on my shy little soul. Why the outstretched paw, Luke?"

"You had jacks back to back and hit a jack on the last card. My last two cards were kings."

"And you had one in the hole, you wicker basket." He dug out a bill clip and detached two twenties and two fives. A fat wad remained.

We grinned at each other. He always looks as though he could stand a transfusion. Deceptive. One pub night in London town some Aussies objected to our version of their national anthem. There were seven of them. We went out on the street with them and took such a licking we couldn't crawl out of the sack the next morning. But not until Baker had busted one jaw and two noses. He has a fist like a sock full of rocks. Whalebone and spring steel, with a reaction time like a dynamite cap. His eyes are two chunks out of

the icy heart of a Greenland glacier.

The bartender gave me an empty shot glass and a chaser. Baker filled it from his bottle. We raised the shots. "One down and six to carry him," he said.

"Off the runway with a dirty spoon," I replied. We drank.

He held the glass too tight. It chattered when he set it down. Slow acid had grooved his mouth. I thought for a minute the guts had run out of him through the imaginary holes that slugs should have made. But not Baker. I should have known better. That back-to-the-wall business was a clue. He had a good view of the door.

"How was Yavero?" I asked blandly.

He still smiled, but nothing about him looked the same. Somehow he was coiled and ready. You could see it and you could smell it.

"Don't look at *me*, Baker," I said very softly. "Not me, boy. Seven other people but not me. I saw Renetti in Panama last February. That's where I got it."

"Renetti's dead."

"Meaning that I know he's dead and now he can't prove he didn't tell me you were in Yavero? The hell with you, Baker!" I turned to walk away.

He caught me with a hand on my shoulder and pulled me back. His smile looked as if it hurt him. "Sorry, Luke. One of those things. You know. Friend from foe. You work for dinero and so do I. You can be bought."

I had to say it right. "I can be bought. But a funny thing. Not against you I can't be bought." I looked down at my wrist. An edge of scar tissue peeped out from under my sleeve. That happened while we were still RCAF, before the transfer to the American Air Force. Hurricanes burn good. He lost all his eyebrows and lashes and half his hair dragging me out.

"Sentimentalist," he said chidingly. But the tension was out of him. "It just looked too good. You coming in. You know how it is."

"I came in because I was brought up in this neighborhood the same as you, Baker. I've been in Pakistan, finding the bugs in some clunkers they built over there. I've got a line on a new pitch, and it hasn't got anything to do with Pan-America, boy."

"I'll see you around, Luke," he said. "Pour one for the road." Dismissal. Gentle but firm. I was no longer the object of his wariness, but he was still tightened up.

I POURED THE SHOT from his bottle. Four o'clock on a haze-struck afternoon in the old neighborhood. Tired yellow sun making a slow arc across the sky, like a pooped-out tracer from a cannon of the gods.

Three of them came in then, fast and smart. Right in the afternoon. Not the old smarties over twenty—the ones you can trust not to kill you for laughs. These could give you the quakes. Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. Pimples and the hair trying to

grow on their faces and eyes still twisted by the inward horrors of adolescence. They break your face and your back for laughs, and because it makes them feel bigger than God.

One stood by the door, his back against the frame. His underlip fell away from teeth he would not keep very long, and I swear that he had a loop of red innertube around the hammer of a big old revolver, holding the hammer back against the tension with his thumb.

Tobey Mike raised his hands. He'd been taken before. Some teen-age girls who should have been home helping mama screamed. They were in a booth drinking beer. They screamed as though they were enjoying it.

The other two came right for Baker and stopped ten feet away. Wide bands of adhesive across the bridge of the nose. It changes the hell out of a face. A disguise that doesn't get in your way. Their artillery was in better shape, though of smaller caliber. You could smell it coming. There wasn't going to be any talk. The excitable citizen they'd left out in the car raced the motor twice in impatience. It sounded gutty and powerful.

The nearest one gave a little flick with the end of the barrel. It was meant for me and it told me to move away from Baker. I did move. I brought his bottle with me and I went down onto my hands and knees, using the drop to give leverage to the overhand flip of the bottle. It

broke on the side of his head with a noise like a falling chandelier and he went down with his ear torn half off. That was all I saw because by then I was rolling toward the shins of the second lad. The little gun went *whip-pety-whap* and I smelled the powder, and I expected to make contact with the legs, but I never did. Somebody broke a ripe melon in midair when my back was turned.

The cannon by the door roared in a funny way and I came up onto my knees to see saggy-lip staring incredulously at the red ruin of what had been his right hand, while glass from Tobey Mike's window still tinkled on the sidewalk outside. That gun had been for showing, not shooting. The fragments had gone every which way. Now one of the teenagers was screaming with real feeling. Saggy-lip raced out and the car roared again, tires yelping on the asphalt as they got out of there fast.

Baker was sucking the knuckles that had given off with the melon-sound. I had dropped one with the bottle. Baker had dropped the other. They looked peaceful. Dreams of a happy boyhood.

Baker got out that bill clip and shoved bills across the bar. "You nailed one with a bottle, Tobey Mike, and pasted the other one. Put the lid on the young ladies."

"Anything you say, doctor."

"Come on, Luke," Baker said. We went out of there. The girl had stopped screaming. She was whimpering. Tobey Mike had the phone off the wall box. Sirens mourned in the

middle distance. Sheep that looked like people were running toward the place from all directions.

Around the corner I said, "Okay! Do we break formation?"

"Come on, damn it!"

The Tyler Park was three and a half blocks away. It is a shabby and somewhat ancient apartment hotel. The lobby has all the decor of a huge bathroom, tile floor and all. Ten thousand old ladies live there, on pensions. The elevator is a huge bird-cage hauled upward on a rusty wire.

A fourth-floor living room, bedroom, kitchen and bath. You know the kind of place and the kind of furniture. Everything has claw feet, even the tub. The narrow windows go up to the ceiling so far away it's almost out of sight. Filled with a dusty, musty smell of sachet, crumbling love letters and roach tablets. She had to let us in. She was special. Tall and short-waisted and long-legged and wearing black as only the Spanish can wear it. Hair like black rainfall, skin with blue lights in it, a tall, ripe body that could not have made an awkward movement even falling downstairs.

"Meet Rosie," Baker said. "Rosie, this is Lucas Spann."

She smiled at me. "'Appy to meet you." Plain gold band on her finger. I was 'appy to meet Rosie.

CHAPTER TWO

BAKER STRIPPED OFF the Shetland jacket. From the right armpit to the waist the imported broadcloth

shirt was pasted to his ribs with darkening blood. It was the first I'd known they'd tagged him. Rosie started being of no use to anybody at that point. She wilted convincingly on the couch and I went into the bedroom with Baker. There was a patch-up kit in the bathroom. The slug had torn the muscle just under and to the rear of the armpit. A lot of blood and very little damage. I washed it, disinfected it, packed it with gauze and taped it in place. His flat torso was stripped and lined with the white welts of older scars. I noted that there were a couple that should have killed him.

He brought a bottle and tilted it up as we sat on the edge of the bed. The Adam's apple slid up and down his lean throat with each gulp. I wiped the neck of the bottle on the palm of my hand and took a potion. We stared at the ruined shirt on the floor in the corner.

"You have a certain lack of popularity in some quarters, it appears, mate," I said.

"Distinct lack," he admitted.

"Need help?"

"You don't work for love, Luke, any more than I do. This would have to be speculation. How's the bankroll?"

"Pakistan generosity touches me. It's obese."

"I was thinking the other day that there's nobody in the world I trust. I forgot about you, Luke. You're too wholesome to be sly."

"Okay. Being wholesome, may I inquire about Renetti?"

"Good point. I needed help with my Yavero project. Renetti spoke the vernacular. The boy was a shade greedy. As in all banana republics, there is an opposition. They need financing. They got to Renetti without my knowing it. Renetti grabbed one of my only two fighter-bombers and flew one of the opposition agents out of Yavero. The agent is Rosie. Rosalinda Martez y Donera. She was to keep an eye on Renetti while the two of them disposed of a fat old emerald necklace that was royal property in Spain back when Sir Francis Drake was being a nuisance. The idea was for Rosie to get the funds in either British pounds or American dollars back into Yavero and that would finance the revolution. Filching the plane was the only way the insurrectionists could get the ice out of the country."

"Listen next Wednesday morning at the same time and find out whether the lovely Rosalinda has found—"

"Wait, mate. There's more." He took another refresher. "Renetti had crossed me up and I was sore. The party in power asked me if I'd like to go help their agents find Renetti and the dish and the jools. A nice bonus for performance. I said sure. I knew Renetti's habits. I picked up the trail in Rio, followed through to Mexico City. I guess he got faked papers for Rosie there. Next stop New Orleans and then New York. I made contact with the Yavero boys in New York. They knew where Renetti was. In the morgue. Some-

body had operated on him with a dull knife. They didn't know who. They took me to a cellar apartment in Spanish Harlem. The fair Rosie was there, complete with hysteria. She didn't know from nothing. My innate breeding prevented me from watching while they went to work on her. I busted a few heads and took Rosie away. I'm beginning to think that was a mistake. In the vernacular, Rosie was hot. The New York cops want her. They have some homicide-type questions to ask. The immigration boys are looking for her. The Yavero big-wigs want her. And her own folks down there think she's crossed them up. Rosie and I made a business deal. I took her to Maryland and married her and brought her back here to the home town. We're only twenty minutes from New York, and it seems like a good place. It seemed like a good place until today."

"What's Rosie's story?"

"She covered the necklace with clay in Yavero, had it baked and painted in gay colors. So it would look like costume jewelry. She wore it all the way to New York just like that. Renetti, through a middleman, made a contact with somebody named Mallard Osborn. Rich. It was all set for the transfer of funds. Small bills. Rosie is convinced Renetti wasn't going to cross her up. He took the necklace. Next thing she knows, the Yavero agents grabbed her in front of a hotel on Thirty-sixth Street and took her to the cellar apartment. Enter Baker.

After that, exit Rosie and Baker."

"Why the firing squad in Tobey Mike's?"

"That had to be my ex-employers. Insurance. If I'm dead and if Rosie is dead, the funds have less chance of getting back to the insurrectionists. Her boys would tend to grab me and find out what I might have to say."

"Have you got any kind of a plan?"

"I'm beginning to get stubborn about this thing, Luke. I want the dough or the necklace. The hell with Yavero. I want a nest-egg for my old age. Don't you know we're facing technological unemployment? Can you fly a jet?"

"So how do I fit?"

"I'm hot. You're not. It would be nice to know if that Osborn paid off."

"What about Rosie?"

"She tried to contact her own group to get help. They know she's teamed up with me. They think she has crossed them." He sighed. "Nobody loves us any more."

ROSIE COOKED US some food. It was hot enough to melt the tines off the forks. She kept melting eyes fixed on Baker. And he had called it a business arrangement. There was one girl who had forgotten the revolution.

I questioned her about Osborn. It was the only name she said Renetti had mentioned. I left at ten o'clock. The nerves on the back of my neck told me I was being observed. I

stopped and lit a cigarette. A shadow moved that shouldn't have. I grinned to myself. I walked into the old neighborhood. I selected the alley I wanted and darted into it. Pitch black. The fire escape was still there. I saw the shape of it against the sky, an overcast sky with the city lights glowing against it. I jumped, caught the grate, wiggled up over the edge and sat on my heels. Just in time.

My man came down the alley. He was being cautious. He kept close to the opposite wall. I could barely see him. He went down to the end and found out there was no exit. I knew that would bother him. He ran into a trash barrel and I heard a stout Anglo-Saxon oath, whispered hoarsely.

A second shadow joined him. They moved to a spot almost under me.

"I couldn't help it, I tell you! I saw him come in here."

The other one cursed. He said, "I'll go report. You stay right here."

The shadow moved away. One was left. When he lit a cigarette it gave me enough light. I dropped onto his shoulders with both feet. It drove him down onto his face. I fell too, but I was up first. I hit him under the ear with the edge of my palm. I pulled him beyond the trash barrels, squatted and held my lighter over his face. A routine face. A face so average it was like no face at all. He wore a snub-nose .38 and his wallet contained eleven dollars and a card sealed in plastic which said that this was one Walter F. Hauser, licensed as a Private Investigator in

the State of New Jersey. It gave me pause. I made a mental note of the address on the card. The other data in the wallet informed me that he was an Elk and owed a payment on his car.

The pixie spirit prevailed. I took a fifty out of the back of my own wallet and put it with his eleven dollars. It would reimburse him and it might also embarrass him. And it would help with that car payment.

I went to my room, packed and checked out. I took a train to New York, found a room at the Empress Hotel and went to bed.

IT TOOK two hours of digging to get filled in on Mallard A. Osborn. He lived in an apartment on Sixty-first. Unlisted phone. Recently married to his sixth cutie. Supports half the psychiatrists in New York. I went there.

There was a man in the way. He looked like a guardsman. He had a face like a wooden toy soldier. He was firm. "Mr. Osborn is at breakfast. He does not care to see anyone today. You must write for an appointment."

I was firm. We were both firm. He stayed in my way. Finally I stepped on his foot so hard his face went white. I begged his pardon. He told me that it was quite all right. I made up a name for myself. Joe Yavero. He went away and came back and told me to follow him.

Mallard Osborn was an oyster-eyed little man with a nose like a dead white worm and a mouth like

the top slot on a mailbox. He wore a figured dressing gown and a cerise scarf tied around a throat of the same color as a plucked turkey. As I came out onto the sunlit terrace I saw something leaving. It was big and blonde. All lace and blue silk and hips, with an irritated flounce.

When I said yes a cup of coffee would be nice, the toy soldier, with hate in his eyes, brought me a cup, filled it and marched out.

Mallard Osborn picked a fleck of toast from between his front teeth with a thumbnail. The city was making the rising roar of noontime traffic.

"Let's keep it hypothetical," I said.

"Of course, Mr. . . . Yavero."

"Just suppose you were going to buy something. And the deal fell through. You were very disappointed. You couldn't make a squawk because the item you were going to purchase was going very cheap on account of questionable title. Then somebody else shows up and says that they have it."

He sucked up some coffee with a sound like a deepwell pump. He sighed. "I'd have to see the item."

"Would you know it if you saw it?"

"Certain items have histories. Full descriptions. Dealers' sketches."

"The salesman would have to protect himself, Mr. Osborn. On an item like that, possession is ten points of the law."

"And of course I would have to be protected from the salesman. You should know my problems. Every-

one tries to take unfair advantage."

"Is that why you dealt through the middleman before?"

"Higgins is very reliable. Usually."

"Is that Robert C. Higgins?"

There was a gleam of suspicion in his eye. It faded. "Did I say Higgins? Dear me! Now what is the man's name. Certainly not Higgins. Mr. Yavero, would you kindly state your business? Why did you come to see me?"

He was closed up like a gate to the mint. I knew it wasn't any good. "I heard you serve good coffee, Osborn." I stood up. "Thanks. When do you want to see the item?"

"Item? What item?"

I left. I heard, behind me, his dry old-man's laugh. The toy soldier stood at attention and let me out. I walked down to West Forty-eighth and had lunch. Then I went into a drugstore and spent forty minutes going over the Manhattan directory. Too many people named Higgins. I took the classified and went through it and wrote down seven Higginses. Two art dealers, three antique dealers, two jewelers. I went over to one of those little Times Square cubicles where you can record your voice. On the fifth attempt the playback sounded remotely like Mallard Osborn. I practised it a few more times.

My line went, "Higgins? Mallard Osborn here."

Blank on the first art dealer. Blank on the second. The first antique dealer was out of the country. The second one said, "Nothing to report,

Mr. Osborn." I let him wait. He jiggled the hook and began to sound a little upset. I hung up.

Ardway Higgins. Fourth Street.

CHAPTER THREE

I WENT TO SEE him. The building looked like a tired warehouse. His office was pure Regency. He had the face of a child. A bland child with a bald head and a putty pillow stuffed under its belt.

He played an imaginary piano along the edge of his desk. I said, "Straight and to the point, Higgins. You acted as Mallard Osborn's agent in his attempt to buy an emerald necklace from a smuggler named Renetti. Renetti was knifed. The police hate to be mystified. I think they would like to open you up, take a look inside, and sew you up again. Does that make sense?"

There was a flaw in the blandness. "Not a great deal, I'm afraid. I never heard of Renetti. I act as Mallard Osborn's agent in a great many purchases each year. He collects antique jewelry. I am certain Mr. Osborn would not deal with a smuggler. He can afford to pay a legal price. He spoke of a Spanish necklace to me. I'm acquainted with the history of the piece, of course. Very, very old. Dropped out of sight in the early eighteen hundreds. Some say it was taken to South America. If it should show up and the seller could prove legal title, I am certain that Mr. Osborn would be interested enough to make an offer."

"I can produce a witness, Higgins, who will swear that Renetti went out the day he was murdered to do business with you."

He laughed softly. "Without my knowledge?"

"That would be for the police to determine, wouldn't it?"

He folded his chubby pink hands together and gave me a fatherly look. "Rather than have you cause me trouble, young man, I think I had best be frank with you. A man came to see me. He brought a necklace. He had found out somehow that I act as agent in such things for Osborn and other wealthy men with kindred interests. He could have been this Renetti. A tall rather dark young man with bad teeth and the lobe of one ear missing. The left, I think."

"That was Renetti. It was the right ear."

"Ah, so. As I say, he brought me the necklace. It was a rather pathetic imitation. He was quite incensed when I told him so. So was the rather volatile young lady who accompanied him. She was of Spanish derivation, I believe. They left in a huff. Just to show you how things happen, it was only a few days later that I received word from one of my agents in France that he had come across the genuine necklace in the hands of a monarchist refugee who could prove title. I have my reservations all set to fly over and inspect it. If it is genuine, I shall pick it up, obtain my bill of sale, pay the duty on it and then surprise Mr. Osborn. Of

course, if he doesn't wish to buy it, there are many other markets for such a piece, so I am taking no particular risk."

He beamed at me. I left deflated. He went to a file, pawed in it, brought out an envelope, took out a glossy print and placed it in front of me. "There's the picture mailed me from France. Exquisite piece of work, isn't it?"

The emeralds were of crude and ancient cut, but the metal work was like lace. The pendant was of octagonal cut and it looked the size of a plum.

"Very nice."

"These things often happen in this crazy profession. Once a man offered me a very clever imitation of one of the lost pieces by da Vinci." He paused for effect. "A week later I was holding the genuine cup in these two hands!"

"I suppose it will take quite a bit of cash to pick up the necklace in France?"

"In this business you must have ample working capital. Now I've been very frank with you, sir. Obviously, since the man who visited me was the unfortunate Renetti, you could cause me inconvenience by going to the police. But no more than that. I hope you'll reconsider."

I told him I would see him again, and I left. I was glad to get out of there somehow. He seemed like a jovial, well-fed little spider in the middle of a very plush web. And Ardway Higgins was obviously no man's fool.

I WAS back in familiar haunts by seven in the evening. I phoned one Mr. Hauser. He was in.

"Still got a stiff neck, Wally?" I asked.

"I sure have. That son of a . . . Hey, who is this?"

"Aren't you going to thank me for the fifty?"

I held the phone at arm's length until his temper tantrum subsided. "Need a client?" I asked. That shut him up completely.

"A nice fifty-a-day client?"

"Where can I see you?" he asked.

"You're not far from the corner of Division and Broad. Get on the first Bayonne bus that goes by after eight o'clock. Be alone. I'll tell you where to get off."

He was on the bus. I gave him a blank look that swept across him. I sat behind him. He was all a-twitter. I let him twitch for fifteen blocks and then I tapped him on the shoulder. He jumped. "Next stop, Wally."

We got off. No one else. He'd know me when he saw me again. I pointed across the way to a yellow-brick cocktail lounge. We angled across the street and went in. He agreed as how bourbon seemed to be in order. He sipped it and said, "Maybe I could take you and maybe I couldn't."

"You couldn't. Unless you've got some real good tricks. Let's carry these over to a table."

We sat down. "You lost me a nice job," he said.

"Sorry. Am I hiring you?"

"For fifty you get me, the wife, two kids and an Airedale, friend."

"The first call on your talents, Wally, is to tell me who hired you and what your orders were."

I decided I liked that plain, good, ordinary face. He frowned. "Once in a while I get a job on my own. Mostly I hire out to a couple bigger agencies when they need an extra guy. It's a living, but not much more than that, believe me. This time it was Martindale Investigators. A Fifth Avenue firm. Class. They paired me with a fellah named Riley. I was with him last night. He didn't know from nothing. The orders were to keep a heavy tail on a guy named Baker and some Spanish tramp he is living with at the Tyler Park."

"His wife."

"Oh, forgive me, I'm sure. The job includes finding out who calls and where they go. Baker went out and Riley lost him. Riley came back muttering. Not too much later you and he came on foot. I didn't get a good look at you. Riley did. You left just when the night shift came on. So Riley and I took out after you. You know the rest. I came to with Riley bending over me. I got my time right then and there. What did you jump off? The roof?"

"Fire escape. Who hired the Martindale outfit?"

"Riley heard a rumor that had it a job for some South American big shot. We guessed that maybe Baker's babe was somebody's wife or daughter or something."

"And so you carried a gun?"

"That bothered Riley and me too. It was in the orders from topside. All they wanted from us was reports. Oh, and another thing. Maybe this will help. Maybe it won't. Riley and I both had the nasty little feeling that while we were tailing those two, somebody else was tailing us."

"I was hoping you'd be more help." I counted out a hundred dollars inconspicuously. "Here's your first job. Find out how far along the New York force has gotten with the Renetti killing. A knifing."

"I read it. Professional curiosity."

"And then get me everything you can on an antique dealer named Ardway Higgins. He's going out by plane to France. Check the airlines. Find out what flight. Find out his financial situation. Report to me tomorrow at noon at the Empress in New York. Lucas Spann. Room 1010. I'm going to see Baker. Will Riley be on?"

He looked at his watch. "He'll go off in a little over an hour. Ten o'clock. You'll be tailed when you come out of Baker's place."

"I'll brush that off."

He nodded slowly. "I think you will, at that."

BAKER LET ME IN. He had a faint glaze. I knew he'd been drinking most of the day. The wench was not about.

"How goes the battle, father?" he asked me.

"The battle is confusing, Bake.

The old question of who sold what to whom and who got paid. One Mallard Osborn is sans necklace. I think. Indications are that he was going to buy it. Why did you marry the girl?"

"A startling change of subject, lad. Like this. Without the marriage, deportation would be something they would do in a jiffy. With the marriage, the boys can be stalled."

"And she wants to get the necklace, sell it, and go happily back to Yavero?"

"I plan to dissuade her when that time comes. If it comes."

"You're pretty well convinced that she is all she pretends to be?"

He leered at me. "Do I detect a small note of suspicion, mate? I trust my darling as far as I can throw this noble old hotel. Why?"

"Nothing, nothing. By the way, there's a tail on you. A New York agency. All they do is make out reports."

He sat down and thought it over. "That seems to make sense. I guess that would be the insurgent group. Rosie's ex-friends. The dough means so much to them that they'll tread lightly for fear of losing their line on it."

"Where's Rosie?"

"She went out while I napped. She left no note. I am an abandoned husband."

"Couldn't one group or the other pick her up?"

"That is why you find me in my cups. Worry, my boy. Great worry."

"The necklace wasn't a phony, was

it, by the way?" I asked casually.

He gave me an owlish glance. "Now that is a disturbing thought. A new thought. No, I don't see how it could be."

The next time I glanced at him he was snoring. I shook him. He mumbled and pushed at me. I went into the bedroom. They were traveling light. Nothing of interest. I made a drink. At midnight there was a tap on the door.

"Roberto!" Rosie called.

I let her in. "So! You! And what ees with heem?"

"Ees with heem dronk," I said.

"Where have you been?"

I could see it had started to rain. Beads of it were caught in her dark hair. "We have saying. About mans with long noses."

"Now if I were you and if I were a smart girl, I would have looked up my own people, the people who work for the people who sent me up here to sell the necklace. I'd convince them that I hadn't crossed them up. I'd get all friends again. I'd figure I need friends."

Her lips curled. "Smart. Very smart."

"I bet you can't wait to get back to dear old Yavero, baby."

The needle job worked. "My cawntry steenks," she said. She recovered herself. "But I go back."

"Sure. You go back. Nuts!"

"So do you steenk." Baker had himself a jolly little playmate. She looked like a cat, the way she was hunched on the edge of the couch. I looked at Baker. The little wires

EXPERT ADVICE ON MURDER

"If a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing; and from robbing he next comes to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination."

—THOMAS DE QUINCY

"Truth will come to light; murder cannot long be hid."

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

"You are not permitted to kill a woman who has injured you, but nothing forbids you to reflect that she is growing older every minute. You are avenged 1440 times a day."

—AMEROSE BIERCE

"Mordre wol out, certein, it wol nat faille."

—GEOFFREY CHAUCER

"Yet each man kills the thing he loves. . . ."

*"The coward does it with a kiss,
"The hero with a sword. . . ."*

—OSCAR WILDE

"Murder, like talent, seems occasionally, to run in families."

—G. H. LEWES

"Murder may pass unpunisht for a time,

"But tardy justice will o'ertake the crime."

—JOHN DRYDEN

"Many who do not murder would like the power to do it."

—OLD LATIN PROVERB

holding him together went slack when he was unconscious. He looked fifty. His mouth was open.

"Please go," she said.

I watched her. With each minute that passed she seemed to be getting more nervous. I suddenly got the hunch that she was expecting somebody.

"Who's coming here, baby?"

"Nobody!" she said, too fast and too loud.

I sat down. "I can wait."

She was like a soap opera actress picking up a new script. This one was all melting. Soft eyes and velvet lips. Pleading. "Oh, Lucas, you *must* go. Please! For me!"

I remembered the Webley automatic I'd seen in the bureau drawer. She was fast. I had to push her out of the way to open the drawer. Then I had a hunch and turned fast. She was reaching for a heavy lamp. I batted her hand and it thudded on the floor. I guess it parted the cord and shorted. The apartment lights went out. I could hear her breathing in the darkness.

SLOWLY, AS I became accustomed to the faint glow of the windows, I made her out standing a few feet away. There was a slim glint in her hand. I got the wrist fast and twisted. She grunted and the knife fell and her teeth met in the back of my hand. It was pure reflex caused by pain. The dark hair muffled the blow of steel against bone. She went down. I recovered the knife. By matchlight I found the fuse box near

the sink. I unplugged the broken lamp and fixed the fuse with a penny. Bad policy.

I bandaged my hand. Her pulse was strong. Baker still snored. In ten minutes there was a tap at the door. The man I let in was tall, silver-haired, very well dressed, very distinguished. The shoulders of his topcoat were sprinkled with rain. He looked at Baker and then at me. He peered in at Rosie on her face on the bedroom floor where I'd left her.

"I hope I'm not intruding," he said. He looked mildly at the automatic in my hand.

"Not at all! Not at all!"

At that moment Rosie heaved up into a sitting position and swiveled around. She glared at me. Her face twisted up and she held both hands to her head. For a few seconds she looked remarkably like the monkey who hears no evil.

She wavered out, leaned on the doorframe and let loose a hail of rattling Spanish.

"She informs me, sir, that you struck her without provocation. It is my duty to see that Yavero nationals do not—"

"She only pulled a knife on me, tried to hit me with a lamp and bit half my hand off."

He chuckled. "The daughters of our race are excitable."

"I wouldn't want to see one mad, friend."

"I assume that is our Mr. Baker. Can you wake him up?"

"A cold shower might do it. Why?"

The stranger looked dubiously at Rosie. She said harshly, "He knows everytheeng."

"Then I can speak frankly Mr. . .?"

"Spann. Lucas Amory Spann."

"Ah, the name is familiar! You were on our list of desirable experts at the time we were fortunate enough to employ Major Baker."

"Then you are one of the boys in the saddle down there?"

He gave me an indulgent look. "Our government is sometimes troubled by dissenting minorities. I am with our embassy here. My name is Luis Martillo. Poor Rosalinda, she has a passion for minorities. Now, however, it appears that we of Yavero fight among ourselves with no reason. The ancient necklace, it is a heritage of our past. All of Yavero will forget our own enmities for a space. We will all forgive the poor emotional Rosalinda, the misguided Renetti, the deluded Major Baker. We must know what has happened to the necklace. If neither side possesses it, then some outsider has taken possession. It makes us all angry."

He was a mild and distinguished-looking man. But for a tiny moment something glowed in his eyes. Some of his ancestors had used obsidian knives on pyramid tops at the moment of sunrise.

I said, "Major Baker was a little upset at that attempt yesterday afternoon."

Martillo gave a charming shrug. "A business risk, no?"

"Will you people try that again?"

"Only if the sentimental Major Baker re-acquires the necklace and appears to be about to assist our . . . belligerent minority, Mr. Spann."

"And how about the task force posted outside this place?"

"That is not my affair, Mr. Spann."

"Rosalinda is a great patriot."

He beamed at her. "Isn't she? Come, my dear. We shall leave Mr. Spann to awaken Major Baker and inform him. There are a few others I would have you meet."

In three-quarters of an hour Baker was semi-sentient. He had a bad hangover. I told him the war was off. He nodded as though it were a matter of minor importance, and then he went back to sleep—this time in bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

WALL CAME TO the Empress at noon on the dot. He looked like an earnest young insurance salesman, but his eyes were tired.

"First, on the police deal. They were going after the Renetti thing as routine until they uncovered his background. Then they got in touch with the proper people in Washington. A couple of shy little guys have come up and taken over. A kid-glove situation. All very discreet. As could be expected, the New York boys who got pulled off it are a little scalded. Every time they get a fancy one the feds seem to want it. There are a lot of rumors, going all the way from a stolen H bomb blueprint to the rein-

carnation of Hitler. But the smart ones say it's hands off because one of our sister American republics is involved, and not in a nice way. Is that what you want?"

"Exactly. Anything to add?"

"Nothing in that department. Now for Higgins. The guy makes large dough. But he spends it too. A fondness for the ladies. And they seem to have a fondness for him. Maybe he appeals to their maternal instincts. Anyway he makes good time in expensive areas. The head waiter's pal—they take the velvet rope down for him and his cuties every time. I went to a competitor and claimed I represented a guy who had taken a gypping from Higgins. The guy was too dignified to call Higgins a crook, but he managed to get his point across. He doesn't handle any fakes or anything like that. He just seems to get more than the going market for his little art objects. And he doesn't care how far down he beats the price when he's buying. I can't find out his status. He's not incorporated and there's no published statements. His credit standing is slow but good. He lives in the Village in a crumbum building housing his very plush apartment. He leaves tomorrow at ten sharp. Passage on Air France. Is that enough?"

"You do right well, Wally."

"Thanks."

"Now for a toughie. Suppose a guy should want to grab Mr. Higgins. In a nice way. Nothing rough or rude. But it would be important

to have him complete with traveling clothes and luggage."

"A snatch is an unhappy affair these days, Mr. Spann."

"For a nice thorough-going plan I would give you five hundred for the idea, five hundred for helping work it out, and five hundred more if it goes well. And guarantee the law would leave you alone."

His eyes were almost shut. He stood up. "Go out for about a half-hour and leave me here, Mr. Spann. For fifteen hundred bucks I can be a genius."

I came back in a half-hour. Even while he told me that the idea was no good, his eyes were shining. "It'll cost, though."

"Let's hear it."

He told me. I had to cash more traveler's checks to give him his five hundred for the idea and another five for expenses. It was a sweetheart.

It was three o'clock when I got back out to the Tyler Park. I didn't phone from the lobby. I went right up. The door to the apartment was locked. I put my eye to the crack and saw that the bolt wasn't shot. So they were out. It would be more comfortable waiting inside. The door presented a few minor problems. The first two times the latch slipped. The third time the edge of the nailfile caught it and unlocked it.

I went in.

You don't get many moments like that in a lifetime. It's a good thing. I looked at her first. I hadn't known her very well, and so it was easier to look at her first than it was to look

at Baker. I remembered thinking how that body could never look awkward. Now it did.

Baker was in the bedroom. He looked fifty again. Nobody would ever think that he died of a heart attack, though. A knife is a dirty thing. You could see how it was. The first slash was too eager. Baker had come up fast and fighting. The second slash had been on target. Baker was looking at a horizon a million miles away. The fly-boy. They'd tried to hammer him out of the air with the slugs and rockets of half a dozen nations. So he had to get it in the Tyler Park, amid the smell of dust and the lavender sachets of old ladies. With a knife.

I WALKED INTO THE bathroom because I thought I was going to be sick, but it turned out that I wasn't. I found a bottle and put a heavy slug in the bottom of a glass. It would have been corny to give the old toast. So I just drank and as it bit my throat I thought about Baker. I thought about him for the last time, because that is the way to do it. Think the thoughts you have to, and then stop, because more thinking is never any good.

It wasn't Baker any more. It was a body. The pants were over a chair. The fat clip was still there. I took what it held because that is what Baker would have done were the situation reversed. The old Baker. A wad of ones under the big stuff.

There was a small box in the bureau. His junk jewelry. And the

Victoria Cross. That was the only one he'd saved.

I smeared my prints on everything I'd touched. I left clear prints on the outside doorknob. I went down to the desk. The clerk's expression was one of supercilious boredom. I changed it in ten seconds to one of graven horror. He'd seen me go up. They'd been dead for a long time. Finding them now would clear me. Finding them too much later might involve me, because time of death is something the mystery writers can fix within minutes, but the coroners and medical examiners are not that clever.

As the lobby boiled into confusion I folded my tent and became an Ayerab. I got hold of Wally on the phone after I'd checked out of the Empress, and I gave him my new address. He said that things were going well. We made a date for eight-thirty the next morning. He told me where to come.

The paper I bought at the stand on the island at Times Square had the story. There was no hint at a connection with the Renetti killing. But I knew that the out-of-towners Wally had mentioned were very cognizant of that connection.

The police were looking for the man who visited the Bakers and told the desk clerk of the murders. They wanted him for questioning. Named Lucas Spann. Friend of the deceased. Middle height, blond, stocky. Grey suit, grey topcoat, no hat. Police were also searching for a man who had visited the Bakers earlier in the

day, at nine in the morning. No description available.

I phoned. After being passed from one guy to another until I got suspicious, I hung up and tried another pay phone four blocks away. At last I got to a Captain Stack who seemed to have some authority. I said I was Lucas Spann and I had some personal business to take care of first and that I would surely be in at two in the afternoon tomorrow for questioning. I hung up while he was starting a strenuous objection. He'd know the call was from New York and know that there was no point in trying to alert the New York police to pick me up and send me on the twenty-minute ride into his clutches. He'd have to wait.

Getting hold of Luis Martillo was more difficult. It was eleven before he got back to his hotel. I made a date with him for noon, at a large busy west side restaurant.

I went back to the hotel in which I was registered as Morgan Deen, and I went to sleep and dreamed of Baker and of knives.

WALL took me to a small garage. The paint was still wet on the big seal on the door of the rented limousine. Air France, it said. He'd done pretty well with the uniform too. He looked very sharp.

When it was time we went to where the girl was waiting. She was dark and cute and had a Parisian accent you could hammer nails with. She was nervous. Wally had reassured her but she could still smell

trouble. But the scent of trouble wasn't as strong as my fifty dollars that he gave her.

She rehearsed and we put her on the air. Higgins answered on the second ring. I stood close enough to her so that I could hear him too.

"We regret the change of schedule, sir, but we haff made arrangement for—"

"But I don't—"

"Zee sedan, she will come to your door in fifteen minutes. We are peeking up all passengers. Please be ready, sir."

"Oh, all right," he said petulantly.

The girl, with a wary look at us, scurried out. We hurried back to the garage. Wally drove expertly. He dropped me off on the corner, went down and turned around and came back to Higgins' door. I saw the small puffy little man hurry down the steps and across the sidewalk. Wally held the door for him. The sedan came toward me. It slowed and the door opened. I jumped in beside Wally and turned and grinned at Higgins.

The blandness was there for a moment, and suddenly it went away. He still looked like a child. An evil child. We had a safe bet. He couldn't risk trying to carry a gun. His eyes flicked from one door to the other.

"That's right," I said. "Melodrama. We took off the door handles and window cranks. They're up here in the glove compartment."

Give him a point. When he saw that there was nothing he could do, he sat and took it. We went over

the bridge and took him into the most dismal waste of farthest Brooklyn, a strange land of billboards, grass, and holes in the asphalt. Wally took off the uniform coat and hat and put on his own. With some turp on a rag he took the Air France seal off the door.

"I don't understand all this," Higgins said.

He didn't want to hand over his bag. I had to get in with him and chunk his fat little chin for him. I sent Wally on a thirty-yard walk. Higgins slumped in the corner and breathed stertorously, a dull red blotch next to his chin dimple. It wasn't in the bag. It was wrapped around his leg just below the knee and held in place by one of those wide elastic supports. When I felt the lumps I stripped the elastic down, pulled out the necklace. It was as advertised. Green fire and lace.

I put it in my pocket and took out the little box of yellow pills I'd lifted from Baker's bureau. Old B and B Baker. Barbituates and benzedrine. I had the barbiturates. I pulled his mouth open and thumbed three down his throat. He choked and swallowed.

I shook him awake then. His pink hand reached down to his knee. There was something like pain in his eyes.

Wally let me out and we drove him over to the airport. He was asleep when we got there. We shook him into a semi-awake state and delivered him over to an understanding stewardess.

I winked at her. "He had a bad night."

"We will take care of him, Monsieur."

We stayed until the big ship lifted off the strip, turning from a lumbering beast into a thing of superb grace. It tilted and rose and dwindled and the sun made a silvery dance along the wings.

Wally let me off in town. I had three-quarters of an hour to think of something to do with the gizmo that seemed to get heavier every moment in my right-hand pocket. I ducked on and off a few subway trains just to make sure, then I bought cotton, a box and paper and string. I wrapped it in the men's room at the Astor. I addressed it to myself at General Delivery, Los Angeles, and marked it "HOLD" in large clear print. I mailed it from a substation and arrived on the west side ten minutes late. Martillo had a table for two. He was courtly. He bought the first round and I bought the second.

Then we talked. I said that it was a sad thing about Rosalinda.

And equally sad about my friend Baker, he added.

"Obviously meant to look like your people," I said mildly. "The knife and all. Very clumsy."

His eyes widened a bit. "Now that you mention it, Mr. Spann."

"Mr. Higgins wasn't very clever," I said.

"Higgins? Higgins?"

"The middleman, you know. Osborn's agent."

"But you can't mean that this man Higgins was the one who—"

I STOPPED HIM WITH a nod. "As I reconstruct it, Renetti and Rosie called on Higgins. Higgins had an eye for Rosie *and* the necklace. He said it was a fake, but he found out where they were living. He contacted Rosie later and gave her a few ideas."

Martillo's eyes were hooded. "So."

"Higgins explained to Rosie that with a pedigree he could unload the necklace for about four times what he could get for it on a sub-rosa sale. And he had the organization to give it a pedigree. Smuggle it out. Easier to smuggle out than in. Take it to France. Bribe a poor Spanish refugee aristocrat to sign a proper bill of sale. Fake a history. Bring it back and pay the duty. Sell it above-board. He wanted Rosie to ditch Renetti. But she knew she'd sold Renetti too well on her intense patriotism. He'd be tough to unsell. It was easier to do a little knifework on him. So she did. Higgins thought she'd turn the necklace over to him right away. But Rosie was too smart. She let him sweat. He finally went and got it. Yesterday morning. And he fixed it so he wouldn't have to split with anybody. Killing Baker made it look better."

"How do you know all this?" he demanded.

"I did a little checking. Rosie lied. She said she only knew the name of Osborn because Renetti mentioned him. But Higgins told me that she

went to his place of business with Renetti. So I began to wonder why she would lie. The obvious answer was that she wanted to play down any connection between her and Higgins. Osborn knew some sort of funny business was going on, but he didn't know what. Higgins had half promised him the genuine necklace. Osborn was nervous because Higgins had approached him on the possibility of a sub-rosa purchase. That was before he found out for sure that Rosie would play ball."

"It is still thin," he said.

"Is it? I saw the bodies. Baker got it quick. She got it slow. The way it happens when you're made to talk. If I had known that he didn't have it yet, that Higgins hadn't gotten it from her right after Renetti's death, I could have saved her. And Baker too. But she had it all the time. I went into the bathroom to be sick. That was when I found them. The shower drain wasn't replaced. There was a piece of nylon fishing leader tied to it. That's where the necklace was. Down the drain. And that's where it is now. Down the drain. Another sort of drain."

"This Higgins, he has it?"

"What do you think?"

He put two patrician hands on the table linen. "Have you told all this to the police?"

"Not yet."

"Please don't. I have friends who would like to speak to Higgins. Where can I find him?"

"Not yet."

"Please don't. I have friends who would like to speak to Higgins. Where can I find him?"

"He's on a plane headed for Paris. He left a little over two and a half hours ago."

Martillo shut his eyes. It took the patrician gentility out of his face. In Spanish his name means "hammer." Luis, the Hammer. He stood up. "Would you wait right here please? I should not be too long. He travels under his own name?" I nodded. Martillo left the restaurant.

He was back in twenty minutes. He sat down with a sigh. He smiled. "It is good to have true friends all over the world, is it not?"

"It most certainly is."

"Call it an affair of venegeance, Colonel Spánn. She was a true flower of Yavero. It would be a pity were her murderer to escape."

"A pity."

"Higgins will meet with a . . . keen reception in Paris."

"He is clever. The necklace may be very well concealed."

"He will speak under the same comfortable circumstances that Rosalinda spoke. Would you have a brandy?"

"I have barely time for one, Señor Martillo. Even that will make me a bit late for my appointment with the police."

He frowned. We ordered. He twirled the brandy glass. "One thing. If you will permit me. A word in the right place. I shall phone when you leave. I am sure that one little phone call will make the police

most cooperative. You see, this is all an affair of great delicacy, Colonel Spann. They have been asked to cooperate with our embassy."

"I would be very grateful if you make the call, Señor. Police are sometimes excitable."

"Truly they are. You can return the favor by telling me why Rosalinda attempted to make peace between the warring factions in the Yavero government."

I SHRUGGED. "THEY CALLED out the passenger list over the public-address system. One seat was vacant when the flight took off. It had been reserved for a Mrs. Baker."

"Ah! And I was giving her her chance to get away?"

"Precisely."

It was time to go. And time to set the hook. "You have been calling me Colonel, Señor."

"It is not a rewarding position. But you might find it profitable. And

our young men are eager. Now that Major Baker has unfortunately—"

"I couldn't report immediately. I have to go to the West Coast on a business matter first. Would three weeks be all right?"

We both stood up. He shook my hand. "Excellent. Report to the Minister of War. He will be expecting you."

Captain Stack was a model of courtesy. The smile he used hurt him. A solemn little man with a State Department manner stood at Stack's elbow and made certain that the courtesy was maintained.

I took a plane to Los Angeles. Three hours out of St. Louis a trio of jets rode by. They made me feel middle-aged. Then I remembered the green fire and gold lace. Just one more year of this noise, I thought. Not more. One more year. Thirty-three isn't a bad retirement age. I hoped Rosalinda had left a sister in Yavero. ♦ ♦ ♦

RACE WITH DEATH

- ON JULY 30, 1933, Dr. John Kennedy, a doomed and brilliant young surgeon, entered the operating theater of the Leflore County Hospital, Missouri. His face masked, his fingers sheathed in sterile rubber, he worked swiftly over his patient, fighting death on two fronts, for the Grim Specter was at his shoulder as well as his patient's—and he knew it.

The operation successfully completed, he collapsed and had to be carried back to his own sick bed, where he died as mysteriously as he had clung to life in order to perform his last scheduled operation. He had refused to discuss his own illness with colleagues—but an autopsy revealed poisoning.

A police checkup put the murder blame on a woman colleague, who was tried from the lowest to the highest courts of Missouri, adjudged guilty in each instance—and never required to pay the penalty!

The giant vultures wheel lazily in the blue sky. Waiting. The unfriendly sun beats down, drying the kindness out of men's hearts, killing off vegetation and leaving only a shimmering wasteland of rock and hot sand. Here, exposed for all to see, are the skeletons, the barest essences, of a man's character. Here nature brings out the worst in men—greed and murder.



Borrowed Lightning

By DAN GORDON

HE LIKED THE loneliness and peace of the desert filling station. You get so you appreciate solitude after the community life of a prison. And he liked the man he was working for. Benson, the station owner. Maybe because he liked Benson, he was arguing with him now.

"We ought to have a sign," he was saying. "A big sign, Mr. Benson. Maybe a yellow one that says we do car repairs."

"Who does it?" Benson said. "I'm no mechanic. Neither are you."

"Sure I am," John told him. "Down at the state prison I kept up a whole fleet of trucks."

Benson clapped a fatherly hand on his shoulder. He said, "Look, John. I know how it is in your spot.

I know you want to make good. But you're young, son. You're just a kid. Better wait a couple of years."

"But it's money," John said desperately. "It would double the station's take."

"For a good mechanic," Benson conceded. "But for us it'd be nothing but grief."

John scratched the back of his head. He had tried every possible argument to convince his boss of his ability. But Benson leaned over backwards to give his customers a fair shake. It made John sore at times, but then he always realized that this same fairness had caused Benson to give him, an ex-con, a break.

Remembering, he said, "Boss, you think more of customers' cars than

you think of your own daughter?"

Benson said, "Can't say as I do."

"You let me go out with her," John persisted. "You trust me fine with Sally."

Benson's booming laugh trailed behind him as he went out into the bright sunlight and climbed into his car. "That's different," he said. "Sally's young. She can fight her own. But a lot of the cars that come in here, why they're plumb old and defenseless." Benson pressed the starter, and the motor came racketing alive with a series of discordant grindings that set John's teeth on edge.

He raised his voice to try again as Benson forced the car into gear. "Look at that heap of mine," John said. "It runs like a ticking watch."

Benson turned his head toward the hopped-up car that was standing in the shade. "That thing?" he said with mock scorn. "That ain't a car. It's a kid's plaything. Give it thirty minutes on the road the way the sun is today, it'd curl up like a strip of bacon." His wide grin took the sting from his words as he waved and drove away.

John was left alone at the station. He watched Benson's car until it was out of sight, and then nothing moved on the straight highway that lay flat across the desert. There were tracks in the gravel left by Benson's car. John raked them smooth, then returned to his one great interest—working on his car.

He was bending above the shiny, souped-up car when he heard the

whisper of tires on the hot desert road. He straightened, a tall young man with a sunburned face, and went to meet the sleek sedan as it rolled up to the pumps.

The man behind the wheel slid out and looked up at the weathered sign. He said, "Hi, kid. You Augie Benson?"

"No, sir. Augie's my boss. My name's John."

"Fine, John. Fill 'er up." The man didn't move around, just stood there, but his eyes moved everywhere.

His friend in the front seat said, "Yap-yap-yap. Don't you want to know how old he is? Has he got any sisters? Where was he born?"

The driver said coldly, "Shut up." He moved to the front of the car and laid a hand on the grill. "Hot," he said. "Damn hot."

"It's the desert," John reminded him. "And nothin' but the desert between here and Stark City. You fellers ought to take off them coats."

"Why?" The one in the front kicked out the word like a whip-lash.

John shrugged. "Because it's hot."

"You don't mind if we keep 'em on, though?" The man's voice still had its edge.

"It ain't nothin' to me," John said. "I'm just out here sellin' gas."

"Gas," the man echoed. "Ain't that tank filled yet?"

The driver said, "Leave the kid alone. It's an old pump. It don't work very fast."

John grinned and watched the in-

indicator hand move slowly around the dial. He said, "It sure is old. One of the first they made. I keep proddin' Benson to get a new one."

The driver wasn't listening. His thin, sharp nose was pointed toward John's hopped-up roadster. He said, "How much'll that thing do?"

"One-twenty," John said, "more or less. I touched a hunnert and thirty once."

THE MAN IN the front seat leaned out, his dark face sweaty in the sun. He said, "Why don't you adopt the kid? You and him could cut up touches night and day. You and him could have lots of nice hobbies."

"Lay off," the driver growled. "You yap so much I can't think."

"I yap," the man said with disgust. He pulled his head back into the car and relaxed against the seat.

John put the cap on the tank and hung up the hose. He said, "Check the oil and water?"

"Yeah," said the driver. "No—wait a minute. How about renting us that heap?"

John's face went wary and cautious under the desert burn. These guys had come in snarling. Now they were interested in his car. He said, "You wouldn't want it."

The driver said, "Just for a little while. Give you twenty to let us take it to Stark City."

The man in the car snarled, "You crazy? You gone clear out of your mind?"

Moving around the hot-rod, inspecting its oversized tires, the driver

wasn't listening at all. He said, "How about it, kid?"

"No dice," John said.

"Why not? Twenty's about all you can make in three days of stand-in' here pumpin' gas."

"I didn't always pump gas," said John.

"No?" the driver said.

"No." John kept his eyes on the man while he added, "I pulled a short stretch down on the state prison farm."

The driver laughed, a harsh, barking sound. "What'd they grab you for?"

John shrugged. "It was a bum rap. Some kids came by with a stolen car. I didn't know it was stolen."

The driver held out a twenty, added an extra five. He said, "Twenty for the use of your heap, five for takin' care of ours."

"Sorry," John said. "No deal."

"You learn anything in stir?" Leaning forward, the man spoke softly. John was uncomfortably aware of the bulge beneath his coat.

"A couple of things," John said flatly. "One, how to make a stock job do a hunnert and thirty. Two, to stay out of trouble."

The driver nodded quickly. "That's what I'm talking about. Play it smart, boy. We could knock you off just as easy, only I don't want it said I killed a guy to save twenty clams."

John let his eyes slide around the station. There were some tools over by the grease rack, and the jack-handle—but that was thirty feet away.

He said, "I see what you mean." He took the money and shoved it into his pocket.

Scanning John's face with his quick eyes, the driver said, "Anything tricky about your car? Anything we ought to know?"

"It's standard," said John. "In the cockpit, that is. It don't do any tricks. I filled the tank this morning, an' the oil an' water's okay."

The driver nodded and moved to his car. He said something quietly to the other man. The other man got out. He got out unwillingly, and his mouth looked as if he were snarling, but no sound was coming out.

John watched them switch the empty canvas bag from their car to his own heap. He helped them find the ignition, and stood back while the engine blasted through the twin pipes. The car rolled on the sand to the highway, gathered speed and fled down the road.

They were gone, and he was standing there, staring at the big sedan. He stood with his hands in his pockets, fingering the twenty-five. The man had wanted plenty of speed. Why? They were in no hurry to get to Stark City. Look how long they'd fooled around the station. There wasn't any rush to get to the lonesome little town out there in the desert. The answer came to him then: They wanted the hot-rod to make a getaway.

Recalling the canvas bag, John Meyers decided they were going to rob the Stark City bank. It had to be the bank, because there wasn't

anything else in that town. Nobody would hold up a soda fountain, or Parson's General Store. So it had to be the bank.

He thought of the thirty miles of highway between the gas station and the isolated desert town. Thirty miles of unbroken space, with the highway the only link. Not so much as a hot-dog stand between Benson's Service and Stark City. He thought about that for a little while, and then he thought of his prison record. That would sure come in handy when his car turned up in a holdup. He decided to phone the bank.

The phone wouldn't work. Jiggling the dead receiver, John stared through the glass, out at the heat waves that were ghosting into the air from the sand and the sparse desert growth. Of course they would cut the wires. It wouldn't be any trick at all. The phone lines ran right along the road.

He went outside. Nothing in sight in either direction on the endless ribbon of straight highway. Over to the left a dust devil sprang into being and traveled, the only moving thing in all the immense flat world.

Then, coming from Stark City, a distant speck appeared. It grew into the shape of a car, a car with a fish-pole aerial. That would be Sheriff Horne.

JOHAN BEGAN TO wave before the car reached him. He shouted as it passed. The sheriff gave him a genial wave and shouted in return. The car went on, its hot tires making

a diminishing, humming sound that faded into the distance.

For a little while John stared after it, waiting for it to return. It didn't though. The sheriff drove on. John walked back and stood in the shade of the building, considering the big sedan, the car the men had left.

He could use their car, drive to the town in the other direction, with the word that someone was holding up the bank in Stark City. Only were they? What did he have to go on besides the fact that the men were tough, that they'd rented his car from him, that they carried a canvas bag?

Maybe people would laugh at him. And, no maybe about it, Benson would sure be unhappy about it if he went loping off and left the station.

There was one thing he could do, and he did it. Raising the hood of the big sedan, he removed the distributor cap, dropped the rotor into his pocket. Then he tilted a chair against the front of the station and settled himself to wait.

His own car returned as a swaying shape that thundered down the road. Almost before he could get to his feet, the two men skidded the stripped car into the station.

He saw the pattern of buckshot where someone had fired a shotgun into the rear of his car, and he saw the freshly caked blood from the small wounds on the dark man's neck. He stood, just looking at them, while they dragged the heavy canvas bag from the floor of the hot-rod

and threw it into the big sedan.

The driver drew back his arm and hurled a small object far out into the desert. The sunlight caught it, and it glinted before it lost itself in the sand. The man said, "There's your key, kid. Don't look for it right away."

John nodded. He said, "You rob the Stark City bank?"

The dark man turned in quick anger, but the driver didn't seem sore. He laughed, wildly and off-key. He said, "Clean as a whistle, kid. There ain't a penny left in the till." He was climbing into the car.

He kicked the starter a couple of times, and beside him the dark man cursed. Then he got out, and he wasn't laughing now. Quickly, he threw up the hood.

John didn't even see him draw the gun. It was there in his hand when he turned. It looked black and very large.

"All right, smart boy. You got seconds. Start putting that rotor back."

John wanted to move away from that gun, but he knew that wasn't sensible, so he forced himself to stand. He said, "I—"

They all heard it—the sound of another car. They swung their heads toward the highway.

There was a girl in a light pickup truck, and when John recognized Sally Benson, he gave her a frantic wave.

She got it, but by then the hood of the truck was even with the first pump. She threw them a wide-eyed

look, blue eyes large in a smoothly tanned face. Swiftly, she shifted the truck into low.

"Stick around, sister." It was the dark man. He shoved a gun at her face.

She got out, a small and shapely girl in a plaid shirt and faded jeans. John was hoping she'd act like a customer, but she came to him for protection and put one hand on his arm. He said coolly, "Hi, Miss Benson."

She said, "John! Are they hurting you?"

He gave up then, and put one arm around her shoulders.

The driver said, "Save the neckin' till later, kid. You got practically no time to fix that car. Count of ten, I shoot the wren." He swung the gun until it was centered on Sally's bright plaid shirt.

John brought the rotor out of his pocket and headed for the car. Seconds later, he straightened. "It'll start now," he said.

"It better," the driver said.

The sedan motor came to life, rocking on its mountings, in a kind of roaring whisper. The driver, seated behind the wheel, yelled to the dark man, "Come on."

The dark man came close to Sally and John. He was holding his gun in his right hand, and his left hand came up slowly and brushed a fly from the caked blood on his neck. "A punk," the dark man said softly. "A double-crossing punk." His voice stayed even, its pitch didn't change, but as he finished, the gun came up

swiftly. Its sight raked across John's face.

It happened so suddenly, John hadn't time to ready himself. He stumbled back with a sharp cry of pain, hearing the dark man's harsh laughter. Opening his eyes, he saw that the man had left them and was jumping into the car. Its wheels spurned the gravel as it leaped for the macadam.

JOHAN PUT HIS hand to the side of his face. It came away wet and red. He thought about that through his shock and his pain, through his feeling of indignation.

Sally said urgently, "John! Come on to the truck. You've got to get a doctor."

"It's not fast enough," John said. Then he added irrelevantly, "They threw away my keys."

"There's no big hurry," the girl said. She was looking at his face. "It's bad," she said, "but not too bad. It's not bleeding so fast any more."

"Let it bleed," he said. "I got another set." He ran for the spare keys in the metal drawer of the service station counter, wondering why he had forgotten them.

He came out, waving them in his hand, and threw himself into the hot-rod. Sally was right behind him, climbing into the car. The motor blasted hot and hard the way he liked to hear it. When he jockeyed the heap from the station, it dug wide swaths in the gravel.

With Sally beside him, crouched

low in the seat, he sent the little car roaring toward the rim of the world, away up ahead on the narrow ribbon of highway. The big sedan was up there, though it looked like a dot in the distance.

John bore down on the gas, and the motor's voice became a scream that matched the sound of the wind. He risked a glance at Sally. She was gripping the door on her side. Her lips were parted; her eyes were wide.

The car ahead grew larger abruptly, then it seemed to rush toward them. John yelled, "Hang on!" and hit the brakes.

For now the big sedan was blocking the road. It was backing and turning around.

The first bullets whined through the hot sunlight before John could kill his speed. He wanted to look at Sally, but there wasn't time. Not now.

The gears clashed and complained in agony as he tooted the car around. Something pinged solidly against the rear. With a scream of metal on metal, another bullet grazed the right-hand side.

Spinning rear wheels took hold, and the hot-rod leaped ahead. And, before John's narrowed eyes, a bullet tore through the windshield, leaving behind a small round hole, and a spiderweb of shattered glass. He looked at the girl. She was staring at the pursuing car, and still there was no fear on her face, only a kind of disbelief.

John gripped the wheel and checked the rear-view mirror. The

big sedan was falling behind as the hot-rod began to buck and sway with speed.

They went on, thundering down the highway, and the distance between the cars widened until the robbers gave up.

When they stopped and reversed their direction, John swung the hot-rod around and began to chase them again.

The big sedan lined out, and the hot-rod loafed behind, doing a comfortable ninety. Once, John tried to creep up, but the whine of the bullets discouraged them. He resumed his former pace. Sooner or later they'd come to a town where the law would be interested in two cars traveling at that rate of speed.

He settled himself for a long run. The cut on his face was hurting a little, otherwise he felt pretty good. Now and then he thought about the station. He'd left it unattended, with the money still in the drawer. Benson would be plenty sore if he found that out, but it was too late to worry now. Anyway, the hot-rod was ticking just swell—not even overheated after all this time on the road.

The sun-baked shrubs went by in a blurred line, and the road flowed beneath the wheels. Lulled by the speed, John did not even see the state trooper who had stopped beside the highway.

The wail of the siren was the first thing he heard, and then he saw the bouncing bike creeping up in the rear-view mirror. He went on. Maybe the trooper would pass them and

take out after the fleeing sedan.

He thought at first the bullet had come from ahead. It went whining above them, and automatically he lifted his foot from the gas to give the sedan a better lead. Then, with sharp terror, he realized the shot had been a warning, fired by the trooper behind.

Slowing, he watched the sedan fade into the distance. As his speed diminished, John headed the hot-rod toward the shoulder of the road.

The state cop parked behind them, and walked up with his gun in his hand. He said, "Didn't you hear that siren, son?"

"Bank robbers!" John said. "They're in that car up ahead."

The trooper nodded sagely. "And you were just trying to catch them." He looked at the girl. "That right, sis?"

"You've got to believe him," the girl said earnestly.

"Sure," the trooper said easily. "It happens every day. I get more bank robbers along this road." He shoved his cap back, exposing his moist forehead. "All right, kid. Let's see your license."

John said urgently, "Look here at this bullet hole. An' look here at my face."

THE TROOPER LOOKED, and there was a change in his eyes. He glanced at the empty road ahead.

"They robbed the Stark City bank," John said. "They even told me so."

There was an instant in which the

trooper studied John. His eyes moved to the hole in the windshield. "Got the license number?" he said.

"Seventeen, eight ninety-four."

Repeating it, the trooper went to the motorcycle and put it on the air.

To John it had a hopeless sound the state cop's voice, calm and unexcited, talking into the microphone. "We've lost them," he told Sally bitterly. "We fooled around too long."

"No we haven't," the cop said. "My partner's up ahead."

John let it go. He had risked getting shot, and worse, he had risked getting Sally shot. Now the men were getting away. Beside the car, the cop was futilely gunning the motorcycle, preparing to speed away.

Then, from the cycle's radio, a crisp voice cut in. It said, "Sighted car. Giving chase." The voice went away, drowned out by the sound of a motor.

The trooper grinned tightly. "So long, kids." He did something to his holster and pulled his goggles down. "Come on, if you want to," he added, and opened the throttle wide.

Hesitating, John looked at Sally. He said, "You want to go?"

She nodded, but didn't speak. Neither of them spoke as the car jetted after the cycle.

They saw the sedan while they were still miles away, then they were closing on it rapidly. It was moving slowly, it seemed to be limping, and one or both of the bank robbers were firing to the rear. The action was clear but in miniature, because of

the clean desert air and the distance.

The toy sedan swerved suddenly, and careened off into the sand. It hobbled briefly, then halted. Smoke came out in a little puff. Then there was a pillar of flame, shooting skyward in a rush.

John stopped the car.

Sally said in a tremulous voice, "I'm glad you're not going any closer. Even if they *were* bad men, I don't think we want to see."

John twisted the car around, preparing to head back to the station. Girls sure got funny ideas. "I'd give

a pretty to see it," he said, "but we just haven't got the time. I want to be back there at the pumps before your old man comes in."

He glanced at the temperature indicator. The engine was moderately warm. He said, "Take a look at that needle, and remember what it says."

Sally looked up and said, "Why?"

"Because there'll be newspaper guys, and pictures." He grinned and listened to the motor. Its voice was sweet and strong. "But I'm gonna get the one thing I want—that mechanic's sign." ♦ ♦ ♦

FINAL STRAWS

- IF YOU'D LIKE to grin, though grimly, go to the cemetery at Scranton, Pa. There you'll find Margaret Casey, surrounded by six of her friends.

Margaret used to work in a detonator factory, a detonator being a powder-filled cartridge used to set off dynamite blasts. Margaret thought it would be a lot of fun to scare the living daylights out of her fellow workers by tossing a live detonator into a coal furnace.

The thing went off harmlessly enough, except that the exploding "squib" tossed a cinder into a powder keg. Neither Margaret nor her friends lived long enough to enjoy the joke. But Margaret would probably like it if you laughed—at last.

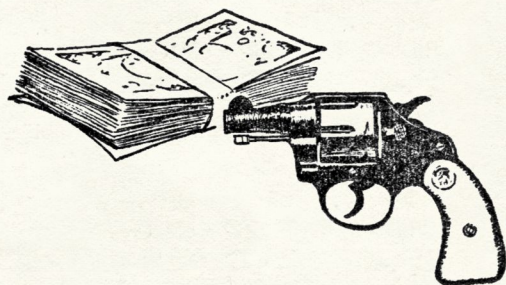
- ADAM MERVICHIN OF Yugoslavia, was a critical husband. Also, he was an impulsive man. If he didn't like the way his wife cleaned house, he simply wiped up the floor with her. This naturally led to strained relations between the two, until finally two weeks went by during which neither of them spoke. Adam eventually broke the silence one night with, "Have some soup."

She refused and Adam proceeded courteously to bat her about until she ate his plateful—and died.

It turned out she had intended to poison *him* with the soup. Adam managed to explain to the court and drew only two years in jail, plenty of time to figure out his domestic problems—now that they were finally over.

Their pictures flash across the continent with the speed of light; police teletypes click constantly with their descriptions; their faces stare out at you from the walls of post office buildings; their peculiarities of appearance and mannerism are noted on a thousand file cards in a thousand different cities: "Scar on left cheek, blinks when talking . . ." They are the men on the lam, the furtive ones who hide in dingy rooming houses and emerge only at night. Somewhere a pair of handcuffs, or a bullet, awaits them. For men like Sam Desh, in this story, it is hard to say which is preferable.

The Girl Next Door



By DON JAMES

THE OTHER APARTMENT was less than twenty feet away, and the young housewife left the blinds up most of the time. By the end of the first week Sam Desh felt that he knew the girl, her baby and her husband. He had little else to do but sit in the coolness of the window in his own apartment bedroom, listen to the radio, and wait until the cops relaxed their search for him.

Sometimes he thought about the morning when he had rushed out of the small-town bank with the money crammed in a bag, and he remembered the sound of shots as he got away in the car.

He remembered the plans he and Bart Lyons had made. A swing down the coast to Los Angeles, a trip into Mexico, maybe South America.

Bart had yelled, "Get going—there's a guy with a gun!" Then there was the first shot and Bart had screamed. The newspapers said later that Bart died in the bank.

Sam had rented the apartment in Portland, giving the landlady a story about coming there for his health. The car was at the bottom of the Columbia. The bag with the money was in a closet. Now all he had to do was wait until he could safely make a break.

The young housewife in the apartment next door called the baby Tommy, and her husband was Chuck. He called her Joanie. At first Sam thought they were a happily married couple. After a while he learned that they weren't.

Joanie was happy only when she was alone with her baby. When Chuck was home there was much quarreling and once Chuck slapped her.

It was dusk and their lights were on, their windows up, and Sam—sitting in his darkened window to escape the summer heat—heard most of the quarrel. It was about a man named Harry.

Joanie said, "Harry Sloan's making a bum out of you."

That was when Chuck slapped her. She didn't scream or fight back. She stood rigidly with one hand pressed against her cheek.

"You've never done that before," she said in a queer, matter-of-fact voice.

Little Tommy started to cry and she picked him up. Chuck went out

and slammed the door. Then Joanie sat for a long time with the baby in her arms, rocking back and forth.

Sam felt sorry for her. She looked like a high school kid. She didn't look old enough to be the mother of Tommy, but she had a way of handling the baby that reminded Sam of his kid sister, Cynthia. It had been a large family and Cynthia had looked after the young ones.

It was a long time back to the farm in Iowa and the family and the first time he'd met Sally Hofstetter at a high school dance.

Cynthia had spoken her piece. "Leave her alone, Sam. She's no good. Her family isn't. Look at her brothers: One's in prison. The other should be. And that mother of hers!"

He'd laughed it off because the excitement of being with Sally was something that transcended anything he'd ever known. Parking on a country road among corn fields, the smell of her hair, softness of her lips, the excitement of holding her.

Fifteen years ago. Fourteen years since he and Carl Hofstetter had held up the service station south of town. Twelve since he'd seen any of his family. Ten since he'd seen Sally for a few moments in a Chicago hotel where she was waiting for Tony Strickland, a big wheel in the slot-machine racket.

She said they were going to be married. When Strickland came she introduced them, cuddling a hand beneath Strickland's arm significantly so that you knew the stuff about

marriage didn't mean much one way or the other.

It hadn't mattered to him. Sally was following the Hofstetter pattern. And Sam Desh was following his own pattern, which they'd first shown him.

Sitting in the darkened window, he thought back over the years and smiled a little grimly. Joanie was still rocking the baby when he left his window and the room and closed the door after him so the light from the living room wouldn't shine through. She might guess that he had been there.

He tuned in a baseball game. Hiding out was the cross he had to bear after every stickup. The phrase his mother had used so often—"cross to bear." He'd have to get out soon. He was near the breaking point. Even the thought of the carefully counted money in the bag—\$87,350—no longer helped. He had to get out!

IN THE THIRD week he began to take the sun on the small lawn between the apartment buildings. The day Joanie brought the baby down, Sam almost left, but Joanie's friendly smile kept him for a while.

"That's a good-looking baby," he smiled.

"He loves the sun," Joanie told him and put the baby on a blanket. "He's just learning to crawl."

Within the hour they were acquainted. He learned that Chuck was a salesman. She was vague about him. She was from a small Idaho

town and they'd been married three years. Chuck's last name was Hollo-way.

"Do you work nights?" Joanie asked.

"I'm taking a vacation. For my health."

"Your home is in Oregon?"

"No. East." He picked up his sun glasses. He didn't want questions. She seemed to sense it and blushed.

"I hope Tommy and I haven't bothered you, Mr . . ." She hesitated.

"Emler," he said. "Sam Emler. And I've enjoyed meeting you and Tommy." He was remembering to be decent. He smiled to himself. "*Mind your manners,*" his mother had said.

He stood. "Don't give Tommy too much sun," he warned.

"I'll be careful," she said. "He's so small and tender."

Sam looked at the baby and realized just how small a baby was. He'd never looked at a baby so intently. Suddenly he wondered what a child of his own would be like. "Okay," he thought. "I'm big and I've good bones and a good build. The kid would look okay."

"Take good care of him," he said and went into the building.

He knew about her trip home. She told him all about it the day before she left while Tommy explored the blanket.

"I haven't been home since we were married. I'm dying to show off Tommy!"

"Your husband going with you?"

She shook her head. "Chuck's busy. He can't get away." There was a worried note in her voice.

"Your folks will be glad to see you."

"We're going to stay a week. I can hardly wait!"

The next day he saw her get ready to leave. Chuck wasn't there. Afterwards he listened to the radio and two newscasts. There was nothing about the search for Sam Desh. There had been no mention for two weeks.

But he couldn't be lulled into a false security. The cops would be watching. They didn't let up. They'd named him as a suspect and there were pictures, descriptions, men watching. It wasn't going to be easy.

He'd decided upon the bus. He'd head for Los Angeles where he had friends. He might go east from there. Eastward were the large cities, and in the large cities was greater safety.

That night Chuck had company. Sam saw the brunette girl kiss Chuck before Chuck went into the kitchen and returned with drinks for them.

Suddenly Sam was angry. With Joanie and the baby out of town a few hours, Chuck was having a girl in the apartment.

"So what?" Sam asked himself. "Why the burn, Sam? She's nothing to you. You've been around. You know the score."

But he still was angry when he tuned in the radio.

The impatience and anxiety to get out became almost unbearable. The cross was becoming heavier every

day. His nerves were giving out.

On the fourth evening after Joanie and Tommy left, the brunette was in the apartment again. They were in deep conversation on the davenport. Chuck reached into a pocket and brought out several small, flat packages of white paper and gave them to the girl. She nodded and went to the small dining-room table pushed against the window, and still set with Chuck's breakfast dishes. She picked up her purse and carefully tucked the white packages into it.

Chuck went into the kitchen and returned with drinks and they drank, laughing. Abruptly they stopped laughing and looked at the door. They exchanged glances and hesitatingly Chuck went to the door and opened it.

Sam watched two men come into the other apartment. One flashed a badge and the second man ran his hands quickly over Chuck.

The girl walked toward the window and stood with her back to Sam. Her hands were busy behind her back with the purse. He watched her bring out the flat white packages and unfold them. Her fingers groped over the breakfast dishes and then she was emptying the papers. When they were emptied she rolled the slips into small balls.

The men and Chuck talked rapidly and Chuck shook his head. The girl leaned back against the table. The men looked at her and one spoke so that Sam heard.

"Where's the stuff, Maisie?"

"What stuff?"

"Don't give me that."

She shook her head and moved away from the table when he came toward her. She watched him search her purse, smiling thinly.

He turned and said something that Sam couldn't hear. The girl shrugged. After a moment of conversation Chuck put on a hat and the girl picked up her purse. They all left the apartment.

"A pinch," Sam told himself.

He went into his living room and smoked several cigarettes. The whole thing suddenly was under his skin. The urge to get out of the apartment and Portland was stronger than it ever had been.

Abruptly he went to a closet. He brought out the small bag and a two-suit. In ten minutes he had packed. He wrote a brief note to his landlady, using a backward slant, explaining that he had been called east.

He carefully checked the apartment and left, carrying the bags.

Outside, the summer night was warm and pleasant. He walked to a corner tavern and called a taxi. An hour later he was in a bus headed south.

Vaguely he wondered why the cops had picked up Chuck and the girl, and he thought he knew. The small, white packages. Once again he felt sorry for Joanie.

THE SUN WAS hot on the Southern California beach. Sam stretched lazily, rolled to his side, and looked at the woman beside him.

She wore a brief swim suit and her tanned body was slim and firm. He had been surprised and strangely pleased to meet her again at Gordinia's Los Angeles apartment. The big wheel, Strickland, had been dead three years.

Fifteen years ago, he thought. She's thirty-two now—two years younger than I am. Thirty-two and she looks twenty-five.

His eyes appraised the tanned body and she seemed to feel the stare because she turned her head toward him.

"All right?" she asked.

"You wear well."

"I'm not so old, Sam."

"You're thirty-two and look seven years younger."

She smiled and took a deep breath that was unnecessary, but inspired. "I take care of myself. A girl has to."

"You've done all right," he grinned. "Loaded with good looks and dough. Smart enough to hang on to both."

She traced a finger along his arm. "It's been a long time, Sam. Remember our dates?"

"Parking in the jalopy?"

She laughed. "You've done all right, yourself. I'm sort of glad. It's nice to know I wasn't wrong about you even when I was a kid."

She shut her eyes. Sam leaned over and kissed her. He drew back, but she smiled and said, "You can do better than that."

"Sure." He kissed her again and her hands gripped his arms.

"I guess I still go for you, Sally," he murmured. He hadn't expected to say that, but it was how he suddenly felt.

"I'll buy that too, Sam."

"So what does it buy both of us?"

She opened her eyes. "I don't know."

He leaned back on his elbows and gazed beyond the breakers.

"I never got the soil out of my system," he said. "I know—I've done okay and hard work is for suckers, but I still get a yen to live on a farm. I like growing things—to work with my hands. Is that crazy?" He looked at her anxiously.

She smiled. "Still a farm boy."

"Maybe I am."

"Don't get sore about it. Maybe I get fed up, too. Maybe you think life's been sweet music and the soft touch for me." Her mouth hardened. "It hasn't. I learned enough for three lifetimes. Guys like Strickland, who was free with the dough—and free with his fists when I got out of line. I know what you're thinking. I came out with his dough. But I earned every cent of it—and more."

"You've no yen for the soil, Sally."

She looked at him defiantly. "You think not? You think I don't remember the sun setting on a corn field, the smell of spring in the country? Maybe not as much as you, but I remember. And I'm not getting any younger, Sam. I'm not kidding myself."

He looked back toward the sea.

"I'm a guy on the lam. I've some dough. What if I find myself a hideout somewhere? Change my name? Become a farmer? Do I get away with it?"

"If you're lucky. If some yokel doesn't read the papers or look at pictures. It's been done, I guess. And if some of the boys don't decide to use your hideout. You can have company any day. Company you don't want."

"I'd have to disappear and make it good," he said thoughtfully.

"I think you could."

He looked at her. "Make a deal?"

She searched his face with her blue eyes, breathing slowly and evenly.

"Sam, maybe I never got over being a little crazy about you. Like that song—faithful to you in my fashion."

"I even want some kids, Sally."

Her lips twitched in a small, gentle smile. "This could be corny."

"Okay. But is it?"

"No."

"Deal?"

"Yes."

THEY DIDN'T WAIT. Sam found the place in Montana. A broad, quiet valley; wheatland and cattle and a house with a view. They drove up the back highways to look at it and they fell in love with it.

"An hour from Missoula," the agent explained. "A couple of hours south and you're in the Salmon River country. All the fishing and hunting you'd ever want. And you can see what the land's worth yourself."

They closed the deal and returned to the Missoula hotel. As they walked down a hallway to their rooms, Sam suddenly stopped.

"Let's drive to Butte. They say it's quite a town. Let's get married and have a party!"

She looked at him. "You're sure, Sam?"

"Why not?"

She didn't answer. After a moment he said, "I see what you mean. A guy on the lam. Maybe I'm all wrong. Maybe I've been daydreaming."

"Maybe that doesn't matter, Sam. Maybe something else does. Just a decent streak in me. You talked about kids once. What if they catch up with you some day and you find yourself in a cell for fifteen or twenty years? What about a kid then?"

He lit a cigarette and his fingers trembled. "I hadn't thought of that. You mean . . . no kids?"

"That's what I mean, Sam."

He forced a smile. "You're right. It's borrowed time, and I've no right to borrow it from a kid. Shall we go to Butte?"

"I'd love to, Sam. And we *will* get married!"

Halfway to Butte they discovered the car following them.

"A cop in uniform," Sally said after a quick, backward glance.

Sam nodded. "Spotted me in Missoula and doesn't want to try to take me alone. Word's probably gone ahead for a road block."

"You can turn off to Helena."

"This car is hot now. They'd spot

it anywhere in the whole state."

"What shall we do?"

"We passed a bus headed toward Butte five minutes ago. I'll drop you. Take the bus—get to Butte and head south for Salt Lake. I'll meet you there." He named a hotel. "Register as Mrs. George Brown."

"I won't leave you, Sam. It's no go. We're together."

"We have to split now. I'll shake the guy and get rid of the car."

"But you can't—"

"The bus stops at these gas stations if you flag it. Ready?"

"I don't want to—"

"It'll be okay."

He stepped hard on the gas. Tires screamed as they took curves in the narrow, wooded canyon. The car behind them dropped behind.

A gas station loomed ahead after a fast curve. Sam braked to a stop.

"Salt Lake," he said.

She kissed him quickly and was out of the car. He was gathering speed on a straightaway when the other car broke around the curve. Sally disappeared into the rest room marked "Women" with her traveling bag. The second driver didn't glance at the station.

Sam watched for a road leading off the highway. He slid a hand under his coat and brought out a gun from its holster. He didn't like what was he was going to do, but he couldn't see another out.

He spotted a side road and braked. Then he had made the quick turn and jolted over a graveled road that led among trees into the hills. The

other car was not far behind him. Sam stopped, grasped the gun and waited.

The second car stopped. After a few moments the driver got out, holding a gun. Carefully he started forward, swinging wide to keep Sam within his view, the gun held low.

Sam waited. When the cop was within a few yards Sam said, "Is this the road to Helena?"

The cop said, "You're Sam Desh. Put your hands up and get out of the car."

Sam turned. "What's the idea? I'm a salesman trying to find his way to Helena. Someone told me to turn off the highway and—"

"Let's stop playing games. Put your hands up."

Sam rested the gun in his lap and slowly lifted his hands.

"Where's the woman?" the cop said.

"I picked her up in Missoula. She wanted a ride to that service station back there. She got out."

The cop started to walk forward.

"Who'd you say I am?" Sam asked.

"Desh. You're wanted for bank robbery."

Sam laughed. "That's a hot one! Look, mister, I've identification. I sell mining machinery. You've got the wrong guy."

The cop frowned and hesitated.

"Let me get my wallet and I'll hand it to you," Sam said.

After a few seconds the cop nodded and stepped forward. "Easy," he said.

"Sure. With that cannon in my

face!" Sam grinned and slowly reached into an inside coat pocket for the wallet. He held it out and as the cop reached for it, he let go. The wallet fell. Instinctively the cop grabbed down for it.

Sam had gambled for that split second. The timing had to be perfect. When the cop straightened he faced Sam's gun.

A thin, white line edged around the cop's mouth. He was a middle-aged man who looked as if he were a little overweight. Fear was in his eyes.

Sam said, "Drop your gun."

The thud seemed almost loud. The cop involuntarily stepped back and uncertainly held his hands out, the wallet still grasped in his left.

"Did you get an alarm out on me?" Sam said.

The cop wet his lips. "You haven't a chance, Desh. You better let me take you in. They're closing in on you."

"We'll use your car. They'll be looking for mine and a man and a woman. Not two men in your car. We're going to Salt Lake."

The cop wet his lips again.

Sam said, "We'll go back to Missoula and south to Boise and Salt Lake."

IT WAS NEAR noon the following day and the sun beat down upon the Snake River valley south of Boise. The car was parked on the rutted semblance of a road that led into desert foothills.

Both men were red-eyed from lack

of sleep. The cop sat uncomfortably with his hands locked by his own handcuffs under one updrawn knee. He'd been that way for hours—during the long, fast drive through the Salmon River country, through Boise and now into the hot desert country.

Sam lit a cigarette for him and stuck it between his lips. His arms ached from hours at the wheel. He was hungry and thirsty. He had made a decision and he didn't like it. He'd never been a killer.

"Family man?" he asked abruptly.

The cop nodded. "Wife and two kids. The boy's thirteen. The girl's five." Fear was in his eyes again.

"You know what I've got to do," Sam said.

Additional perspiration broke out on the cop's forehead. "Just let me out," he said. "I'll keep my mouth shut. I'll forget I ever saw you."

"The minute you showed up, they'd have it figured. Anyhow, you're a cop. You'd have them on me in an hour."

The cop shook his head futilely. He turned to spit the cigarette through the open window.

"I don't care for myself," he said huskily. "It's the wife and kids. Who's going to look after them?"

Sam didn't answer. He didn't want to think about it. He glanced at his watch. It was almost noon and there should be a newscast. He could check the search. He leaned forward and turned on the car radio.

In the sagebrush, grasshoppers sounded like angry rattlesnakes. Heat

rolled over the land and into the car. The smell of overheated metal was in the air. The men were silent as the radio warmed. An announcer handled a station break and the newscast came on.

It was the third story. "Search for Sam Desh, fugitive bank robber, and Carl Lonninger, a Missoula policeman believed to be held captive by the desperado, has centered near Kalispell, Montana. An unidentified woman, reported to be with Desh when Lonninger spread the alarm from Missoula before setting out in pursuit of them, is believed to be with the two men. . . ."

Sam glanced at the cop and smiled thinly. "They're way off," he said.

"Listen, just let me out and—"

"I can't take chances."

"My little girl is sick. She has to have an operation. I'll never—"

"Shut up!"

Sam swore under his breath. Why did the guy have to make it tougher than it was?

The radio voice was on another story and Sam listened.

". . . Portland. A young housewife and mother, Joan Holloway, today was indicted for the drug-slaying of her husband, Charles, a suspected dope peddler. After what neighbors report as a series of quarrels two weeks ago, Mrs. Holloway took her small son and visited her parents in Idaho. A few days after her departure, Holloway was arrested with a woman, Maisie Smithers, by narcotic agents who had trailed the couple to the Holloway apartment.

Holloway was released immediately, but the woman was held for further investigation. The following day Holloway was found dead in the apartment from an overdose of drugs. Police technicians found a large quantity of drugs in a sugar bowl on the Holloway table, and traces in the coffee cup Holloway had used.

"Mrs. Holloway denies the charge that she found drugs in the apartment and, after a quarrel with her husband, deposited a quantity of the drugs in the sugar bowl before leaving for her parents' home. A spokesman for the district attorney's office stated that the evidence is conclusive that she planned the murder.

"In Denver . . ."

Sam turned off the radio. The cop watched him.

She hasn't a chance, Sam thought. That Smithers woman didn't get a chance to tell Chuck—and she'll never admit she dumped the stuff in the bowl. She'd be asking for a rap in the big house.

"Desh . . ."

"Shut up." Sam didn't want to think about the cop now. He was thinking about Joanie, who looked like a high school kid and had a baby. What happened to the baby? What a deal for a kid to face the rest of his life! His mother convicted for the murder of his father.

"And I'm the one guy who can clear her!" he muttered.

He angrily turned to the cop. "You heard that? About that Holloway kid? Accused of murdering

her husband? I saw that other dame pour the junk into that sugar bowl. I was in the next apartment."

"Then you ought to—"

"Yeah? I ought to go back and tell 'em? How? Walk in and say I'm Sam Desh? That I want to tell them something? Where does that put me? Right behind bars!"

"She'll die in a gas chamber if you don't."

"What's it to me?"

Suddenly the fright was gone from the cop's eyes. "Listen, you rat. You're planning to get rid of me. So what do I lose by talking? I'm going to tell you what a rat you are. A tinhorn punk. You've no guts—you're yellow. A brave guy with a gun—but you haven't the guts to save a girl's life. Where do you think you'll get off? You think you'll ever have any peace? Well, there'll be me—and when you read about the girl dying in the gas chamber, there'll be her. And remember her kid, and my kids. I hope whoever finally gets you makes you die the hard way—a long time dying and a hard death!"

SAM STRUCK HIM across the mouth. The cop shook his head and blood trickled down his chin.

"Sure! I'm handcuffed! You can slug me. You'll kill me in a few minutes. But I wouldn't trade my place for yours right now for life itself! It's going to catch up with you. You've got something to look forward to every hour from now on."

In Salt Lake, Sally waited for him. They'd bought the farm in Montana, but they couldn't go back there. They couldn't go anywhere. That farm stuff . . . a dream.

A kid who looked like a high school girl. A baby who crawled over a blanket.

Suddenly Sam felt alone. It had been a long road and the ending was as bleak as this dried, forlorn spot in the desert. "A cross to bear," his mother had said.

There wasn't any road ahead and he was tired. He smiled bitterly.

"Yeah, that's a cross to bear," he said.

The cop said, "A big one."

"Letting a kid die so I can spend hot dough. Borrowing time from a kid and her baby to spend dough that isn't mine."

Sam reached into a pocket. He brought out a key and quietly unlocked the handcuffs and dropped his gun on the seat between them.

"Listen, Lonninger, you've got to see I get a chance to clear that kid. She didn't kill her husband."

"You'll get the chance."

The cop picked up the gun and put it in a side pocket. He massaged the handcuff marks on his wrists.

"Look, Desh—I'll take some of it back. About no guts, about your being yellow."

"Stow it. I'm a sucker—a sucker for a punk kid and her mewling brat. Just a sucker. That's me."

He glared at Lonninger.

"Well?" he demanded. "What are we waiting for? Let's go!"

Lonninger nodded quietly. "Let's go," he said. "You drive." ♦ ♦ ♦

LOVE THAT CORPSE!

- AFTER DEATH HAS been pronounced and the departed has been buried, what are the legal aspects should the supposed dead one be dug up again and then revived? Suppose the person brought back from the grave were a beautiful young lady. Suppose she had been married to a rich scoundrel. Suppose she was in love with a poor young man. What then?

There is no need to suppose further. Stranger than fiction, it happened in Paris.

The girl was buried but dug up again by the young man. She recovered life and strength and they went to live in England, where ten years flew by before their return to Paris. While walking in a Parisian park one day they met the rich man, the girl's former husband. That gentleman, after recovering from his shock, claimed the girl as his wife. The young man claimed her on the grounds that he had recovered her from the grave. The courts were called in, but before the case was tried the young couple fled back to England where they were immune to a possible strictly literal interpretation of the French law.

Up Maine way, they have a reputation for not saying much, for being satisfied with a "Yep" or a "Nope" or a "Mebbe." And the outsider who tries to read anything from their faces and flinty eyes will turn away baffled. But that still waters run deep and murky, and that violence is not restricted to city folk, Hugh B. Cave shows below, to the tune of twenty-four stary-eyed corpses.

Seven Dirty Dollars

By HUGH B. CAVE

THERE ARE TWO ways this story could be told. I could yarn it from my side, exaggerating a bit here and there to make myself out a smart lad with an eye for clues and a load of intuition, or I could go into a trance and tell it from his side, which would get me into hot water right off the bat because I'm no psychologist.

The best I can do under the circumstances, therefore, is to muddle along in second speed and stick to the facts. Which at first may be about as inspiring as a stroll through a morgue.

It began in a town about eighty miles north of Portland, Maine, where I'd stopped after driving solo

from New York. I was set to stay overnight, I scribbled my John Hancock in the register, and the clerk said, "I believe there's a telegram here for you, Mr. Dickson."

I could feel the pep and vinegar oozing out of me, already. I took the envelope and scowled at it. It would contain bad news. Telegrams to an insurance dick on vacation always contain bad news. There should be a law forbidding insurance dicks to tell the home office where they're going or at what hotels they intend to stop when they leave in search for rest and quiet.

The bellhop was about to pick up my Gladstone and lug it upstairs. I stopped him with, "Hold it, kid. I

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may not be staying with you after all."

The wire read:

INVESTIGATE BUS CRASH TOWN
OF WEST HILTON BEFORE CON-
TINUING YOUR VACATION STOP
MISS ANNE CARNEY ONE OF VIC-
TIMS INSURED THIS COMPANY
TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS STOP
WIRE COMPLETE DETAILS

WINKLER

"Did you say something, Mr. Dickson?" asked the clerk politely.

"I said *damn* and I say it again. Damn! I've got a right to say damn! This is the fourth time in four months I've been rooked out of a vacation."

The clerk murmured something about being very sorry and I hiked across the hotel lobby and slumped into a chair and stared at the telegram, my mind half made up to ignore it. They couldn't do this to Bill Dickson, not four times in a row. Damn it all, the trout season would be over in another week, and if I once poked my nose into this mess it would be the end of me. They'd drag me back to New York and tell me to go vacationing in January.

I crumpled the telegram and shoved it into my pocket, stood up and hiked back to the desk.

"Where's West Hilton?"

"West Hilton?" the clerk said. "About forty miles from here, Mr. Dickson. That's where that terrible accid—"

"I know. Well, maybe I'll see you next year."

"You're not staying, Mr. Dickson?"

"Mr. Jeremiah Winkler," I said, "says I'm not. He says I'm going to West Hilton. Unfortunately he's the guy who pays my salary."

That was how I got into it.

THE BUS, PACKED tight with a holiday crowd returning from the state fair at Newboro, had run into a wicked downpour between Hilton Corners and West Hilton. If you've never been up that way, just close your eyes and imagine what a town named West Hilton ought to look like, and you'll be right. A mill, a handful of stores, a few scattered houses. A town where you know your neighbors and know how old their kids are. Movies twice a week in the town, and a dance every Saturday night. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* once a year without horseplay. In short, the kind of town you'd like to live in, only if you weren't born there you'd never fit.

A brawny, capable lad named Walter Burns was driving the bus, and it growled its way along through the rain and the darkness, fighting the storm, while its passengers sang songs and refused to be frightened. After all, a cloudburst was nothing to worry about.

And everything would have been all right except for the bridge.

The bridge is a wooden span over the South Branch River, and the river at that point is deep and fast. Walter Burns slowed down when the headlights picked it out. He slowed

to maybe fifteen miles an hour, because visibility was bad and the metal treads on the bridge were apt to be slippery.

Then something happened.

There was an explosion—a sort of double explosion, according to my informant—and a front tire blew, just as the big bus rolled onto the bridge-treads. The bus pitched and swung sideways. Burns fought the wheel but wasn't strong enough. Passengers screamed.

It's a narrow bridge and an old one. The bus smashed into the railing, went through it and over. The sullen waters of the South Branch were forty feet below.

"And that's about all I know, Mr. Dickson," said the red-haired kid who was telling me about it. "Me, I was sitting way in the back with Nolly Burgess and Mary Sunderland, and I'm not sure what happened. I think Nolly busted the window and I guess that's how I got out, but I don't really remember. They picked me up way down the river." He shook his twelve-year-old head solemnly. "I guess," he added, "I was lucky."

I told him I guessed he was. Out of twenty-four passengers, this kid, Jimmy Carver, was the only survivor, the only one who could give even a hint as to the cause of the tragedy. He'd been washed ashore half a mile below the bridge, half drowned and unconscious. Eleven others had been pulled out of the river, too, but not alive. The rest were still in the bus, probably, and when I talked to Jim-

my Carver the bus was still in the river.

I went down there the following day and watched them pull it out. I'd already done my duty by the company. I'd been over to the home of Miss Anne Carney and had a talk with her mother, and everything at that end was straightened out. But I wanted a look at that bus. I couldn't get out of my head what young Jimmy Carver had told me about the blowout of that tire.

"Sort of a double explosion."

Far as I know, bursting tires make only one boom.

It wasn't a pretty sight when the bus came up. I didn't crowd close because, from where I was standing in the back row of a small army of spectators, I could see the tangle of bodies inside, and I could see some of the faces. Until the bodies were removed, I stayed right where I was.

When I did go over, a couple of state police and the local chief of police were inspecting the tires. Three of them were flat—crushed, I suppose, when the heavy bus ripped through the bridge railing, or when it hit bottom. The left front, though, was the one that told the story. And I don't mean the tire; I mean the rim.

You couldn't tell by the tire alone that it wasn't just a routine blowout. Stick a needle in a balloon and you can't tell, afterward, what made the balloon burst. And I suppose that if my head hadn't been full of Jimmy Carver's statement about the double explosion, I might have be-

lieved, as the cops seemed to, that the dented rim was nothing to get excited about. A sharp stone could have dented it.

A sharp stone hadn't, though. I'd fooled around with firearms too long to make any such mistake. That depression was made by a bullet.

I looked it over, all by myself, and then called over the cops. "Did any of you fellows have a talk with Jimmy Carver?"

One of them said, "Who're you?"

I told him. He looked me over and scowled. "What do you mean, did we have a talk with Jimmy Carver?"

I told him what I meant. He looked at the rim, and then at me. "You know," he said, "you could be right." Then, after we'd all talked it over, he told me, "Keep quiet about this, Dickson, will you?"

"Sure."

"If the townspeople got wind of it, there'd be the devil to pay."

"There sure would," I agreed.

The wrecking crew took the bus away and the crowd dispersed. The cops weren't paying any more attention to me. I walked up the road a little way, to get perspective, and looked things over.

THE ROAD WAS real narrow at that point. It swung around a bend, dipped, then curled onto the bridge. To the left—and the shot must have come from the left, because it was the left front tire that had taken the bullet—a tangle of brush rose sharply from the road shoulder and crawled up a rock cliffside.

With no one watching me, I clambered to the top of the cairn and looked down.

You couldn't miss. If you were any kind of shot you could lie there, well hidden by rocks and brush, and draw a bead on the bus as it came around the bend. You couldn't miss, even if it were traveling thirty miles an hour. At fifteen it was like knocking down tin ducks at a three-for-a-dimery. Even in the dark, in the rain, you could judge the location of the tires by the position of the headlights.

I studied the ground at my feet, hoping to find footprints, but it wasn't that kind of ground. It was hard, gravelly. I stooped and picked up something brown and twisted—the butt of a homemade cigarette, lying there in a little pocket of rock. And another one. And a third. And an empty tobacco sack.

I looked the cigarettes over and there was something queer about them. Clumsy, that was it. Rolled too tight and twisted all to hell. Being a lad who rolls his own when on a hunting or fishing trip, I noticed the crudeness and made a mental note of it. And carefully folded the butts into a handkerchief. I might need them later.

There was a path leading off the knoll and I followed it, still hoping to find a soft stretch and some footprints. There could have been footprints, even with all the rain, because back from the cairn of rocks a little way the path ran into thick woods and the tall trees would have

cut the force of the rain to almost nothing. But the ground stayed hard.

The path—in spots you could hardly call it that, and I kept wondering what it was used for—curved for a few hundred yards through the woods and then broke out onto a sandy road. A short cut, evidently, from the sandy road to the main road. And there could have been footprints in the sand, too, but there the rain had washed everything clean.

I went up the road a quarter-mile, past two or three houses, and then back again. In the other direction it dead-ended in a clearing overlooking the river. Stymied, I gave up and went into the village, to hand over those cigarette butts to the cops.

Not many people roll their own these days. The cigarettes might mean something.

They did. Not to the state police, because those lads were not locals and could not be expected to know the idiosyncrasies of West Hilton's people. But the chief, a wise and grizzled cop named Harson, who owned and ran the general store on the side, laid the three butts out on a table, scowled at them, hit the spittoon in the corner neatly with a stream of tobacco juice, and said, "Now we're gettin' somewheres."

He looked at me shrewdly. "Where'd you say you found these?"

I told them.

"H'm," he said. "Well, I can name three or four fellers in this

town who make their own coffin nails. Old Henry Nichols does, and so does his son Joe. And so does Pete Wheeler. And so"—he scowled at the butts again—"do I, but I don't roll 'em that bad."

He wasn't the sort of man you'd fire a lot of foolish questions at. The state cops and I just stood there, waiting for him to finish, if he wasn't finished already.

He wasn't.

"Never did like old Henry Nichols," he said, letting go another stream of tobacco juice, "and never had much use for his son. They live on that back road you was askin' about." He looked at me. "Couldn't have been them, though, because Mrs. Nichols and the two girls was in the bus. As for Pete Wheeler, he's plain no good. And there's been bad feelin' between him and Walter Burns for some time." He added, for my benefit I suppose, "Burns was the driver."

One of the state police said, "Suppose we have a talk with this Wheeler."

"A good idea," Harson agreed, nodding. "I'll go get him."

CHAPTER TWO

HE WAS GONE about half an hour, and when he came back he had Pete Wheeler in tow. He had someone else, too: a scared-looking youth he introduced as Paul Marsh.

Pete Wheeler was the sort of man who can't look at you. You've met the type. They stand in a slouch and

talk without moving their lips any more than is necessary, and while talking they look at the top of your head or a button on your vest, or they dig at their fingernails and look at that. Wheeler dug at his fingernails. He was a big, sloppy-looking lad with a face that could have been handsome except for the shiftiness of his eyes and the sullen twist of his mouth.

"Just what were you and Burns sore about, Wheeler?" the chief asked him.

"Nothin'."

"Nothin', hey? Well, it must've been a mighty sizable nothin'. Only night before last, you and Burns pretty near came to blows."

Wheeler shuffled his feet uneasily and said in that sullen voice of his, "Who says so?"

The chief looked at Paul Marsh. "You seen 'em, didn't you, Paul?"

"I—yes, I seen 'em."

"Suppose you tell us what happened."

"Well," Marsh said reluctantly, "we was playin' pool in the room up over Gilliam's. That is, me and Walt was playin', and Wheeler came in. He stood around watchin' us for a long time and he kept gettin' in Walt's way, and every time Walt would miss a shot, Wheeler would sort of sneer at him. So finally Walt asked him would he please leave us alone because he couldn't shoot pool with him watchin' us like that." The kid looked at Wheeler and took a backward step, as though afraid Wheeler would go for him.

"Well," he continued, "Wheeler got sore and said he guessed there was no law against him standin' there watchin' us, and did Burns want to make somethin' of it. He got real nasty and we tried to ignore him and go right on playin', but you just couldn't concentrate with him standin' there, gettin' in the way all the time. So finally Walt put down his cue and went for Mr. Gilliam, and Mr. Gilliam ordered Wheeler to clear out."

"You anything to say to that, Wheeler?" the chief asked.

"No."

"Admit it, do you?"

"What if I do?"

"All right," the chief said, turning to Paul Marsh. "What else happened?"

"Well, nothin'—except that Wheeler got real sore and said he'd get even. All the time he was walkin' out, he kept talkin' under his breath and sayin' how he'd get even."

The chief nodded and hung a scowl on his face and looked at Wheeler again. "Where were you when that bus went over the bridge, Wheeler?" he said.

"How do I know when it went over?" Wheeler challenged sullenly.

"You know, right enough. Around seven o'clock. Where were you?"

"I was home."

"Home, were you? Can you prove that?"

"Can you prove I was anywheres else?" Wheeler snarled.

"Well, now," the chief said quietly, "if you're fixin' to get rough,

we'll all get rough. You won't like that, Wheeler. There's a bunch of us here and we can be a whole lot rougher than you. So suppose you be civil and answer my questions."

Wheeler stood there and glared at us. At each of us in turn. He was a hard nut to crack, that lad. He was scared—you could see he was scared—but he was determined not to show it. Yet he had to step down, or things would go hard with him.

He looked at the floor and shuffled his feet and finally raised his head to look at the chief again. "I was home," he muttered. "I can't prove it, because my ma was over to the Mitchells', doin' their washin'. But I was home. You'll just have to take my word for it."

Chief Harson surprised me then. He nodded and said without animosity, "Well, Wheeler, all right. We'll take your word for it. Run along and forget it." He scowled then and said quickly, "Wait a minute. Just let me tell you one thing. If you get rough with Paul on account of what happened here, it will go hard with you. Understand that?"

Wheeler nodded, glaring.

"All right," Harson said. "Both of you clear out."

THEY WENT, AND he sat down in a rickety old chair, facing us. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "Maybe I'm wrong in lettin' him go, but it seemed like the wisest thing. He could have done it, of course. He had a reason, and he's a good shot with a rifle. But I've known Pete

Wheeler ever since he was so high, and it wouldn't do no good to keep him locked up. He'd never admit he done it. We'd still have to prove it."

We sat there and talked about it. To me, this kind of crime investigation was a novelty; being a city insurance dick I was used to the less direct, more subtle methods of big-city sleuthing. Yet when you come right down to it, what's the difference? When a crime occurs in the city, the police look the situation over, narrow their attention down to a few hot suspects—if any—and then either round those suspects up for questioning or keep an eye on them while waiting for a "break." Here we had a similar lineup of suspects, at least one apparent motive, and the wisdom of a grizzled old police chief for guidance.

We talked it over. We talked about Wheeler and Henry Nichols and Henry's son Joe. Old Henry Nichols, it seemed, was quite a character in West Hilton. Going on eighty, he'd worked for years in a granite quarry, had a notorious temper, and drank like a fish. He and his family lived in an old frame house on that road I'd explored. That is, he and his family *had* lived there. Now, with the bodies of his wife and two daughters awaiting burial, he and his son Joe were the only ones left. Son Joe, a quiet boy about nineteen years old, worked in the quarry.

"I think," Harson said, "we can count Henry and his son out of it, unless, of course, the shootin' was an accident. It ain't likely a man would

wreck a bus with his wife and two girls aboard; and as for Joe, I can't picture him doin' a thing like that, either. Joe ain't mean, he's just sort of slow and dumb; sort of plods along like a sick dog."

"Still," one of the state troopers said, "we could have a talk with them."

"Yes, I guess we could. They ought to be home right now, I reckon. Joe won't be workin' so soon after what happened, and maybe for once the old man will be home sober, 'stead of bein' off somewheres gettin' roary-eyed."

I didn't go with them. For one thing, I had to make out a report to the home office, and for another, I figured I wasn't needed and perhaps wasn't wanted. I went over to the house on Main Street where I'd taken a room, and for an hour or so worked on my report. I mailed it, and then, not knowing what to do with myself, I strolled up the street and went into a store for cigarettes.

The name of the store was Gilliam's, but I was inside, lighting a cigarette, before the name meant anything to me. Even then it wouldn't have, if I hadn't heard the click-clack of pool balls upstairs.

I went up, more out of curiosity than anything else, and there, in a musty, bare-walled room, three men were playing cards and a fourth was lazily practising shots on a pool table.

He was Pete Wheeler.

I sat and watched him. He was good, and I couldn't help thinking

if he had an eye like that with a cue he must be a damned fine shot with a rifle. He looked at me once, but after that paid me no attention. He was smoking a home-made cigarette.

I waited for him to throw it down, and hoped he wouldn't step on it, but he did. After a while, though, he propped the cue against the table and rolled himself another.

I walked over to him.

"Wheeler," I said, "it may be none of my business, but I don't like the way those cops laid into you. I think you ought to do something about it."

It floored him. He took the butt out of his mouth and gaped at me and said, "Huh?"

"I was there after you left," I said, "and I heard what they're planning to do to you."

The smoke from his cigarette curled up into my face and I wrinkled my nose.

"Huh?" Wheeler said.

I stepped back, coughing. "For the love of Mike, throw that thing away and smoke a decent cigarette," I said, and offered him one.

He took it. He lit it from his own and flicked the home-made fag to the floor. He'd have stepped on it, but I dropped the pack and got in his way. Then I took his arm and steered him to the door, where in my most mysterious voice I said, "Wheeler, you take my advise and clear out of here. Go home. Stay home. Otherwise you're going to be in trouble up to your neck and you'll never know how it happened."

"What are you handin' me?" he

said sullenly. "What kind of trouble?"

"Never mind that. Beat it. I'll see you later." And I pushed him toward the stairs.

It was as easy as that. Either he had a guilty conscience or the look on my face scared him. Rid of him, I walked back to the pool table and picked up that cigarette. It was still glowing. I pinched it out, sniffed it, put it in my pocket. The three men who were playing cards sent some queer glances after me as I went out.

THERE WAS A funeral the next day, and I wouldn't talk about it except that it's an important part of what happened there in West Hilton. I never did like funerals, and this one was hell on the nerves. They'd decided, those good people, to bury their dead collectively. Every living soul in West Hilton was there, including old Henry Nichols, who for once in his life was sober.

I hung around outside the church as long as I decently could, and then I slipped in quietly and took a back seat. I figured if I didn't look too hard or listen too hard, it wouldn't get me—but it did. Every face I looked at was gaunt, haggard. Everywhere I turned, someone was sobbing.

More than a score of persons had died in that bus crash, and nearly everyone in the church was brother, aunt, cousin, or somehow related to at least one of the victims.

I'd taken a seat beside Chief of Police Harson and he'd pointed out

to me old Henry and Joe Nichols. They were sitting a couple of rows in front of us, and I tried hard to concentrate on them, if only to get my mind off what was happening all around me.

Joe Nichols was a big fellow, with a mop of untrimmed black hair that curled around his ears. He didn't look too bright. Dressed in what was apparently his best Sunday suit, he sat there like a restless youngster, squirming every now and then, glancing this way and that, not knowing what to do with his hands.

They were big, rough hands. I got a good look at them when he stood up, holding a hymn book. His hands were bigger than the book.

The old man, beside him, looked sick. He wasn't drunk, as I'd expected, but he looked as though he'd been drunk for a long, long time and would sell his soul for a drink right now. He had the shakes—not the way you or I might get the shakes, but bad. Real bad. All over him. So that when he stood up, his whole body shivered, and when he sat down, his head kept twitching on his thick stump of leathery neck.

Pete Wheeler was there, too, with a frail woman who, Harson told me, was his mother. And up front, sitting sort of all alone, was the kid who'd told us about the scrap between Wheeler and the bus driver. Young Paul Marsh.

When it was over and we were outside in the sunlight, I drew a deep breath and moved off to the edge of the crowd. Most of them were head-

ing now for the cemetery, but I'd had enough. I wanted to go off somewhere by myself, alone, and just sit down where it would be quiet, with no people sobbing.

But it wasn't written that way.

Harson came up beside me and gripped my arm. "Take a look at Pete Wheeler," he said under his breath. "If you was to ask me, I'd say he was actin' mighty peculiar."

I followed the jerk of his head and saw Wheeler at the edge of the crowd, and if ever a man's actions were furtive, his were. He kept edging farther away from us, as though trying his best to get away, out of sight, without attracting attention.

"You suppose we ought to follow him?" Harson said.

It was a good idea and I would have said so, but right then something else happened. Old Henry Nichols and his son Joe brushed by us, and Henry threw down a cigarette he was smoking. It fell at my feet, and being cigarette-conscious just then, I looked down. So did Harson.

Then we looked at each other.

Harson stooped, picked up the cigarette. It was home-made. Crudely home-made. He held it in a cupped hand and stared at it.

"Come with me, Dickson," he said in a low, strained voice.

CHAPTER THREE

I SUPPOSE IT WAS a brutal time to lay a trap for a man, when he was away from home, watching the

burial of his wife and two daughters. Harson had no choice, however, and so, ten minutes after finding that cigarette, he and I, with two other men, headed for Henry Nichols' house on that back road. The rest of the town had gone to the cemetery.

We went along in silence, none of us in a mood to do any talking. It was a clear, warm morning and the sandy road was a golden ribbon winding through the deep green of the woods, and birds, flashed through the trees, and once a rabbit popped out of the underbrush to look us over.

The house itself didn't surprise me much. I'd expected something pretty awful, and it was just that.

It was an old grey farmhouse, but the land around it had gone to seed and was overrun with weeds. The place hadn't seen paint in years, and part of the roof was gone, and most of the windows were crudely patched with slabs of board. You wouldn't see it unless you were looking for it. A solid wall of trees hid it from the road.

We followed a pair of wagon ruts into the yard, and stood there for a few minutes looking the place over. When Harson cupped his hands to his mouth and called, "Halloo there! Is anyone to home?" the echoes of his voice came back to us and were a long time dying to silence. I tell you, that broken-down house in that lonely, out-of-the-way setting was enough to give a man the creeps.

Apparently no one was at home.

"We'll go inside and wait," Harson said.

He led the way and we followed him. The door, I noticed, was open. When I tried to close it behind me it swung half shut and then stopped with a shudder. I looked down, scowling, and saw that someone had driven a spike into the floor for a doorstep.

We sat down. Harson rolled himself a cigarette, slowly put it between his lips and lit it, while I watched him. I would have asked him if he could do it with one hand, but my voice would have shattered that weird, depressing stillness, and probably McNiff and Kellerson, the other two men, would have yapped at me to shut up. I looked around.

We were in the kitchen, but apparently it was used for a sitting room and dining room as well. The table was covered with worn green linoleum; one of the chairs around it was a home-made affair with a section of tree trunk for a seat. There was one window, broken and patched with tarpaper, and there was an old kitchen range. The floor was bare and grimy.

And we waited.

McNiff said, "Why do you suppose he done it, Harson? You suppose he was just drunk?"

Harson, rolling his third cigarette, said, "I don't know," and got up and went to the door. He stood there a while, looking out, then returned to the rocking chair from which he'd risen. The chair creaked when he lowered himself into it, and the

sound was like a file on my backbone.

The silence came back. We sat there, the four of us. After a long while, we heard voices.

The surprise, if any, was more on Joe Nichols' face than on his father's when the two of them walked in. Joe stopped short, with his hand on the door, and gaped at us. The old man cleared his throat and said simply, "What do you fellers want?"

He was drunk. He had a pint in the pocket of his worn-out coat and his eyes were streaked with crimson.

"We want to talk to you," Harson said. "Take a seat, Henry. You, too, Joe."

"Talk to me about what?" Henry challenged.

"You'll see, Henry. Sit down."

The old man snorted, walked unsteadily to a chair and flopped into it. If any normal human being had been that drunk, his knees would have buckled and let him down with a crash, but Henry still knew what he was doing. He looked at us, scowling, and then said, "Go ahead. What's eatin' you?"

His son Joe, looking kind of idiotic in that Sunday-best suit of his, sat down and mutely stared at us. He looked uncomfortable. The sleeves of his jacket were tight and way too short, and his cuffless trouser legs were a good six inches above his shoe tops. He wore no socks, his shoes weren't mates, and his legs were black with hair.

Chief of Police Harson said quietly, "We're checkin' up on that acci-

dent, Henry. We'd like for you to tell us where you were at the time it happened."

"Why?"

"We're kind of curious, Henry."

"Well," Henry said, "I don't know where I was, and that's the honest truth. I was out somewheres, sleepin' off a drunk."

HARSON HEAVED A sigh and pushed himself to his feet. "Henry," he said wearily, "we didn't come way over here to be told lies. Suppose you be reasonable now and tell us the truth."

"I'm tellin' you the truth. Hell, you don't suppose I had anythin' to do with that accident, do you? You ain't crazy enough to think that!"

"We got evidence, Henry."

"Evidence? What kind of evidence?"

"Never mind that now."

"Well," Henry said defensively, looking uneasily at all of us, "I say you're crazy, the whole bunch of you. I wasn't nowhere near the bridge when the bus went over. I was sleepin' off a drunk, like I told you."

The chief of police looked searchingly at Henry's son and said, "Do you know where your pa was, Joe?"

Joe Nichols shook his head.

"Well," Harson said, "we got to take you with us, Henry."

"What for?" Henry snapped.

"For shootin' at that bus and causin' it to go over the bridge. We got evidence you did it."

The old man may have been

drunk, but he was not too drunk to realize the seriousness of that accusation. He stood up and took a backward step and then stood wide-legged, glaring at us. His hands were fists and the harsh wheeze of his breathing was like wind in marsh grass.

"I never done it!" he snarled. "I never wrecked that bus and I ain't goin' with you. I ain't leavin' this house!"

"There's four of us here, Henry," Harson said quietly.

"I ain't goin'!"

"You sit down and think it over."

"I tell you—"

"Sit down, Henry," Harson said.

Old Henry Nichols sat down. He didn't want to, but he did. His face, under its layers of grime, seemed pale and his bony hands twitched. He looked at us and looked helplessly at his son. I glanced at his son, too, and Joe was scared. Joe's eyes were big with fright.

"Now tell us about it, Henry," Harson said.

"There—there ain't nothin' to tell."

"Yes there is," Joe said. "He done it. He wrecked the bus. I heard him say he was goin' to do it."

Harson's chair creaked and for a moment there was no other sound anywhere. The old man looked at Joe and his mouth sagged. His eyes bulged and showed white around the blotches of red. He came up straight and stiff in his chair, gripping his knees. Joe stared back at him, defiantly.

"You're a liar!" Henry shrieked, shattering the silence. "I never said no such thing."

"Yes you did," Joe muttered. "You said you was goin' to wreck the bus."

"Joe—are you gone crazy?"

"I ain't crazy. I heard you say it."

The old man seemed dazed. He pushed the back of one bony hand across his mouth, and stared, and then, mechanically, thrust the hand into a pocket of his coat and fumbled out a cigarette. A home-made cigarette, already rolled. He wet his lips with his tongue and with trembling fingers lifted the cigarette to his mouth.

Harson said, looking at Joe, "You heard him say that, Joe?"

Joe nodded.

"He said he was goin' to wreck the bus? He said that, Joe?"

"That's what he said."

The silence came back. Old man Nichols hadn't lit his cigarette; he was just sucking it. He couldn't seem to shift his gaze from Joe's face, and his own eyes were rimmed with white. Joe, nervously sitting there, fumbled a little sack of tobacco and a packet of papers from his pocket and rolled himself a smoke. *His* hands were shaking, too.

"Tell us about it, Joe," Harson said.

"Huh?"

"Tell us about it."

Joe finished rolling his smoke. "Well," he said slowly, "we was sittin' here, me and him, and he was drunk. I said it was most time for

ma and the girls to be gettin' home from the fair, and Pa begun cussin' them out for spendin' money on stuff like that. He cussed 'em out good and plenty and got madder by the minute, and then he grabbed up his gun and said he was goin' to wreck that bus with them in it, to teach 'em a lesson. And he stormed out of here."

I let him finish. Then I got out of my chair and said, "Joe, you're a liar."

"I'm tellin' the truth," he said sullenly.

I said, "You're a liar. *You* wrecked that bus!"

Harson said impatiently, "Now wait a minute, Dickson. Hold on a minute."

I ignored him and snapped at Joe, "Why'd you do it?"

He stared at me. And once again the silence came over all of us, because there was murder in that stare of his. It was the stare of a trapped animal.

I WONDERED IF I was right. I wondered, feeling uneasy about it, if I'd overlooked some little thing or was making too much of what I'd seen. Of what, for that matter, I was still seeing—for Joe was still rolling that cigarette, mechanically, while he stared at me.

I looked at old man Nichols and said, "Who made that cigarette you're smoking, Mr. Nichols?"

"Huh?"

I repeated the question.

He took it out and looked at it.

"Why, Joe made it. He give me three or four this mornin', 'fore we went to the funeral."

"I thought so," I said triumphantly.

"What in the world are you gettin' it, Dickson?" Harson demanded, frowning.

"This," I said. "You're blaming Henry for the bus crash because he threw away that cigarette outside the church. You've been looking for a cigarette like that ever since I found those butts in that cairn of rocks. First you suspected Pete Wheeler, but I got a sample of Pete's cigarette-making and it didn't fit. Then by sheer luck the finger of evidence pointed to Henry Nichols here."

"And he's guilty," Harson said. "He's sure enough guilty."

"No. Because he didn't roll that cigarette. Joe did."

I stood up. I walked over to Joe and grabbed the cigarette out of his hand. Passing it to Harson I said, "Look at it. It's like the others. It has an odd twist because it was rolled left-handed. The truth was under our noses all the time but we couldn't see it."

He scowled at me. "When Joe began making this cigarette a moment ago," I said, "I suddenly woke up. He's left-handed. That's where the butt gets its peculiar twist. And he's big-handed, awkward. That's why his cigarettes are clumsy."

"Now wait a minute," Harson said thoughtfully. "This still doesn't prove..."

I thought I knew what he was going to say. The cigarettes pointed an accusing finger at Joe, their maker, but maybe Joe had rolled some of those cigarettes for his father, the morning of the bus crash, and maybe Henry was the man who dropped those butts in the cairn of rocks.

But I had an answer for that objection.

"Don't forget," I said, "I found the tobacco sack, too. That's pretty plain proof those left-handed butts were rolled right there on the knoll above the bridge."

"Yes," Harson said thoughtfully, "it is." He stood up. He had a pair of old-fashioned handcuffs in his pocket and he lifted them out. "Put out your hands, Joe," he said simply. "I guess you're it."

"No," Joe said, shaking his head wildly.

Harson glanced at McNiff and the other deputy. They stood up and closed in on Joe as he lurched to his feet.

He made a good fight of it. He was big and strong as an ox, but there were four of us and after wrestling him all over the room, upsetting chairs and crashing into the walls, we finally subdued him. I claim a measure of credit for that, since just before we did get him he grabbed up that home-made chair and would have brained McNiff with it—only I dove under it, crashed into his legs and upset him.

We got the handcuffs on him and then let him up, pushed him onto a

chair. Then he began sobbing. And I felt queer.

CHAPTER FOUR

As I SAID before, I don't pretend to understand Joe Nichols' mind. It wasn't a normal mind and I'm an insurance dick, not a psychologist. He sat there a while sobbing like a baby and mumbling incoherently under his breath, and then all at once, for no apparent reason, he looked straight at Harson and said simply, "All right, I done it. I admit I done it. I'll tell you why."

He told us why. He and the old man were alone that afternoon, and they got into an argument. The argument began when the old man said he was going out to get drunk, and Joe said he wasn't.

"I told him he didn't have no right to go off and get drunk all the time," Joe muttered, "while me and the two girls slaved to get money to buy food. This wasn't no new argument, you understand. We'd been over it plenty of times before."

So they argued, but the old man was adamant. He was going out to get drunk. To hell with the girls and to hell with Joe and to hell with their mother. And he went.

"So I sat here all alone," Joe mumbled, "thinkin' about it, and I decided we'd be better off without him comin' home at all. It was around two o'clock then and I knew he wouldn't be back till supper time. So I figured out what to do, and I done it."

Joe Nichols worked at the quarry, which was closed that day because it was a holiday. He went out and walked down through the woods, over the back road, to the quarry, and broke into the shed where the explosives were kept. He knew all about handling explosives. It was his job.

He carried some blasting compound—"dope" he called it—back to the house and lugged it down to the cellar. He removed a heavy upright post that supported the cellar stairs, and cut a section out of it near the floor. Then he replaced the post, but first putting the "dope" under it, in the slot formed by the removal of the section.

"I could've done it plenty of other ways," he explained, scowling at Harson and the rest of us, "but I didn't want no evidence around afterward to prove the house was blowed up by an explosion. People would say right away I done it, because of my job. So I had to be mighty careful."

He was careful, all right. He rigged a heavy beam on a length of wire and counterbalanced it above the charge of "dope." He set it up so that a slam of the front door would drop a piece of iron pipe across the supporting wire, knock loose the counterbalance, and let the beam drop with a thud.

Then he went upstairs and waited, figuring the old man would be home at supper time and would be drunk and would slam the door.

"You mean to say," Harson de-

manded, "you *knew* he'd slam that door?"

"Three times in the last week," Joe Nichols snarled, "I had to take that door down and fix it, he slammed it so hard. I knew he'd slam it, all right. He'd be drunk and come in growlin' for somethin' to eat, and he'd raise the roof. Anyway, I fixed the door so's it only had to be pulled shut. It didn't have to be slammed hard. I wasn't takin' no chance."

"And then what happened?" Harson muttered, looking sideways at old Henry, who sat there in a sort of trance, gaping at his son.

"Well," Joe said, "I didn't want to be here when he did come home, so I went up the road a ways. I took my rifle along so's I could say I went out huntin' if anyone was to ask me. But I didn't do no huntin'. I climbed up on Fisher's Ridge and sat down and watched the house. But he didn't come."

His voice droned off and he stared glumly at the handcuffs on his thick wrists. "He didn't come and I—I begun to get worried," he said. "I begun to think maybe Ma and the girls would get home first. The longer I waited, the more worried I got, and then I heard the bus comin'."

We knew the rest of it. No one interrupted him.

"I didn't know *what* to do then," he mumbled. "There wasn't time to go back to the house and fix it so's it wouldn't blow up. I sort of went crazy, watchin' the lights on the bus comin' down the valley. Then I figured I could stop the bus by shoot-

in' a tire, so I ran down the road and through the woods to that bunch of rocks near the bridge, and . . ."

"And what, Joe?" Harson whispered.

Joe shrugged his shoulders. "I guess you know what I done. Only I didn't mean to *wreck* the bus, I swear I didn't. All I wanted was to stop it so's I'd have time to get back to the house 'fore Ma and the girls got there."

We sat there in a kind of weird, heavy silence. I, for one, believed Joe's story, and I could tell by the faces of Harson and the others that they did, too.

After a while, Harson said, "When you saw the bus go over the bridge, Joe, what'd you do then?"

"I come back here. I was scared."

"When did your pa get home?"

"Not till the next mornin'. He was out drunk all night."

"And in the meantime you'd removed the charge of dope, huh?"

"Well," Joe said, "no. I was too shaky to be foolin' around with that stuff. I just hammered a spike into the floor, to keep the door from closin'. You can see it here."

HE GOT OUT of his chair and walked over to the door. I didn't suspect what he was up to. He was handcuffed and I thought he was helpless.

He looked down at the spike and touched it with his foot and said, "Here it is, right here." And then, without warning, he kicked the spike clear out of the wood and sent it

clanking across the floor, and grabbed the door with his manacled hands.

"And you ain't takin' me to no jail!" he yelled. "Don't think you are!"

We gaped at him. We sat there like an assortment of wooden dummies and stared at him in absolute amazement. I didn't at first feel any fear; I don't suppose any of us did. It was just astonishment. The fear came later, when Joe Nichols twisted his mouth into a crazy grin of triumph and leered at us.

"You ain't takin' me to no jail," he said. "I'm gonna blow the house up."

He was oddly calm about it, as though the thought hadn't occurred to him that in blowing the house up he would blow himself up with it. Or else he realized what would happen to him, but didn't care. As I've already said twice, I'm just an insurance dick. I wouldn't know about those things.

But I did realize what would happen to *me* if he yanked that door shut, and something inside me came up into my throat and choked me.

Chief of Police Harson got out of his chair very slowly and said in a soothing voice, "Now wait, Joe, wait."

"Oh, no you don't!" Joe snapped. "You stay right where you're at!"

Harson stopped his advance and stood still, breathing hard through his nose. The two deputies were unable to do more than gape. Both were pale, trembling.

I tried to think of something to

HAIR-TRIGGER MEN

THERE ARE, BY various estimates, anywhere up to 50,000 strong-muscled and, presumably, hair-trigger gents operating as sort of adult baby-sitters in these United States. They guard heiresses, movie stars, politicians and gangsters, for salaries ranging from a few bucks to a few thousand. Highest wages for bodyguards were commanded by Bernard Rosenkrants and Abraham Landau, who looked after the well-being of Dutch Schultz and got about two thousand a week apiece for the chore.

The job was cheap at the price—both were shot down when Dutch got his!

say. I tried to remember what you're supposed to say to madmen, to quiet them. But my brain was packed tight with horror. It wouldn't work for me. All I could do was watch those manacled hands.

Joe Nichols leered at us. Finally, with a scowl of impatience, he said petulantly, "Well, ain't you gonna say nothin', any of you?"

"I am, Joe," his father said.

"You?" Joe snorted.

"Me, Joe. I ain't scared of you. It won't do you no good to slam that door. I was downstairs this mornin', 'fore we left for the funeral. I seen what you rigged up down there and I fixed it so's it won't work. I took out the dope."

"You're lyin'!"

The old man shrugged his shoulders. He didn't get up out of his

chair. He just sat there, sucking placidly on his cigarette.

Joe stared at him. You could see by Joe's face that he didn't know whether to believe the old man or not. Finally he snarled again, "You're lyin'. You know you are!"

"No, I ain't," Henry said quietly. "When I found out what you'd done down here, I brought the dope upstairs and hid it. I'll show ye."

He did get out of his chair then—and Joe let him. If any of the rest of us had tried such a move, Joe most certainly would have let out a roar, but he didn't roar at the old man. He just stared. Maybe it was because Henry was his father. Maybe it was just the calm, matter-of-fact way Henry stood up and walked across the room to the stove. I don't know.

Joe stared, scowling, and Henry stooped to pull aside a long wooden box filled with kindling wood. Reaching behind it, he opened the door of a crude, home-made cupboard. "I ain't lyin', Joe," he said without turning his head to look at Joe. "It's right in here."

He reached into the cupboard and turned around. When he turned—and he turned quickly—he had a rifle in his hands. And he said grimly, "Get away from that door, Joe."

Joe was a wooden statue, gaping at him.

"Get away from it!" the old man said hoarsely.

JOE DIDN'T MOVE. His lips curled in a snarl that showed his teeth, but he stayed where he was. They

faced each other, father and son, for a good thirty seconds in absolute silence. All you could hear was the wheeze of the old man's breathing.

Then Henry said, "All right, Joe, I've gave you your chance," and squeezed the trigger.

It was a big gun. The blast of it was so deafening, I thought for a minute that Joe Nichols *had* slammed the door. Pots and pans rattled against the walls, and the chair under me jumped as though alive.

Joe Nichols let go the door and took a step forward and fell. Fell on his face and lay there. His legs twitched a while and then he was still. The old man put down the rifle and slowly paced forward.

"I gave him his chance," he mumbled.

No one else spoke. Harson knelt beside Joe for a minute and then straightened up, nodding. He broke the silence by saying, "*Did* you go down the cellar, Henry?"

"I ain't been down cellar in weeks."

"We'll take a look then," Harson declared.

We went down the cellar, all of us, and it was just as Joe Nichols had told us. The sawed-off upright was there, suspended on a counter-balance, and a slam of the front door would have knocked the balance loose and let the beam fall with a thud. Very carefully Harson removed the charge of "dope." Possessed with a morbid curiosity, we all examined it.

"Wait a minute," Henry said then.

I looked at him and he was scowling. Reaching out a veined, bony hand, he said, "Let me see that."

Harson, holding onto the cylinder of dope, shook his head. "I'm keepin' it, Henry. I'm takin' no chances."

"There ain't no chances to take," Henry said. "That cartridge is empty."

"What?"

"Joe made a mistake."

We stared at him, unwilling to believe him. He moved closer, peered at the cylinder in Harson's hand and said, "Yep, Joe made a mistake. You take the cap off of that, and you'll see."

In a dead silence, Harson gingerly unscrewed the cap. Inserting two fingers, he pulled out of the cylinder a little roll of dirty green paper. Bills. One-dollar bills. He counted them and there were seven.

Henry said, "It must have been dark down there in the quarry. It always is. And bein' nervous, he reached too far back on the shelf. This here cartridge is mine. It's where I been hidin' my money, so's

Ma and the girls couldn't get it away from me. My liquor money. Joe took it by mistake."

We gaped at him and I thought of Joe, lying dead upstairs, and of "Ma and the girls" in that bus. I thought of a lot of things until my thoughts were all jumbled together and my head felt somehow strangely empty.

It didn't make sense. More than a score of people were dead. Pete Wheeler, who'd aroused Harson's suspicions after the funeral, was probably in hiding somewhere, scared stiff by what I'd told him in the poolroom. Joe Nichols was dead by his father's hand.

I opened my mouth to say something, but Harson beat me to it. He put the seven one-dollar bills back in the cylinder and put the cylinder in his pocket and said, "I—I guess we can go home."

"Wait," Henry Nichols said. "That money is mine."

Harson stopped, turned to face him. In a low voice that was barely under control, Harson said, "You go to hell." ♦ ♦ ♦

THE TABLES TURN

- IF CONVICTS were shot, it would be a good thing for everyone concerned, according to J. Edward DePatrick who conducted a one-man campaign to gain election to the mayoralty of Montreal, Canada. According to him, the fact that bullets are cheap, and that maintaining a convict in prison is expensive, is enough to condemn the prisoner to death automatically.

DePatrick didn't get elected. He got sentenced to prison for two years for fraud instead. According to latest reports, he had not yet suggested that he be shot so as to save society the cost of maintaining him in prison.

"Vanity, vanity; all is vanity," cried the old Romans. Well, they should have known, because they tossed some gay little parties, those old world-conquerors, featuring such rollicking spectacles as Christians being fed to lions and gladiators fighting to the death. All, as we say, for kicks. In this story, however, Harry Whittington deals with a different kind of vanity, one more devious, subtle and deadly, even than that possessed by the Romans—a woman's vanity. God help the man who offends it; better to be fed to the lions!

Vain Lady

By HARRY WHITTINGTON

IT HAD BEEN easier even than she'd planned. Below her, at the foot of the wide stairs, Lloyd Deerman, the first man who'd ever loved her, lay dead. She had just killed him. Bernice stood staring down at him, noting the strange, awkward way he lay, with his broken neck twisted back on his shoulder. His unseeing eyes stared back up at her. But he wasn't seeing her any more now than he had when he was alive, for Lloyd Deerman had been blind, and Bernice had hated him almost as much for that as for anything else.

She heard the clock striking downstairs, and she shivered. Biting down

on her thin, straight lip, she started slowly down the steps, hearing the chimes strike and echo eleven times in the silent, darkened house.

At the telephone, she summoned Deerman's business partner, his doctor and his family. She listened with detached pride to the trembling timbre of her voice. A tall, thin girl, she ran her long-fingered hand through her brown hair, brushing it back from her sallow, high-cheeked face. Brown, stringy hair she hated, showing the crisp, burned ends of much but futile curling. As she talked, she turned her astigmatic blue eyes behind thick lenses, looking

across her shoulder at the body of her dead employer.

A big, athletic man with his blindness concealed behind dark glasses, he had adored her, and he had been completely dependent on her. She hated him because, loving her, he clearly demonstrated to her how unwanted she was in the world she longed for. All her life, before she'd known Lloyd, she'd been plain, unattractive Bernice Harper. Sometimes she'd wished herself dead to escape her hateful, lonely existence. She'd seethed, seeing lovely girls promoted over her, watching helplessly as pretty, dumb little things walked away with every man she ever wanted. When blind Lloyd Deerman had come to her office, she'd been assigned to work for him. She'd known why. Lloyd Deerman couldn't see her. She was withdrawn and cold toward him, but this attracted him, and he gave her lavish presents, invited her out, and when he left the company he took her along as his private secretary.

She'd been desperate, but life with Deerman was a mockery. She'd longed to escape it, but there was nowhere to go. Bernice knew she wanted only one thing, to be treated the way beautiful women are treated. She'd been completely despondent the night Lloyd Deerman had told her to get down some account books. She touched the wrong set. For a moment, the cover turned back, she stared. Later, returning, breathless, she counted it. Over twenty thousand dollars in cash. . . .

She hadn't been able to get that twenty thousand out of her mind. It was free, separate from his banking accounts. No one knew he had it hidden. A blind man, mistrusting even banks in the dark world in which he existed!

He had been willing to keep her listening to his miserly whining, attending his wants. Now—with his money she could buy the kind of life she'd always wanted. Beauty, charm, background—the adulation and attention she desired above everything else in the world.

She had helped him along the upper corridor. At the open stairwell, she'd cried out as though missing her step and she had thrust herself, falling against him. For a moment, he turned his unseeing face toward her, and then he'd sprawled outward, rolling and twisting to the very bottom step.

Now, she watched them as they entered his house. Partner, doctor, family. And when she told her story, no one doubted it. There was no mention of her in his will. Everyone knew he had loved the plain, unlovely girl and they all felt she should have been happy with him. She watched their faces as she told it. She'd been in the downstairs office. Deerman had called to her. But he hadn't waited. She'd cried a warning, but in horror watched him falling. . . .

Two days later, Bernice sat at the window in her own small, drab apartment. She had gotten away with it; it had been called clearly

accidental death. She watched the people on the street below her. Pressed her fingers against her aching forehead. She had not yet been able to get the sight of Lloyd, lying at the foot of the steps, neck twisted back, out of her mind. She wouldn't have minded that so much, she knew. She was willing to pay for what she wanted. But now she was afraid. It had been too easy.

She got up and dragged out the false-fronted account book from its hiding place. The green bills leered and winked up at her. Perhaps, she thought wildly, the money is counterfeit.

She stared at the open window with its shade barely stirring. She'd kill herself if this money weren't real. She'd wanted to kill herself before, and now the whispers stirred in her again.

She began to walk up and down the room, horribly drawn toward that window. She was afraid to try to spend the money. But she knew she had killed for it, for what she wanted, and she had to know. . . .

AT THE CITIZENS' BANK, she steadied her trembling fingers, casually thrust the bill through the window. Then her eyes met the green ones of the teller. He smiled, a deep white-toothed grin in a blond, handsome face. Handsome. As a Greek god. As a movie star. Like the fulfillment of her fondest dream. She knew what she wanted to buy with Lloyd Deerman's money.

She let her gaze fall to the plate

where his name was neatly printed: Mr. Carlos Brandon. Under his scrutiny, she felt her face grow hot to the roots of her stringy hair. Conscious of her drabness, she collected her money, thankfully aware there was no question about it. The money was good—and she could spend it, making herself lovely enough to attract Carlos Brandon. . . .

But now, six hectic weeks later, alone in their four-hundred-a-month apartment, she fixed her eighth highball and considered what she'd bought for her money. Not much. Bernice had begun to suspect the ugly, bitter truth when they were still on their honeymoon.

She and Carlos had been having their fourth breakfast in a restaurant. Bernice had spent a great deal of her money on herself and her beaming eyes were glamorous beneath expensive, featherweight glasses. Her hair had been trimmed to a halo about her face. The three-hundred-dollar original did for her figure what nature had thoughtlessly neglected.

Bernice had reached over to straighten Carlos' bright tie. Riding a passionate crest of happiness, she couldn't keep her hands off him.

"For God's sake," Carlos snapped. "Not in public. I swear, Bernice, you don't act like you're in love—you act starved!"

She'd stared at him. Red mouth lax. Starved. Of course she was. Months and years—a lifetime of starvation, of wanting to be loved, of wanting a man like Carlos. Look-

ing at him, the twist of his spoiled mouth, the sullen anger in his eyes, Bernice shivered. . . .

That same night, Bernice woke up screaming. Sullenly, Carlos snapped on the bedlamp and sat on the edge of her twin bed, eyeing her distastefully. "What is it?" he demanded, his voice sour as the inside of his mouth because he'd been drinking all night.

She stared, round-eyed at him, thankful for the light. Her heart was still pounding ruggedly beneath her sheer, expensive gown. She had been watching Lloyd Deerman falling, falling, his neck dangling crazily. "A dream," Bernice whimpered, trying to get into Carlos' arms. "An awful dream. I'm so frightened."

Carlos shrugged and stood up, lighting a cigarette.

"Forget it," he advised, "and go back to sleep. I know you got something on your mind, but don't try to keep me up all night with it."

She looked at him dazedly. How would he know? And then she sank back against her pillow, shaking her head. Carlos didn't know. He was just telling her he didn't give a damn about her woes, whatever they might be.

The next morning when she awoke, Carlos was already gone to breakfast. Bernice, passing the dining room downstairs, saw his handsome head bent wolfishly over his eggs and ham. She paused, staring. She'd never noticed before the hungry, greedy way Carlos ate. As though he could never get enough—as though

he coveted everything in the world, and more.

Bernice paused with her hand on the knob. Then she walked slowly past to the hotel bar. She was the first customer. She ordered three whiskey sours and lined them up before her. She shook her head, thinking she needed a clear, alcoholic mind now. . . .

Now, she paced up and down their bedroom, her eighth cocktail in her chilled fingers. These weeks had been a succession of bars for her. Carlos had quit his job at the bank. A job she found he'd not had very long. No matter what she found out about him, she wanted him and she'd bought a sleek new convertible, thinking maybe he might be grateful to her, maybe return some of her passionate devotion. Carlos casually assumed complete possession of the car and didn't even bother to say thanks.

It was after three in the morning. She had tried to sleep again tonight, but had been afraid of her dreams, if Carlos wasn't beside her. She had lain, twisting and turning, wanting to sleep, and afraid to.

In the grey, filmy darkness she could see her reflection in her full-length mirror. She caught her breath. The old, stringy-haired Bernice was staring, squinty-eyed, out at her! For all Carlos cared, it might as well be true. She wheeled away, running from the reflection.

And there before her lay Lloyd Deerman, his neck twisted crazily. She clapped her hand over her mouth

to seal back the scream twisting up through her tightened throat.

She heard the apartment door stealthily opening. Breathless, she waited in the shadows.

The breath sighed out of her when she saw that it was Carlos, and she started toward him. She heard his sharp intake of breath. His head jerked up and in the light spilling across his wide shoulder from the corridor, she caught a look of surprise and fear in his eyes.

They stared at each other. She started toward him again, a little uncertainly.

Carlos stepped away from her and snapped on the light. Wheeling, Bernice stared at the place where Lloyd's body had been. She almost laughed aloud. It was her own mink coat. Angry with Carlos, she'd carelessly hung it up, and it had fallen to the floor.

She turned on her heel, facing Carlos. "Where have you been?" she said.

He looked at her, composure regained. Straightened his tight, blond curls with the heel of his hand. "What difference does it make?" he inquired.

"I married you to be near you," she said emptily. "But I never see you at all. You've got to love me, Carlos. I can't stand it if you don't. I swear it—I'll kill myself."

He just looked at her, his mouth twisted. "You haven't got the guts," he said. He pushed past her, trailing the elusive scent of some woman's perfume. . . .

DOZENS OF NIGHTS. Dozens of highballs. Alone again, with her dozenth highball, she admitted it. This was a very poor bargain. It was nothing she wanted. Not all the changes she'd made in herself could make Carlos love her.

She met her eyes in her tinted mirror. Getting up, she walked very steadily, like someone walking an impossible straight line, into the bedroom. She found the small, red vial. She'd bought it that morning on her honeymoon when she'd found out the truth, that Carlos didn't love her as she loved him. She'd wanted to die that morning.

She came back and sat down where she could watch her made to order beauty in that tinted mirror. The whispers were stirring again, a hundred times stronger than ever. She looked about the apartment. Of course Carlos wasn't here again tonight. Dear Carlos wasn't ever home any more. It was a place of loneliness, a place of bitterness where she sat and remembered what she'd done to Lloyd Deerman, the way she'd shoved him, the way he'd fallen.

She got out a fresh fifth of whiskey and a small cocktail glass, kicking a chair out of the way as she wobbled back to the mirror. She smiled at her reflection. She'd make her own whiskey sour. With red biters from the little vial. She wouldn't like the taste. But she'd never liked the taste. Whiskey was an escape. Escape from Carlos' greediness. Escape from the terror of her nightmares. And now death was going to

be the final escape. A blessed release.

She carefully snapped the head off the vial. A sudden, pungent odor burned her nostrils. Her heart fluttered crazily. She felt her fingers weaken and tremble as she poured the red stuff in the empty cocktail glass. Then with a smirk at her own forlorn little joke, she tipped in two drops of lemon. She filled it slowly to the brim with amber, shadowy liquor.

She stood staring at the trembling ripples on the surface of the glass. Well, it has been a hell of a short life and a bitter one. Poor, plain little Bernice Harper. Who'd ever thought she'd kill one man, and then kill herself because she couldn't live without the love of another, worthless one?

She felt weak in her knees. She wasn't going to be able to drink it standing up after all, she thought shakily.

She sat down with her knees drawn up on the ottoman before Carlos' easy chair. Easy chair. Easy. Her bitter eyes raked across his picture. Grinning. Handsome as hell. Cruel as hell. Took everything. Gave nothing in return. Not much longer, my friend.

Suddenly, she stood up.

"No!" she said aloud. "He won't have my money. What a damn fool thing I was about to do!"

She was laughing sourly as she crossed the room on shaky legs. She pulled down the false-fronted account book. She'd never been able to put that money in a bank. She was afraid of the questions, even

now. It was safe enough, as long as she lived. As long as she could keep it hidden from Carlos. She counted the green, flat bills slowly, finding it was already more than half gone.

She looked at it with loathing. Something more than eight thousand dollars. Murder money. What had it bought her? A fast ticket to hell on earth, and nothing else! And she'd been about to leave it for Carlos to throw away on his wenches. She was damned if she would!

She giggled, feeling the urge for another drink. But she wasn't quite ready for the cocktail. Weaving, she got the fifth, held it to her mouth and drank lustily. Stars and prisms pinwheeled behind her eyes, and she almost gagged.

Listing a little, she crossed the room, holding her arms out for invisible supports. She got out large envelopes and began stuffing the green bills into them. When they were all sealed, she got her fountain pen and scrawlingly addressed them to every charity she could think of. A couple she repeated. She didn't give a damn. She threw the pen on the desk. She'd keep Carlos from getting that money.

Smiling her secretive satisfaction, Bernice began stuffing the envelopes under books, in her budget box, behind Carlos' grinning picture, kept moving until all were hidden.

Sighing expansively, she returned to the ottoman. Sitting down, she looked at the cocktail. The quick, burning, lethal drink. Then she'd call the police, tell them to investi-

gate so they'd find the money addressed to the charities. What a wonderful, bitter joke on Carlos!

She regarded the cocktail. It looked so harmless, and yet she was afraid she might not have time to call the police after she drank it. Maybe the pain would be intense—not that she cared.

She got up and calmly dialed the police. Asked for a detective. Which detective? Any detective. She gave her address and dropped the receiver back in its cradle.

A door slammed.

"Bernice!"

She froze. Watched Carlos stride into the room. Tears stung behind her eyes. He was so handsome. So everything she wanted. She had killed, she had changed her life to have him. She shook her head. Damn him. She'd had nothing she wanted.

"I need fifty dollars, Bernice."

FOR A MOMENT she frowned dazedly as though she hadn't heard him. Then she began to laugh hysterically.

He strode close to her. "Stop that laughing, damn you. You're drunk. I never saw anybody so drunk. Is that the only way you can stand yourself, Bernice?" His laugh was hard. "Maybe I could stand you if I got drunk enough. Poor starved little Bernice. Poor empty Bernice. Sorry, I can't stay and hold your head. I've a date. I need fifty dollars. Stop laughing and get it for me."

She stared at him starkly. "Get it yourself," she said. "I haven't got

fifty dollars. It's all gone. There isn't any more, Carlos. You've had the last penny you're ever going to get from me!"

His voice was a snarl. "I happen to know better. I know you, Bernice. That blind guy you lived with settled plenty on you before he died. Why do you think I married you? Even after you fixed yourself up so I could stand to look at you, you made me sick. You're still starved little Bernice—"

"Stop it!" she wailed at him. "Haven't you done enough? You've taken everything from me. Leave me something!"

He looked around the room, his face white, mouth pulled into a wolfish grin. "Sure. I'll leave you something."

He strode about the room, jerking open drawers, leaving them open, looking behind pictures. She watched, but a dozen furry images of him weaved before her as he ripped the place apart searching for her money. She didn't attempt to stop him.

"It's here somewhere," he rasped. "A checkbook. Something. You've got money, baby, and I mean to have it!"

He knocked over his grinning picture and found several of the envelopes she'd hidden. She listened to his whoops of laughter as he read the addresses aloud, ripped them open and pocketed the money without even counting it.

The room was a shambles when he was through with it. He strode over to her. "So I've taken the last thing

from you, have I?" His mouth twisted. He picked up the cocktail she'd fixed for herself. He said mockingly, "Do you mind?" She opened her mouth to protest, then shut it.

She watched him enter Hell. His insides cooked, seared and shriveled. His eyes watering, face grooved, he railed and cursed at her. He started toward her, fists doubled. But he didn't make it. Eyes bleak, she watched him twist and fall almost at her feet.

She was still staring at him when the detective came. He was a grey man, very brusque. He looked familiar, and Bernice knew where she'd seen him before. At Lloyd Deerman's.

She felt her cheeks sag, knew her eyelids were pulled down. She heard his voice, full of triumph. He brought up handfuls of money from Carlos' pockets. Thousands of dollars. "This cinches it!" the detective declared. "I thought this was a screw-ball call, then I check the address. What do I find? You! Just like I

found you over at Lloyd Deerman's.

"Sure, you killed Deerman. Only that time you were clever about it. You had us stopped. But any fool can look at this guy and see he's been poisoned. What's your motive? Money! Somehow, you got money we couldn't trace from Deerman. And now you've forced this poor devil to bring his savings so you could bleed him. Didn't you?"

But Bernice couldn't drag her distended eyes from the body on the floor. She could only shake her head. The detective shouted at her, "You did it, sister. Don't think you're the first beautiful woman that's taken a man for everything—and then killed him. But being beautiful ain't going to get you nowhere—except a lot of publicity at a trial. You did it. You might as well admit it!"

The despair washed from Bernice's white face, and a pleased, odd smile replaced it. She looked at the detective, arching her head almost flirtatiously. "Yes," she said. She nodded. "Yes. Yes, I'm guilty." ♦ ♦ ♦

MESSIAH OF CRIME

- IN BUCHAREST, a somberly clad figure prowled the slums, collected some three hundred human derelicts to whom he introduced himself as the "Messiah," and whom he invited to a sumptuous mansion to be wined and dined and educated in the arts of genteel living. Police paid no attention—until they discovered a crime wave emanating from the mansion. The "Messiah's" guests had organized under one Constantin Gribin to help themselves to the finer things of life they had just learned about. They specialized in jewel thefts, and under the protection of the "Messiah" they developed into one of the most efficient gangs in Europe.

A half-century ago, when New York City had three police commissioners, one of that trio was an unknown, energetic young gentleman named Theodore Roosevelt. Right after his appointment, reporters approached the new commissioner and asked him about his policy on the saloon problem. In open defiance of the law, and with the connivance of crooked police and politicians, the saloons had been staying open long past the curfew hour. Many of them, indeed, brazenly proclaimed in huge signs and advertisements that they were open twenty-four hours a day. "Commissioner," the reporters now asked, "what are you going to do about the saloons?" "What am I going to do?" repeated Teddy, as though puzzled by such an obvious question. "Hell, I'm going to close 'em!" It is on this note that Leslie T. White begins his story—

Curfew Night

By LESLIE T. WHITE

ANYBODY AROUND CITY HALL can tell you about that thirty-year feud; it flared in the newspapers every few years, and a lot more of it's buried in confidential police files. But about the love story nobody knew. Neither Inspector Joe Carney nor Big Mike Golden was aware of it; they were too busy hating each other. But I knew. And when I opened the door of my flat the other night and found Aileen standing there with young Alex, I had a bad

moment. Maybe it was because I had been dozing when they rapped, but at first glance I thought it was Mary Ellen and Big Mike. Then I remembered that Mary Ellen has been dead for twenty years. Why should Aileen have come to me?

It started like this: The first time Mike Golden laid eyes on Joe Carney, he slapped Carney's face. He slapped it so hard the sting lasted thirty years.

Big Mike had just been put in

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charge of his first saloon by the brewery. Carney—it was *Sergeant* Carney then—had a new vice squad. They were of an age, those two—both in their middle twenties, both proud and ambitious, with more than a fair share of hot-headedness.

It was almost three o'clock in the morning when the sergeant led us into Big Mike's place. Mike knew damn well the closing hour was two A.M., but it was the opening night and he was celebrating. The gilt lettering was barely dry on the plate-glass window; the fragile maiden drawn on the huge mirror behind the bar had not yet commenced to fade. Big Mike's well-wishers had not wound up their congratulations. And Mike himself, big, flamboyant Mike, flushed with pride and warmed by his own liquor, was circled by admirers when Joe Carney entered at the head of his raiding squad.

A clash was inevitable. Behind our brand-new sergeant, we waited, a little skeptical, perhaps, as cops are of young superiors. Behind the dapper young saloon keeper stood some two score men, wondering whether that genial youngster had the guts to stand up to the law. And although they had never met before, Joe Carney was looking straight at Mike Golden when he spoke.

"Who's in charge of this dump?"

Big Mike set his glass deliberately on the bar. "I am. What about it?"

"There's a law in this town," said the sergeant, "that says these joints close at two. Now I'll give you just about two minutes to clear out these

drunks, or I'll run you all in." It was characteristic of Carney that he should use "I" instead of we. He meant it just as he said it.

Big Mike didn't move. Carney waited. They made a magnificent pair, these two. Sergeant Carney's blue uniform coat glittered with brass buttons. His cap, despite regulations, was canted at a provocative angle and cast a shadow that accentuated the cold gleam in his eyes. Big Mike was just as tall, and built like a wedge. His mustache was smaller than the sergeant's, and waxed. The rest of his costume was made insignificant by the rainbow splash of his fancy vest and by the massive gold chain that joined the two lower pockets. And when he spoke, his voice was filled with the consciousness that this was his big night.

"Listen, you comic-opera flatfoot, vamoose before I call my alderman."

They were facing each other now like a couple of pit-bulls. Then the sergeant barked, "Get out before I throw you out!"

That was when Big Mike belted him across the mouth.

THAT WAS THE beginning of the whole feud, that whack in the jaw thirty years ago. It was also the signal for a general brawl, and most of the newness was chipped off the saloon before the reserves brought order again. The gold-leaf name lay like so much alphabet soup in the gutter; the beautiful nymph of the mirror was permanently dissected by an ill-aimed stein. The patrol wagon made

three round trips with prisoners, and it was on the first of these that Sergeant Carney personally escorted Big Mike on the latter's maiden trip to jail.

You'd have thought Joe Carney would have been satisfied, wrecking the saloon and arresting Mike Golden. But he couldn't forget that punch in the mouth.

Eventually the saloon was repaired. A bigger and brighter name flared from the new plate-glass window; an even more seductive maiden assumed her languid pose on the mirror behind the new bar. But there was no patching Mike Golden's feelings. He wanted just one thing—revenge. When his local alderman proved unable to get Sergeant Carney fired, Big Mike got so mad he chose a candidate of his own, and damned if he didn't get him elected. That was where Big Mike learned the rudiments and got started in politics.

Carney didn't come out unscathed, for although Golden didn't get him fired, he was hauled up on the carpet. And that was when Joe received *his* lesson in practical politics.

The Old Man had been blunt enough. "Carney, if you want to stay on the police department, watch who you shove around. Keep out of joints with political connections."

"The closing hour is two A. M.," the sergeant pointed out in that clipped tone of his.

"I don't give a damn if it's six P. M.!" shouted the chief. "You antagonize them brewery moguls an' their pets, an' somebody'll bring

pressure on the mayor. Then you'll be through, understand? All through. You won't get another warnin'. That's all."

That session on the carpet planted the seeds of hate in Joe Carney for political pressure, and to him Big Mike Golden epitomized the whole system. But if he didn't quit, he at least skirted the political shoals until he was able to strike hard at spots where there could be no comeback. He rose steadily in the department, forging a name for absolute honesty, ruthlessness, squareness, and personal sourness. He wasn't popular with the men, but he was respected and they liked to work under him, for he asked no man to do what he himself would not do. He was hard but just, and that's all any good cop asks.

So these two climbed together, each in his own sphere. Big Mike enlarged his domain until he controlled a string of saloons from the harbor to the exclusive Riverdale Heights. And by that time he had important pipelines into City Hall.

Through it all they kept alive their feud. When, as occasionally happened, a square administration sat on the throne, Joe Carney hit head on. He bombarded Big Mike's places to the point of ruin, keeping them within the letter as well as the spirit of the law. Then, when the pendulum swung the other way and Big Mike's political satellites were in the saddle, Carney's claws were clipped until they bled. But even then he pursued a guerilla warfare, prowling in the shadows until he could pounce on

one of Big Mike's lambs that might have strayed from the fold.

JOE CARNEY WAS a lieutenant of police when he met Mary Ellen. It was *me* that introduced them, and lots of times since then I've hated myself for doing it. Many's the sleepless nights I've wondered what would have happened if I hadn't done that, if I had gone ahead on my own. A guy can overdo loyalty.

I met her on a train when I was returning from an unsuccessful extradition case. I've got to make you see how she looked, otherwise you won't understand what happened. Can you imagine a tiny thing that looks just like a child and yet is capable of mothering you at the same time? The top of her head was even with my badge. Her father had been a country doctor, so maybe that's where she got that soft, understanding manner. But anyhow, I know that I was telling her all about everything the first day we met. Why I started building up Joe Carney, I don't know. I guess he seemed like the finest kind of a cop to me, and that meant the finest kind of man. So I introduced them.

Carney never mingled with women, but he went off the deep end for Mary Ellen. I don't know what I expected, but later when Carney called me into his office as if he was assigning me to a raid or something and *told* me I was the best man at his wedding, I said I was glad. I stayed drunk for a week.

The wedding affected me worse

than my first execution. I wasn't at all sure I could stand up through it. Mary Ellen in her white gown looked as if she had been carved out of ivory. Her soft golden hair was curled up in front and on the sides, with tiny curls low on the back of her neck. She aroused something so deep within big, pugnacious Joe Carney that he sobbed with sheer emotion when he carried her in his arms over the threshold of the little white house he had bought for her.

Strangely enough, a couple of months later Big Mike Golden married a genial wench who was able to mix with his political friends. She bore him a lusty son within a year, and because of a song popular throughout all Big Mike's joints, they named him Alexander.

For a few months it looked as if maybe marriage was going to end the fight between Carney and Mike Golden. Yet those roots of hate had gone deep, and I wondered if love was really the stronger force. No man knew all the ramifications of that feud; the policies of the police department were unconsciously tinted with it, and certainly for a quarter of a century City Hall was never free of the shadow of Big Mike Golden. Without a doubt their personal hatred was the spur that prodded them up their respective ladders.

Carney never took the police department home with him, but for some reason he insisted on inviting me home to dinner. I ducked it until one night Mary Ellen called me her-

self and I went. After that I went a lot of times.

She got to calling me Tim, as Carney himself did, and she insisted I call her Mary Ellen. I always thought of her by that name, but when I tried to say the words, I had trouble with my throat. Even then I didn't know how it was, and of course Joe Carney never thought about it.

As I say, it looked as if the feud was going to die out, but it didn't. Carney was a cop first of all, and I could see him getting restless. He couldn't sit still around the house of a night without thinking of Big Mike and wondering. So before a year was out, he dropped back into his old habit of prowling around nights on his own time, looking for loopholes in Mike Golden's machine.

Because he didn't like to leave his wife alone, he'd say, "Tim, you're not doing anything tonight. Run out to the house for dinner and keep Mary Ellen company. I got a tip I want to work on."

So it got like that, sometimes two and three times a week. Mary Ellen never complained, but somehow she began to fade. We'd sit and play two-handed pinochle until around eleven, and then if Carney didn't come home, I'd leave.

I didn't like it, but by this time Carney had climbed to a captaincy and picked me for his driver. He could handle a hot-wagon better than I could, so when he told me to go stay with his wife, there was nothing I could do about it. Joe Carney

was the kind of a guy you don't argue with—not more than once, you don't.

One night after I'd been going out to their house for about three months, the skipper failed to show up by eleven, and I got up to go home.

Mary Ellen put her hand on my arm. "Don't go yet," she pleaded. "I don't want to be alone tonight."

My hands were shaking when I dealt the next round of pinochle. I started talking about what a swell guy the boss was and how he was the shrewdest, smartest cop on the whole department. I thought I was doing fine, until Mary Ellen suddenly flung the cards on the table and burst out crying.

"I can't stand another day of it, Tim!" she sobbed. "I can't, I can't!"

I got up and moved over so I could pat her arm. "Gosh, Mary Ellen, what's wrong? The skipper loves—"

"Love?" she cried, jerking up her head. "Joe doesn't know the meaning of love. He *hates* so much, there's no room for love. Night after night he hunts alone like a—a tiger! Tim, I can't face it. You've got to take me away."

"Me?"

She looked me full in the face. "You love me, Tim. Don't deny it. You've loved me from the day we met. That's the kind of love I need now. Your kind, Tim."

Loyalty's a strange thing; I could have murdered Joe Carney right then, but I couldn't take his wife. Of course she'd called the shot. I hadn't realized myself how much she

meant to me. Not until this minute.

"Things will be different," I promised her. "I'll have a talk with the skipper." Then I broke away.

I DROVE THE STREETS all night trying to think straight. Then I made my decision to do something I didn't do until over twenty years later. I didn't because of what Joe Carney told me next day.

He didn't come into his battered cubbyhole of an office until late afternoon. He grinned a little queerly when he found me waiting.

"Captain Carney, I got something to say to you," I began.

He never noticed what I said. He clapped a big paw on my shoulder and there were tears in his eyes.

"Tim," he said huskily, "Mary Ellen's going to have a baby."

"I'm glad," I said, and went out and sat in the car.

Things got busy around the station house, so I didn't go out to the house any more. Carney invited me a couple of times, but I wormed out of it. Mary Ellen didn't call. She understood. And Carney himself stayed home with her nights.

Six months later she died in childbirth. I helped carry her to the grave.

When a man can't cry, he suffers. And for a long time Joe Carney found no relief. At first he tried to hate the baby, and for a whole week he wouldn't even look at it. Then one morning when we were driving together, he said, "Tim, Mary Ellen didn't die. She just got tinier. Come

out to the hospital—I'll show you."

Sure enough, the baby looked exactly like Mary Ellen.

"If it had been a boy," Carney said, leaning over the bed, "Mary Ellen wanted to call it Tim. It ain't, so we call it Aileen."

"Why don't you call it Mary Ellen?"

Carney just shook his head.

Well, there's no law to keep me from loving another man's kid, and Aileen was the greatest youngster I ever saw. Maybe Carney's conscience bothered him, but he gave Aileen all the love he should have given her mother. He got a housekeeper, but it was Joe Carney and me who raised Aileen Carney.

There never were two people more totally unlike than Mary Ellen and Joe Carney, but Aileen was like them both. Of course she was the picture of her mother, with her sweetness and affection, but she had her father's stubborn tenacity. When those two met head on, it was my job to find a compromise.

By the time Aileen was ten, Carney had fought his way up to an inspectorship. Prohibition had not actually interfered with Big Mike's empire, but it did give Inspector Carney more opportunity to strike. He struck hard and often. Then one night Carney led a wrecking squad on a building which an informer had assured him was filled with choice liquors belonging to Mike Golden. I was with him. Instead of a liquor cache, Carney found he had raided a private sanitarium.

Of course there was trouble. Carney and the police department were both sued for illegal entry, and lost the suit. Big Mike's politicians pulled out all the stops on the organ and clamored for criminal action against Joe Carney. He was tried by the police board, and only his fine record saved him from dismissal. But he lost his hard-won inspectorship and was demoted to a patrolman in a suburban district.

That's hard to take at any time. Joe Carney knew he had been framed. And by whom. All his savings had gone to satisfy the judgment. His hatred for Mike Golden became an obsession that smothered everything but his love for his girl. His hair turned silver. He divided his off hours equally: half with Aileen, the other half trying to find a vulnerable spot in Big Mike's machine. Meanwhile I went back to riding prowl cars, and seeing Aileen Carney whenever I had free time.

He came back up, of course, but it took him another ten years of his life to reach an inspectorship, right where he had been before.

"That's ten years Mike Golden owes me, Tim," he told me the day he got me back as his driver.

"Ah, to hell with Big Mike, skipper," I said, but he didn't answer.

I got closest to Aileen during those last gawky teen years. We had a lot of fun together. Once she asked me why her father hated Mike Golden. I told her it was just an old quarrel that had become a habit.

"It's a pretty strong habit, Uncle

Tim," she said. "Sometimes I think it's the most important thing in his life."

"Not by a damn sight, it ain't," I said. "You're the most important thing in Joe Carney's life."

I believed that, too.

She went away to boarding school a girl, and came back a woman. She looked so much like her mother I was afraid of her. I suddenly realized I was an old man.

JUST WHERE SHE met Alex Golden, I don't know. All I know is what she told me the night she picked me up in her roadster and took me for a drive along the palisades. She loved him. She wanted to see how I'd take it before she bearded her old man.

"Aileen, you can't do it. You just can't," I said when she told me.

"Why, Uncle Tim?" Can you give me one valid reason?"

"Sure, I can—lots of them. The main one being that no kin of Mike Golden's is fit to—to talk to you."

She laughed and dodged the buggy around a milk truck. "Alex has already passed his Bar examinations."

"A lawyer," I sneered. "A shyster to fit into his old man's crooked machine."

She slowed and drove into a quiet spot beside a lake.

"Uncle Tim, Mike Golden has quit."

"Quit? *Big Mike quit?* Not while there's a dollar to be made out of gin and graft, he ain't. Don't you go believin' any crazy talk like that."

She linked her arm through mine and snuggled closer. "But he has, really he has," she insisted. "When Alex's mother died ten years ago, Mike Golden promised her then that when Alex started to work, he could start clean. Alex means everything in the world to Big Mike, so he disposed of all his business interests, so that it would never touch Alex. It's true, Uncle Tim."

"Your father won't stand for it, kid," I warned her.

"Why?"

"Now look here, Aileen," I growled. "You can't go around asking why to everything. Of all the young punks in this city, I don't know how you came to meet Mike Golden's kid."

"That's why," she laughed. "Everybody knows about dad and Big Mike, so one of the boys thought it would be a gag to introduce Alex to me. We clicked just like that." She snapped her fingers.

"Well, you got to break it up," I said stubbornly.

"But it's so silly," she reasoned. "Mike Golden has quit politics, and daddy is going to retire on his pension in a couple of months. He told me so last night."

"Whew! Did you tell him about you and Golden's kid?"

She shook her head. "That's why I brought you riding, Uncle Tim. I want *you* to talk to him."

"Me? Oh, no. I've known your pa a lot longer'n you have, an' I'd no more tell him his baby girl's stuck on Big Mike's kid than—

than—" Then I got stuck **for words**.

"Uncle Tim, look at me!"

"Now don't start that stuff," I shouted, but before she took me home, I'd promised to broach the subject to Carney the very first time it didn't look like deliberate suicide.

For the next couple of days, I checked up on the Goldenes. Aileen had it straight. Without any fanfare, Big Mike had quietly got rid of all his joints and backed out of the picture. Young Alex had opened his own law office. I saw the office myself, and there was none of Big Mike's lavish touch about it; it was modest and cheap. The kid was doing it all himself.

So I went in to speak to Joe Carney.

"Big Mike's quit," I said.

He smiled, but there was no warmth in it. "I knew that a month ago, Tim. That's why I had to work fast."

"You remember those crooked paving contracts we worked on nearly three years ago?" he asked me. "Well, I tied Golden into that deal. The Grand Jury just indicted him. I've waited a long time for this chance to nail Big Mike Golden to the cross!"

My heart sank. "But Mike's quit, skipper. And that paving case is dead. Why dig it up? Aileen tells me you've decided to retire. The score's even between you and Mike, so call it a draw and forget it."

He looked my way a long time without speaking, then I realized that it wasn't me he was seeing, but some-

thing that happened long, long ago. When he musingly rubbed his jaw, I knew he was thinking of that wallop Big Mike had given him thirty years back.

"It's not even yet," he growled abruptly, and walked away.

Within an hour the news of Mike Golden's indictment was all over town.

I KNEW AILEEN WOULD be counting on me, so I tried to talk to Carney again, but I was licked before I started. Once Big Mike was arrested, Joe Carney *had* to take his case to trial. He couldn't quit then, even if he wanted to. He wouldn't talk about the case; all he wanted to talk about was his retirement.

"Tim," he told me when we were driving out to interview a witness, "I'm going to make up to Aileen for a lot of the things she's missed. We'll take a trip around the world together, and then maybe a little place out in the country some place where we won't ever be apart. Those are the things I always wanted to do for Mary Ellen, but—"

"I understand, skipper. But Aileen, maybe she's—well, what I'm tryin' to say is, maybe she's got plans of her own." This wasn't the time to tell him what I knew.

He smiled a smile I had never seen on his face. "You've never loved a woman, Tim. There's a lot of things you can't savvy."

"I guess so," I said, and changed the subject.

Aileen caught up with me that

night. And I was stuck again.

"Did you tell father about Alex and me?"

"Take it easy," I pleaded. "I couldn't."

She wasn't Mary Ellen any longer; she was Joe Carney in voice, and in the line of her jaw. "Well, I will," she said.

"You'll break his heart, kid." And I told her what Joe Carney had said.

She was crying when I finished, but her chin was still out. "He's breaking mine, Uncle Tim."

"You can't tell him now, Aileen. It's too late to stop the case. Why throw your own father down for a rat like Mike Golden? You must be nuts!"

"It's more than Mike," she told me. "It's Alex. He knew his father sold liquor all through Prohibition, but he doesn't believe Mike ever touched a dollar of graft. He told Mike as much and offered to defend him against what he feels is a frameup by my father."

"Can you believe it's a frameup, Aileen?"

"Oh, Uncle Tim, I don't know, or care, about that part of it. I can't see why this had to happen to Alex and me."

"Mike'll get the cleverest lawyers in town and maybe beat the rap," I offered. He'd need the best, because I knew when Joe Carney built a case it was iron-clad.

Aileen was trembling. "He won't get any other lawyers. When Alex told him he believed in him, Mike said, 'If you believe in me that much,

son, you take the case. I put myself in your hands.' ”

“Big Mike’s insane!” I shouted. “Leaving an important case like that to a green kid! Why, Joe Carney and the district attorney will crucify them!”

She stopped crying and looked me square in the eye. “You called Mike Golden a rat a moment ago. But he loves his son enough to jeopardize his own liberty rather than throw him over and let him learn the truth. If that’s insanity and being a rat, then I’ll take a piece of the same.”

“But, baby, listen!” I pleaded. “If Mike’s convicted, Alex will be in a hell of a fix! The boy’ll be ruined before he gets started!”

She was suddenly cool and quiet. “I’m going to see father,” she said. “Right now.”

It must have been like two Joe Carneys coming together, head on. I don’t know what was said but Aileen packed up and moved out.

Joe Carney had taken a lifetime of ups and downs without squawking; he didn’t squawk now, but he looked twenty years older when he came down to the station house the next day.

The trial came swiftly. I kept expecting Big Mike to call in some of the famous lawyers he’d had on tap for twenty years, but he didn’t. And young Alex believing in old Mike, demanded an immediate hearing.

This move, made in all its innocence, took the prosecution by surprise. They anticipated the old, old

postponement trick. Their witnesses began to give them trouble; several of them reneged on their testimony and a couple more dropped out of sight. The D.A. bellowed his head off that defense was intimidating witnesses, but that was just for publicity. Joe Carney had built his case up from the bottom, and *he* was prepared to testify as to what the missing witnesses had told him. Carney liked that, for now the fate of Big Mike Golden rested on his testimony alone.

They took four days to pick a jury. The next day Joe Carney was slated to go on the witness stand.

This was the night Aileen brought Alex Golden to my apartment.

AS I SAID before, I’d been dozing when they knocked, but it was a long time after I opened that door that I found my voice to ask them in. I knew Aileen looked like her mother, but I’d never realized how much. And it was with Mary Ellen’s voice that she cried, “Oh, Tim!” and ran into my arms.

Alex came in and took my hand without saying anything.

When we got around to talk, Aileen told me, “Alex and I were married this afternoon, Uncle Tim.”

“That’s swell,” I said, and kissed her. Then like a fool, I asked, “Have you told your father?”

“No.”

Alex put in rather embarrassedly, “I thought perhaps we had better wait until, well, after the trial, before we got married. You see—”

"Wait for what?" I shouted at him. "Some people wait all their lives for things only to wake up some day and find them lost forever. You don't wait for love, you young fool, you take it when you know it's there!"

Aileen touched my arm, and I suddenly realized I was yelling.

"Why, Uncle Tim! What on earth's the matter?"

"Plenty," I growled and snatched up my hat. "I'm goin' to do a job I wish to hell I'd done twenty years ago!"

I found Carney alone in the living room of the same little house he had bought for Mary Ellen. He waved me toward a chair, but I stood in the middle of the carpet and said what I'd come to say.

"Joe Carney, you're goin' on the witness stand tomorrow and brand Mike Golden a thief for chiselin' a few bucks on a paving contract, but I've come here tonight to tell you you're the biggest thief of them all!"

The creases deepened between his eyes. "Tim, are you crazy, or—"

"No, I'm not crazy now—but I have been! You told me the other day I never loved a woman! You're a liar! I loved Mary Ellen from the day I met her, and you stole her from me. Then you gave her nothing but the leavings of your hate. Twenty years ago, she asked me to take her away from you. I came to tell you I was going to, but you told me first about Aileen."

The muscles in his neck were swelling. He said very low, "Go on!"

"You let Mary Ellen die without the love she craved, and you've held out on her daughter. Aileen is Mary Ellen, you damned fool! The Lord gave you a second chance, and you've fumbled it. Oh, you talk of trips together when you retire, but when Aileen finds love, you want to destroy it. Mike Golden, the man you despise, has given up all his interests because of the affection he bears for his son, but you're incapable of doing as much for your girl."

"Are you finished?"

"I've one thing more to tell you."

"Tell it and *get out!*" he roared.

"Okay, chew on this one. Today your daughter married Big Mike's son!"

The kids were gone when I got back to my apartment.

WHEN I GOT down to court the next morning the case was already under way. The D.A. was enumerating to the jury the things he intended to prove against Mike Golden. It looked bad for Mike; it was more of an execution than a trial because when the mess first came up two years ago, the actual contractors had been convicted. There were scores of politicians tied into it as much as Big Mike Golden, and to single him out, even though technically guilty, looked to me more like persecution than prosecution.

It was the first time I'd seen Big Mike for years, but he looked much the same. Heavier, and his black curls now white, but the years had been kind to his face. Laughter had played

a large part in furrowing his features, and I got the impression of a life fully lived.

Joe Carney sat hunched in a seat at the prosecution table, listening impassively to the D.A.

He took the stand when court convened right after lunch, and his voice was firm and controlled as he began to answer the questions of the district attorney.

I wish I could give the feel of that crowded courtroom, the judge on the bench with the flag behind him, the newspapermen tensed, white-thatched Mike Golden with his son, pale and drawn beside him. But I can't because it wasn't things you could see that counted.

It was the sure knowledge of what Joe Carney's words were going to mean to so many lives. I thought my heart would bang itself out of place by the time the D.A. passed through the preliminaries and got down to the real meat of the testimony.

"Inspector Carney, you took a statement from the witness missing in this case, did you not?"

"I did."

"Repeat what was said at that time."

Here it comes, I thought.

Carney glanced down from the stand at Big Mike and savored for an instant the full taste of his power. This was the *coup de grace*.

"The witness stated that Mike Golden had—" He stopped abruptly.

"That Mike Golden had *what*?" prompted the D.A., but Carney didn't hear him. Carney was staring

MODEST BANDIT

ACCORDING TO F.B.I. records, the most dangerous criminal America ever produced was a gent of whom you've probably never heard, one Charlie Chapman. J. Edgar Hoover claims that compared to him most publicized hoodlums, even Dillinger, were just Tyros. A successful, honest contractor, he'd amassed a fortune when he decided to turn bandit. Then he quickly piled up a total of more than 150 years in jail terms—of which he served only twenty-nine months! He finally lost his last battle, and paid with his life, in 1942.

at the back of the courtroom. He half rose out of his chair, then sank back.

The prosecutor scowled and turned around, and simultaneously every eye in the courtroom did a right-about-face to see what Joe Carney was staring at. I got up and looked.

Mary Ellen Carney was standing just inside the doorway.

Tell me I'm crazy. Tell me that the dead don't come back, that it was only Aileen, who looked the way Mary Ellen used to look; that it was an illusion because Aileen happened to be wearing her blond hair the way Mary Ellen wore hers. Or that maybe it was the love she bore young Alex that put that soft touch in her eyes and on her lips. But I know it was Mary Ellen come back, and Joe knew it too.

Then Mary Ellen seemed to smile shyly and go away, and it was Aileen

standing there. She moved quietly down the aisle, a little embarrassed because everybody was staring at her, and dropped into a vacant seat beside me.

"Hello, Uncle Tim," she whispered.

But I couldn't talk. I could hardly see the man in the witness box. I was remembering what Joe Carney had told me the day, twenty years ago, when he first took me to see Aileen. "*Tim, Mary Ellen didn't die. She just got tinier.*"

The district attorney was barking, "Well, what's the matter, Inspector? Go ahead and tell this jury what the missing witness told you."

Still Joe Carney didn't speak, and finally the judge pounded his gavel.

"Inspector Carney, answer the question!" he ordered.

I could see Carney's shoulders come back up. "I'm sorry," he said in a low, controlled voice. "I can't remember."

WHAT HAPPENED THEN was pretty terrible. The district attorney blew up and the judge brutally castigated Carney before he did the only thing left he could do—dismiss the case for lack of evidence. But somehow we all got out of that courtroom and I found myself standing in the corridor with Big Mike, Alex and Aileen. Nobody else seemed to know how it had happened. I did, of course, but I kept my mouth shut. So we were huddled in a silent group when Joe Carney came out of the court.

Alex intercepted him. "Inspector

Carney," he began, "I want to—" but Carney brushed right past him and walked up to Mike Golden.

I don't care what you say about time and calendars. This was thirty years ago, and Joe Carney was face to face with Big Mike. They made a magnificent pair still: Carney's blue uniform glittering with brass buttons, Big Mike built like a wedge, his suit dimmed by a pearl-grey vest. You say you've heard these words before, but I repeat, I saw this same scene before.

Then Joe Carney slapped Mike Golden across the mouth.

Young Alex yelled and made a dive for Carney, but his father caught his arm. Old Mike was grinning. The two enemies eyed each other a moment longer, then stuck out their hands in unison.

"That makes us quits."

"It was a good fight, Joe," said Big Mike. "I'd already quit."

The skipper let go Mike's big paw and took Aileen into his arms. He let her cry for a while, then he put a hand on young Alex's shoulder.

"Be good to her, kid," he growled. He started to say something else but changed his mind. "Look, I'd like to give you kids a trip around the world for a wedding present. I know it's a good trip."

Then he turned to me. "Tim, would you be good enough to drive me down to the commissioner's office? Something tells me it's time I quit, too."

I nodded, for I know a great guy when I see one. ♦ ♦ ♦

History says that the Chinese invented printing, or at least discovered the underlying theory that makes modern printing possible—the idea of movable type. The story goes that Marco Polo first saw it there and brought it back to Europe, and somehow or other a German named Gutenberg got hold of the idea and printed a Bible, and from there on you know what happened. But like everything else man has evolved, there are always those, on the prowl for an easy buck, who can find a way to misuse something worthwhile. Like the gents who work in dark little cellars turning out fresh, home-made greenbacks. Or gents like Max Willoughby, in the story below, who had the neatest little scheme anyone ever got killed over.

The Murderer Type

By P. B. BISHOP

ABOUT THE SMARTEST crook I ever ran across was Max R. Willoughby. He had been a lawyer and a school teacher, and he owned one of those needle-sharp minds that makes lace out of the law, plus an empty heart which believes everyone else is a sucker. In twenty-four hours' time he had committed forgery, perjury and murder. And was safe. For a time. I first met him one chilly autumn night right outside of Sacramento.

When I got there, after leaving Pulaski, Ohio, behind I was one jump ahead of county relief. Sacramento may be the capital of one of the greatest states in the Union, but all it has for strangers looking for work is "On your way, mister." Hunger got so bad one night I stuck a smoking pipe in my pocket to play like it was a revolver and went out hunting.

I walked out past the city limits and took up waiting under an elm tree whose leaves turned purple and

pink from a neon sign flashing across the road. It blazoned "The Purple Parrot" and under the name a pink roulette wheel spun against the night sky. Whenever the door opened, music blared out loud and happy, while inside, as the saying goes, joy reigned unrefined. I gripped the pipe barrel hard, hoping I wouldn't pick a mark carrying a real rod.

Right after a kiss-me-kid jalopy had rolled away from the door, Mr. and Mrs. Larry Norman came down the steps. She was one of those blue-black brunettes, short and pert, who jiggled when she walked. Larry Norman was the jack to her queen, with a collar-ad face, every feature neat and what you'd expect. Although when you got up close you saw greed in the way his nostrils curved back too fast.

When they'd gotten settled nice and comfy in their Lincoln convertible, I stuck the pipe in Norman's ribs.

"What in hell is this?" he said.

"How about a ticket to the Pick-pockets' Ball?"

"Man, you're way off your rocker. Way off. I'm Larry Norman. Five minutes after you leave here, every cop in town'll have orders to pick you up on sight."

"Hand it over. Without the advertising."

"This is Senator Norman, and I am Mrs. Norman," she told me. "If you're actually hungry or—"

Standing out there, being offered a handout, with what anyone would take for a gun in my pocket was

chump stuff. "Skip the sympathy and move over."

That was a car to wake up Barney Oldfield. He moved away like a dream. When we had reached a residential section where the houses were dark, the good people sleeping and the iron deer bright-eyed in the moonlight, I parked at the curb.

"Now get this straight, Mac," Norman began. "A smart guy will blow right away from here."

I took the keys out of the ignition and put them in my pocket. Norman was probably twenty pounds heavier, and three or four years younger. But I wouldn't have cared if he was Harry Greb. As I began to get out of the car, he mumbled something and started to hand his wallet across. The minute I reached for it, Norman grabbed the ends of my fingers in a judo hold while Gorgeous batted me over the head with her handbag. From the weight of it, she must have been in the habit of carrying cold cream jars around. I was still loopy when I yanked Norman out onto the sidewalk.

"The gun is strictly Russian dressing." I showed him it was only a pipe, then threw it far away.

He grinned. Turned out he had something to grin about too. He had learned how to box in a gymnasium, I guess. In the first two minutes I got ripped with enough left hands and right crosses to stab Mt. Rushmore off base. Once he got me back against the car door, with the door handle eating into my spine and Mrs. Norman maneuvering to confer the

order of the loaded purse. I ducked and wrested into the clear. Then I stopped fooling.

If he had learned how to fight in a gym, I'd picked up mine the hard way, as a kid back in New York's Hell's Kitchen. I slipped inside another punch, chopped his Adam's apple, and before his breath came back, I had stepped on his off foot and socked one home. And another. Then I pulled down his guard with a light left, and put all I had into a drive for the head. He cursed me, back pedaled, and I hit him two belts on the jaw before he began to go down. I caught him, held him up, and worked on his mid-section long enough to make him decide to sit this one out.

Then I pushed Mrs. Norman away and put the wallet in my pocket. That reminded me I had their car keys. I took the money out, threw all the personal stuff back, and told them I'd leave their car keys with the next cop I saw, and walked away. Which I did, and got away from a guy in uniform with a moonface and eyes no bigger than pips before his questions got too insistent.

THE FIRST STOP was for a quick meal. After that I headed back to the hotel that was graced with my patronage and found that the Bennett fortunes now sang to the tune of \$360. What I had just done was nothing I felt very good about, but at least I knew where the next dozen meals were coming from. I was riffling a deck of cards on the hotel

room bed when there was a double rap at the door.

Sounded like this Norman had all the drag he boasted of.

The window was out because it led into a counterweight fire escape and that emptied onto a lighted side street. The cops would cover that first thing.

"Wait'll I get my clothes on," I called, stalling for time.

No answer.

For the next thirty seconds I was a busy gent. I tousled up my hair, kicked off my shoes, stripped off my coat, stuffed the money in a crevice on the underside of the washbowl, roughed up the pillows, and went to the door buttoning up a shirt that didn't need it.

The little man who stood there looked like a ferret. He had that kind of pointed profile, with a twitchy nose at the prow, plus an up-swept Kaiser Wilhelm mustache. All you honestly saw was his head, for the body under it was insignificant, much too puny for the force of will that appeared in his eyes. He poked back the door with his cane.

"Crummy joint," he said. "I'm Max Willoughby."

"What are you—"

"No wise cracks, Bennett." He pushed the door shut with the tip of the cane. "You held up Larry Norman a while ago. Why?"

I looked into those bright eyes and was met with all the geniality of a man measuring somebody for a coffin.

"We'll skip that," he said. "Sit

down." He looked around the room, decided against the chairs and the bed, and finally went over and leaned lightly against the windowsill.

From where I was sitting on a straight-backed chair, I started to light a cigarette.

"We'll skip that as well," said Willoughby. "I'm allergic to nicotine. Even smoke is enough to give me an attack. If you please."

The guy would have been funny if there hadn't been behind the pose, something you could see practically never made a mistake. Even without the jam I'd just gotten myself into, Willoughby gave you the impression that if he didn't like what you were doing, he could rope you up in trouble so fast you couldn't get out without strangling yourself.

"Your name is Tom Bennett. You've been in Sacramento nine days. You're a printer and out of work. An hour ago you stole several hundred dollars from a friend of mine. That means we can put you away for six months to a year."

"To hell with the statistics," I said, wondering how he'd gotten all this dope so fast. "What's on your mind?"

"How would you like me to forget the larceny rap?"

"In return for what?"

"In return for taking a good job. And you can keep Norman's dough."

"Sure. Wait'll I get my Alice-in-Wonderland hat on."

"You don't think very fast, do you? I'm Max Willoughby. I'm the Three Castles Press." He handed over

a card, careful not to touch my hand. "I've had trouble keeping a good night linotype man. How are you on the lino?"

"There's nothing I can't do in a shop except catch up on sleep."

"Can you put it out swift and keep putting it out? And no belly-aching over the night shift?"

"Try me and see."

We talked salary and hours, places where I'd worked before, stuff like that. Before he went away, Willoughby told me I'd be setting Q. and A. That's printshop talk for Questions and Answers in legal copy. The guy had so much inner energy the room seemed to sag after he'd gone. It was crazy, it didn't make sense. Being offered a job for sticking up a guy. And a guy who, according to Willoughby, was his friend.

The Three Castle Press proved to be the biggest and snazziest shop in town. When I walked in next evening everybody was as busy as a jackhammer with the shakes. In Willoughby's office, he introduced me to a man built like a fieldstone fortress, with a tough, amiable face and a cigar butt that wagged up and down when he talked.

"This is Alex, my foreman," Willoughby said. "All ready to go?"

Out in the shop, Alex stood by while I made ready and plunked out a few trial slugs. Then he grinned around his stumpy cigar. "You'll do. The boy'll keep feeding it."

From six to nine I worked steadily. When I went out to the washroom for a smoke, Alex waved me over

before I'd gotten over twenty feet.

"How's it going?"

"Pretty good, I guess. What do you think?"

"You got it, boy. Couple of months and you'll be top man around here. Keep giving me all the dead copy you got. We got to be extra careful on this one. You're working for our best customer. Hammacher, Pierce and Lipton. Biggest law firm in the West. Mighty particular."

I brought the last sheet of original transcript over and laid it on the stone. He grunted something and I went off for my cigarette.

There was a fellow in the wash-room sitting on one of the hand-basins reading a newspaper. In the mirror behind him, the headline, all of 108 points, had started to make sense when he thrust the paper at me.

"You see what happened this afternoon?"

There it was. "Sen. Norman Murdered in home." I read: "The youngest member of the State Senate, Lawrence Norman, 29, was fatally shot this afternoon in the bedroom of his home at 684 River Terrace. The police believe an intruder entered the house shortly after lunch and made his escape after shooting young Norman. However, the police are holding Mrs. Dorothy Norman, 25, the victim's wife, for further questioning. The first . . ."

I went back and worked another half-hour. Then Alex came over, gathered up all the live and dead

copy, and recommended the New Waldorf around the corner as a good place for chow.

AFTER I'D FINISHED up work, I went out on the town. Everything was as dead as Tuesday midnight in a deserted church. When I remembered how lively things had been at the Purple Parrot, I headed there. And it was there, while standing at the bar, teasing a drink and eyeing the local beauties, that this young guy wearing a porkpie hat came up to me.

"Looking for somebody?" he said.

"Yes and no. What's on your mind?"

He showed me the card in his wallet then. I went along with him, after winding up the highball, and the next door I walked through announced: "The Department of Justice of The United States."

The agent who had brought me in never gave me any name then. But he introduced me to his boss, Dave Harris. Harris was a thin, sharp-featured man in his early forties, streaks of white in his hair, who would have looked more at home as a high school teacher than throwing lead from a tommy gun.

"Bennett, we know all about your one previous conviction," he announced right off.

"All about it? Three years for stealing a lousy hundred and ten bucks?"

"Maybe they socked it to you. Cops often do."

"Every time I ever talked square

to a copper, I ended up standing on my head."

"One tough rap doesn't make a cop hater, Bennett. Unless he's that way to begin with."

"Maybe. What did you bring me in for?"

"To help us crack a new wrinkle. First time in my experience anyway. How about it?"

"Keep talking."

Harris glanced at his sidekick. They both smiled. All right, so maybe I didn't know which fork to use in a Federal office.

"We want you to keep right on working at Three Castles Press. Except that from here on in . . ." The rest of it was pretty technical.

And if the Feds had the right dope, plenty dangerous. One slip and somebody would pour a pint of molten lead over my ears. But I agreed.

That next night I went to work wearing coveralls. With deep side pockets. One thing more. A small pocket mirror that could be propped up over the keyboard to warn me if anybody came up from behind.

Everybody in the shop got the same hello as usual, the same meaningless smile, but inside, my nerves were dancing around like a drunk on a tightwire.

I never worked harder or swifter in my life. At nine o'clock Alex the foreman came up to the machine and said, "Not putting out much tonight, huh? Whatsamatter, hang-over?"

I gave him a halfwit's grin and

got ready to jump if he examined the stack of slugs in front of me.

"You get a load on last night, Bennett?"

"Have a heart, Alex. Don't mention the stuff. I'll pick up some."

"That job's due in a few hours now. Don't go cold on it."

He walked away then, and seeing his back move away in the hand mirror was as pretty as watching a ship go out to sea.

That night I worked like six madmen imitating a machine gun. By one in the morning I was up to production. And a little more. Enough more to make me feel fine inside. All I hoped was that when quitting time came, I could walk out that door without sounding like a ruptured tank. My coveralls were carrying enough excess metal to finance a bombing raid.

Two o'clock a battered old alarm clock rang, the machine stopped clanking, and there was that sullen hum before the switches went off.

"Bennett!" That was Willoughby, standing in the door of his office.

It was only thirty feet to the door and fifty back to his office. It felt like a mile on an uphill treadmill. Alex was there, and a third character who looked as if he had posed for plenty of front and side pictures. Three pairs of eyes came to rest on me.

"How'd you do tonight?" Willoughby said, very casually.

"Same as usual. Why?"

The only light in the office came

from a polished green-glass shade that dropped to within a foot of Willoughby's head. Outside in the shop I heard a few "good nights," somebody went by the door yelling at somebody else, "See you at Barney's joint."

"That machine was banging pretty steady for what little you turned out, Tom." Alex worked the cigar around in his mouth, watching me.

"You wouldn't try playing fancy, would you?" said Willoughby. "Don't forget I met you through Larry Norman."

The third man simply looked, as intent as a novice bird dog being taught how to flush quail.

"Because if you do try anything—" Alex began.

"Cut the gab," said Willoughby. "Search him, Ed."

THE FIRST LINO slug I threw hit the desk lamp and set it spinning like a fo'c'sle light in a Technicolor typhoon. The second smashed the bulb. The office rained glass and went as black as the pit of your stomach. Somebody, maybe Alex, got between me and the door. I smashed home a fistful of still-warm metal and made it into the clear. Out in the shop, a bullet sighed past my ear and powder suddenly sprayed out of a calcimined pillar ahead of me.

Twenty more steps of the hardest running I ever want to do got me inside the rubber-edged revolving door. It gave a soft squish, began

turning, and eased me out into the beautiful California night. There a stocky figure threw his arms around me. The instant before I let go a hand full of lead, I saw it was the same FBI agent who'd picked me up the night before.

"Brother, the way you go for photo finishes," I said, "you'll never live to a hundred and three."

Willoughby came out the door then, and Dave Harris got out of a sedan parked at the curb.

"You got what we want?" Harris asked me.

"Right in my pocket."

Harris gave a satisfied nod, ignored Willoughby's protests, yanked one arm up behind him, frogwalked him down to the sedan and locked Willoughby to the steering wheel. Then Harris and the other agent—his name turned out to be Jerry Antrim—with guns in hand now, went back and picked up Alex and Mr. Anonymous.

Down at the FBI office, Harris put all the pieces together.

"How did you know that Willoughby killed Norman?" I said.

"Little things. But I'll get to that later. What we wanted him for was perjury. You see, when the government takes on a trust-busting case, first thing they hold is a preliminary hearing. The judge, Judge Nettleton in this one, isn't present. He decides whether the government has a case or not, *only* from the printed evidence. That's where Willoughby came in. His racket was to alter the evidence by having his men make

what he told them were 'customers' corrections.' The lawyers paid him plenty to tamper with what was actually said in the courtroom. He loused things up neatly, just enough to throw a doubt in the judge's mind as to whether the government could win. And when you printed those extra slugs for us, the original Q. and A. *before* Willoughby 'corrected' them, you cracked the case, Tom. It means that The Three Castles Press is out of business and somebody up at Hammacher, Pierce and Lipton gets disbarred."

"Where did Larry Norman get into it?"

"He was Willoughby's salesman. A good one. He spread word around that if any law firm wanted its case to look good on appeal, Willoughby would fix it. Then he began demanding a bigger cut. Dorothy Norman even told us her husband had threatened Willoughby he'd open up another shop in direct competition. That did it."

"What have you got for a jury?" I asked.

"Here's what happened out at the Normans'. Mrs. Norman got back inside the house a minute or two after the killer had left. Larry was still breathing. But it was too late for a doctor. Too late for anything but to find out who'd killed her husband. She's a good housewife. When things aren't perfectly spotless she notices it."

"Don't tell me Willoughby wore baseball spikes."

Harris smiled. "This is for the

jury. Point One: Norman admitted the caller himself and took him into the bedroom to talk. So he must have known him well and trusted him. Point Two: The usual place for any ordinary caller would have been in a chair opposite to where Norman sat on the bed. Or most any other chair in the room. But what Dorothy Norman, the careful housewife, noticed was that the curtains over the windowsill had been crushed down as if someone had been leaning there. We'd watched Willoughby long enough to know that was a confirmed habit of his."

I recalled the night Willoughby had walked in on me and spent the time leaning against the hotel windowsill.

"Point Three: The first thing she found when she came into the room was a smouldering bath towel. Willoughby had wrapped the gun in that to muffle the sound. But no ordinary bath towel off the rack. Willoughby was a bacteriophobe. Hated germs. He had to take a towel straight back from the laundry. Out of the linen closet. Point Four: And this clinched it for us. Whoever leaned against that windowsill shifted his weight from time to time. Whenever he did, he left small indentations in the carpet. Ten to one they fit the tip of Willoughby's cane. Which is why Mr. Willoughby will go to the gas chamber."

He did too. With one legal dodge or another he held the sentence off for nearly two years. But in the end they cut the string on him. ♦♦♦

Nothing will quite shock civilized people so much as the murder of a child. Who, even today, does not think with horror of the murder of the Lindbergh baby? Who among the oldsters in the population does not still recall the famous disappearance of Charlie Ross, child heir of a wealthy Philadelphia family? Who has not felt shivers along his spine at the memory of that infamous child-killing pair, Leopold and Loeb? But it is not often that child murder is the subject for fiction. It is a subject too horrifying, too "realistic" for the pen of any but the most daring and skillful of writers; a subject that awaited a writer like Cornell Woolrich, who now, in stark and dramatic tones, takes you along the path of terror, in the wake of that most vicious and demented of killers—the infanticidal maniac.



I f I Should Die Before I Wake

By CORNELL WOOLRICH

THE LITTLE GIRL who had the desk in front of mine in 5-A was named Millie Adams. I don't remember much about her, because I was only nine then, not going-on-twelve like I am now. I only remember about those three lollipops—the two she got and the one she never

got—and how we never saw her again after that. Me and all the fellows used to tease her a lot. Afterwards, when it was too late, I wished we hadn't. We didn't tease her because we had anything against her, but just because she was a girl. She had two pigtails hanging down her

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back, and I had a lot of fun dipping them in my inkwell and sticking chewing gum on them. I got kept in plenty for it too.

I used to follow her around the school yard at noon recess pulling them and saying "Ding ding!" like they were bells. She used to say, "I'm going to tell a policeman on you!"

"Yah!" I hooted. "My father's a third grade detective. That's better than any policeman!"

"Well, then, I'll tell a second grade detective. That's better than a third grade one!"

That stumped me, so I went home and asked him about it that night.

He looked over at my mother, a little uncomfortably. She answered before he could. "Not better," she told me, "just a little smarter. Your father'll be one, Tommy, about the time he's fifty."

He squirmed, kind of, but he didn't say anything.

I said, "I'm going to be one too when I grow up."

She said, "God forbid!" but she seemed to be talking to my father more than me. "Never home on time for meals. Called out in the dead of night. Risking your life. Your wife never knowing when you'll be carried back on a stretcher—or not at all. And for what? A measly little pension when you've given your youth and strength, and are no good to them any more!"

It sounded swell to me. He sort of smiled. "My father was one before me," he said. "And I can remember my mother saying the same

thing when I was Tommy's age. You can't stop him. You may as well get used to the idea. It's in the blood."

"Yes? Well, it's going to come out of the blood, if I've got to use the back of a hairbrush to drive it out!"

Millie Adams, on account of the way us fellows had teased her, got in the habit of eating her lunch in the classroom instead of coming out in the yard. One day when I was getting ready to go out with mine, she opened her tin lunch box and I saw this peachy green lollipop stuck in it. One of the kind that cost a nickel apiece, not just a cent. And green is lime, my favorite flavor. So I hung around and tried to make up with her.

"Let's be friends," I said. "Where'd you get that?"

"Someone gave it to me," she said. "It's a secret." Girls always try to tell you that any time you ask 'em anything.

I knew better than to believe her. She never had any nickels for candy, and Mr. Beidermann down at the candy store wouldn't even trust us for one of the penny kind, much less a five-cent one like this with wax paper on it.

"I bet you swiped it," I said.

"I did not!" she flared. "A man gave it to me. An awful nice man. He was standing on the corner when I was coming to school this morning. He called me over and took it out of his pocket and said, 'Here, little girl—you want some candy?' He said I was the prettiest little girl

went by the whole time he was standing—”

SHE COVERED HER mouth with her hand. “Ooh, I forgot! He told me not to tell anybody. He said he wouldn’t gimme any more if I told anybody.”

“Gimme a lick,” I said, “and I won’t tell anybody.”

“Cross your heart and swear?”

I would have promised anything to get at it. So I crossed my heart and swore. Once you do that, you can’t ever tell—especially if your father’s a third grade detective like mine. You’re not like other fellows. You can’t ever break your word, not even to a dumb thing like a girl. If you do, you’re a double-crosser. He told me that and everything he says is true.

The next day when she opened her lunch box at noon, there was an orange one in it. And orange is my favorite flavor too. I was right there on the job, believe me. We shared it lick and lick alike.

“Oh, gee!” she smiled. “He’s an awful nice man! He’s got big eyes like a saucer and they keep looking all around. He’s going to give me another one tomorrow. A licorice one.”

Licorice is my favorite flavor too. “Bet he forgets,” I said.

“He said if he does, I should remind him, and I can go with him and get it myself. I can take as many as I want. He’s got a big house off in the woods, all full of lollipops and gumdrops and chocolate bars, and I can bring back as much as I

want. He’s the nicest man ever.”

“Then why didn’t ya?” I said. As though any kid in their right mind would turn down a swell chance like that! I knew she was just making the whole thing up to sound important and show off.

“Because it was one minute to nine and the bell was ringing already. Think I wanna be late and spoil my record? But tomorrow I’m gonna leave the house early so I’ll have lots of time.”

When we got out at three I steered clear of her because I didn’t want the other fellows to think I was a sissy. But she came up to me just as I was beginning a game of catch with Eddie Riley and yanked my sleeve. We were about a block away, all going home in a crowd.

“Look!” she whispered. “There’s that man I told you gave me the lollipops. See him standing down there under that awning? Now d’ya believe me?”

I looked but there wasn’t anything wonderful to see. Just a man in slouchy old clothes, with great big long arms nearly hanging down to his knees. The blue shade from the awning came down over his face and shoulders, but you could see his big pop-eyes glistening through it. He had a shiny jackknife in his hand and he was cutting his fingernails, and looking all around him like he didn’t want anybody to see what he was doing.

I was ashamed to let Eddie Riley see me talking to a girl, so I shoved her away. She didn’t have any lollip-

pop left any more, anyway. "Aw, who cares?" I growled. "Throw me a curve, Eddie!"

Eddie muffed a couple of my throws, because he was going backwards, on our way home, and while he ran after the ball to pick it up, I had time to look around. Millie and the man were walking down the side street holding hands with each other. But then all of a sudden he turned around and walked the other way in a hurry and went around the corner without her like he forgot something. Mr. Murphy, the traffic cop came up the side street just then, on his way to stand in front of the school and direct traffic like he always did when we kids were let out. That was all.

Next day Millie finally broke her record. She didn't come to school all day.

I WAS KIND OF hopeful that maybe she'd come the day after with all that candy, like she said, and share it with me. But the day after, her desk stayed empty too.

The principal came in just before three, and we saw two men in gray suits who looked like truant officers standing outside in the hall. We all got kind of scared at first, but it wasn't anything; they weren't after any of us for breaking windows or anything. The principal just wanted to know if anybody present had seen Millie Adams on the way to school day before yesterday.

One girl raised her hand and said she'd called for Millie, but Millie had

left the house extra early, quarter past eight, so she'd missed her.

I was going to tell them what she told me, about that house full of candy in the woods, but I remembered I swore and crossed my heart, and my father was a third grade detective, so how could I? I knew it was all just fibs anyway, and they'd just laugh at me or make me stand up in the corner.

We never saw Millie again. One day about three months after, Miss Hammer's eyes were all red and wet, like she'd been crying just before the bell rang. She was our teacher. And from then on my father wasn't home for nearly a week straight. He'd just come in late at night once in a while, for a shave and a shower, and go right out again.

One night through the door, I heard him saying something about "an escaped lunatic." But I couldn't understand what that word meant. I thought it was some kind of an animal. Some breed of dog, maybe.

"If we only had some kind of a lead!" he said. "Any kind of description at all to go by, no matter how sketchy! If we don't get him, you know, it'll only happen over again. It always does."

I got out of bed and went out to him. I said, "Dad, if a guy gives his word not to tell something, can't he ever break his word?"

"No," he said, "never. Only stool-pigeons tell, and welshers."

"One in the family's enough!" my mother said sharply. "That'll be all of that!" And she reached for

her slipper, so I beat it out of there.

Sometimes when he came home like that, that week, he brought papers with him. But when I'd find them the next day, the front page was always torn off, like it had somebody's picture on it I wasn't supposed to see. But I only went for the comic strips anyway. Then, after about a week, they were left whole again like before, and he started coming home for supper again.

Pretty soon all of us kids in school forgot all about Millie Adams.

I got promoted in the fall, and in the spring again, and in the next fall and spring. I couldn't get anything higher than C's in proficiency and C-minuses in conduct, but as long as I made it and didn't get left behind, my father would just shove my head with his hand and say, "That's all right, Tommy, you'll make a good detective anyway. You're a chip off the old block."

Only he always said it when my mother wasn't around. Oh, I nearly forgot! He got made a second grade detective when he was only thirty-five yet, and not fifty like she said. She got kind of red when he reminded her, I noticed.

I was lucky all through 5B and 6A and 6B. I didn't have a girl sitting in front of me again until 7A. She was a new girl, transferred from another school. Her name was Jeanie Myers. She always wore a white middy blouse, and she had a bunch of brown curls hanging down her back.

I liked her from the start, because she got very good marks, and the way the work kept getting tougher all the time, it came in handy the way she let me look over her shoulder and get all the right answers. Most girls are stingy that way, but she was just like a fellow. So when the other fellows started to tease her, I punched one of them in the nose and made them quit after that. But then she had to come up to me in front of the whole crowd and say, "Tommy Lee, I think you're awful wonderful!" I didn't like that much.

CHAPTER TWO

OUTSIDE OF DIVVYING her answers up, Jeanie was just as dumb as other girls. She had one baby habit; she was crazy about colored chalk. She was always carrying it around with her, and whenever you saw pink or yellow streaks on a fence or the side of a house, you knew Jeanie Myers had passed that way. She just couldn't resist marking up everything in reach. She couldn't seem to go by anywhere without drawing a long track after her on a wall or sidewalk. We fellows used lots of chalk too, but the plain white kind, and we used it for something useful like a baseball score or a game of prisoner's base, not just making wavy lines along fences. She didn't even know she was doing it half the time. She just walked along with her hand out tracing chalk marks without looking.

Buying it all the time kept her

pretty broke; that colored kind comes to a dime a box, and sometimes she bought as many as two boxes a week. So she hardly ever had any money left over for candy. That was why I was so surprised when I saw her unwrapping the wax paper off this five-cent lollipop one day at recess.

It was green. Lime is my favorite flavor, too.

"Yesterday afternoon," I accused her, "you wouldn't lend me a penny for caramels, then you go and buy a whole five-cent lollipop, you piker!"

"I did not!" she said. "A man gave it to me on the way to school this morning."

"Aw, since when do grownups hand out candy free to us kids like that?" I wanted to know.

"He did so! He's in the candy business, that's why! He's got a great big warehouse or somep'n full of it. I can have all I want for nothing, free. All I hafta do is go there and help myself."

For a minute I had a funny feeling like somebody I once knew long ago had been given a green lollipop like that, and I tried hard to remember who, but I couldn't. It wasn't last week, or the week before, or last month. It wasn't even last year, and I could hardly remember back that far anyway, so I had to give up trying.

After she licked it down halfway, she split it with me. She was very nice that way, Jeanie. "Don't let on what I told you to any of the other kids," she said, "or they'll wan-

na get in on all the candy too."

Next day when the bunch was all piling out into the yard at recess, she turned and whispered over her shoulder to me, "Stay in! I've got another one."

She kept the lid of her box down until they were all gone, then tipped it and showed me. It was orange, and orange is my favorite flavor. I shoved in on the seat next to her and we got to work between us.

I screwed my face up and kept staring at the blackboard, which was all empty. I kept trying to remember something about an orange lollipop too. First green, then orange. It was like I'd done all this before. "Boy, am I having fun this week!" Jeanie raved between licks. "Every day a free lollipop for a treat. He's an awful nice man, whoever he is. Tomorrow what kind d'ya think I'm going to get? Licorice!"

Without knowing how it happened, I wasn't thinking about lollipops any more. I was trying to remember the names of breeds of dogs. I don't know what that had to do with it, but I couldn't quit. I even asked her to give me some when I ran out of them myself, but she only gave me the ones I had already. Airedale, St. Bernard, Collie. It wouldn't work.

"Ain't there some that end in 'ick'?" I said.

"Masticks?" she said.

"No, that's mastiffs," I said scornfully.

I had an awful empty feeling, like I had to tell somebody something real

bad, but I didn't know who, and I didn't know what I had to tell, so how could I? And then the one o'clock bell rang, and it was too late.

I HAD AN AWFUL bad dream that night, about a lot of old newspapers lying on the ground out in the woods somewhere, and they all had their front pages torn off. Then when I picked them up and looked under them, somebody's whole arm was sticking up out of the ground, stiff and dead, and the hand part was holding onto a shiny black licorice lollipop. Boy, it scared me! I woke up and pulled the covers all the way over my head.

My mother had to call me three times next day, I was so sleepy, and I just about made school by the skin of my teeth. I just landed in my seat as the bell quit ringing, and Old Battle-Ax Flagg gave me a dirty look, but she couldn't do anything about it.

When I got my breath back, I looked up and something looked different about the room. I could see Eddie Riley's head and shoulders up two seats ahead with no one in the way. Then I saw right away that was because Jeanie's desk was empty. And she was always in ahead of me. She'd never been late before.

Something had happened.

Flagg called on me right away, and I was kept too busy to think about anything but what the square root of some blame thing was. Then at ten after, Jeanie and another girl named Emma Dolan came in to-

gether. The girls didn't say anything.

When the period was over Old Hatchet-Face Flagg said, "Jeanie, you're staying in this afternoon for being late. Emma, I'll overlook it this time, because I know your mother's sick this week and you have to help around the house."

It was the first time she'd ever been kept in like that, Jeanie, and I felt kind of sorry for her.

At noon she took a licorice lollipop out of her lunch box. She was boiling.

"I'da had a million of 'em if I hadn't run into that ole Emma!" she complained. "We were on our way over to where he keeps his candy supply. It would of only taken a minute, and then she had to come along and spoil everything. He went off and left me! Now I can't go this afternoon either on account of being kept in!"

I wanted to be extra-special nice to her—we were going to have an exam next day and her answers would come in handy—so I said, "I'll wait for you outside, huh, Jeanie?" when the bell rang at three and everybody but her got up to beat it.

I hung around playing ball with myself, throwing curves up into the air and running under them to catch them when they came down, and it sort of carried me down a ways without noticing it, until I was nearly two blocks away from the school. Then I missed one and I had to run after it, and it wound up in front of somebody's feet standing under an awning on the sidewalk.

I bent down and got it, and then I looked up and there was a man standing there very still in front of me, in the blue shadows under the awning. He had big stary eyes and long arms like them chimps at the zoo, and he was doing something with his fingers, bending them in and out like he wanted to get hold of something with them.

He didn't pay much attention to me. I guess he wasn't interested in little boys. I looked at his face for a minute, and I had a feeling I'd seen it before some place. Especially those eyes. I backed away and went on playing ball, and he just stayed there where he was, without moving, except only his fingers like I told you.

I threw an extra high one, way up, and while I was staring straight up watching it, all of a sudden a name seemed to come down and hit me out of the blue sky. "Millie Adams!" I knew where I'd seen those funny eyes before, and now I knew who'd shared a green and an orange lollipop with me. He'd given them to her—and then she never came back to school any more. Now I knew what I wanted to tell Jeanie—not to go near him, because something would happen to her. I didn't know what, but something.

I got so scared I quit playing ball and I ran all the way back to school and went in the yard, which we weren't allowed to do after hours. I sneaked up outside the window and looked in.

She was still sitting there at her

desk doing her homework, and Miss Flagg was up front correcting papers. So I started to tap as light as I could on the pane, to get Jeanie to turn around and look at me. She did, but then right while I was making signs to her, Flagg looked up and caught us, and she made me come inside.

"Well, Thomas," she said, sour as a lemon, "since you seem unable to tear yourself away from the classroom, suppose you sit down and go to work. No, not behind Jeanie—on the other side of the room please!"

Then, after a couple minutes, just to make things worse, she said, "You may go now, Jeanie. You've stayed long enough. Tomorrow see that you get here on time." But then when she saw me getting ready to get up and go with her, she snapped, "Not you, young man! Stay right where you are!"

I couldn't hold back any more. I hollered out at her, "No! Miss Flagg, don't let her go! You can't! Make her stay in! She's going after some candy, and—"

She got riled as blazes and banged her hand down on her desk. "Here, here!" she yapped. "That'll be all of that! Not another word out of you! Every time you open your mouth, I'm keeping you in another half-hour!"

I saw Jeanie gathering up her books and starting for the door, and I couldn't stand it. "Jeanie!" I yelled at her. "Don't go out there! Wait for me outside in the yard!"

Miss Flagg got up and came down

the aisle and stood there over me.

"Do you want me to send for the principal?" she barked. "I'll have you put back to 6B if you make another sound! I'll have you expelled for insubordination!"

I never saw her get so sore before.

Jeanie was sore too—at me. "Snitcher! Tattle-tale!" she said under her breath, and closed the door after her. I saw her go past the window outside, and then I didn't see her any more. She'd left the grounds.

I DID MY BEST to try and tell Miss Flagg, but she wouldn't let me talk. I was half bawling, and so excited I could hardly talk straight anyhow. "She's going to get some lollipops and she's never coming back, and then the front pages of the papers are all going to be torn off and . . ." I was sobbing so hard I don't think she heard half I said. Her face was like stone, and she was writing a note to my father. I yelled, "Like Millie Adams—and *you* done it, *you* done it!"

She hadn't been on the staff when that happened to Millie Adams, so she didn't know what I meant. And she kept giving me another half-hour, until finally I had to stay in every day all week until six, and I was suspended, and I had to bring my father, and a million other things. I was licked and I knew it, and I just had to sit there mum, while the sun went down outside and shadows piled up in the school yard, and finally it was all dark, and she put on the electric lights. Even then

she wouldn't let me go, until the minute of six.

Then she made me take a note home with me, and when I lit out and didn't close the door, she made me come back and do it over again.

When I finally got out for good and all, the streets around the school were dark and empty, just a bleary arc light shining down on the corner, and when I passed where that awning was, it had been folded up for the night and there wasn't anyone standing there any more. Something funny went up and down my back, like when a cat's fur goes the wrong way, as I went by there.

Instead of going home, I went to Jeanie's house first, which was off in another direction, and hung around outside trying to look in the windows and see if she was in there. They were all lit up and I saw her mother and her kid sister, but not her. Her mother kept coming to the window and looking out, and that's how she saw me out there. Then she came out to the door and said, "Tommy, have you seen Jeanie? She should have been in long ago. I think she went over to Emma's house. If you see her, will you tell her to come right straight home? It's after six, and I don't like her staying out this late."

I felt sort of sick and scared, and I didn't have the nerve to tell her. I backed off the porch, and I said, "Yes, ma'am," and I ran like anything.

Emma lived awfully far out, and she wasn't there. I knew she

wouldn't be, anyway, but I went to see, because Emma's family didn't have a phone. Emma came to the door chewing bread and said Jeanie never showed up at her house after she got let out. I didn't know where else to go but home then.

I would have been scared to go there at all any other night but this. It was after seven already—and was I in dutch! Just that night my father had to be home early, and supper was all over, and he was sore it me for being late. And I guess they'd both been kind of scared too, and they took that out on me too.

I couldn't get a word in about Jeanie. I no sooner opened up about being kept in, which was only the first part of what I wanted to tell him, when he whacked me and told me to go to my room and stay there. Then while I was still trying to tell him, he saw the note Miss Flagg wrote, and after he read that, that finished it. I couldn't get a word in sideways, he was making so much noise. He locked the door on me from the outside, and there I was.

Nobody seemed to know but me, and nobody would listen to me or believe me or try to help me. Not Miss Flagg, nor Jeanie's mother, nor even my own father, who I thought was such a regular guy. Now it was probably too late. I sat there on the edge of my bed in the dark and held my head.

I heard our phone ringing through the door, and he quit ranting long enough to answer it. Then I heard

my mother say, "Oh, Tom, no—not again!" in a scared voice.

"What else *could* it be?" he said. "The chief just said they found her school books lying there in an alley. I told you it would happen again, if we didn't catch up with him the first time."

He meant Jeanie! I knew he meant Jeanie!

I jumped up and started to shake the doorknob like sixty, and holler: "Dad, lemme out a minute! I can tell ya what he looks like! I saw him this afternoon! I saw him with my own eyes!"

But the front door banged before I got halfway through, and they'd both gone out without listening to me. I guess my mother must have gone over to stay with Mrs. Myers a while and try to buck her up. I kept up my racketing, but no one answered.

I didn't know what to do then. I sat back on the bed and held my head some more. I thought, "How're they ever gonna get him, if they don't know what he looks like? I do, and they won't gimme a chance to tell them. I gotta stay here shut up, when I'm the only one knows!"

Thinking about Jeanie made me feel shivery even where I was, right in my own house. I wondered what a man like that would do to her. Something pretty terrible, because they hardly ever called my Dad up like that after he went off duty, and they had tonight.

I got up and went over to the window and stuck my hands in my

pockets and stood looking out. Gee, it was dark out! The street looked so scary and lonely, with just a pale arc light way down by the corner. I thought of Jeanie out there some place, with something awful happening to her and nobody around to help her. I took my hands out of my pockets and some of the junk I always carried around with me spilled out. Marbles and nails and a hunk of chalk and . . .

I stood looking at the chalk.

I threw up the window and climbed out onto the porch shed. We lived upstairs in a two-family house. Maybe a grownup would have had a hard time shinnying down the porch post to the ground, but it was a pipe for me.

CHAPTER THREE

I BEAT IT OFF the block in a hurry, in case my mother should come back. I knew my Dad wouldn't. He stayed out whole days at a time when they sent for him like this. After I got past the street that went down Jeanie's way, I wasn't worried about being spotted any more.

I went the same way I did every morning on the way to school; only I'd never gone to school at night like this before. But I didn't go all the way. I stopped two blocks away where that rolled-up awning was. Everything looked different from what it did in the daytime, the school black and the sky black and no kids around at all—only me.

I said to myself, "She bought a

SLOW DEATH

ONE OF THE weirdest convictions on record was handed down by a Swedish tribunal, back around your great-grandfather's time. A pair of identical twins had just been nailed on a murder rap and were all set to entrain for eternity via the gallows, when it occurred to somebody that here was a swell chance to find out about those coffee nerves. At the last minute the two condemned men were offered a chance to drink themselves to death—on coffee and tea respectively. The idea was to find out which would kill them quickest.

The tea-drinker succumbed first—at the early age of 83! Now the Scandinavians drink more coffee than anybody.

new box of chalk day before yesterday, because I saw a full-length stick in her hand when we got out at three." But it didn't last long, the way she wore it away against everything in sight. Suppose she didn't have any left—by today?

I went around the corner from where the awning was, and I started looking along the walls. There wasn't anything on them, but they weren't any good for chalking anyway. They were mostly glass and storefronts and doorways. I went down the whole block and I couldn't see a mark. But then she might have been walking on the outside.

I got all the way to the next corner, and I was going to turn around and go back when I saw a hydrant out on the edge of the curb and it

had a pink chalk gash across the hub. Jeanie—this afternoon. Because her house was up the other way. She never passed here on her way home other days.

For a little while I forgot to be afraid. It was like that game we kids play, "Hare and Hounds." I ran across the gutter and went along the next block. There was still too much glass, which is no good for chalk, but there was an ash can sticking out that must have been there all day without being taken in; it had a wavy pink line around its ridges.

Next block didn't have anything, and there was a peach of a brick wall along it too, perfect for chalking. She wouldn't have passed that up, no, sir! So I crossed over to the other side of the way, and she and he must have too, because there was a lamp post there and that had a short little dab.

Next block had something, and next, and then all of a sudden it quit. I went ahead looking, then had to come back again to where they ended. Did her chalk give out here, maybe? Did he catch her doing it and make her throw it away? Not Jeanie—you couldn't get her to part with a piece of chalk for love or money. And he wouldn't get rough with her, because this was Allen Avenue, and in the daytime there was lots of people around, even if there was no one around now.

I turned off to my left and went down that way. It wasn't as nice here as our part of town any more:

a great big gas works, and old tumbled-down houses, and dark alleys and things. But the chalking was swell. That was the trouble. There was too much of it. Nearly every wall and vacant space was crawling with it, and some of it was words you get your mouth washed out with soap for saying. But it was all white chalk, luckily, so I knew it wasn't Jeanie's. Then when I saw where a sudden bright yellow streak started up and went on and on, with just breaks where there were doors and windows, I knew I'd found her again. She'd run out of pink around the corner and started in on a yellow stick, that was all.

IT WAS SO easy to follow, on account of being a thick hunk she was holding, that I started to run instead of just walking, to catch up quicker. I shouldn't have. All of a sudden without any warning a skinny little bit of an alleyway opened up alongside of me, and there were a whole lot of men standing around in it.

A car was fronted up to the curb with its lights shining smack into it. But what scared me worst about the whole thing was that one of those men was my own father. He was standing right in the middle of all of them. Did I jump back quick! He had his back to me luckily, and didn't see me. I heard him saying, ". . . here some place. Well, the quicker we start a house- to-house search, the better, boys."

One of them was holding one of

our arithmetics like we use in school, with our names and grades on the inside of the cover.

Was it Jeanie's?

I ducked around the back of the car, keeping out of the light, and got across to the other side of the alley. The yellow line went right on from there uninterrupted, about me and Jeanie's reach from the ground.

I was dying to step up and tell him, "Dad, if you'll only follow this line it'll take you to her. I *know* it will!" But I didn't have the nerve. I knew what I'd get for being caught out on the streets that late without permission, especially after he left me locked up at home. He'd probably whale the daylight's out of me right in front of the whole bunch of them.

So I went off by myself into the dark, away from them all, and kept following the line on my own hook, and I guess they never even knew I passed there.

I couldn't understand why she'd throw her own books away into an alley like that. She knew better than to do that to school property of her own accord. And she was still all right up to here. Nothing had happened to her yet, or she wouldn't have kept on tracing this line. The only thing I could make out was the man must have been carrying them for her, pretending he didn't want her to get tired, and he shied them in there without her noticing, figuring she wasn't going to need them any more. Or else he pretended they weren't going very

much farther, were going to come right back, and said to leave them there for a minute.

But they did go on farther, lots farther—so I guess she never noticed he got rid of her books for her. All of a sudden vacant lots began showing up, and then there was one last house, and then the houses quit dead and it was the edge of town. Open fields started in from here on. The road kept going, but without any sidewalks any more.

I'd never been this far out before, not even in the daytime, and I was stumped for sure now. There wasn't anything left to chalk up any more. But the yellow streak had run right smack up to the very edge of the end house and then run off into thin air, so they must have kept pointed straight ahead. I did too, but I sure wasn't keen on it. I had to walk in the dirt and stones along the side of the road, and jump back sometimes when cars came whizzing by, so I wouldn't get hit.

Way up ahead—it seemed like a mile off—there was a row of billboards. It took me a long time to get up to them, but when I did I was glad I had kept going, because the lower supports had little yellow strokes on them. So she'd still been holding onto her chalk even this far out. It must have been lonely out here even in the afternoon, and now it was terrible. Just this grey road in the darkness, with black fields all around, and high grass hissing in the wind. The road had lights on telegraph poles, but they were

awfully far apart. And you felt worse after you left each one behind than you did before you came up to it. She'd marked them, though; they must have been walking offside like I was. Maybe he'd been afraid to ask for a lift while he had her with him.

I looked back and the lights of the city were so far behind me I couldn't see them any more, just a haze in the sky over where they were. I wanted to turn around and go back, but I kept thinking, "if I was in poor Jeanie's shoes, I wouldn't want the only fella that knows where I am to give up and go back!"

So I didn't.

There was worse coming up ahead, too. I tried to ignore it as long as I could, because I knew what it was, and I didn't like the idea very much either. Something even blacker than the rest of the blackness had been slowly coming nearer for a long time. Like a big black wall where the fields ended, and the nearer I got the taller it got, until it was way up over me. The woods!

Finally they got up to me and closed in around me on both sides. I took one last long look back, toward where my father and those other men were, so far behind me. Then I took a deep breath and held it, and kept moving.

The road kept going right on through, and even the lights kept up far apart, so at first it wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be. I was careful not to look anywhere but straight ahead. I was just as

scared now to turn back as to go ahead. That's why I kept going ahead.

WHEN I GOT up to the next light pole, she'd passed it too. But when I got to the one after that—she hadn't. They'd turned off somewhere in between the two.

Boy, I sure felt little and lonely and scared. It was like dying a little to go in there. If I'd only had even just Eddie Riley along with me, or anyone at all, it wouldn't have been so bad.

I probably would have hung around there all night trying to make up my mind, when something did it for me all of a sudden. A roaring sound came heading toward me through the woods, and before there was even time enough to get scared, a pair of bright white headlights came shooting down the road at me, with a car behind them headed in to town a mile a minute. I only just had time to jump out of the way to keep from getting hit, it was whizzing along so fast.

The brakes squawked and screeched and it stopped somewhere down the road out of sight, beyond the light. I ducked behind a tree, listening, and I heard a lady's voice say, "I'm telling you it wasn't an animal! I distinctly saw his face! Now what's a child doing alone in the woods at this hour of the night? Go back and see if you can find him, Frank!"

I heard the door open and a man got out and came back toward me

calling "Little boy! Sonny! Come here, we won't hurt you!"

I wanted awful bad to run out to him and say, "Take me in with you, will you please, mister?" But all I had to do was think of Jeanie and I couldn't do it.

I turned and beat it away when he got too near, afraid he'd collar me and keep me from trying to find Jeanie. And that's how I got in the woods. I stopped again, in farther, and held my breath, so he wouldn't follow me by the noise I was making. I heard the car start up again, and caught a red wink from its tail, way off between the trees, and then it was gone and I was alone in the woods.

Once you were in under 'em, the trees weren't as close together as they looked from the outside. It was bad enough, but at least it wasn't like a jungle or something you read about in books. About five minutes after I first went in, something funny started to happen. The tops of the trees all lit up red, like there was a fire around, and some of it got through down to the ground where I was. But then when it started to change to white little by little, I caught on it was a late moon coming up full. In one way, it didn't make it any better for me; it made it worse than before. I could see my way better, but I could also see lots of spooky shadows and things that I couldn't before when it was all dark. This way I saw too much.

I went on, knowing I might lose the road for good and all, but too

tired and scared already to care much if I did. Every once in a while I'd think I'd see something move, and I'd run—away from it, don't worry. It was while I was sprinting like that, across a sort of open place pale with moonlight, that my foot caught over something and I took a full-length flop, and there was a clatter that nearly busted my heart in two.

It was her tin lunch box, lying there on the ground.

She'd carried it all this way, thinking she was going to fill it up with candy. So now I knew I'd finally hit the place where she'd caught on, got frightened, and quit going any more of her own accord. He must have kept talking a lot until now to keep her attention, to keep her from noticing how far into the woods he was bringing her. But here was where she finally tumbled something was wrong.

There were other things there beside the lunch box. I had to look a little, but I found them in the moonlight. Two brand new pieces of chalk that hadn't been used yet, but that somebody had stepped on and broken where they fell. And I also found the black sailor tie that she always wore around her middy blouses. The bow was still in it, but it was torn in half, like he'd caught her by it when she tried to run away.

"Oh, gee, Jeanie," I thought, scared stiff, "did he kill you?"

Ahead, like looking through a long black tunnel, there was another open patch of moonlight. I ran on to-

ward it, because I was too scared to stay there with that lunch box and those other things any more. When I got to it and looked, somehow I knew it was the place, and nothing was stirring, but it kind of—seemed to be waiting.

It was a much bigger clearing than the last. There was a crazy old decayed house standing in the middle of it. It didn't have any glass in the windows, and you could tell no one had lived in it in a long time. Maybe it had once been a small farm or something, and it had been given up. The trees were closing back in on it; the little trees in front, the bigger trees behind them. It just sat there in the moonlight, kind of waiting, as if to say, "Come on in, little boy," and then—*snap*.

CHAPTER FOUR

I CIRCLED ALL THE way around the house first, without coming out from between the trees. I dodged behind them from one to the other, and it felt like someone was watching me the whole time from those black holes of windows, waiting for me to come nearer.

Finally I got up my nerve and stole out into the open, on the side where the shadow of the house fell, and there was no moonlight to give me away. I got up close under one of the yawning windows and listened. I couldn't hear anything, but that was because my heart was thumping so hard.

I whispered very low, "Jeanie, are

you in there?" and then I nearly dropped dead. But nothing happened.

I was afraid to go around by the door, because that was the side where all the moonlight was, and I knew that warped porch would grunt like anything under me. So I finally reached up and caught the window ledge I was under with both hands and chinned myself slowly up, without scraping my feet against the weatherbeaten old clapboards. I'm a good chinner in school. But when my eyes came up over the sill, it was all black inside. I couldn't see a thing. I let myself down to rest, and I thought of a test to find out if it was okay to go in there or not. I picked up a handful of gravel and tossed it in, and heard it light all over the floor inside like rain. I crouched, ready to sprint back to the trees, but nothing moved, nothing happened.

The house just seemed to keep on waiting. So I got up my courage and chinned myself up again, and this time I stuck my legs across and got in.

I waited for hands to grab me, out of the dark, but they didn't, and after I was in a little while I could see moonlight reflected in the front part of the house and that sort of guided me. I went toward it through an opening in the wall where there wasn't any door left any more, and came out into a hall. It was bright as milk out there, with moonlight spilling through the open door in front and the busted fanlight above

it. Off to one side there were rickety stairs going up into the dark.

I put my hand on the post at the bottom of the stairs and waited for more nerve to work itself up. When it had, I started inching up them, waiting on each step before I took the next. Every time they squeaked, I got off that place and moved to another. One time the whole thing snapped, like a log in a fire, and I waited a whole five minutes with my tongue hanging out, but still nothing happened.

When I was finally up on the top landing, there was a closed door off to one side of me. It wasn't missing like the ones downstairs. I put my hands against it and started easing it open. If there'd been anyone in there, I kept telling myself, they would have heard me long before now. I finally got it back far enough to look in around the edge of it.

This room was on the moon side, but it had its shutters closed over the glassless windows. Only crazy little criss-cross chinks of light came through the slats. I whispered, "Jeanie, are you in here?"

I only had nerve enough to do that once in each room. But this time somebody sort of coughed. I had to grab my mouth with both hands to keep from yelling. Before I could get my head back out of the door, the cough came again. It was such a little bit of a sound, like a baby choking, that I hung onto the door frame with both hands and managed to keep from bolting for the stairs. It almost sounded like a weak cough

for help, if there is such a thing.

I could make out a lot of lumps on the floor, a pile of old burlap sacks or something strewn around. I said, "Jeanie?" a little louder than I'd yet spoken, and to my horror they started to wave a little. I didn't know what was coming out of them, rats or snakes or—I hung on tight to the door so as not to give ground.

What did come out of them was two feet. Little feet, a kid's feet, tied together. One was black with a stocking on it, one was white, because the stocking had fallen down.

I wasn't afraid now. I jumped over and pulled all the empty sacks off, and I could see her white middy blouse in the dark. I felt for her face, and the reason she could only cough was her mouth had a rag tied across it.

I took a terrible chance and scraped one of the matches from my pocket along the floor. I could have opened the shutters, but that would have taken longer. The match showed there wasn't anybody else but us in the room. Her eyes were shining, but it was all black around them where the tears had been running down for hours steady. I took a good look at the knot on the gag and then I put the match out. I needed both hands.

I GOT IT OFF easy. I'm good at knots. He'd tied the cords around her hands and feet good and tight, but my fingers were smaller than his. I could get them in places he couldn't. Even so it seemed to

ake ages, and I kept expecting to feel somebody grab the back of my neck any minute.

I slipped my arm under her and helped her to sit up. She cried a little more just from habit, because she'd been crying so long already.

"Where'd he go?" was the first thing I whispered.

She quit crying long enough to let some voice through. "I—I don't know," she whispered back.

"Has he been gone long?"

"When the m-moon came up."

"Did he go out of the house?"

"I think s-so."

"Maybe he's gone for good," I breathed hopefully.

"No, he said he—he was just going to dig the hole. He said he was coming back and—do it then."

"Do what?"

"K-kill me with that knife he's got. He pulled a hair outa my head right in front of me and tried it on the knife to see if it was sharp enough or not. . . ."

We both looked all around us fearfully. "Let's get out of here," I said hurriedly. "Can you walk?"

"My legs are asleep." One of them gave under her when she tried to stand up and she nearly went down, but I caught her just in time.

"Hold onto me!" I said.

We got out the door that way and to the head of the stairs. The moonlight down below in the hall looked wonderful—if we could only get down there and out where it was.

"Don't make any noise going down now," I cautioned. "He may

be around out there some place."

We hobbled down them as quiet and careful as we could, on the inside close up against the wall, me feeling our way along it, she hugging me close. The circulation came back in her legs and it got easier for her to use them. We were only about a quarter of the way down from the top when it happened.

I think both of us shouldn't have stood on the same step at one time. That was it. Something banged like a gun, and the step split in the middle and went down like a V. My whole foot went in and through. The toe part got caught down *below* the split and I couldn't bring it back again.

We both worked like sixty, she with her hands and me with my hands and feet both, trying to get it loose again. I couldn't, no matter how I turned it. The board had snapped part way back or something, and it hurt like the dickens the way it squeezed. I couldn't even get down to my shoe and unlace it, or I would have tried pulling it out of that.

We had to quit finally, we got so tired out pulling and hauling at it. We both had to sit down together on the step above it—I could do that—and rest. And wait.

"Jeanie, go ahead!" I kept begging her. "Get down there while you still can make it, and—and keep going straight over that way, with the moon behind you, until you get to the road."

She hung onto me like glue with

both hands and wouldn't budge. "No, no! I'm not going without you. If you hafta stay, then I'm gonna s-stay too. It wouldn't be fair, Tommy."

We sat without saying anything for a while—just listening. Listening hard. Once in a while we tried to cheer each other up.

"Maybe he won't come back till daylight, and somebody else'll find us first."

But who would come to a forgotten house like this way out in the woods?

"Maybe he won't come back at all." But he hadn't gone to all the trouble of bringing her here just to leave her tied up, and we both knew it.

Once she asked, "Why d'you suppose he did it? I never did anything to him."

I remembered something my father had said when that happened to Millie Adams that time. "He's an escaped cadillac or something."

"What do they do to you?" she wanted to know.

I wasn't sure. I only knew they found them out in the woods under old newspapers long afterwards. But I couldn't tell her that, because she was only a girl.

"I—I guess they bully you and tease you lots."

"He did already," she shivered. "He kept drinking out of a bottle and singing loud without any tune, and then he'd make me feel how sharp that knife was, and he cut off one of my curls and waved it around

on his finger, like that. . . ."

Something crunched outside the house like little stones, and our arms grabbed each other so tight we were just like one kid instead of two.

"Quick, Jeanie! Run!" I hissed.

She couldn't even whisper, she was so scared. All she could do was shake her head.

THERE WEREN'T ANY more crunches for a minute, and we thought of everything we could that would help and said it into each other's ears.

"Maybe it was just something fell down off a tree."

"Maybe he won't come in, maybe he'll stay out there."

We both saw the shadow at the same time, and gave a heave together. It was in the middle of all the white moonlight on the floor down below, like someone was standing close up against the front doorway listening. It didn't move at first. Just stayed still, a big black head and shoulders.

We lay back flat against the slope of the stairs and tried to get in as close as we could against the wall where it was darker. But my foot wouldn't let me move much from where I was, and her middy blouse was so white.

The black shadow was moving now. It was coming further in. It was spreading across the moonlight like ink on a blotter. It got longer and longer and longer, and grew a pair of long legs like a man on stilts. He was down there below us in the

all now. And he was coming up!

I breathed into her ear, "Hide your face against me! Don't look at him! Maybe he won't see us!" She turned her face around the other way like I said, and I went on looking through her hair.

The stairs shook a little. He must have put his foot on them. Then he put his other foot down, and they shook some more. He came up like a cat, hardly making any sound at all with his feet. But we could hear his breathing plain. I guess he hadn't seen us yet because he had just come in out of the bright moonlight. The higher up he got, the more of it he shut off from us. All I could see now was him, a black shape in front of us.

She tried to turn her head back again to see, but I grabbed it with my hand and held it.

All of a sudden he stopped, with a creak of the whole staircase, and didn't move. I guess he'd seen the white of her blouse up there ahead of him. Something scratched and we both jumped, she and I, and then yellow shone out all over the stairs and he was holding a match out to us!

It wasn't very bright, but it was plenty for him to see us by. And us, him!

I'd been right! It was the man under the awning! But what good did that do now? Those long arms, and bulgy eyes, and gee, what a fierce face! Then he started to smile like he was tickled.

He said, "Oh, so a little boy came

too, while I was gone. That's nice."

He came up a step. "And you both got all the way out here and then you couldn't get any farther—hee, hee!"

And he came up another step. "Well, I don't like little boys much, but as long as you came all the way out here, I'll have to make the grave a little bigger!"

I started to tuck my free leg up under me, to stay as far away from him as I could as long as I could. Jeanie was just a little round ball against my side.

"Get out o' here!" I said in a scared voice, very low. "Get out o' here! Leave us alone!"

He came up another step and he was bending right over us, double nearly. I couldn't hold out any more, even if I was going on twelve. "Dad!" I started to holler. "Oh, Dad, quick!"

"Yes, call your daddy," he said silkily, reaching out one long arm for Jeanie's blouse. "Call your daddy. He'll find you all cut up in little pieces. I'll send him your ear, maybe, by parcel post."

I didn't know what I was doing any more. I struck out at him with my free leg.

My foot went right into his stomach and he never expected it. He made a funny sound like "Oof!" and the match went out. The staircase gave a worse bang, even, than when my foot got caught.

He went thumping all the way down to the bottom, and a whole lot of dust came up all around. When

I could see the moonlight through it again, there was a big black gap in the middle of the stairs, but not too wide to jump across, and the rail was off, and the whole thing was tipping sideways from the wall, but not enough to spill you off. And best of all, oh best of all, my foot was free!

He was down there at the foot of the stairs lying back on his elbows. But he didn't seem to be hurt much. He jumped right up and gave a roar, and reached into his clothes, and when he swung his hand back, something flashed in it in the moonlight.

"Jeanie, quick! My foot's out!" I yelled, and we both went scampering.

WE GOT BACK in the room where she'd been tied and banged the door. He had to come up real slow and careful after us this time, so the stairs wouldn't give way altogether, and that gave us time to run all around the place looking for things to block up the door with. There wasn't much—hardly anything at all. Just two empty packing cases and they hardly weighed a thing.

We couldn't get out through the window, because Jeanie couldn't have made it, jumping from that high up.

We got the two packing cases up against the door one on top of the other, and then I got behind them to hold them, and she got behind me. We could hear him testing his way carefully up, growling and cursing. We could even hear his clothing brush the thin wall between us and

LITTLE RED JAILHOUSE

MATTAWA, CANADA, IS probably the only town in the world where every native with a high school education is a prison graduate. It is probably the only place in this creation, too, where the weekend drunk who lands in jail is liable to wake hearing strong young voices wrestling with the three "Rs." Because of lack of funds during the depression of the '30's, authorities decided to use the jail for a high school. It's worked out okay. To the kids the joint is no worse than any school—and the crime rate has dwindled. Even a hardened crook will quail at the prospect of having to face a schoolmarm.

him. Finally he gave a terrible laugh and that showed he was up on the landing already. Then he rushed at the door.

The shove pushed the door and cases and her and me back a little, but we squeezed it closed again.

"Should I pray?" Jeanie panted.

"Yeah, you better!" I puffed, leaning with all my might.

She started to jabber in back of me, "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord—"

He gave another heave, and this time it opened the widest of the lot. I couldn't squeeze it back where it was any more. His shoulder got in and one of his long arms came through, trying to reach at me.

The next heave finished us.

We all went down together, me and her and the cases, and the door

swept us back against the wall. That saved us for a minute. He came too far into the middle of the room before he could stop and turn. I kicked one of the cases toward him so it would get in his way, and we both scrambled to our feet and broke, she one way, me the other.

He went for her, with the knife out again. I got all the way around the door and out into the hall, but I had to come back again. She'd gone the wrong way, and he'd cornered her.

She kept running back and forth in front of the shuttered windows, from one corner to the opposite one, trying to get by him, and he kept dancing in front of her, cutting at her with the knife. Her and me were both squealing like pigs, and he was yowling too.

I grabbed up a case, tilted it way up over me with both arms, and threw it at him with all my might. It hit him right on the back of the head, and he stumbled for a minute, but it was empty, and he stayed right on his feet. He whirled and said, "I'll get to *you* in a minute!" and he swung one of those long arms at me with a *whish*—like I was a mosquito.

The back of it swiped my head, and something like a comet with a white tail seemed to hit me, and I was way over at the wall, slumping all the way down it to the floor. The last thing I saw was him snatching up one of those sacks to throw it over Jeanie's head like a net. The comet kept getting brighter and

brighter, and it switched over by the open doorway instead of my head, and split up into two or three comets, and some men came stampeding in behind pocket flashlights, like that one my father carries.

One of them even seemed to be him, but I knew better than to believe that. I knew I was just dizzy. I closed my eyes and sort of went to sleep for a few minutes, wishing I'd been able to save Jeanie.

WHEN I OPENED my eyes I seemed to be floating around halfway between the floor and ceiling, and when I looked around, so was Jeanie. We were both sort of swinging around up in the air. I thought maybe we'd died and turned into angels, but it was just a man holding her in his arms, and another one holding me.

Neither one of them was my father, though. But I saw him across the room swinging his arm up and down, his fist balled and two of the other men trying to hold him.

I heard him saying, "Too bad I didn't get out here a little ahead of the rest of you! Well, I may have to bring him in alive, but I'm damned if I'll bring him in conscious!"

They took Jeanie and me to the doctor to be looked over as soon as we got back. We were okay.

When we got home I asked my father, "Did I do all right?"

He took out his badge and stuck it on my pajamas.

"You made me look like a piker!" was all he said. ♦ ♦ ♦

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