OCT. THE SUSPENSE MAGAZINE 25¢

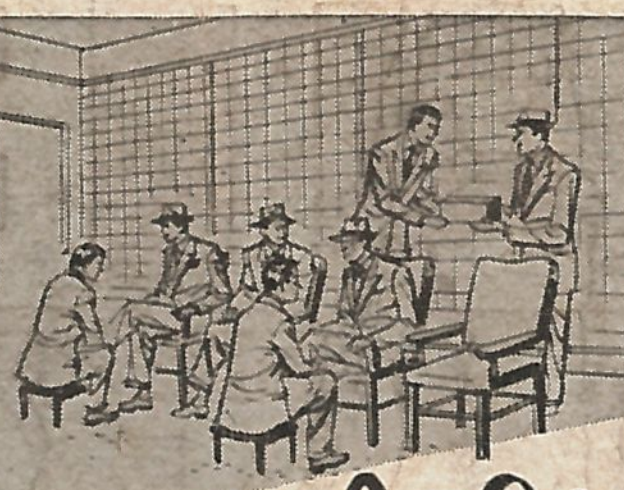
DETECTIVE TALES

THE LOOK THAT KILLS!
by DEAN EVANS

DEMING • POWELL
PRINGLE

START A Fine Business in Spare Time!

RUN THE BEST "SHOE STORE BUSINESS" IN YOUR TOWN!



FREE! SELLING OUTFIT

YOU DON'T INVEST A CENT! EVERYTHING FURNISHED FREE!

I put a "Shoe Store Business" right in your hands . . . you don't invest a cent . . . make big profits . . . no rent or store overhead . . . exclusive sales features build your business.

You can have a profitable "Shoe Store" right in your hands. *You just make money!* You're independent, in a business with a never-ending demand, because EVERYBODY WEARS SHOES.

Just rush coupon—I'll send you my Starting shoe outfit right away. ABSOLUTELY FREE. Valuable actual samples, and demonstrators of calf skin leather, kangaroo, kid, horsehide and elk-tanned leather furnished free of a penny's cost to qualified men.

My Professional Selling Outfit contains cut-away demonstrator so your customers can *feel* the restful Velvet-eez Air Cushion innersole. Special accurate measuring device—National Advertising reprints—door opener kits—the actual shoes—Everything you need to build a profitable repeat business. Here's your chance! Join me and get into the BIG MONEY!

Put a "Shoe Store Business" Right in Your Hands . . . You Don't Invest a Cent . . . Make Bigger Profits . . . No Store Overhead . . . Exclusive Sales Features Build Your Repeat Business

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Add more profits selling top quality horsehide, capeskin, suede, nylon, gabardine, and other popular leather jackets. Also raincoats. EVERY OUTDOOR MAN A PROSPECT FOR THESE STURDY, HANDSOME GARMENTS, STYLED AND TAILORED BY EXPERTS.

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OVER 150 FAST-SELLING STYLES FOR MEN AND WOMEN

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BOUND FOR NEW YORK CITY AFTER A WEEK'S FISHING TRIP, DOUG DAVIS WATCHES THE PILOT OF A CRASHING PLANE DRIFT INTO HEAVY TIMBER...

HE FINDS GAIL WILSON, CO-OWNER OF A NEW YORK AIR TAXI SERVICE IN A BAD SPOT.

ON THE LONG DRIVE BACK, GAIL AND DOUG FIND PLENTY TO TALK ABOUT.

AMERICA'S MOST UNUSUAL DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

DETECTIVE TALES

25c

Combined with F.B.I. DETECTIVE STORIES

VOL. FIFTY OCTOBER, 1952 NUMBER ONE

Three Action-Packed Crime Novelettes

THE LOOK THAT KILLS! ..... ***Dean Evans*** **12**
—fixed itself on Doc Haynes. . . .

TOO MANY BODIES ..... ***Richard Deming*** **48**
—spoil even the best of parties . . . unless, of course, it's one of Miss Sedalia's soirees—for murderers only!

DOWN PAYMENT ON DEATH ..... ***Herman Landon*** **90**
—was made each day by Garvian. . . .

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Four Dramatic Short Shorts

DEADLIEST ENEMY! ..... ***Talmage Powell*** **34**
—to Clane was the Law itself!

NIGHTMARE ..... ***Larry Holden*** **41**
—Kerry called it. The girl called it a mistake—though not *quite* a fatal one!

GOOD COMPANY ..... ***Harriet Crittenden*** **79**
—was the wealthy Widow Lucullus. Ask her dead husband. . . .

DON'T LOOK NOW ..... ***Don Pringle*** **83**
—Jerry, my boy, but somebody's trying to murder you!

Two Special Features

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ODDITIES IN CRIME ..... ***Jakobsson and Stone*** **10**

Next Issue Published September 19th!

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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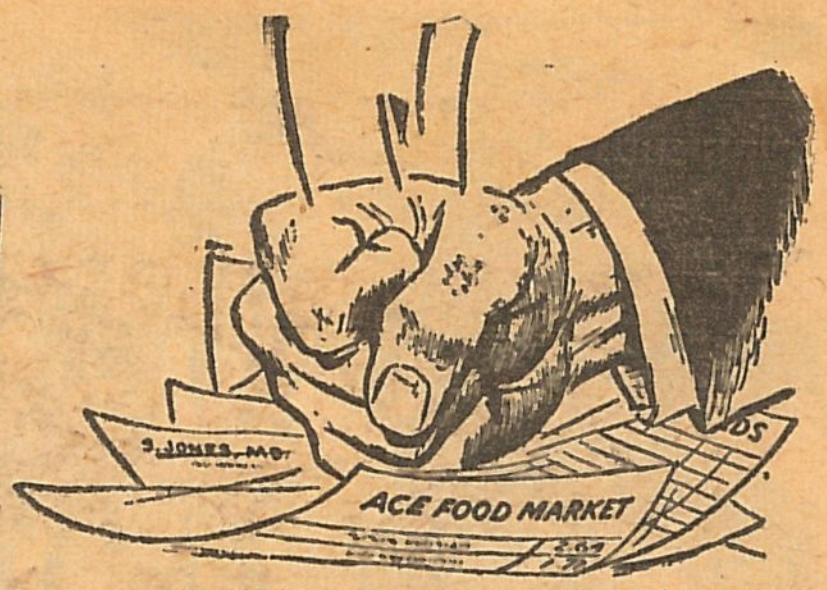
Crack Down on MONEY WORRIES!



Do you find it tougher every month to come out even on your budget? Bills piling up? Never enough cash to go around? The way to get rid of those worries for good is to *make more money*. And you can do it!

Look around you. The men who are getting ahead are the *trained* men. They've learned special skills that bring them higher pay. It's the men *without* training who are standing still.

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Bellingham, Wash.

Women—your chance!

You need to get ahead too. I. C. S. has courses that will help you advance in business, make you a better housekeeper, help you save more money or earn extra cash for more comfortable living. Look into it!

Are you the one man in ten?

Out of ten men who read this page, only *one* will have the drive and initiative to act. Are you that man? If you are, you've already made a head start toward success. Don't wait. Mail the coupon NOW!

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Occupation_____

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THE CRIME CLINIC

THIS month, let's consider the problems of the clear-minded crook who goes right to root of the problem of stealing—and finds the law waiting for him. Now, some guys like to make off with hot furs, jewelry, or automobiles. They're not so smart, when you come right down to it. A mink stole may be valuable, but you can't trade it in for a ham sandwich or even a three-cent stamp.

So our boy asks himself, "What's the most valuable—and negotiable—item around?"

"Money," he answers.

"And where do they keep money in large quantities?"

"In banks, son," he whispers, and heads for the First National.

Trouble is, a lot of men have thought of this before him, and as Joseph Fulling Fishman herewith relates, you've got to get up the day before yesterday to think of a method of bank robbery that hasn't been tried before. And if it's been tried, brother, the bank knows how to handle it. . . .

Despite the ingenious schemes of bank swindlers, that racket has, in a comparatively few years, changed from the most profitable to the riskiest in which a crook can engage.

Because the banks have become wise to all the old tricks, the schemes of these easy money lads have to be so imaginative as to be almost inspired in order to have any chance of success. Within a few days—sometimes only hours—after a new trick has been worked in, say, New York City, banks throughout the United States in even the smallest towns will not only learn all about it from the detective agency which these financial institutions employ, but will also be instructed how to alter their procedure in order to prevent its being worked on them.

Nevertheless, as the ball players say, the swindlers "are always in there pitching." Some of their plots are so grotesque that they have become classics among the banking fraternity. Their originality has excited admiration even among those who've been the victims of it.

There was, as an illustration, the "teller's wife" trick, which was first sprung by a previously-unknown crook. This man walked into a bank in St. Louis with five thousand dollars in cash which he deposited

(Continued on page 8)

WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?

Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

WHY was this man great? How does anyone—man or woman—achieve greatness? Is it not by mastery of the powers within ourselves?

Know the mysterious world within you! Attune yourself to the wisdom of the ages! Grasp the inner power of your mind! Learn the secrets of a full and peaceful life! Benjamin Franklin—like many other learned and great men and women—was a Rosicrucian. The Rosicrucians (NOT a religious organization) first came to America in 1694. Today, headquarters of the Rosicrucians send over seven million pieces of mail annually to all parts of the world.

The Rosicrucians
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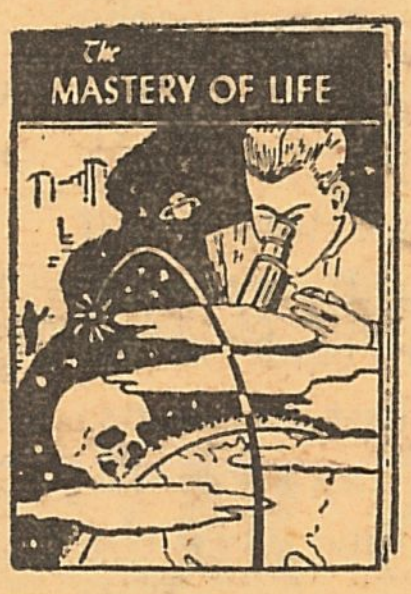

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Please send me the *free* book, *The Mastery of Life*, which explains how I may learn to use my faculties and powers of mind.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____

ZONE_____ STATE_____

(Continued from page 6)

in a newly-opened account in the name of Charles W. Martine.

He gave as his address—and it was his real home while in St. Louis—one of the leading hotels in the city. He was genial and friendly, with a considerable amount of banking business. He made frequent deposits and withdrawals until his balance was down to $2,500.

It was not noticed until later that he always made these deposits and withdrawals in person, and invariably at the same wicket, although there were three tellers' windows. This gave him plenty of opportunity to become friendly with the teller with whom he conducted his business. And this, as it developed later, was the first step necessary to the success of his plan.

In time he began to tell that official something about his—nonexistent—wife and children. The teller, naturally, told something about *his* family, the church they attended, the card club to which they belonged, the fact that his wife was just learning to drive, and the other "folksy" information which men exchange.

This brought the curtain down on the first act. The friendly depositor was now ready for the second—and last.

The stage for the next one was set at about eleven o'clock one Saturday morning. Martine glanced inside the bank as he walked past the entrance. Just as he expected, there was a line before all three tellers' windows. This was the time when employers were usually getting money for their payrolls and individuals were withdrawing cash for their week-end expenses. Martine retraced his steps and went inside the bank toward the window of the teller with whom he had become friendly, and at whose card club he had recently spent a pleasant evening.

But he didn't go to the end of the line. Instead, he went to the head of it, apologized to those whose turn came later, explained that he was in a vital hurry, and asked if they would mind if he had a check cashed.

He didn't wait for their reply but shoved through the wicket a check made out to "Cash" for $2,300.

"I think I have enough balance to cover this," he smiled. "Maybe you'd better check it up."

THE teller wrote on the teletype the inquiry for the bookkeeper. Neither the teller nor anyone else in the bank noticed particularly a man at the glass counter busily engaged in writing a deposit ticket. But that man's eyes were taking in the scene at the teller's window. The moment he saw the latter counting out the money to give to the self-styled Martine, he hurried out of the bank.

It was just a moment or two after the $2,300 was passed through the window that the teller's phone rang:

"This is the City Hospital," the voice at the other end said. "Are you Mr. Hendricks?"

"Yes," the teller quavered, fear clutching at his heart. "What is it?"

"You'd better come here at once. Your wife has been seriously injured in an automobile accident."

The stricken recipient of the message hurriedly told those in front of his cage to go to the next window. Then he rushed for his overcoat and hurried into a taxicab, instructing the driver to get to the City Hospital with all possible speed.

Mr. Martine didn't leave after he received the $2,300. He handed through the opening to the other teller another check for $2,300, which he had previously prepared. Now he said nothing about seeing if his balance was sufficient to cover the amount. As he expected, however, the latter wrote out on the teletype exactly the same inquiry his fellow-employe had made but a few moments before.

"I presented the check at the other win-

(Continued on page 110)

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Gil Vine, the house detective with the fanciest title in the business, is really earning his salary these days. The unknown beauty, Teresa Marino, is enough to cause an epidemic of loss of sleep in her own right; when her true identity becomes known, it is evident that big things are at stake. Radio and Advertising V.I.P.s who must be handled with the utmost delicacy becomes involved in an unsavory murder which challenges the talents both mental and physical of Gil Vine who, while a great respecter of persons wasn't made security chief for his good looks alone.

Gil Vine's investigation ranges over the length and breadth of Manhattan, with side trips to Lexington, Kentucky and Long Island, to gather evidence, and to round up suspects.

DEAD OF NIGHT is sophisticated, exciting and murderous. And you get Gil Vine, too!

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—Albert E. Idell, Philadelphia Inquirer

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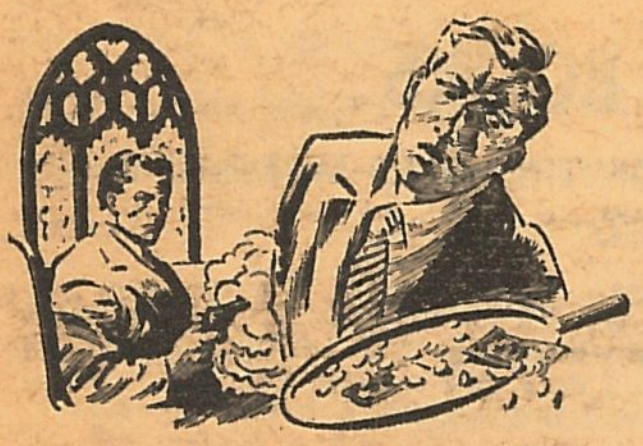
ODDITIES IN CRIME

By JAKOBSSON and STONE

Love has been taking a licking lately in courts of law. A man in Houston, Texas, was fined fifty dollars for clearing his throat admiringly at two pretty girls. On the beautiful Isle of Capri, it has become illegal for a couple to kiss in public. And a friendly Boston girl got ninety days and a judicial scolding for the biggest crime of all—she made a habit of getting engaged, had had five fiances in ten years.

When Tommy Ellis of Iowa was fifteen years old, local sheriff Howard Reppert put him in the clink overnight on a minor juvenile charge. Other prisoners beat him savagely, just for the fun of it. Last year, Tommy was awarded a judgment of forty thousand dollars against Sheriff Reppert's estate, on charges Reppert failed to protect him. Clinching evidence that the beating affected him permanently, thus justifying the settlement, was the fact that Tommy shortly after stabbed and killed an old lady. He will receive the money next year, when he is twenty-one. He will enjoy it, if he can, in the prison where he is now serving a life term for murder.



Except for his one rather troublesome, purposeless hobby, mousey little Thomas Simpkin of Duluth never bothered anyone. But this hobby chanced to be murder. The State of Minnesota tried keeping Simpkin in an insane asylum. He escaped, and in another state, under an assumed name, he applied voluntarily for admission to another asylum. Within days, he was discharged as sane. That was the verdict he wanted.

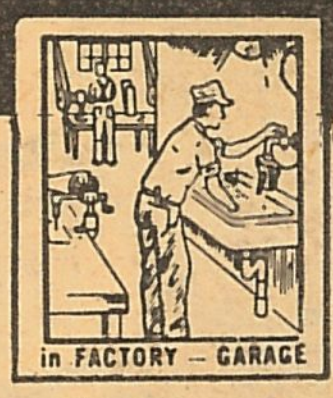
One day in 1920, he walked into a New York church, sat quietly through a Sunday service, until an usher passed a collection plate. Then he drew a gun, and for no reason at all shot the usher dead.

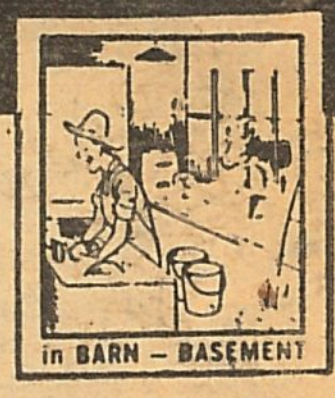
A puzzled society sent him to Matteawan, where he died four years later.

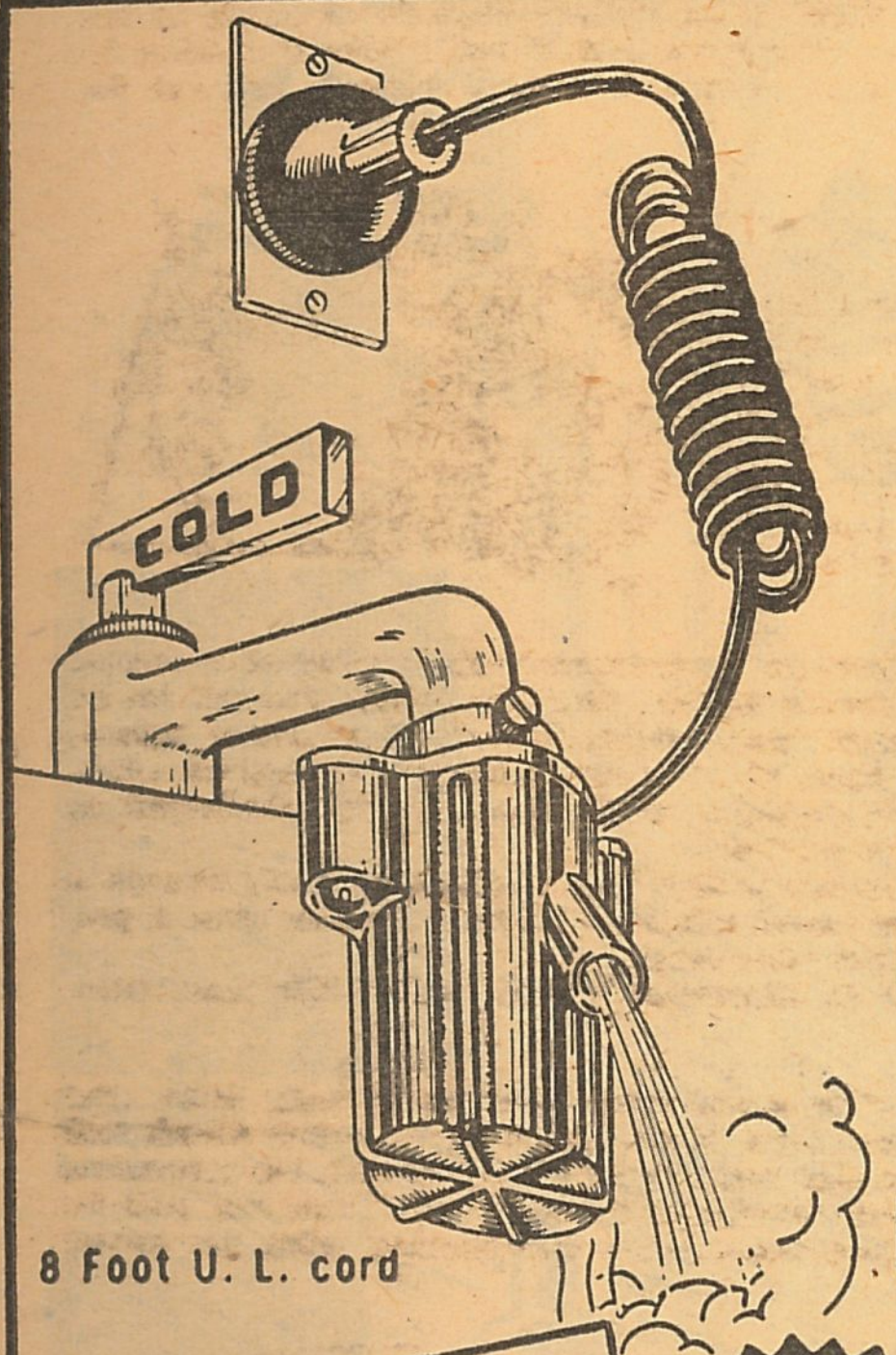
When Angelina Bazzaro, of Naples, Italy, was married recently, few would have called her a lucky bride. Her groom, Benedetto Pilon, was currently serving time in Procida prison colony. However, a group of twenty friends took pity on Angelina and her imprisoned beloved. They furnished a complete wedding breakfast, attended the ceremonies, and wished the couple good fortune. The twenty philanthropists were Benedetto's fellow-convicts. They had paid for everything in the only way they were able—by fasting for twenty-four hours before the marriage, using the savings for the feast.

Running HOT WATER ...in a *Jiffy!* from any COLD WATER FAUCET

for EVERY KITCHEN need


in FACTORY — GARAGE


in BARN — BASEMENT



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JET INSTANT HOT WATER HEATER FILLS A GREAT NEED!

A long and urgent need is now easily fulfilled. You can get hot water ANYWHERE! in kitchen, basement, garage, summer cottage or cabin, camp, office, factory—on the farm or barn wherever a cold water faucet and an electrical outlet are handy!

FULLY GUARANTEED — 10-DAY MONEY BACK GUARANTEE!

The JET INSTANT HOT WATER HEATER is fully covered by factory guarantee against defects in workmanship and material. Should the JET INSTANT HOT WATER HEATER fail to give HOT WATER *instantly*, return for full refund.

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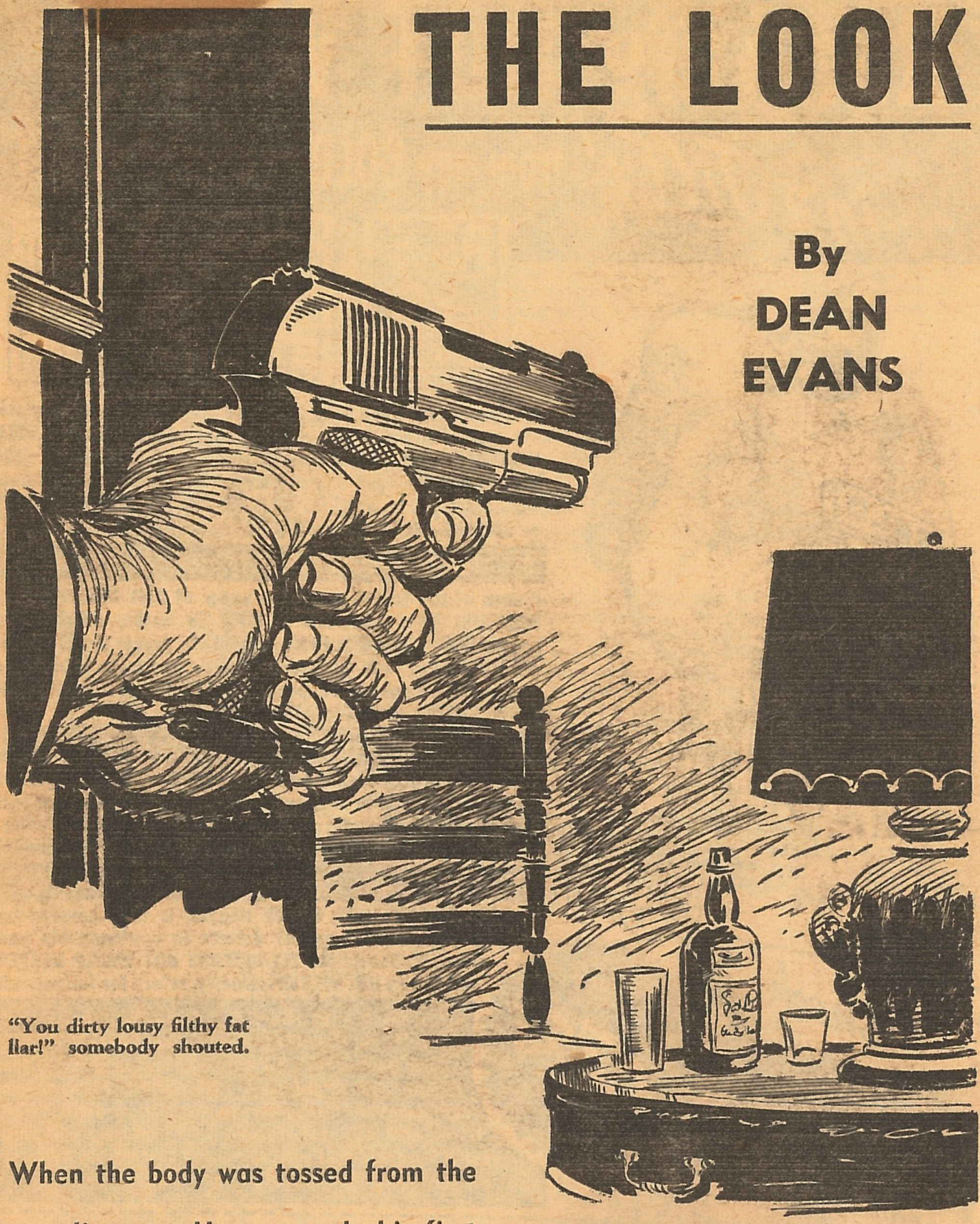
10 DAY MONEY BACK GUARANTEE!

THE LOOK

By
DEAN
EVANS



"You dirty lousy filthy fat liar!" somebody shouted.

When the body was tossed from the speeding car, Haynes made his first mistake in noticing it. His second was telling the cops. But his third—and almost fatal error—was in planning to stay alive!

THE District Attorney's waiting room was dim, quiet, with the smell of ancient cigar smoke hanging motionless in the dead air. I sighed and leaned back in the chair and looked up at an old electric clock on the wall. It was reaching out for and grabbing the passing minutes.

I closed my eyes. There wasn't a sound

THAT KILLS!

save for the quiet, steady typing of the red-headed stenographer at her desk down in the far corner of the room. I opened my eyes and slanted a half-look at her.

She seemed to be watching. She seemed to be smiling secretly. As though she were thinking to herself: Be patient, Doctor Haynes, the District Attorney will be with you just as soon as he finishes on the phone. And my, but you're a big one, aren't you? I didn't know school teachers came that big. But I wonder if you really thought you were big enough to handle Al Baker's organization when you testified like you did this afternoon?

I closed my eyes again. Redheads leave

me cold. I closed my eyes and drew a mental picture of a dark, rain-filled night with the road out in front of the wet gray stones of Norton Hall a gleaming black ribbon that snaked off in the steady downpour. I saw again the headlights of the big sedan spray around the curve and come to a sudden stop. I smelled, in memory, the blue exhaust smoke; saw the wide door of the sedan swing outward in the rain. I didn't see the face of the dead man—not then, that is—as it flung down into the depressed shoulder of the road. I did see the face of the man still in the sedan: a white face; a staring, putty-filled mask with fright holes in it for eyes. I heard the door slam quickly. I heard the engine of the big sedan roar angrily as the car rolled away into the night.

I jerked my eyes open to get away from the memory. I looked up. District Attorney Waggonner Hart was standing in the doorway and staring at me with washed-out blue eyes that looked as tired as eyes can ever get. He nodded and then turned around in the doorway and went back in his office. I shoved up out of the chair and crossed over the thick gray carpeting. The red-headed stenographer's typing went on uninterrupted. As I went through the doorway I looked back. She was typing—but watching me at the same time. Her eyes were large, staring things, like the eyes of a rabbit with its ears streaked back. I snorted at my own imagination and closed the door.

Hart's office was small, paneled in mahogany, and had two tall, round-topped, old fashioned windows that let light in dingily. Hart himself stood before one ot them holding out his hand and smiling.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Doctor Haynes. Hizzonner had me on the phone. I was telling him about this afternoon—and about you."

I took his hand. It was warm, soft. Too soft. Girl-soft. I wondered if my own hands would ever get that soft.

HIS pale blue eyes were studying me quietly. "That was a brave thing you did a while ago," he said. "There wouldn't be any point in kidding you, putting the finger on one of Al Baker's friends isn't quite the same as flunking out one of your students."

I shrugged. "If you see 'em, you gotta call 'em," I said. "Spellman almost posed for me the night he kicked the body of that lumber contractor out of his car and into the ditch. I was on the gravel path, behind some trees, and just leaving Norton Hall on my way home. If I had been twenty feet farther up the path I would have got a flying tackle across the knees with it."

He nodded. "You realize who Al Baker is?"

I shrugged again. "As far as this is concerned it's just a name, isn't it?"

His lips went a little tight. "I can see you need educating, Doctor. If we say that Al Baker is some sort of vague bogy who now and then gets his picture in the paper because he's a kind of bad influence or something around town; a vote-broker, perhaps; perhaps a refined sort of gambler; a legendary man, a nice legendary man who doesn't seem to mind what anybody says about him because he *is* nice; perhaps just a much-misunderstood fat man . . . if we say all that, then that would be what most people think—when they think at all."

"All right," I said quietly. "You're saying that most people—including myself—think of Al Baker as about as wicked as a schoolboy playing hookey. And at the same time I gather you don't share that popular idea."

For an instant his eyes went hard on my own. Then he went around behind his desk and sat down, picked up a pair of dark-rimmed glasses which he poked at his tired eyes. He looked down at his soft, white hands. He sighed, stared up again at me.

"Strictly speaking," he said slowly. "Al Baker is legitimate. By that I mean he has his money in legitimate honest business

such as a brokerage house; a very large machine shop that turns out vital parts for the aircraft industry; a wholesale liquor establishment. Things like that so that he can hold out the books of these nice honest businesses in one hand for the inspection of the income tax boys while at the same time his other hand is away off somewhere quietly fingering the reputation, perhaps, of the wife of the man who lives just down the street from us who is just considering bidding in on the new City Hall contract."

He stopped, smiled, shook his head. "A little involved. Maybe I should go back to school and learn the language. You do teach English over at the college, don't you?"

I didn't smile back. "A blackmail specialist?" I said.

His mouth curled. "How the hell would I be knowing that for sure?" he said bitterly. "Nobody ever catches him at his sidelines."

"But you're warning me to be careful?"

"I'm doing more than that. This is an important trial, Doctor. If we can convict Spellman, we stand a good chance of using the scrub brush all over the county. For that reason you're going to have some of my companions walking around with you for the next few weeks. And I hope *your* bed has two pillows on it, for one of these boys will even sleep with you." He stopped, stared for a moment. "And that," he added, "is what *I* think about Al Baker."

I blinked at him. I didn't say a thing. I went over to the chairs against the wall and sat down. I got out a cigarette and lit it and blew smoke. I looked up again at his tired figure.

"That isn't a very comfortable chair," he said. "I'm sorry, for we might have a little wait."

We did. The minutes went by. I crushed out my cigarette in his big smoke-stand. A whole lot later I lit another. I was just butting the fourth when the phone rang. I looked at my watch. Four fifty-eight. Hart reached for it across his desk, tucked it into the crook of his arm and spoke wearily into it. He said "yes" twice. His pale blue eyes flicked across the room at me. He said "yes" a third time and then "thanks," and pushed the phone away.

"You know who that was?" he said softly.

I made a face.

"The Grand Jury just returned an indictment against Councilman Walter T. Spellman. And that's your cue for on stage, Doctor. From this minute on you don't walk under any ladders."

I nodded. For a moment I looked at the darkening world outside the two round-topped windows of the room. "It's a funny life," I laughed. "A man only does his duty—as I tried to do—and right away the city he lives in and works in and pays taxes in becomes the noose he gets hung in."

"We're hoping not, though," he said. He leaned across the desk and gave me his hand again. I took it. I said good-bye to him and went out of his office. I closed his door and went across the quiet gray carpeting of the outer waiting room. The stenographer was leaning far over her desk now, just pulling the cover down over her typewriter. She looked up at me big, round, nakedly; a wisping curl of her red hair tumbling down over her forehead and coming to rest, gibbet-like, directly over her left eye. The old electric clock on the wall pointed to five-oh-one. There was a girl who believed in being prompt—at least in the one direction.

I flared my nostrils at the stale smell in the place and went out and down the marble hall to the elevators, and so on out of the building.

I WENT home to my apartment. I didn't see any of District Attorney Waggonner Hart's men behind me. Probably they were out to supper. I began to feel a little sorry for myself. I began to feel that maybe even the dean of a college has a right now and

then, to hang on a good one. This particular dean, anyway. I shut the door behind me and went into the bathroom and looked at myself in the medicine cabinet mirror.

"Doctor George Anderson Haynes," I whispered. "The six foot-three hero who isn't afraid of testifying at the trial of Councilman Walter T. Spellman. Who isn't even afraid of a bogyman named Al Baker."

My reflection stared back at me and looked a little white under the eyes doing it. I shook my head and went into the living room and picked up the phone and ordered a fifth of rye from the corner drugstore. Then I sat down and waited until it came. Then I sat down again and held it in my hands and just stared stupidly at it. Until the telephone rang.

It was a woman's voice. It didn't sound old, it didn't sound young, it did sound as though it could fall somewhere in between without breaking an elbow. But the thing it was saying sounded all wrong:

"Is this Doctor Haynes? This is Mrs. Peter Von Klinger, Doctor. I am speaking from my suite at the Stratford. Would you find it convenient to be here at eight o'clock this evening?"

I blinked at the phone. "There seems to be a little mistake, Mrs. Von Klinger," I said.

"This *is* Dean Haynes?" Edges came into the voice.

"That's right, Mrs. Von Klinger, but . . ."

"I was under the impression the Board of Governors had already spoken to you about me." Still edgy, but willing to thaw. "It was in reference to the endowment in my late husband's will, of course. . . ."

I blinked again. I said: "I am sorry to say the Board has not mentioned it, Mrs. Von Klinger. Therefore I didn't know. But I could get in touch with the President immediately for you and. . . ."

She didn't like that. Somehow, even as I was saying it, I was thinking she wouldn't.

"You could find the time to come yourself, *perhaps?*" Frost coated the words.

I felt, suddenly, that indeed I could. I said: "Naturally, Mrs. Von Klinger. If there is anything I personally can do. . . ."

"Quite! Very well then. Eight o'clock. I'll send a car."

"Eight," I said. I put down the phone and stared at it. After that I looked at my watch. It was seven-thirty. I frowned at my unopened fifth of rye and sighed and then went back to the bathroom and once more stared into the medicine cabinet mirror. I started to peel off my coat and shirt. The only thing I knew for certain about Mrs. Peter Von Klinger was that she would not appreciate me in a black, day-old beard.

AT ONE MINUTE before eight I went downstairs and stood just under the canopy and waited. At two minutes after eight a long, black sedan, looking as if it would need two hundred and fifty horsepower to budge it from a standstill, swung silently into the curb and stood there engine throbbing very low, very subdued. The front door opened on the driver's side. A man in a dark coat, collar pulled up to meet a dark hat pulled down, got out, came around the wide, glistening grille and, almost looking at me but not quite, said:

"Doctor Haynes?"

I started toward the sedan. The driver opened the rear door and stood aside.

"Hop it, will you, Doc? I'm a little late."

I stared at him in the darkness. "Surely not enough to lose the title over?" I grunted. He didn't answer that. I leaned over to get my head and shoulders through the low door, started to climb in. I wasn't the only passenger. On the opposite side of the seat was a man in a gray suit, gray covert cloth coat, gray snapbrim and gray wisped mustache which looked as if it did its growing with a great deal of timidity. The man grinned and showed a set of startlingly white teeth.

"Professional, Doctor," he said. "Same as you. I'm Mrs. Von Klinger's lawyer."

"Oh," I said. I sat back. The door went to with a soft thud. The overhead light went out. I fumbled for a cigarette, held out the pack. He shook his head. I got a match, got it lit and blew smoke into the darkness of the front seat which looked to be roughly five yards up toward the front.

"I think it best to tell you I won't be much help," I said. "You see a thing like this is out of my jurdisdiction, the Board Members would have to handle matters of a legal nature."

He still grinned. "We wouldn't want you to do anything unethical, Doctor," he said.

"Well, peachy," I said.

He continued to grin. While we had talked the big sedan had moved soundlessly away from the curb. The man driving sat straight, rigid. He wasn't watching in the mirror. He was everything you could want in a chauffeur, but at the moment it was being wasted.

We went out Alameda Street and almost at once began to climb above the level of the surrounding buildings. I looked out the window on my side. Down below, and off to the right in the distance, lay the gray squat buildings of the University: small, toylike piles of dark stone, forlorn and scattered looking as though they were but alphabet blocks left out in the yard overnight by some careless little boy who hadn't put them away when he was through playing with them.

And then the sedan took a wrong turn. "Downtown is the other way," I said. "The Stratford is on the other side of town." I swiveled my head and stared at the man across from me. And that made his grin turn into an amused little chuckle.

"Little surprise, Doctor," he said. "You see, Mrs. Von Klinger thought we should make a night of it, sort of. She's meeting us out at the *Club Memphis*. Call it a ball if you'd like."

"Well shame on her," I grunted. I leaned forward and gave the driver's shoulder a shove. "The next half acre you come to, turn this locomotive around. You can give the madame my regrets."

He didn't turn his head. He didn't say anything. I looked in the mirror. His eyes were there, watching me. But eyes that saw and recorded, only. Animal eyes.

I looked at the man in gray. And then was when I saw the small blued automatic in his right hand.

"I hate surprises like this," he said very quietly.

Those were his only words. His grin had left, covering the too-white teeth. His eyes became flickering dark things lit up only momentarily by passing lamp standards. I read nothing in them. His steadily-held blued automatic was another matter though. I could read that with ease: it was telling me I had as much chance of doing something about it as King Tut had of getting up and calling loudly for a change of linen. I sat back and perspired.

CHAPTER TWO

First Blood

THE sedan rolled, snuffling the road quietly like a dog with its nose down, going across a vacant lot—except about seventy miles an hour faster. At the turn-off to the Freeway, with Indio unguessed-at lights in the distance the sedan turned the other way in the general direction of Palm Springs.

Perhaps it went five miles farther on. Or ten. Or twenty. At that speed it was difficult to guess distance. And then the sedan turned on to a side road that led to I didn't know where. And then, moments later, around a sweeping curve and I saw it: *Club Memphis*. The big neon glowed in the center of a halo of bright green light against the dark background of the rolling San Bernardino Mountains.

The sedan turned in, went up blacktop and along the side of a low, whitepainted building done in stucco and a red tile roof. Behind was a parking lot with a few cars in it, each angled neatly into a white barrier. The big sedan came to a stop.

"All right, Doctor. Be very careful." Simple words. I got out. The blued automatic came behind. The driver got out, came around the front of the car, went to a small door in the rear of the building.

"Straight ahead, Doctor."

I went in. Somewhere a band was playing, but soft and far away as a train whistle heard on the edge of a dream. We went down a narrow hall with a high ceiling and walls of pale blue with a gold border stripe. The driver disappeared through an arched opening in the side: we went on to the end, to a door. The man in gray said, chuckling:

"This is where I get off. Nice to have known you, Doctor."

"Sure," I grunted. "See you in court."

I could feel his leer behind me. He gave the door a little shove with a stretched out left arm over my shoulder. I could have taken him then—maybe. The gun poked as I thought about it. I went through, and the door closed and the faint band music drew back into remoteness.

It could have been an office, there was a typewriter on a metal stand and a desk and a couple of beige-colored filing cases. Or, it could have been someone's living room, there was a rug, a big smoke-stand; a divan upholstered in leopard skin placed in front of heavy red drapes. Two people were using the divan and watching me. One was a woman, a blonde, with lips the color of a clean fire engine, and legs longer than necessary; a blonde who looked as though she'd been frantically holding her fleeting years with all the calmness of a human fly clawing the side of a building. Her companion was a dark-haired, dark-browed, dark-eyed man with skin a little like half-smoked tobacco.

The man's eyes were the first to flicker. "Say something, guy," he muttered.

I nodded grimly. "You've no idea," I told him. "In fact I'll say something for the next several minutes."

It left him very bored. His eyes went lazily away from me and went to the blonde at his side. "He the one?"

The blonde's eyes jerked sideways. "I want my payoff, Sam!" Her mouth almost fumbled with the words. I blinked at the voice. It was the same one I had heard not too long ago on the phone telling me about her late husband's will and the endowment for good old hey U.

The dark man made an impatient gesture with a flicking left hand. "I just said something, Agnes. Is this the one you talked to or ain't it?"

The blonde's mouth made nervous twitching movements. "I said, didn't I? My God, can't you tell? All he needs is a black robe and one of them damfool hats with a tassel on it."

I snorted. The blonde's eyes jerked to mine. "Thanks a lot, honey," I said. "And all you need is a bra with weak straps and a flower in your garter."

Her jaw dropped slackly. "Hey. . . ."

The dark man got very bored again. He looked at me; at her.

"Sam?" The blonde twitched. "Sam, I want my payoff, Sam."

His left hand flicked impatiently again. "Go bend an elbow, Agnes."

"I want my pay—"

His face didn't change expression. His left hand whipped up, splayed, and cracked across the blonde's mouth. Her head snapped back and a keening cry, a startled, hurt sound, spewed all over the air.

"I said bend an elbow, Agnes." There wasn't a trace of emotion in his voice. He waited. I waited. A moment of indecision went by with the blonde's right hand pressed tight against her mouth and her eyes shock-filled orbs that stared at his dark figure. She finally got to her long legs. A whimper escaped from her and she went

across the floor in stiff, jolting steps and passed by me without looking up. The door banged loudly behind her.

The dark-eyed man made a face. "Good old Agnes," he growled. "Used to be an actress. She now dreams about it when she gets a load under the skin. All right, guy, let's see your wallet. I ain't sure you are the dean or you ain't the dean."

A gun suddenly appeared in his right hand as though he had pulled it out of the air. He pointed it at me. I reached for my wallet, threw it over. He caught it left-handed, flipped it open, dropped his eyes briefly at the license under the celluloid window. Then he flipped it flat again and tossed it back.

"Beats me," he said flatly. "In my day a dean of a college talked different than you, guy."

"What day was that?"

He shrugged. Then a weak grin that looked as if it had lots of practice coming out stillborn flirted at the corners of his mouth. He nodded. "Oke. So I never went to college. So what. I done pretty good without it, didn't I? This is my club, and I got no partners."

"With that in your hand you don't need partners."

His eyes went to the gun. He frowned sourly. "Yeah." Then he put the gun away and sighed hoarsely. "Look, guy, don't get the wrong idea. This here shindig ain't none of my affairs. I wouldn't even say I approve it. Matter of fact the whole idea stinks from here to Pedro and back. But that ain't no skin off my rear podium. You might say I'm just renting the office for a spell. Have a seat—I'll go announce you."

He got up. Standing he looked a lot bigger than he did sitting down. He ambled across the rug with his gun jolting in his coat pocket and his right hand feeling the jolts and liking them. He went out. The door clicked behind him. I tried it. Naturally it was locked.

I WOULD have known him anywhere, his face still looked putty-filled. He came through the doorway and looked straight over at me on the leopard-covered divan. Two others followed him in, the man in gray and the driver of the sedan. They didn't bother to look at me, they had seen me before. The driver leaned his back against the door, closing it, and then just stood there. The man in gray went to the middle of the room, found a spot he liked, folded his arms and stared down at his shoetops. The one with the putty-filled face came across the rug to me.

"This had to be fast," he said in a tight voice. "Another hour and you'd have been under wraps. Making myself clear, you understand."

"Oh hell, by all means," I said. I stared at his unhealthy-looking skin, at the dark unhealthy eyes set in that skin. While I watched he brought his hands together and rubbed them. They were thick hands, short-fingered hands. Peculiar hands, with nails that bent over at the ends of the fingers curling like a parrot beak. He wasn't very tall, and his feet were small like a dancer's. He got a cigarette from a satin silver case, snapped a light at it, blew smoke quickly in a fat plume.

He said finally: "All right, Arthur."

It was the man in gray. He poked his tongue at his cheek, took out his blued automatic and pointed it carelessly. "This boy done seen it before," he murmured.

"All right, Arthur. Show him."

The gray man came over. He flopped the automatic up and down in his hand. Then he stopped doing that and held it out and put the nozzle of it against my forehead. Then he put it on my right eye. With my left eye I looked up into his grinning, white-toothed face. He flipped the safety on and off again. Slowly. Tantalizingly. Making me sweat.

While he was going through the motions the putty-faced man stood to one side taking in smoke in quick jerks. Now he

leaned over the big floor smoke-stand and crushed the butt. He said:

"All right, Arthur. He gets the idea."

The gray man grinned. He put the gun away and went back to his former position in the middle of the floor. He took out a cigarette and lit it and blew smoke at me. Then he looked at the putty-faced man. The putty-faced man said:

"That would be one way. Short, quick, snappy. There's one other way I haven't mentioned yet. Here it is: Sometime in the next few days you could have the pleasure of announcing to the Board Members of the college about a new Foundation to be known as Friends of Education. The original deposit made in the name of the Society would be for ten thousand dollars. No strings. The President of the Board will have the right to spend it when and where he likes."

He stopped talking. When I didn't answer right away he took out his cigarette case and lit another cigarette. He blew more plumes. He said, waving the smoke away:

"I felt this little meeting out here away from town would be best. That's why—"

"If you're admitting you kidnaped me, Councilman," I said softly. "There isn't a jury in the world would haggle over it. You did."

THE gray man chuckled. Councilman Spellman turned his head and glared. The man in gray stopped. Spellman said:

"The original deposit of ten thousand dollars would, of course, be renewed from time to time."

"Very generous," I said slowly. "For a while I was getting to think the blonde had kidded me. Speaking for the President—which I have no right to do—I thank the Foundation."

I got slowly to my feet. I stared at the driver who lounged against the door. He, too, had a burning cigarette in his hand. I started toward the man in gray. I said:

"Everybody's smoking, it seems. No objections, probably if I light up?"

Nobody said anything. I got out a smoke, speared my lips with it. "Light?" I said.

The man in gray shrugged. He took a match book and tore one out, scratched it for me and held it up. I leaned toward it—about four inches. I looked at him. I smiled in his eyes. Then I kneed him in the groin.

His gray eyes flew apart and his head started to come down in a swooping arc. I brought up my fist and laid it on the point of his descending chin. I could feel the jar of it go all the way down my spine. His head flew up again. I sank my fist in his middle. He came down again—all the way and to his knees and then slowly, meltingly, to the floor at my feet.

Eliminating just the gray man was a guarantee of nothing, of course. Even as he fell I heard Spellman's soft curse behind me, and out of the tail of my eye I caught the drived over at the door lunging forward.

I spun around to meet him. His descending gun barrel caught me on the shoulder, and a paralysis as numbing as fingers caught in a slammed car door fanned down my side and my arm.

I was in trouble now.

And then, miraculously, I wasn't. There was the sound of breaking glass somewhere, but muffled as though in the next room. The heavy red drapes behind the divan parted and a gun looked through. It pointed at Spellman. A voice followed the gun in.

"End of the line, everybody out."

I hadn't known there was a window behind the drapes. I gawked. The driver's uplifted gun barrel—about to come down again—froze solid in midair. Spellman's short, thick body went rigid. And then the voice spoke again:

"Okay, Prof, tell him he can't play with it any more."

I reached for the gun from the driver's hand. He didn't try to stop me. His mouth

was slack and his eyes—so very well trained for the job of chauffeur—went open and stayed open.

"Now try the good Councilman, Prof," the voice said again.

But Spellman wasn't armed. I looked toward the drapes. There was a head showing now, a head with grinning blue eyes and freckles and hair cut short and standing straight out from under his hat.

"Guess you and me'll mosey, huh?" he said. "This here thing I'm peeking through is a French door, Prof. Move that billious sofa away and come on out." He laughed. "And oh yeah," he added. "Secret word is swordfish. D.A. told me to tell you."

I grunted and grinned weakly. I shoved the divan aside. Spellman and the driver didn't move. I opened the French doors, went out on a little balcony that was built about three feet off the ground. I went over the railing and down. The weight of the drapes pulled the French door closed. That blotted out the room altogether.

"Okay, Prof, let's us cruise."

I followed him over to a dark convertible. The next moment we were leaving the Club Memphis behind.

I SANK back against the cushions and took a deep breath. "For a minute there I thought I was going to be a worried man," I said.

He laughed at me out of the sides of his eyes. Irish eyes. "For a college dean you sure are one heller, Prof," he said. "You must of hit that guy with the trunk of a tree. Incidentally, I'm Kelly. Waggonner Hart had me tail you from the office this afternoon."

"I'll be darned," I said. "I didn't see anybody."

"Thanks," he said dryly. "What did you think of that back there?"

"I'm wondering what they're thinking," I said, and laughed nervously. "Spellman had something on his mind when he came in the office. He said something about having to work fast, that another hour and I'd have been wrapped up. I don't think I quite get that."

He made a noise in his throat. "That's something we'll have to talk about later. But I mean the other. How did it strike you?"

"I don't know. He had the man in gray —Arthur, he called him—make passes in front of me with a gun. Then he switched abruptly to talk about a Foundation and endowing the college with ten grand."

He nodded without removing his eyes from the road. "Just in case you don't know it, Prof, they're strictly sandlot back there. That was a play, sure. The point is Spellman is a worried man. He don't know what to do about you. The gun waving was just to see you go hot and cold. That Arthur guy is Art Rand—a punk with a tailor complex, he likes nice clothes. But as I say, Spellman is worried. Even to you it must have seemed phoney as fish."

"Maybe I'm not up on my fish," I said. "The chauffeur's gun coming down on my shoulder seemed pretty real. I can feel it yet."

He nodded again. "That . . . sure. But I meant the whole deal. I got there seconds after you did. I went in the front. There were a few couples around a dice table—not much business. But tucked away in a corner of the barroom at a booth were Spellman and the chauffeur and Art Rand. When I seen them I began to wonder about you. A minute later a blonde named Agnes Roberts came in to the bar and began to fill up her cavities with scotch. And then Spellman and the two with him went away. I wondered about the blonde a little. She's a downtown gal, she is. Not much for outlying places like the Memphis. And after that I figured I better be a little mouse. I got to the balcony windows just in time to hear you putting Rand to sleep and Spellman feeling mighty bad about it."

He drove for a while after that. I didn't say anything. The lights of Indio flew by,

scattered, winking things like lightning bugs in a backyard. The big Greyhound Terminal sprawled brightly for a instant then it, too, sank back into the darkness.

I took a breath. "I don't think I like the way Al Baker plays," I said. "Hart warned me about him this afternoon but I expected something a little smoother, somehow."

Kelly turned his head and blinked at me. "You're kiddin'," he said. "That wasn't Al Baker's setup, Prof. Al ain't no amateur. No, take it from your Uncle Dud, that back there was all Spellman, and not very good Spellman at that. I get the idea he's worried, as I said. I also get the idea he was trying to feel something out. Sort of to see how serious you were about testifying when it comes his trial. Frankly, if he was playing for keeps tonight do you really think you'd have got away with smacking Rand around like that?"

"Maybe I'd better not think back on it," I grunted.

He didn't say anymore. The rest of the way he drove in silence.

THE first thing he saw when the apartdoor clicked shut behind us was my unopened fifth of rye on the telephone stand. His eyes popped and his mouth went down and stayed down.

"Well, by God," he remarked softly. "Prof, you are a man's man. You know something? I had an idea this was gonna be a dry evening. So I brought along a pint of my own—and now look, will you. Just shows to go you."

He wafted a flat bottle out of his pocket and held it up. "Oh man!" He uncorked the pint, held it to his lips. "Let's shoo this away first, huh? It ain't in the same room with that fifth of yours."

I grinned. When he took the pint from his lips and handed it to me I was still grinning. A half hour later, trying to lie still in bed with the ceiling bending down at the corners like wet cardboard, and the bed curving up to meet it, I was still grinning.

Kelly waved with the fifth in his clenched right fist. I slanted my eyes and stared at the freckles on his nose, his throat, and on his stubble-haired chest. "Y'know something, Prof?" he said. "This happens to me only about once a year. Rest of the time it's beddie-bye for yours truly with the little missus and the little family. Nice, of course, but uninspiring. Now this . . . this is a ball." He put the bottle to his lips. I watched his Adam's apple undulate under the skin.

I let my eyes swivel back. That made me look at the ceiling once more. I watched it come down, waving like palm fronds in a gentle breeze. I grinned. One corner of the ceiling bent over, way way over, and started to curl under. I raised a hand and caught it and unrolled it part way and broke off a piece of it and heaved it at the wall. I listened. It hit without making any noise, like fresh marshmallows bouncing off a lace curtain. I grinned. Still grinning, I listened to somebody laughing happily.

Kelly propped himself up on one elbow and stared down into my face. "What the hell you laughing at?" he demanded.

I grinned. I could still hear somebody laughing. I wondered who it was.

His head shook slowly from side to side. "Y'know something, Prof?" he said. "I think you're oilder'n a codfish."

"Rye!" I croaked. I reached out. That made the bedroom turn into a long narrow hall with Kelly sitting on his elbow way down at the other end of it. He reached out an arm thirty feet long. I made a pass at it. Two passes. On the third I connected neatly, and put the bottle to my mouth and tilted it up.

"You're gonna be sicker'n a hound dog, Prof."

"I took the bottle from my lips and stared at him. He reached it, held it up to the bed light and made a face. "By God, a drunken dean. I never thought I'd live to see the day." He sighed loudly and let the

bottle drop to the floor. It rattled when it hit.

"Lord, I'm tired," somebody muttered, and the bedlight went off with a click. I didn't know who had said it or who had turned off the light. I only knew it wasn't me.

I squinted into the darkness. The room was getting unbearably hot. I reached to loosen my collar and tie. I wasn't wearing a collar and tie. I went to unbutton my shirt. I wasn't wearing a shirt.

Somebody began to snore. It was Kelly. I listened to it. I listened to it for a long long time, feeling as heavy as a burial vault, bronze doors and all.

I closed my eyes. They wouldn't stay closed. I squeezed them shut tight. I held them like that. And that seemed to be the all clear signal for a fast freight on the Southern Pacific to come roaring into the bedroom and go over the bed, a flat wheel on each and every car rattling in the back of my brain. Cinders flew sharp and cutting. Steam and hot oil smells mixed together and jumped into my nostrils like blowing up a balloon with exhaust gas. My stomach began to roll.

I felt somebody's feet hit the cold floor and start weaving around the bed toward the door. I went after them. I went out into the hall, taking part of the door casing along on my shoulder. Kelly's snoring stuttered on behind him. I went to the bathroom, closed the door, leaned back against it, fighting for air. I fumbled on the wall for the light switch and couldn't find it. Then I stumbled over to the bathtub and put my palms flat down on the wide rim and leaned over. Somebody was going to be sick. I passed out cold as a buried Eskimo.

Somebody set off firecrackers. Somebody stuck four firecrackers into the moist earth and saw to it that each fuse was standing erect and proud like four little nice new pipe cleaners. Then somebody ran a lighted match down the row of erect fuses like drawing a stick along fence pickets. The firecrackers went off one after another at marvelously spaced quick intervals. It was a very quiet world after that.

I felt cold. My head was pounding and my teeth chattered uncontrollably. I jammed my teeth together and raised myself by the rim of the bathtub and slowly, painfully, got to my feet. I found the wall switch and snicked it on. I opened the door and went out into the hall. I went into the bedroom. I kicked the empty bottle with my bare foot and hardly noticed the sharp pain of it. I leaned over, gripped the headboard for support and felt for the bedlamp. I found it quickly. I turned it on. And I looked straight down into two wide-open eyes that saw nothing and would continue from now on to see nothing through all eternity.

He wasn't grinning anymore, the rictus of death was all that remained of his smiling Irish lips. Four small, red spots on the bedsheet told why. They all centered around his heart.

I stumbled blindly out to the living room and groped for the telephone.

CHAPTER THREE

The Wrong Kelly

I STARED into Waggonner Hart's unbelievably tired eyes. "I can't get it out of my mind," I said dully.

His eyebrows raised slowly.

"Kelly," I said. "Do you know what he told me? He told me he only goes on binges like this about once in a year. That he's got a nice wife at home and everything. Kids even."

"This man . . . this Kelly . . . said th[illegible] He smiled faintly.

I sucked in a breath. "I[illegible] Somebody's got to break [illegible] And Dammit, it was a[illegible] hadn't let him get dru[illegible] this minute."

He came close. He dropped an arm on my shoulder, and said in a soft, surprisingly gentle voice: "A man in your shoes is liable to feel pretty badly, I know. But don't brood it out now. Plenty of time later on for that sort of thing—if it's necessary."

I looked up at him. I could suddenly feel tears burning hot and sharp behind my eyes. I didn't give a damn. I dropped my head again. Hart went on quietly:

"All right, Doc. Would you, please?"

I looked up. But he didn't mean me. He meant the heavyset man across the room. The heavyset man nodded, came over, dropped a bag on the sofa on top of my feet and took something from it. I closed my eyes. I felt something cool rubbing a little spot on my arm. Then something sharp.

"Easy," warned Hart. "Doctor, you need sleep. Don't worry about school, I'll call your secretary."

"What time is it?" I mumbled.

"Five forty-five."

"What?"

"Morning. Have a look."

I did. Dawn was a stiff, dirty gray hanging in the sky outside my window like an unwashed woolen blanket drooped over a sagging clothesline. I closed my eyes again.

"God, but I'm sick," I moaned.

Hart said, again quietly: "Were you able to get anything?"

The heavyset man answered: "Enough for ten analyses—if ten were necessary."

Hart said: "Take along the whiskey bottles. I've got the gun. I'll see you later. He won't be interested for a few hours."

I wondered numbly who it was who ...dn't be interested for a few hours. I ...pen my eyes again. I found that ...found that I didn't care.

...us of footsteps tiptoeing ...uietly as someone walk- ...h the shades drawn. I listened. They were meaningless, without rhythm, almost without sound. They were here, there, with no identifying background noises to give them symmetry; careful footsteps, footsteps that should have been accompanied by the harsh rustle of a starched uniform—but weren't. Homely, old-maidish footsteps that didn't have the decency to squeak a loose board somewhere. I opened my eyes and there was Waggoner Hart coming across the room toward me.

"Feeling better?"

"I've been eating sandpaper again," I groaned. "What happened?"

"Well, frankly, you were a little more than just plain drunk. I had the medico give you a shot."

I nodded. I tried to raise up on one elbow and found that I could. He said, not smiling now:

"Which one of you had the last drink out of that bottle?"

I remembered Kelly's throwing the empty fifth to the floor after I killed it off. "I did."

"All right. Being frank again just to save time, I'll say that we analyzed the mess you made on the bathroom floor. Did you realize you were drugged?"

I stared.

He nodded, said:

"You were. Since they found nothing in his own stomach, that meant he slipped it in right before you finished the bottle."

I stared hard. He went on:

"What happened after you left my office?"

I told him. I told him about the phone call from the imitation Mrs. Von Klinger. About the Club Memphis. About the driver, the man in gray named Arthur Rand. About the blonde. About Spellman and, finally, about how Kelly had rescued me. As I told it Hart's lips began to curl with an ironic twist. "And that's the bald hard truth," I said.

"I'll believe it, Doctor. But what hap-

pened to the gun you took from the chauffeur?"

That was another easy one to remember. "I put it on the telephone stand when we got home," I said. "I remember putting it there and picking up the unopened fifth."

"This is?" He took a gun from his pocket, held it out. I looked at it. Guns can be guns, but it looked the same.

I said: "It looks like it."

He sighed. "Shot four times. This is the gun that killed your friend. And now brace yourself."

"What?"

"Your prints were the only ones on it!"

You can take so much only. After that the blows fall on nerves that refuse to acknowledge or respond. I heard my breath going in and out and I felt the blood vessel in my head throbbing—and that was all. I sat there, propped on my elbow, and stared at his emotionless features.

He said finally: "It was meant to look like that, of course. He must have been shot while you were out cold in the bathroom. The gun was wiped clean afterward, then your hand was pressed tightly around it and the gun was put back on the telephone stand."

I couldn't utter a sound.

He smiled again, then looked down at the gun. "We're pretty sure of that, you see, Doctor. While you were sleeping this afternoon we ran a paraffin test. The skin on your hands showed nothing. Which means you weren't the one, I'm glad to say."

A little time went by while I thought about that. Traffic noises in the street below filtered up shadowed, as though from a great distance and of no importance. Hart smiled again, finally, and went over to a lamp and touched the switch. That made my living room a little brighter.

"It's suppertime," he said irrelevantly.

"Has anyone told his wife yet?" I said.

He didn't answer. He went to the door, opened it and stuck his head out and motioned. Then he came back. A dark man as tall as I, but thinner, came into the room, looked over at me and then looked at Hart.

Hart said: "Doctor Haynes, meet Abe Kelly. The one and only Kelly, I might add. Yours wasn't quite genuine. Abe was supposed to be with you last night but mised connections when you left for the Club Memphis."

The tall man waved a negligent hand and grinned. "Delighted, Doctor. Glad to find I'm not as dead as reported to me earlier."

I gawked. I didn't say a word.

HART said quickly, "Abe was supposed to camp on your doorstep last night, but by the time he got here you were alalready gone. At that time we didn't know where to. There was nothing to do until we could locate you—which we never did. The dead man, the one you knew as Kelly, was an unemployed actor named Chandler Arlington Dickerson. He had a record, incidentally. And now that you've told me about the blonde Agnes Roberts I'm gradually getting a picture out of it. She probably recommended Dickerson for the part and he was probably glad to get the job, not knowing, of course, it was the last job he'd ever hold. You see, they didn't mind sacrificing someone. They had a big plan in mind."

He stopped, thought for a moment. And then:

"I'll have to pay the Club Memphis a visit. I should like very much to talk with the blonde Agnes. By the way, this strikes me just a little odd, Doctor. Didn't you think anything at the time seemed fishy?"

"That's the word *he* used," I said. "All right, now that I look back on it, well yes. Fishier than hell. In the first place, the guy seemed to have known all that went on, although he wasn't in the office at all. Another fishy thing was the ease with which I

kicked Art Rand around, and also the wonderful timing of the gun coming through the broken window in the French door, thus saving me in the nick of time."

Hart nodded slowly. "Do you understand it all now? This was a deliberate set-up to smear you. Dickerson has a record on an old morals charge. That would have looked fine. . . . you up on a rap of killing him. Imagine what good your testimony at Spellman's trial would be after all that."

"My God." I whispered it.

"Do you see why I warned you about Al Baker?"

I nodded.

"As usual," he said grimly, "we don't seem to have anything to hang on *him*. He has spent the last week or so in Kansas City—is there now, in fact. Well, there's one thing we can do to surprise somebody: we're not going to let this killing get into the papers. And in the meantime, Kelly here will be your guide and companion."

"In case they trip me again at least you'll see me fall," I said.

But he didn't see anything funny in it. He said coldly: "Slap us any time you feel like it, Doctor. After all we're only public servants. It's folks like you who pay your salaries."

I put a hand to my mouth. Hart didn't say anything else. He nodded shortly, raised a hand to the tall thin man, and then crossed the room and a moment later the door clicked shut behind him. I took a breath and shook my head. I felt as sour as Nero with a broken A string.

AFTER he had gone I got up from the sofa and went to the bathroom. Somebody had cleaned up the mess I was supsupposed to have made there. Coming out I took a breath that would last me quite a while and then dove into the bedroom. It was unnecessary. My drinking companion was gone, I wouldn't ever see his open mouth again except in dreams. The bed was made up and a blue spread that I had never seen before lay peacefully on top as though nothing at all had happened underneath. I got on some fresh clothes and went back to the living room.

Abe Kelly was standing by the window looking out at the night. He didn't turn when he said. "You had quite a time didn't you? Funny. There's a hell of a lot that's funny about this whole business. I don't know whether Waggonner Hart realizes it or not."

I didn't comment. I went over to the phone and called downstairs and ordered a pint of whiskey. Abe Kelly turned around from the window and stared.

"Don't jump at conclusions," I said sourly. "This Kelly—this other Kelly, I mean—may have been a louse for all I know. But it seems to me I owe him that much. If I have one in his memory I'll feel better."

"Holy cow!" He said it tonelessly.

I made something to eat. The first food I'd had all day. Abe Kelly watched me, saying nothing, studying me as he would study a bug wandering across the floor.

I said at last: "Something funny, you said. I think so, too. For instance, how did Kelly—I mean Dickerson—know that you were to be the one to be with me last night? And if so, how did he know *I'd* know? He mentioned first thing that his name was Kelly and that the D.A. had sent him."

His eyes went flat, speculative. "That's exactly what I meant. That's what I meant when I said maybe Waggonner Hart didn't realize it."

"He must be pretty busy these days," I grunted and took a swallow of hot coffee.

"Too busy. This Spellman thing is hot right now. And it's a good thing none of this is coming out in the papers. Spellman should have been behind bars when it all happened, you know."

"Well, why wasn't he?"

He shrugged. "Bond. Just one of those lousy breaks."

"Do you think Hart will ever nail Al Baker?" I asked.

"Hell, who knows, Doctor? A man can only do his job, you know. Take it from me, Waggonner Hart does his."

We didn't say anymore. I finished the coffee. Ater that the pint of whiskey came up and I put it on the kitchen table and stared at it and didn't open it. Kelly watched me, saying nothing. I sighed and pushed it away.

"Somehow I can't," I said.

He nodded. He got out an old battered pipe and filled it and lit it and blew gray smoke toward the ceiling. The telephone rang just when he had it going good.

"I'll take that, Doctor." He laid down the pipe and went into the living room. I listened to him grunt into the phone. I listened to him listen. He said: "Who?" And then, and with a very different tone in his voice, a tone that was cagey—and trying hard not to be at the same time: "I see. Just a moment, please. Hold the line."

He came back, crooked a finger at me. "Remember that chauffeur? The one you took the gun from?"

I nodded and dropped my mouth.

"Him on the phone. He wants to talk to you. I don't think he knew who I was, or if he did I don't think it mattered to him. Get on it. Every word he says, memorize like you never memorized before."

I took the phone. I said "hello." I listened to the voice. Abe Kelly was right as rain, it was the driver and as he talked I could see again his dark animal eyes staring back at me in the mirror of the big black sedan.

"Doc? You know who this is. Look, I ain't got much time. I know who answered the phone and that's okay. Where could I meet you?"

I made signals to Kelly. He mouthed "here" at me.

I said it into the phone.

"No soap, Doc. I just might like to see the dawn come up."

I covered the mouthpiece and shrugged. Kelly frowned, poked me back at the phone. "Where then?" I said.

"There's an old ranch house on the northwest corner where Redland Road meets Waterman, Doc. Nobody lives there anymore. You know where that is?"

"I'll find it."

"Oke. One hour. And look. Bring the law that just answered your phone. I got something to say about that gun. It was mine okay, but it wasn't me that used it, see?"

I nearly dropped the phone. "Hold on a minute," I said.

"That's all for now. G'night."

There was a click. I put down the phone and told it to Kelly. He nodded, thought for a while and looked at his watch.

"Peachy," he said. I hope we can get the boss."

But he couldn't. Hart was not at his office. Hart was not at his home. Abe Kelly looked at me helplessly. "Ain't this the kinda luck you get when you're born under the wrong sign though?" he grumbled. "All right, by God, if I'm going alone then I'm going alone. But I don't like it."

"There's always me," I said.

But he didn't think that was humorous.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Last Laugh

IT WAS early but there wasn't very much traffic. I watched low clouds scud over the rolling hills like tumbleweeds going across a vacant lot. Kelly muttered almost to himself, "Going to rain, sure as hell."

The wind was strong, bringing smoke smells from the city dump over on the left. I looked in that direction and caught the low red glare in the sky as it flickered briefly and then waned. It was a dark night, or going to be, and there was a possibility he was right. I said it:

"It just might rain, you might be right."

Kelly turned his head and looked at me

as if I had pulled that out of my hat. I said: "You just said it yourself."

"Oh. Did I? I was thinking something. This boy—the one who called—he sounds to me like he awful bad wants inside in case of rain. And he think it's going to."

"What would that be in English?" I said.

"Just this. They killed Dickerson, didn't they? And it was the chauffeur's gun that did it. It didn't have to be, they could have used yours if you owned one, or anybody else's. But it was his. See the point? Now he's worrying about it. The way I get it, he didn't know they'd use his gun. And he's thinking way ahead, that boy. In case of backfires he suddenly craves the arms of the law. What do you bet he asks protection?"

"After last night I wouldn't bet on anything."

"Yeah." He grinned sideways. He didn't say anything else. We went by Grand View where the highway tunnels through the hills. What little traffic there had been petered out and the night got darker. I watched the faraway lights of the city of Colton to the north gradually fade and swirl back into the distance.

Kelly suddenly said: "This must be it."

The road curved off to the right. Intersecting at that point was Waterman Street, a narrow, winding road that snaked between trees and disappeared almost before it got started. You couldn't see a house, but there was a drive.

We went in and up a rutted double path strewn with fallen eucalyptus buds looking like dried acorns. Kelly snapped off the headlights.

"Ruts like these you can drive with your eyes crossed," he grunted. "Couldn't get out of them if you wanted."

We came out in a small clearing surrounded by the torture-twisted white boles of eucalyptus trees. In the center of the clearing was a vague form that might have been a small frame house. On the left and very close by was another vague form that might have been a small coupe. Kelly drifted farther in and then cut the motor.

"If he's there then he's sitting in the dark," I said.

"Right. And if so, why? I don't think I like it. Look, Doctor, do me a favor, will you? I'm going to look around. You stay here in the car, huh?" He opened his coat and reached in and got a service revolver out of his armpit. "Dammit, I hate to dramatize anything and yet on the other hand you got to look at the realities."

I nodded. He got out and walked cautiously toward the small coupe. He looked in, then turned from it and went to the house. There was a porch on the side that looked, even in the darkness, to be rotted and caving. He disappeared inside. A moment later he was out again and motioning to me. I went over.

"He's waiting."

That was all he said. I followed him up on the porch over boards that looked sturdy enough if nobody tried to walk on them. Kelly held a flash. I went in.

There was a small square room smelling of damp earth and decay. The floor was bare and strewn with the litter of abandonment. Kelly shone his flash around, letting me see. Then he said: "Now look," and tilted the beam upward.

The chauffeur was hanging very quietly, very motionless. His body might have been a sounding lead on a taut fishline in a deep still pool.

"Cold," Kelly breathed beside me. "Is he the same man?"

I nodded.

"Somebody wanted to surprise us," he said. "Well all right, I'll give him that much, he did."

"What?"

"Knife in his back. Not a suicide."

"I'm going to be sick," I said. I turned around and stumbled in the direction of the door. I took two steps in the darkness. Then a light that came from nowhere blazed

white and merciless directly behind my eyeballs and at the same instant I felt the back of my head flattening from a blow. It was the first time in my life I had ever been sapped. I went down and out. I didn't even feel my face rub against the filth of the bare wooden floor.

I CAME to with my head rocking gently against a cushion. There was power somewhere, I could feel it low and throbbing. But I couldn't reach out and touch it, the rope cutting into my wrist bones prevented that. The back of my head was sore. I opened my eyes. I was in the front seat of the big black sedan.

We hit a bump. The sedan grunted politely over it, and kept on moving but faster. I slanted my eyes to the left. The gray man was hunched over the steering wheel and his eyes were on the rear-vision mirror. There was a tightness on his face, and even though it was dark I could see the outline of his gray hair and the sharp cut of his gray mustache. He didn't look at me.

The sedan swayed. He was pouring it on now. A car somewhere behind sprayed reflected beams from its headlights. The glare came in obliquely, went along the side panel and out the left front window. In the mirrored reflection I got a glimpse of the gray man's face.

"The dirty son!" he cursed. His voice sounded taut, scared. His right foot went down hard on the accelerator. The sedan leaped.

I tried to raise my head. The gray man's face jerked toward me. He showed me his too-white teeth in a bare, quick glance. "No time for you, wise guy!" he snarled. Then his eyes clawed again for the mirror.

I didn't argue the point.

There was no traffic. I lay there thinking that was a fortunate thing. The road seemed narrow. Trees went by jerking on the left and right sides and streaking back into the night.

"That fat slob!" The gray man mouthed grimly. "I oughta. . . ."

The light which had sprayed through the big sedan a moment before came back, went square with the rear window and held there.

Rand swung his head around and gave it a quick scared look. "I can't shake the louse!"

The light grew stronger and then held as firm as poured concrete. The gray man wrenched on the wheel and the sedan began to take a curve. At that instant somebody started shooting.

"I ain't getting paid for this!" The gray man's eyes spread widely toward me. I felt the sedan lurch, heave its great weight over a rise and then go down, sliding. A boxcar couldn't have done it better. His right leg stretched out and he ducked his head in the crook of his lift arm. Then is when it happened: the big black sedan found a tree.

Somebody's voice said: "He took off. In these woods he's either being cagey or else he's reached a clearing somewhere, I can't hear a thing now."

Someone else said: "Okay, we tried. You can't say we didn't. Anyway we got Haynes."

I felt myself being half carried, half dragged from the sedan. My dangling head seemed to have no anchor. I vomited.

"He's coming around."

"I found that out. Goddam, I just bought these shoes."

Somebody laughed. I lifted my head and took a deep breath. I heard my voice saying, "What's funny?"

Nobody answered. I was lifted and shoved into the rear seat of another sedan. I went for another ride.

MY HEAD cleared. I raised a hand and touched behind my ear. Then I took down the hand and gawked at it. The rope around my wrists was gone. I had company but I didn't see any guns being

aired. The sedan moved quietly. I sucked in a breath and straightened up in the seat. That made my head throb but that was all, I was going to live.

The sedan rolled out through the Gray Mar district. Street lamp standards went by sedately and there was the smell of wet kelp in the air. We wound around a part of the beach then up a steeply inclined concrete drive that led through wrought iron gates set in masonry. The sedan came to a stop under a porte cochere. A door with a large leaded window in it opened as if the stopping car had been a signal.

We got out. Nobody spoke. Inside the door stood a man in a black suit and looking as old as the first epistle of Paul.

"This way, sir," he said in a very old voice.

My company came behind. I followed the old man. We went across a hall with a tessellated floor done in dark woods and through a carved, heavy mahogany doorway. I was being shown into the library.

It had books in it, three walls of books. Leather chairs. The fourth wall—the outside wall—had French doors. It seemed I was destined to be in rooms with French doors. They were open and the kelp smell came in off the ocean. I was being sat down. I was being handed a tray with whiskey and glasses. After I refused that I was being looked at with a great deal of concern. My driving companions stood, one on each side of the doorway, and studied the dim reaches of the ceiling above.

A door opened somewhere, closed again and I heard heavy footsteps crossing the tessellated floor outside. The mahogany door opened and in walked the fattest man I had ever seen.

He stopped just inside the doorway, shot a glance at the two men on either side, then looked across at me. He was wearing galoshes with the cuffs of the trousers folded and tucked into them. He was wearing a heavy overcoat. He was wearing large mittens and around his neck a white woolen scarf and on his head a tan snapbrim hat. His face wasn't the fattest part of him, but as far as I could see it was the reddest.

The old butler bowed gravely and began to unrobe the fat man. The fat man then came across to me rubbing his hands briskly as though he'd just come in from the Arctic.

"Doctor Haynes, this is a great honor!"

He said it and he sounded as though he meant it. I gawked up at him.

"My name is Baker sir!" he went on smoothly. "Alfred Baker. Believe me, Doctor, I am glad—more than glad—to see you alive and well. More than glad!"

"Fine," I said. "Let's declare a bank holiday."

That made his fat jowls ripple. "Ha, ha, Doctor, I see you still retain a sense of humor. Splendid, splendid!" He rubbed his hands briskly again. "I've just flown in from Kansas City. Cold in Kansas, Doctor. Deuced cold."

"You've made a swell entrance," I said. "You've brought the house down. Now let's get on with it. Your hoods over there look impatient."

That made his eyebrows come together and the good-natured look went out of his eyes. He looked at the two, glared a little. "What . . .?" he said.

The one on the right lifted his shoulders, said: "We were a little late, boss. The guy Rand had already put the snatch on him. The D.A.'s man was there. He'll always be there unless somebody moves him."

The fat man's body quivered. "Tell it!" he rapped.

"I am, boss. Like I say, we were a little late. Rand had just gone when we come in the rear door. We followed him, naturally. He piled up two miles north of Grand View. When we pulled up the Doc was in the car but Rand was gone. There was heavy woods all around and we couldn't find him. We come on here—and that's that."

The fat man nodded slowly. He turned

back from them, dismissed them with a flick of his fat hand. Then he put his hands on his big hips and looked down at me. His face looked as serious as the face of a fat man can ever get. The door closed softly on the two gunmen as he said:

"First off, Doctor, my most abject apologies for whatever necessary roughness my men might have showed. It was probably unavoidable in the circumstances. Second, I must tell you I have just flown hurriedly back from Kansas City because of you."

"One more word like that and I'll roll over on my back and kick my heels."

It pained him but he got over it. "I am not without influence in this town, Doctor. Conversely, I am not the man to illegally use that influence. That is why I am here at this very moment. That is why you were rescued. Not so much, perhaps, because of your own self but because of my own. I had been advised this afternoon about what went on here last night."

"That's a dandy word," I said. "Advised."

He looked pained once more. He said shortly: "I had absolutely nothing whatever to do with last night. I know Councilman Spellman, I don't deny it. It astounds me to knew he was mixed up in last night's fracas."

"It astounds me to know you know," I said.

"Only right you should feel like that, Doctor. As I said, I have influence here. I also have an ear to the ground. The Club Memphis doings were told to me early this afternoon. I am here to assure you I had nothing whatever to do with it."

"By God," I said. "I'd have bet you'd say that."

His head came down in a nod. "Understandable," he agreed. "We'll clear that up right now."

HE WAVED his fat hand again. The old butler moved to the door, went out. A moment later the door opened and he came back, bringing with him the very frightened eyes, the very red lips, and the too-long legs of the blonde who called herself Agnes.

When she saw me she whimpered.

Al Baker smiled. "Come right in, Miss Roberts. No need to be alarmed. This is just a friendly visit."

The blonde looked like she wouldn't believe that for the next eighty years.

Baker said again, smoothly, smilingly: "The word of Al Baker on it, Miss Roberts. I have you here merely to explain something to Doctor Haynes."

The blonde's mouth gaped. She looked like she was fixing for the fits. "I. . . ." that and that alone came out of her throat.

"Explain to the good Doctor what went on last night, Miss Roberts." His voice still smiled.

"I . . . ."

"The truth, Miss Roberts. But the whole truth."

The blonde took a breath. Her eyes went from his to mine and then back again to his. "The Councilman hired me to do a phone act," she said.

"Splendid, Miss Roberts. Go on, please."

"I . . . I called him. I told him a car would pick him up. They took him out to the Memphis where Spellman was. Beany drove and Art Rand went along. Then they pulled it off. Just at the right minute Chan broke the window and pretended to hold us up like we planned it. He took him away."

"Who was Chan, Miss Roberts?"

"Chan Dickerson. An actor. We needed somebody else."

"I see. Go on. What happened after that."

"Well, Chan was supposed to fix some whiskey and put him out. And that's all I know . . . honest to God!"

The big fat man smiled grimly. "I see. And whose was this little plan? I mean who thought it up?"

The blonde's mouth began to tremble,

and her eyes flickered wildly. "Spellman's," she whispered. "He told me he wanted it to look like something smooth like what Al Baker would pull."

There was an instant of silence.

I took a breath. I didn't say a thing. He threw back his head as far as it would go on his fat neck muscles and then laughed at the ceiling. It was a long, chuckling laugh; a long rippling, conquering, jelly-shaking magnificent chortle of a laugh, and the sound of it carried above him and boomed jovially around in the vaulted spaces of the high room.

"Haaaaaaaaa!" He roared in utter satisfaction.

It was the final word of the final scene of the final act. Even as he laughed some momentary shifting of the light in the room—a small thing like a shadow cast and removed even at the casting—etched briefly into the corners of my eyes. It came from the open French windows. And even as the laugh rang out a gun shot punctuated it.

"You dirty, lousy, filthy fat liar!" somebody shouted.

Al Baker's head remained in the thrown-back position but the sound of his laughing died off. His eyes remained open, his hands still curled on his fat stomach and his jowls still danced sluggishly. And then all that changed. His knees gave way. He went down at first slowly, with a certain great dignity. Then fast, heavily. When he hit, the floor trembled.

Art Rand's gray eyes stared in hating, from the French windows. His white teeth fanged out of his drawn back lips and his smooth gray hair looked as if he had just combed it the instant before. His right hand held a smoking blued automatic.

His moment of triumph was short. The old old butler pulled a gun from nowhere and shot him through the left eye. As he fell, the butler sighed and dropped the gun from a listless hand and walked slowly over to the very dead fat man. He leaned down over him. He got down on his knees. He began to cry. And the blonde let out one tinny scream.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY Waggonner Hart's eyes looked numb. He smiled sadly at me and splayed his hands out from his sides as if they would feel better if he did that. He said softly:

"It seems there is to be no trial after all. Councilman Spellman hanged himself in his bedroom. So all of the things that have happened to you seem to have been just for nothing."

"What about Kelly?" I said.

"He has one in his left shoulder. It's painful but not too serious, I'm glad to say. The way I reconstruct it, the chauffeur and afraid the murder of Dickerson would finally get pinned on him . . . when he learned it was his gun they used. He planned to tell what he knew about the whole thing. But Spellman couldn't risk that. He had Art Rand put him out of the way. Then Rand waited for you, sapped you down and shot Kelly. After that you played out the last part of it yourself, so you know what happened."

I nodded. "Was Al Baker telling the truth?"

"Of course not. For the first time in his life Baker was frightened. There were too many loose ends dangling in this for Baker. He liked them smooth as glass. He planned the frame on you, yes, to help out Spellman. And probably at a price. But after Dickerson's death—that is, when nothing about the Dickerson killing leaked out—I believe he then figured it would be best to duck the whole business. Probably he knew how Spellman would react—scared bad. And he was right. Spellman did what he thought was the only thing, he had Rand hijack you at the shack where Rand knifed the chauffeur. Probably the idea was to take you out to some lonely canyon and lose you."

"So I'd never get found again," I muttered.

"Exactly." He said it calmly, but smiled. "However, something went wrong. I believe even then Baker was ditching him entirely. For that reason it was necessary to stage a rescue of yourself, take you out to his home and sit you down so you could listen to the blonde Agnes' warmed-up story."

"You mean the blonde sold Spellman down the river and then did what Baker told her to do?"

"Not necessarily. Years ago Baker used to have a couple night spots of his own. Agnes worked for him then. She probably didn't sell anybody out, she just did what Baker told her to do all down the line. When Rand got away in those woods he doubtless contacted Spellman at once. He was genuinely Spellman's man—the only one, by the way—and Spellman told him to do what he did. So he did it. And died himself. That butler is a remarkable man . . . would you believe he's seventy-two years old?"

I shook my head. "I'm dead myself," I said. "I'm glad it's over, glad I'll never have to think of it again as long as I live."

"Except in the very quiet moments," he reminded gently. "Just before you drop off to sleep."

"Yes," I said. "I guess you're right at that. Incidentally, three things about this I don't understand. One is how Spellman knew at once that you were putting a bodyguard on me; and how his name was going to be Kelly. Two, how did the chauffeur find out it was his gun that killed off Dickerson? Three, even though Baker admittedly had connections, how was he able to know what went on so fast, so accurately?"

"I wondered if you would ask that," he admitted quietly. "There is only one possible way these things could have come about, of course. A leak in my own office."

"I'll be damned," I said.

"Yes. I, too. I'm now on my way down to the office to pick her up and book her with everything I can think of bar none."

"Her?" I said.

"Her. You remember that redheaded stenographer who works in my outer waiting room? You must have seen her the day you were down there."

"I did," I said, and my mouth dropped open.

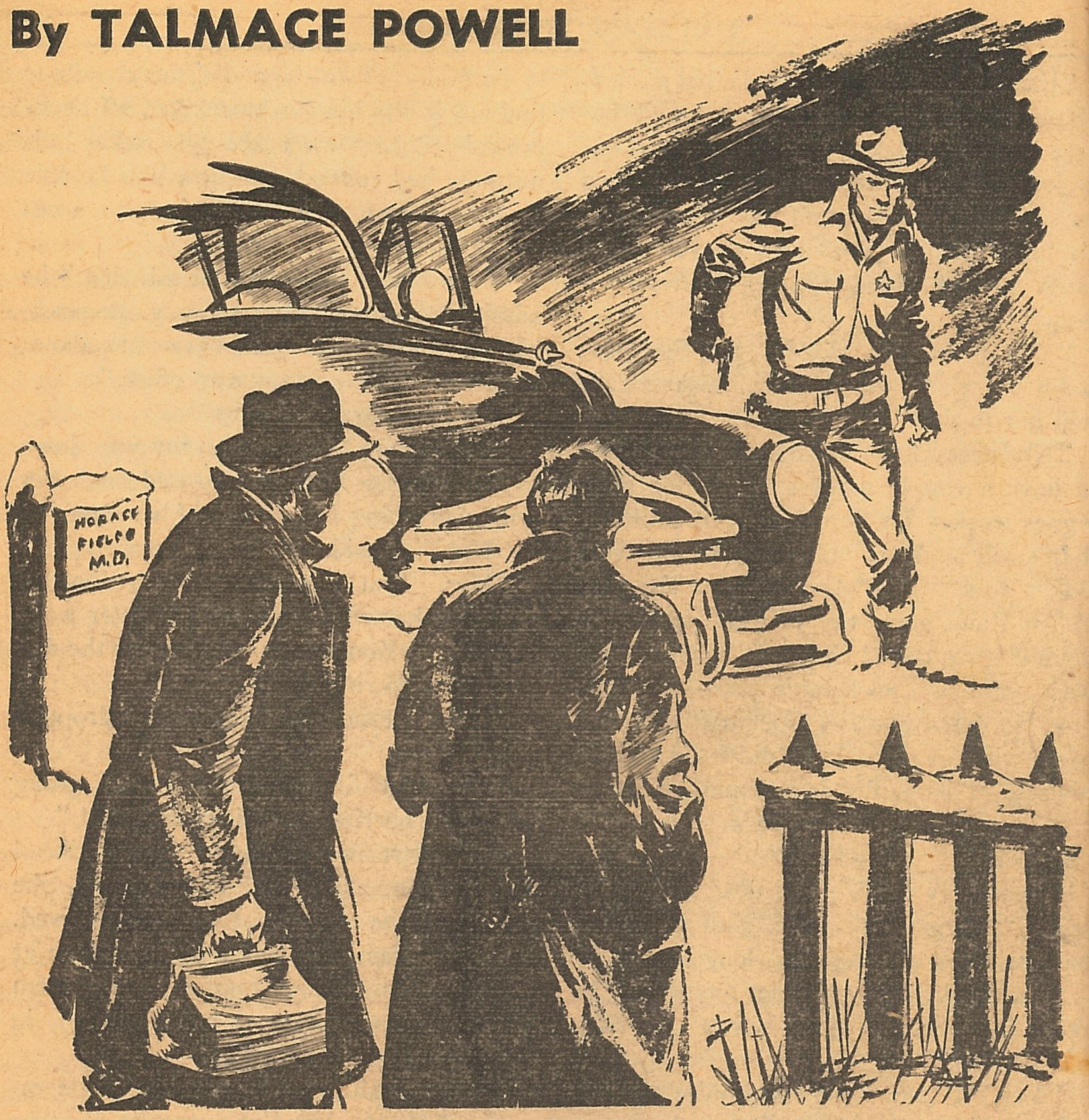
"In about fifteen minutes she's going to be one horribly surprised little girl."

But Hart was wrong. The redhead wasn't at the office when he got there. She wasn't at the apartment where she lived, either. In fact she wasn't in circulation at all it seemed. It took four weeks for them to find her—in a town called Yazoo, in Mississippi.

I suppose she's on an extended State vacation by now, but I'm not sure, I never heard of her after that. I didn't follow it in the papers. I was too busy being a dean again.

♦ ♦ ♦

By TALMAGE POWELL



Rufe got out of the car, his gun already drawn. . . .

The most dangerous power you can give a man is the legal right to take a gun and go after his . . .

DEADLIEST ENEMY!

I CLOSED the car door behind me and bored my way across the village street through the lashing snow, moving toward the lighted warmth of Len Abbott's general store. It was a bitterly cold day, an angry north wind hurling the snow down through the mountain passes. Though it was only four-thirty in the afternoon, the village lay cloaked in a thick, gray near-darkness.

I stomped my feet and shook my coat when I was inside the store. Len was dozing behind the counter. Three mountain men were grouped on nail kegs around the potbelly stove in the center of the store. Len said, "Howdy, doc."

"Any mail for me?"

Len handed over a couple of envelopes and a small, brown package, mail from relatives and sample drugs from a pharmaceutical house. I stuffed the mail in my pockets, and bellied up to the stove, feeling its warmth on the full, red flesh of my cold face.

Though a mountain doctor has little time for such things, I always enjoyed a stopoff in Len's. Like the mountains, the store hadn't changed in its reflection of a way of life. The store meant grub when crops went bad or a man's livestock sickened. It was a meeting place where Saturday poke buyers swapped news of Dogwood Mountain for news of Jackson's Cove. Girls in their teens flirted behind their mamas' backs and in summer young bucks pitched horeshoes or staged weight lifting contests with sacks of grain in the store yard. The main thing I liked about the store was its smell. It smelled just as it had when I was a boy coming to town with pa in the buggy when Len's pa ran the store, fifty years ago. Time had blended the odors of new harness, salt meat, chewing tobacco, fresh denim, fertilizer, snuff, candy, crackers, until there wasn't another smell quite like it on earth.

The trio about the stove continued their various occupations: one dozing, one chewing homemade twist, one just as studiously whittling thin shavings into the shallow sandbox in which the stove was set.

The tobacco chewer fried spittle against the cherry-red side of the stove and said, "Doc, I hear Edie Clane has had her baby."

A silence took possession of the store. The whittler paused; the tobacco chewer stilled his lank, lean, stubbled jaw; the dozing man cracked his eyelids.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"Rufe—the sheriff—told me. Said he was up there at the Clane place this morning, figuring the weather must have drove Jack in out of the hills. Said Edie is poorly from having the child with only a midwife."

I felt the muscles on the back of my neck tighten. They were looking at me, waiting for me to affirm the report. But I didn't affirm or deny. I said, "Edie can take whatever comes her way." Then I turned up my coat collar against the wind and left the store.

RUFE was getting ready to leave his office when I got there, a swirl of snow entering with me. He grinned at me and finished stuffing the ends of his muffler under his leather jacket. He was a tall, handsome young man. There was rawboned, sinewy strength in the sweep of his shoulders and quick intelligence in his brown eyes. Rufe was born an inch above the average cut of man. He was hard-working, honest, a leader among his people. There was only this one bad flaw in him, this blind, unreasonable hatred he bore for Jack Clane. I, and all those close to him, knew that it was like a festering sore, eating away at the good fibers that made him a man.

"Doc," he said, "this weather has brought the blood ready to bust out of your cheeks."

"Not only the weather," I retorted.

He raised his brows and went about pulling his hat down snug on his head.

"You know what I'm talking about!" I said. "It's a lowhanded trick you're trying, putting out that rumor that Edie is sick from having her baby all alone. You know that word will get to Jack when he stops at some cabin for food or passes a hunter in the hills. You figure a new born babe and an ailing wife is bait strong enough to get Jack in the trap you'll be ready to spring on him."

"I'm the law," Rufe said, "and he's a would-be murderer on the run. If I can't find him by going out in the hills, I'll make

him come to me. Doc, whose side are you on anyway?"

We stood a moment eye to eye, glaring. Then I sighed. "You young fool, whose side have I always been on? This poison you're nursing inside yourself is about as safe as sleeping with a rattlesnake. In your heart you know that Jack Clane is no would-be murderer. And a trick like this—it's beneath you. It's not like you."

He had pulled on his gloves. He was ready to leave. He locked the office when we were outside. I watched him walk to the mud-caked car with the sheriff's emblem on the door. He walked straight, not bending against the fury of the storm, his booted feet hitting the frozen earth solidly, a gun hanging at his side, a star pinned on his chest. I shook my head and moved off toward my own car.

Jack Clane's place was halfway up the reaches of Huckleberry Mountain. It consisted of a few acres of meadow land and rocky hillside farming patches. The barn and corn crib sat off beyond the house, which was a low structure of hand-hewn logs the color of brown earth, set tight and snug against the breast of the earth itself. This was the kind of place that required the hard fertilizer of a full measure of a man's sweat, a place that yielded only when forced to by determined, work-calloused hands, if the human beings on the place were to survive.

By the time I stopped my car in the narrow, rutted dirt road below Jack's house, the snow was abating, but the wind was higher. Whole stretches of barren, frozen mountainside were completely naked of snow. The wind had whipped it away to pile it in powder fine drifts in the low places as the snow had fallen.

I stumbled and slipped a time or two as I went up the path toward the small yellow spots of light that marked the windows of the Clane house. Puffing, my nose feeling like an ice box ready to start dripping, I knocked on the cabin door. It was opened by Belle Felder, the fat, sleepy-looking fourteen year-old daughter of a family across the ridge.

I moved inside quickly and Belle closed the door. Edie was sitting in a rocking chair near the yawning stone fireplace where an oak fire crackled. My knock had brought her to the edge of her chair, and she didn't relax even after she saw who it was.

I put my bag on the center table, peeled off my gloves, and stretched my hands out to the fire. I smiled at her.

"You've got some word of Jack," she said.

"Nonsense. I simply thought to stop by and check on my prettiest patient before turning in for the night. How do you feel, Edie?"

She ignored the question. She was a small woman of delicate bones. Her face was thin, made alive by a dream-like kind of sensitive beauty. As sometimes happens with slender women, she was great with child, massive with child. It seemed as if this offering to her race stirring within her would never stop growing.

I had worried about her more than I cared to admit. The delivery would take place right here in the cabin. That was tradition, convention; that was where all hill babies were born. But a factor far stronger than convention bound her to the cabin—her dread, surpassing even her terror of first-birth, that Jack would risk himself to return to her side and find her gone when her time came.

She looked into the fire; then turned her head to me and her large, dark eyes seemed to have gathered to themselves some of the heat of the flames. "I know what Rufe is trying to do. The Felders heard as early as this morning. That's why they sent Belle over."

"Are you sure Rufe started the rumor?"

"Who else would? Rufe couldn't catch Jack; so he's using this way."

"There isn't much I can say on Rufe's

behalf, is there? Would you believe me?"

"No, it wouldn't be like you to defend him for a hateful thing," she said. "Once I thought I loved Rufe. Now I can't help pitying him. He's living with his own private devil."

After I examined her, I gave her a light sedative. She'd be hysterical before long if she continued to think back over this day, the arrival of Belle, big-eyed to see the baby, her questioning of Belle until she understood the tale that had been started.

When I went out in the night again, I paused below the cabin. My gaze moved over the windswept reaches of the wild mountains. I didn't know exactly what I expected to see, perhaps Rufe's shadow in the pale, cold moonlight that had come with clearing skies.

ALONE in my house that night, I lay in my feather ticking and tried to sleep. The rushing wind, moaning in the eaves, annoyed me. Slumber danced away from me in the flames in the fireplace. My mind was on edge, remembering.

It was written in bone, muscles, blood, and brain that Jack and Rufe be either friends the powers of darkness couldn't sever or the bitterest enemies. There was no middle ground, no meeting place for those two. The presence of one was a challenge to the other.

It had begun years ago, when both attended the one-room country schoolhouse below Walnut Gap. Jack's ma had died and his pa had sent him from north Georgia, one segment of a broken family, to live with an aunt and her husband.

Rufe waited for Jack by the schoolhouse pump that first day. Rufe spat on his knuckles and said, "You have to fight me if you go to this school." Rufe's words carried no bravado. He wasn't a bully, simply a young, primitive king already sensing a challenge to his domain. The boys fought that day, as if they were men, toe to toe, silently. Neither quit; both stopped fighting from exhaustion that left them on the earth sucking for air. But Rufe knew in his heart that the other boy had the edge on him.

They fought eleven times during that school term. Beatings by their elders failed to stop them, and the beatings they gave each other settled nothing.

Rufe went away to school, and Jack went to work on his aunt's rocky, hillside farm. Rufe had advantages that Jack could never have, security, the prestige of a family that had long supplied the hill people with leadership. Yet Rufe would have gladly surrendered all these things if he could have, one single time, met Jack Clane on exactly equal terms and thoroughly and decisively whipped him.

When war came, both men quietly enlisted. Rufe became a lieutenant, Jack a sergeant. Rufe caught a piece of shrapnel on his first beachhead in Italy. Jack's fighting carried him all the way from Normandy to the Rhine.

After they came home, sobered by war, they fought less often; only when they met at a schoolhouse dance or shucking bee.

The real trouble began when Edie Simmons came to the village to take the telephone operator's job. With her delicate beauty she was like a gust of springtime. Rufe began seeing her constantly. He grew quieter in bearing. His eyes shone when he spoke her name. His hand trembled when he touched her.

Edie met Jack some time later when she went to a quilting party at his aunt's house. He drove her home that night, and from that moment, she was a changed woman.

Six months later she married Jack. Men sat in church during the ceremony, blood pulsing thick and cold in their veins, and wondered if there was going to be a shooting in the church yard when the service was over.

But nothing so direct would now have appeased Rufe's anger. Several months later he suffered the final outrage. He heard that Edie was going to have a child. Up to this

point he might have felt that somehow he would gain her in the end. Now he knew that she was lost to him forever. He took the news with a pale face and lips that tightened until his flashing white teeth were laid bare.

He took to stopping by the Clane place when he was in the neighborhood to pass the time of day, he said. It was a suffering man's excuse to torture himself with the sight of her blooming toward the birth of another man's child. Here for Rufe's eyes was the evidence of love, the token of the manner in which her spirit was welded to the spirit of the hated enemy.

Jack was quiet on these occasions, as he was when he and Rufe met in town. Jack recognized the deadliness in the man before him. The same sidewalk wasn't big enough to hold the pair of them, and it was Jack who slipped to one side, but with a calm grace that bespoke no cowardice, only common judgment, and made him the silent, unaggressive victor.

Rufe was sheriff now, a young man of power in the community. What thoughts passed through his head none can say, but his cold attitude, the glitter in his eyes when Jack Clane's name was mentioned indicated that Rufe had but one hope for his future, the utter annihilation of his enemy.

It so happened that a hound dog put Jack at Rufe's mercy. A big, red-spotted creature, the hound belonged to a sullen farmer named Clem Coggins. The dog ran beneath the wheels of Jack's truck as he was homeward bound in the dusk.

He delivered the dog's crushed body to the Coggins place. Coggins came out of the house, saw the dog, and knocked Jack down. Jack struck back. Coggins tumbled from the blow and struck his head against the corner of the cement cap on his well.

Coggins was groggily getting to his feet when his wife and three children came out of the house. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Coggins," Jack said. "I didn't mean to kill the dog, or hurt your husband either. Better get him inside and dress that head wound. It's bleeding some. And try to calm him down and tell him I'll pay whatever the dog is worth."

That was Jack's story, as related by Edie.

I was called to the Coggins place late that night. Clem was in a near-coma when I arrived. He was suffering a fractured skull.

Jack vanished into the hills, a fugitive from a warrant charging him with attempted murder. Perhaps he hoped that Clem would relent as his condition improved. Or perhaps he hoped not at all, struggling only because that dogged courage would not allow him to do otherwise, knowing that surrender would place him in the hands of Rufe. Six days now he had endured the pinching hunger, the bone-rotting cold. In his mind must have been the intention to endure indefinitely, until Edie had her baby, until he could steal the two of them away to leave the hills and Rufe's hatred forever.

It was a hatred poisoning my own flesh and blood; Rufe was my only son . . .

LACK of sleep caused aches to filter in my joints the next day. The snow still lay in the hollows and the earth crunched beneath a footfall. The sky was a cold, metallic blue. It turned into a leaden sheet as the day progressed and finally was tinged with purple when I went home.

The woman from the tenant family on my place, who has swept the house and done the cooking since my wife died, had put my supper in the range warmer. I felt too tired to eat, but ate anyway. I'd made the Clane place my last stop before heading for supper, and my mind was filled with thoughts of Edie. She was waiting for something horrible to happen, and I wasn't surprised that her endurance was being beaten down to the vanishing point. Later tonight I intended to make another call at the Clane place.

Meanwhile there was a fire spreading its warmth through the parlor. The high-

backed leather chair had molded to my body through years of use. My head nodded forward. I slept.

A shaft of brittle cold moonlight was reaching through the window when I awoke. The fire had died away to a few embers in the fireplace. My body shook against the cold that had seeped into the house. I started to get out of the chair, and a hand, lean, sinewy, strong, clamped over my mouth.

"Don't holler, Doc," Jack said quietly.

I relaxed and he took his hand away. I turned to look at him. He was a thin shadow beside my chair. Moonlight touched his face, making shadows of his eyes.

"I heard the tale, Doc. I came to see. She hasn't had her baby, but she's having it now. Worry and nervous strain are hurrying things up."

"I'll get my bag."

"And an overcoat, Doc."

"You're cold?"

"No, but I'm hurt a little, and I don't want her to see the blood. I've been shot. And your boy is right behind me, Doc."

I brought him the overcoat, and he put it on. He was on his feet, still able to move. Edie, I decided, needed my attention first.

Jack and I walked halfway across the front yard before the headlights swooped over the hill above the house and bore down on us. Jack made a movement. I caught his arm. His face in that moment reflected the pain and naked hatred of years. But the moment passed, and a new expression took possession of his gaunt features. He was austere, beyond the reach of wounds most mortals feel. He stood straight, unbent, unyielding as the sheriff's car swung to a stop.

"He saw you. You'd never get away," I said. "But I promise you, Jack, that you'll be there when your baby is born."

Rufe got out of the car, his gun already drawn. He walked toward us, tall in the moonlight. The two men faced each other across this moment that was the apex of all the years they had lived. There was little for them to say. Rufe had run his man to earth; Rufe stood with all the power either of the two could summon in his own hands. Yet Rufe had not won. Rufe was not the victor, because Jack refused to be the vanquished.

"You don't need the gun, Rufe," I said. "He's already carrying one of your bullets."

"He was carrying a rifle," Rufe said, "and refused to stop." He motioned with

BEAUTIFUL, BLUE, and DEADLY!

By Burt Sims

With or without the luscious chick at the wheel, the convertible looked like a bargain. But all that Johnny Aiken was buying with his famous "highest prices"—was his own private hearse!

Also in the October issue—Larry Holden, Carroll Daly, Julius Long and others.

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his gun. "We'll go back to the village in my car, Clane."

"We'll all three go to the Clane place in mine," I amended. "His being there might make the difference between life and death for Edie. You can have your prisoner when I'm finished with my patients."

Still he held the gun. My thumb pressed the latch on my bag. It flipped open. My other hand reached and withdrew the pistol I always carry in the bag.

"I'm sorry, Rufe. I made a promise to Jack. If it'll make you feel any better, let's just say that I bagged your man first."

His hat brim shaded his face in the moonlight, but I saw his mouth move, forming words that made no sound; then slowly, he holstered his gun.

Once or twice during the drive to Jack's place, I wondered if I had a dying man on my hands. He swayed and gasped in the seat beside me. Every mountain doctor has experienced times when he needed four hands, two brains; a dozen hands, half a dozen brains—for that matter. As long as Jack remained conscious, I had to close my mind to everything but Edie.

Her moans smote us as we walked in the cabin. Belle Felder was hunched in the corner of the room, staring at Edie, biting her fist, and sobbing. I sent her into the other room.

As the wave of pain subsided, Edie eased her teeth from her lip. She held out her hand to Jack. He took it, kneeling by her bed. In the light of the fire and the yellow, flickering lamp, fine drops of agony sweat shone on her forehead and cheeks. She looked at Rufe and said to Jack, "He brought you back to be with me?"

"Yes," Jack said quietly, "Rufe brought me."

"Then everything will be all right," she said in a limp voice.

Another pain took possession of her. The battle began in earnest then; and in five minutes I knew we had a real fight on our hands.

HER agony was long. It took the three of us to deliver the man-child, Rufe holding her against the bed after she went half mad with pain, Jack helping as much as he was able.

Then it was over, and she sank in slumber. I wrapped the baby and tucked him in the basket she had prepared for him days ago. Rufe watched me. When I finished tucking the baby in, he had turned his gaze to her sleeping face. Then he brought his glance to Jack and said, "Are you ready?"

"He needs some patch work," I said.

Rufe cut me short with a gesture of his hand. He and Jack looked at each other, and I suddenly felt as if they had slammed a door in my face.

"I'm ready," Jack said.

"Then stay that way. I'll be back to get you when Doc has dug the bullet out of your ribs. I've beaten you all the way through. Did you know that, Jack Clane? I whipped you as a kid just as often as I took a whipping, but I had the notion in my head that you had the edge on me. I took some bullets in Italy. You never did. I whipped you wrestling, pitching horseshoes, lifting grain in Len Abbott's store yard. If Edie had held the feeling for me every man wants in a woman, I believe I'd have whipped you there, too. I always beat you, but I never could seem to win. Tonight I found out why.

"You refuse to take the beating. You had me fooled all these years into thinking *I* was the one who was getting the licking. Now that I know the real score, I don't feel the need to try beating you any more. I don't need Clem's lying testimony, and I don't need Edie's grief." He turned and walked from the cabin.

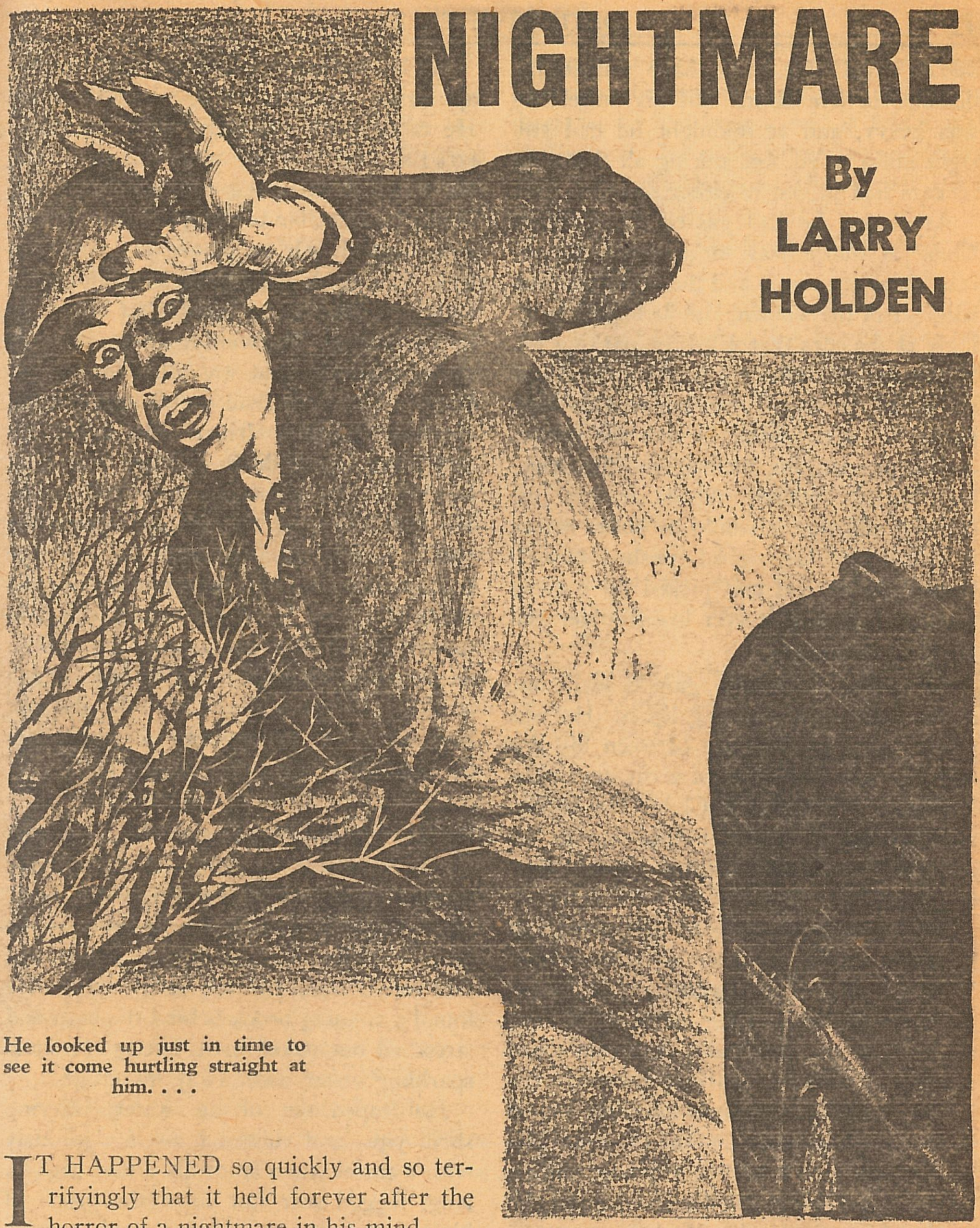
Jack said, "He's a scrapper, that one."

I walked to the cabin door. Rufe was moving down the hill before me. The air was so cold it brought mist to my eyes.

In the brittle moonlight, my boy's shadow lay straight, tall, and clean-cut against the hillside. ♦ ♦ ♦

NIGHTMARE

By LARRY HOLDEN



He looked up just in time to see it come hurtling straight at him. . . .

IT HAPPENED so quickly and so terrifyingly that it held forever after the horror of a nightmare in his mind.

It was late, too late to be hitch-hiking down this stretch of lonely highway, but he had wanted to reach Bay City that night. An hour before dark, a farmer had given him a lift in a battered pick-up and had let him off twenty-five miles north of the City. It was then that he learned that he was not on the highway, but on the little-used sec-

The girl was doing her best to convince Kerry it had all been a terrible mistake. Nobody, she explained, was really trying to kill Kerry . . . well, anyway, not *yet!*

ondary road. He could have walked the distance in five hours, but his duffel bag was heavy, and at midnight he had still eight miles to go, and during all that time no cars had passed in either direction.

At eleven, he had passed the Country Club. A dance was in progress, for he could hear the music and the high, carrying laughter of the women, and he looked longingly at the cars that filled the parking lot. He swung his duffel bag to the ground and sat wearily beside it, reaching into his shirt pocket for a cigarette. It was not until a car swept past him, turning into the driveway, that he realized the dance was just starting and that it would be hours before it was over. He sighed, pushed himself heavily to his feet and picked up his bag again. He swung it over his shoulder and plodded southward.

At twelve, he rested again beneath one of the infrequent highway lights. He was placing another cigarette between his lips when he saw the lights of a car approaching from the Country Club. He hastily snatched up his bag and stood beside the macadam, his supplicating thumb outstretched.

The car was traveling at high speed, but it slowed slightly and swung toward him. With a feeling of tired gratitude, he picked up his duffel bag. Then suddenly he was aware that the car had picked up speed again, and he looked up just in time to see it come hurtling straight at him. He leaped back wildly, but not quite far enough. The near fender struck his trailing bag, and he was flung violently off the shoulder of the road and into the shallow ditch.

Through waves of stifling pain, he heard the car come to a tire-screeching stop. Dimly, he saw the headlights rake the bushes as the car turned and came slowly back. Mistily, he saw the driver peering intently from behind the wheel.

And then the car picked up speed and roared northward. A minute or two later, another car passed, coming from the city.

He lay in the ditch and watched the disappearing taillights in agonized disbelief. He thought he was dying. He lay paralyzed and could not breathe. Then slowly, his tortured lungs began to draw air, and finally he was able to sit up. The pain was gone, and shakily he moved his arms and legs. One ankle felt a little sore, and there were scratches on his hands, but otherwise he was unhurt. The wind had been knocked out of him, and that was all. He was too tired to feel more than a dull anger at the reckless, heartless driver. He found his duffel bag in the ditch—a seam was split, but his clothes and books were still inside. He shouldered it and limped down the road. A few minutes later he saw the peaked silhouette of a barn roof against the starlit sky, and he angled across the field toward it. Within ten minutes he was so deeply asleep on a pile of burlap bags, which smelled of dust and rot, that he did not hear the police sirens come screaming up the road from the city.

THE sun was high when he awakened the next morning, stiff and sore. There was no sound inside the dilapidated barn, and when he looked outside he saw that the farmhouse had burned down so long ago that weeds were growing in the ruins. He found a running brook behind the barn and stretched out naked in it, letting the cold, sparkling water wash away his fatigue.

He leaped out of the water, uttering shrill yips, and rubbed himself vigorously with a towel taken from his duffel bag. A long, jagged scar ran down the inside of his left arm, the reason for the honorable discharge papers he carried in his wallet. He sang as he dressed, his blunt, homely face pink from the scrubbing he had given it. It was so good to be alive and tingling with energy that he found indulgent excuses for the driver who had almost killed him.

Poor guy, he thought. *Probably scared to death.*

He knew all about being scared to death, and he made excuses.

He reached Bay City about three that afternoon and took a room in a small, cheap hotel on Mulberry Street near the freight yards. He showered, dressed in white sneakers, seersucker slacks and a dark green T-shirt, and walked across the street to a bar aptly named Jim's Joint. It was Sunday afternoon and the barkeep and a lone customer drowsed over a beer at the end of the bar. He ordered a whiskey-and-beer and picked up the Sunday paper that someone had left on the bar. He passed casually over the headline, *Socialite Released On Bail,* but his eyes became suddenly intent when he saw the accompanying two-column cut. It was the photograph of a sleek sport roadster with a crumpled front fender, and inset was the picture of a girl with shoulder-length blonde hair. It was not the girl, but the car that held his attention. It was familiar, familiar. . . .

Quickly, he read the story. The girl was Mrs. Walter Cowan, and she had been arrested for reckless driving—pending a more serious charge. Acting on a tip that she had run down and killed a pedestrian on Old Albee Road, the night before, police had found her car parked at the Country Club, it's front fender smashed in with smears of blood on it. The girl protested her innocence, but was unable to account for the condition of her car. Police were searching for a passing motorist who may have given aid to the severely injured or dying man. Hospitals and doctors were being canvassed.

Yes, that was the car that had almost run him down. His first reaction was a feeling of pity for the girl. True, she had gone away and left him lying there, but she had gone through hell since. She. . . .

His mind came to a sharp and abrupt stop. Something struggled in the back of his consciousness. A girl. . . . But it hadn't been a girl behind the wheel of that car. Even last night he had thought to himself, "The poor *guy*. . . ." Even last night, through the muddy agony of trying to breathe, he had known that it was a man in that car. He could never have mistaken that girl with the long blonde hair for a man.

He thought uneasly, *What the hell's going on here?*

He reread the story, not missing a word, and when he finished, his homely face was hard and angry. Now he had the picture. That business about the police "acting on a tip" was what had done it. *Whose* tip? The paper did not say.

There was only one guy who could have done the tipping. The guy who had diven the car. A rat. Not only had he fled the scene of the accident—if it had been an accident—but now he had blamed it on someone else.

He called sharply to the barkeep, "Say, bud, where's police headquarters in this town?"

TWENTY minutes later he was telling his story to the stolid desk sergeant, who turned him over to a Detective Flynn, a thin, sharp-faced man with icy eyes. Flynn took him to a small room on the second floor.

"What's your name?" he asked abruptly.

"Dave Kerry."

"Where do you live?"

"Claremont Hotel on Mulberry Street."

"What's your story?"

Dave flushed at Flynn's cold tone but told him exactly what had happened, ending with, "And if you ask me, the guy who accused Mrs. Cowan was the guy who was driving that car."

"Nobody accused nobody of nothing," said Flynn flatly. "We got a call saying a car traveling at high speed had knocked down a pedestrian on Old Albee Road, and he gave us the license number. He thought the car turned in at the Country Club, but he wasn't sure. Before we could get his name, he said he was going for a doctor,

because the pedestrian was hurt bad, and hung up. We found the Cowan dame's car ourselves. Nobody pointed it out to us."

"He was giving you a line. Nobody came to look at me while I was lying there in the ditch. Another car passed, but it was too far away at the time to have seen anything."

"Yeah?" Flynn looked him up and down. "You look a little healthy for a guy that was knocked down by a speeding car."

"It only hit my duffel bag."

"Duffel bag, eh?" Flynn walked to the window and stood drumming on the sill with his fingers. He turned. "How long have you known that Cowan dame?" he barked.

Dave stammered, "I don't know her at all. I—"

"Maybe *you* were in that car too last night. Maybe *you* were the one that was driving. How'd it happen? You had your arm around her and you were loving her up a little, maybe kissing her, then all of a sudden, *bump!* and you ran into the guy. Then you hightailed it back to the Country Club, because she didn't want her husband to know she was out necking with another guy. Was that the way it went, Kerry? Or was she driving and drifted off the road when you began to mush it up with her? Come on, fella, let's have it, and give it to me straight this time!"

He hammered at Dave for a half hour, then called in another detective, and the pair of them hammered at him, shouting questions, accusing him, wheedling to get him to say it had been the girl who had been driving. Then, abruptly, they walked out of the room, leaving Dave alone. Flynn came back ten minutes later and said contemptuously:

"Beat it, punk. Go back and tell your girl friend it didn't work." Then, as Dave strode angrily out of the room, Flynn called after him, "And don't try to leave town, Kerry. You're as guilty as hell, and I'm going to prove it."

Dave yelled back with impotent fury, "You're so dumb you couldn't prove which way is up!" But he was more bewildered than anything else. He had told them the truth, and they had not believed him. And were trying to implicate him. He couldn't believe it. It was crazy. The feeling of nightmare crept back over him. He walked until he came to a bar and had two straight whiskeys. Then he took a nickel and called the Cowan girl.

He said, "Mrs. Cowan? My name's Dave Kerry. I'm the guy you're supposed to have knocked down with your car last night."

She gasped, then her voice came frigidly, "I'm sorry but I don't appreciate practical jokes!"

She hung up, but he called her back immediately.

"Just listen for a minute. This isn't a joke," he pleaded. "I'll tell you something to prove it. You weren't driving the car. It was a man."

He heard her draw a sharp breath, and then she began to talk very fast, "Mr. Kerry, I've got to talk to you. Where can I see you? Where are you now?"

"Well . . . I'm in a gin mill. I could come out to your place and—"

"No, no. Not here. Do you live in the city?"

"The Claremont Hotel, but I don't think. . . ."

"No, no, you're quite right." She hesitated, then dropped her voice and said quickly, "I've got to talk to you where we won't . . . can't be overheard. I'm terribly afraid. Do you know where Lake Powhatan is?"

"No. I just got in town today."

"It's about five miles south of the city. The number 102 bus goes by the lake road. I'll meet you there. But please, please be careful!" There was a skirling overtone of hysteria in her voice.

"I'll be there," he said soberly.

"Be careful," she whispered again.

Some of her fear—for she sounded almost terror-stricken— communicated itself to him, and he thought of Flynn's icy eyes and that parting threat—*"You're as guilty as hell, and I'm going to prove it!"* He shivered.

He had heard of innocent men going to jail before this. He had also heard that the police didn't have to have a body to prove a killing. What would a jury think of that smashed fender with the blood on it? He almost wished he had not called the Cowan girl, wished he had gone back to his hotel room and stayed there, for if the police could not prove any connection between him and the girl, they would not be able to implicate him. But that feeling was only a natural wrench in the coils of the nightmare, and he shook it off. The girl was not guilty. He was going to help her. In spite of Flynn.

IT WAS quite dark when he got off the the bus at the Lake road. There was a dismal yellow overhead light at the intersection. He looked around but could not see anyone waiting. Then two hundred yards up the dark road a pair of taillights blinked on and off, on and off.

She was standing beside the car when he walked up and she cried tremulously, "Oh thank God! I was afraid you weren't coming."

By the pallid light from the dashboard, he could see her misty blonde hair, and he could smell the rich, heady perfume she was wearing.

"Let's drive," she whispered. Her hand on his arm was shaking. "It's . . . safer."

He slid into the front seat beside her. She did not say anything until the car was moving. In the light of the dashboard, her face looked pinched.

Finally she said, "Are you sure . . . that it was a man you saw driving my car last night?" Her trembling fingers touched his wrist briefly. "How can you be absolutely certain?"

His mind cast back. How could he be sure? What was there that made him sure? Then he remembered. The man had been wearing a definitely masculine black snap-brim hat.

"I'm sure," he said.

"Can you identify him?" It was a prayer.

He shook his head ruefully. "I . . . don't think so. But it was a man, all right."

"That's something, thank God! You don't know how awful this has been. You see," she said miserably, "I know who it was. It was my husband. Last winter he . . . tried to kill me. That's the reason I'm so frightened now. That's the reason I want you to be careful If he even dreamed you saw him . . . oh, it's so awful! We'll have to go to the police."

"I've been to the police. They didn't believe me."

"They didn't—oh no! Why didn't they believe you?"

"Well. . . ." Then reluctantly, "They thought I was, well, mixed up in it."

"But how?"

"They, well, thought maybe I was driving or something." He couldn't bring himself to saying that Flynn thought her his girl friend.

"That's silly," she said indignantly. Her voice became dull, "They didn't believe me either, and I told them the truth, too. Walt and I went to the Country Club dance, and he proceeded into the bar, leaving me alone, as usual. He always gets drunk. But last night he just pretended to get drunk. I was terribly upset when he went into the bar. He's been wanting a divorce, but I . . . I thought there was a chance of saving our marriage if he would give up drinking. When I say he tried to kill me last winter, I'm not sure. It could have been an accident. But last night, when I saw him start drinking again, I went out by myself on the golf course. I wanted to think things out. We have a little boy, and did not want to give him the insecurity of going through a divorce. I went out to the little lake by the

fifth hole. That's where he proposed to me four years ago. He must have seen me going, he must have known where I was going. When I got back—her voice turned wooden—"the police were there. They arrested me and accused me of running down a pedestrian. It was my car. I always drive when Walt and I go out together. I mean, because he always gets drunk." She began to cry.

DAVE sat there miserably, not knowing what to say or how to comfort her. There was a loneliness and despair in her small, choked-in sobs, and the tears welled up at her eyes. Her lips trembled, and she pressed them together.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to break down like this. I'm confused. I'm so terribly confused! Do you know why I asked you to talk with me alone like this? I'll tell you. I wanted to beg you not to go to the police if you could actually identify Walt as the man who tried to run you down last night. Because that's what he did, deliberately. Not because he had anything against you—but because he thought it was a way to get rid of me. I wanted to plead with you not to go to the police!"

"Not go!"

"Please."

"But a man like that. . . . He tried to kill you. He tried to kill me. And you're afraid he might try again. Oh no . . ."

"Wait, please. Listen to me. It would be dreadful if he were arrested and were sent to jail I mean, for our little boy. As long as you were not hurt last night, what difference does it make to you? And as long as you were not hurt, they can't do anything to me except charge me with reckless driving, as they have done. I don't mind that. They'll let me off with a fine. Please promise me not to go to the police again. Please!"

He was moved by her plea, but he said, "You just told me that if he thought I could identify him, he'd try again!"

"I didn't mean it. I was hysterical. There's nothing wrong with Walt except his drinking. Really there isn't. He was probably drunk last night."

Dave remembered the terrifying rush of the car straight at him as he stood on that lonely road, he remembered the tire-screeching stop and then the slow prowl back with the driver intently scanning the side of the road. There had been a deliberateness in it that did not sound like the stupefied actions of a drunk. That driver had wanted to kill him and had turned and come back to make sure that he had, and if that other car had not come up from the city, scaring him off, Dave had the grim feeling that he would have *made* sure, right then and there!

He avoided the girl's pleading eyes and stared straight ahead through the windshield.

"A man like that," he said slowly and with difficulty, "is better off in jail. Where he can't hurt other people."

"But he was drunk. He didn't mean deliberately—"

"He was not drunk, and he did mean to hit me!"

The girl bit her lip and let the car roll to a stop.

She turned to him and laid her hand on his arms again, stroking it.

"It's the disgrace," she said desperately. "I don't want my little boy to have to go through that. If you went into court and said that Walt deliberately tried to run you down . . . oh, can't you see what would happen?"

"They'd send him to jail," said Dave stubbornly. "Where he belongs."

She looked beseechingly into his face, then suddenly she fell across his lap, reaching up and pulling down his head. She kissed him frantically, whispering:

"If you won't do it for him, do it for me, then. For me!"

He turned his head away from her kisses, feeling ashamed. He could not take what

she offered. She stiffened, then pushed herself away from him.

"Oh damn you!" she cried. "You're making it worse for me. You say you've been to the police and they didn't believe you. You say they're trying to implicate you, that you were driving. Don't you think I know why they're trying to implicate you? They think you and I were out together in that car last night. That's what they think. I'm not a fool. I can see that much. I could see it when you were telling me about it. And do you know what will happen? They'll put us on trial together and try to prove to the jury that not only did we run down a pedestrian and leave the scene of the accident, but that we were cheating on my husband. That'll be the real issue. That's what will convict us, even if we didn't run down anybody. They have the car with the smashed fender, there was blood on it. Oh God, can't you see what they'll do to us?"

He could see, remembering Flynn's icy eyes.

She cried, "If you don't care about yourself, think of me! Think of my little boy! I want to keep him out of this awful situation!"

"I am thinking of you. And your little boy," he said heavily. "And I'm thinking of your husband who goes around trying to kill people. . . ."

She closed her eyes. "You're right, of course," she said dully. "He shouldn't be permitted to get away with it." She managed a white smile. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kerry. I shouldn't have . . . let's have a drink. I really could use one"

"I'm sorry."

"No, no, there's nothing to be sorry about. You are quite right. Can I buy you a drink? Our cottage is right up this road."

"I could use one too, I guess."

She touched his arm, smiled wanly again, and started the car. Dave knew she was going to try again to persuade him, and it made him miserable.

THE cottage was made of halved logs and had a wide verandah that faced the lake. The girl went to the front door and said with surprise, "Why, it's open!"

She swung it wide and turned on the light. Inside, a tall, fair-haired man lay sleeping in the lounge chair that faced the fieldstone fireplace. A half-emptied whiskey bottle stood on the floor beside the chair.

The girl said bitterly, "He's drunk again!" Her glance flickered at Dave, then turned quickly away. She shook the sleeping man by the shoulder" but he grunted unintelligibly and turned his face into the chair. She looked at Dave.

"He didn't try deliberately to kill you last night," she said. "He was drunk. He's always drunk."

Dave shook his head. "I'd like to go now, if you don't mind," he said.

"No wait. We'll have a drink."

She crossed quickly to the tall pickled-pine breakfront at the side of the room.

"I don't feel like having a drink," said Dave. "You go ahead and have one. I'll wait out in the car." He did not want to stay in the same room with Walt Cowan.

She cried, "Wait," and he half turned at the urgency in her voice. His jaw dropped, and he stood transfixed.

She was pointing a gun at him. She was smiling and there was a crazy, dancing light in her eyes.

"There's something we have to do before we leave," she said softly. "Sit down at the desk there. *I said, sit down!*"

The gun tightened in her hand and the muzzle lifted threateningly. Dave glanced instinctively for the doorway behind him.

"It's too far, Mr. Kerry," she mocked him. "And I'm a very good shot. Now do as I told you. Sit down at the desk and take a sheet of paper and a pen from the top drawer."

Dave obeyed. She nodded.

"Now write this," she said. Then slowly

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TOO MANY

"Don't stay too long, Hank," Sedalia called. "I think Mrs. Madigan is after you!"

DURING my fifty-five years I have lived what the tabloids would describe as a checkered career. I have been, in chronological order, a high school teacher, an associate professor of English literature at a state university, a successful burglar, an unsuccessful burglar, a convict, a women's club lecturer on the subject, *Crime Does Not Pay,* a memory-act vaudevillian and a newspaper music critic. But of all the methods by which I have managed to eke out a living, by far the most hazardous has been my ten years' employment by Miss Sedalia Tweep.

The census bureau lists my work as "secretarial," which is about as descriptive as listing the work of the President of the United States as "administrative." About one-tenth of my job as personel flunky for the world's most exasperating female concerns secretarial duties, and the other nine-tenths involves every hare-brained idea

BODIES . . .

—spoil even the best of parties . . . unless, of course, it's one of Miss Sedalia's exclusive soirees—for murderers only!

By RICHARD DEMING

which conceivably could pop into the dynamic mind of a middle-aged virago which too much money and an overpowering curiosity about other people's business.

That is, it concerns every possible duty but bodyguarding. In addition to my routine activities as chauffeur, butler, business manager, social secretary and errand boy, Sedalia Tweep might ask me to shadow a suspect, make an illegal entry, steal a swimming pool or perform any other implausible act which occurred to her on the spur of the moment. But I am safe from the doubtful honor of guarding her body for the same reason Joe Louis does not require a bodyguard. Sedalia has enemies, but a bodyguard would only get in the way of her long, looping right, or get tangled up in a judo hold as Sedalia pitched her attacker over a roof top.

My employer is not exactly a defenseless woman.

A duty not included in my agenda, but which I have set for myself, is keeping Sedalia Tweep as far as possible from Inspector Stephen Home. Not that I dislike the inspector personally. It is simply a matter of self-defense. The only three times in my life I have ever been hospitalized resulted indirectly from the inspector interesting Sedalia in murder cases.

Once, as a matter of poetic justice, the inspector ended up in the hospital bed next to mine, which should have taught him caution. But he has an asinine respect for what he terms "Miss Tweep's cold, logical mind," and I have never been able to convince him her success in unraveling mysteries is almost entirely due to the same unbelievable luck which made her a fortune on the stock market.

THIS particular Friday evening we were going to hear Rabenof, a matter which had required rather skillful manipulation on my part, for Sedalia's culture was deplorably neglected in her youth and she would have preferred to attend the fights. I was having my after-dinner liqueur, and Sedalia her usual beer, when the phone rang.

I have come to be able to distinguish the difference in Inspector Stephen Home's tone when he has a problem for Sedalia instead of merely a social invitation. He uses exactly the same words in either case, always saying, "Henry? Miss Tweep, please," but he senses how I feel about him, and a note of belligerence creeps into the words when he plans to involve her in some unsavory matter.

Fortunately, our phone is located so that by keeping my voice low, Sedalia cannot hear me from the front room. Sedalia rents the entire top floor of the Sennett Hotel, which is not as extravagant as it sounds, since the Sennett is a small hotel. It gives her a private elevator which lets you out into a tiny lobby separate from the rest of the apartment, eight rooms and a long, narrow hall running from one side of the building to the other. The hall has the six rooms constituting Sedalia's apartment on one side of it, my bedroom and the study wherein I perform my secretarial chores on its other side. The phone is in the hall a dozen feet from the door to Sedalia's apartment, so that it is difficult for her to hear from her front room.

In a low voice I said, "Sorry, Inspector, but Miss Tweep is resting. Could I have her phone you?"

"Don't talk so low, Hank!" Sedalia roared from the front room. "Speak up so I can hear you!"

"Wasn't that Miss Tweep?" asked the inspector.

"Just the plumber come to fix a leak in the bathtub," I said, still in a monotone. "I'll tell Miss Tweep you phoned—"

From behind me Sedalia gently removed the phone from my ear. With her other hand she lifted me from the floor by the collar of my tuxedo jacket and set me to one side, a habit she knows infuriates me.

I said, "If we miss this concert, I resign!"

She frowned at me, then said into the telephone in a sweet bass, "Sedalia Tweep speaking."

I strode to my room, put on my white scarf and a dark topcoat, gathered the concert tickets from my dresser and returned to the hall. Sedalia was just hanging up.

"That was Steve Home," she explained unnecessarily.

I said stiffly, "We're due at the concert in thirty minutes."

Her eyes regarded me with an amiable twinkle. She is a big woman, nearly six feet tall, with thick arms and legs and a huge, solid-looking bust. On her doctored bathroom scales, which are set to register twenty pounds less than the correct weight, she weighs one-hundred and eighty-one pounds. None of it is fat.

A news columnist once described Sedalia as "the nation's ugliest rich woman." This was not quite fair, for though she has startlingly heavy features, including the largest female nose I have ever seen and huge ears which form right angles with her head, she has two attributes of beauty. Her complexion is such a creamy white, her skin seems almost transparent, and her soft golden hair, which she wears in a mass of coiled braids, is the envy of every woman in town. Personally, I consider Sedalia a not-unhandsome woman in her own striking and peculiar way.

Sedalia said gently, "We're not going to the concert, Hank."

"I quit," I said.

"Oh, stop your dramatics," she said crossly. "I couldn't drive you away from here with a machine gun. Now shut up and get my coat."

I was still seething when I climbed behind the wheel of the Cadillac and Sedalia gave me an address on Taylor Heights Boulevard. Knowing it was useless, I made no further mention of the concert, but I am afraid I exhibited my state of mind by deliberately breaking the speed law. I drove the whole distance at thirty-five, and the limit, of course, is thirty. In my reckless mood I even half-hoped some police officer would give us a ticket.

Our destination turned out to be one of those futuresque one-story bungalows which the moderately rich build along Taylor Heights Boulevard. The district, though new, was growing fast. In spite of having been opened less than two years before, we saw not more than a half-dozen vacant lots in the five-block stretch it included. Two of these happened to be either side of the house which was our goal, and since the house was also set back from the street some thirty yards, this made it relatively isolated.

It was a low, flat-roofed building of brick with a white stone front. In architectural circles I believe they are called ranch-house style, though I cannot imagine a space-loving cowboy residing in such cramped quarters. My own leanings are toward high ceilings and wide verandas with a few tall pillars.

Through a huge picture window giving onto the front porch we could see a number of people seated in the front room. Among them, but standing, I spotted two blue uniforms and the round figure of Inspector Stephen Home. When I pressed the button on the door jamb, musical chimes sounded within the house, causing a general stir among the people gathered in the front room.

The Chief of the Homicide Division himself came to the door. His broad face lighted with pleasure when he saw Sedalia, then became merely polite when he looked at me.

"Come in, Sedalia. Delighted you could come." He sounded as though he were welcoming her to a tea. "Ah there, Henry. Good to see you."

I sniffed and followed Sedalia indoors.

INSPECTOR STEPHEN HOME is a round, placid-faced man of almost studied neatness except for one item. His clothes

are always pressed, his shoes carefully shined, and he always looks as though he just left a barber shop, where he had a haircut, shave and manicure. But he has a ragged, sandy-colored mustache whose individual hairs have no sense of direction.

After helping us remove our wraps and secreting them in a closet near the entrance, the inspector delayed us in the hall instead of taking us into the room where the others were.

"Reason I called you," he told Sedalia, "I'm a little over my head. People in there too social register for an old rubber-hose cop like me. Thought maybe you'd help me out, since you know how to talk their language."

This, of course, was intended for my consumption and was the purest balderdash. I had seen Stephen Home at Sedalia's parties too often, amiably conversing with internationally known artists and playwrights and statesmen, to believe for a minute he would be impressed by the social position of anyone he might encounter in a murder investigation. He simply knew Sedalia would rather attend a murder than a concert, and was repaying her hospitality in his own peculiar way.

"Where's the body?" Sedalia asked.

He led us to a small combination study and sitting room at the rear of the house. Outside the door two young men with a wicker basket between them patiently waited to cart off the body. Inside the room, we found no one but the corpse and a medical examiner.

The corpse was that of a woman about seventy, thin and unyielding and grim-faced even in death. She was lying face up near a small fireplace, her expression one of sour triumph, as though her last thought had been vindictive.

Such an air of malevolence seemed to hover over her, that in spite of myself I could summon no spark of pity for the poor woman. My only emotion was one of instinctive dislike for the harridan she most certainly must have been before dying.

IN A TONE somewhat like that of a tourist guide, Inspector Home said, "Her head's bashed in. Can't see it the way she's lying. Name is Mrs. Agatha Chambers." He paused to stare at the corpse placidly. "Widow, and lived here alone with a combination companion-maid. Maid's been gone a week visiting relatives." He pointed toward a small metal rack one side of the fireplace. "Weapon seemed to be some fire tongs in that. At least had blood on them. Gone now. Lab boys took them along to test for blood and fingerprints." Then he looked at the medical examiner. "How you coming, Doc?"

The medical examiner rose and examined a thermometer. "All finished for now," he said absently. "I'd guess six to ten hours ago. Tell you more accurately after an autopsy, if you tell me first when she last ate." He paused. "If you want to believe her watch, she was killed seven and a half hours ago. At one P.M."

Inspector Home raised one eyebrow, went over and lifted one of the woman's wrists. "Hmm . . . Crystal broke. Watch stopped at one-oh-three. Could be, but could also mean the murderer deliberately set the hands. Nowadays they've all read mystery stories, and they try all the angles."

He rose and brushed off his knees. The medical examiner closed his case, told the inspector he would send him a report in the morning and departed. As we followed him out of the room, the two young men entered with their basket.

"Haven't really questioned anyone yet," the inspector told Sedalia. "Except in a general way. Body was discovered by a whole bunch of people. Seems the old lady had scheduled a family meeting of some kind for seven-thirty, and all the relatives arrived more or less together. When nobody answered the bell, they figured something was wrong because there wasn't a light in the place. Front door was on night

lock, but somebody finally went around back, found the back door unlocked and let them all in. Sort of in a bunch they searched the house and found her. Just happened the assistant D.A. was with them, so we got the call quicker than we would have otherwise. It's only about eight-thirty now."

Sedalia looked interested. "The assistant D.A. was with them?"

"Yes. Not quite sure why. One of the things we'll find out now."

He opened the double glass doors into the front room and held them for Sedalia and me to enter.

Seven people were in the front room. Two were uniformed policemen who simply stood with their hands behind their backs waiting. Of the others two were women and three were men. All were in street clothes, and immediately I became conscious of my dinner jacket and Sedalia's golden evening gown. We had dressed for the concert, of course, but it seemed rather incongruous costume for a murder investigation.

One of the men, a bouncing, dynamic young fellow with a cheerfully open face and ears nearly as large and perpendicular to his head as Sedalia's, was standing in the center of the room asking questions when we entered. When the door opened he broke off, and Inspector Home introduced him as Alvin Christopher, the assistant district attorney. I noticed he and Sedalia examined each other's ears with the interest of people who have something in common.

Both the women proved to be nieces of the dead woman. The youngest, a fresh-looking blonde girl with clear gray eyes and the trimly muscled figure of an enthusiastic sportswoman, was Miss Irene Chambers. I guessed her to be about twenty-five.

Mrs. Monica Madigan, whose stressing of her first name led me to believe she was a divorcee, was a dark-skinned, sleepy-eyed woman of thirty, slim but lushly developed. She barely glanced at Sedalia when she was introduced, but her slumberous eyes moved over my one-hundred and twenty pounds in an almost embarrassing examination. I felt myself flush, for I am not used to being examined by women in such a calculating manner.

The second man, a nephew of the dead woman, was named Gerald Rawlins. He was a blond, red-faced man of about twenty-eight with an athletic build, just beginning to go to fat, a round, not particularly intelligent face and a sulky cast to his mouth. He looked, I thought, like a spoiled brat.

The third man was named Jerome Straight, and turned out to be the attorney for the deceased Agatha Chambers. Perhaps sixty-five, he was a gaunt, humorless man with a gray face, sunken cheeks and wide brows jutting like a balcony over a thin sliver of a nose.

"Miss Tweep's not here in any official capacity," Inspector Home explained to the group. "Been of some service to the police in the past, as you may know if you read murder news, and just here as an observer." He glanced at the young assistant district attorney. "Didn't mean to interrupt you, Al."

The young man waved it aside. "Just killing time till you got back. I'll sit by and listen for awhile."

Home nodded, ran his eyes over the two nieces and the nephew. "One of you tell me what this family meeting was all about, eh?"

There was silence for a moment as each of the three waited for one of the others to speak. Finally red-faced young Gerald Rawlins drawled, "It was just another of Aunt Aggie's will-changing clambakes. She had 'em about twice a year."

The inspector looked a polite inquiry, and the lush of Mrs. Monica Madigan elaborated. "Aunt Agatha had all the money in the family, you know. We three are her sole heirs, and she liked to punish us by

alternately cutting us off. This time it was my turn. She was mad because I divorced my stinker of a no-good husband."

"I see," Inspector Home said. "She changed her will often?"

Blonde Irene Chambers laughed, a bitter mocking laugh. "You put it mildly, Inspector. She was as loopy as a roller coaster. Aunt Aggie had the bulk of her fortune divided into three amounts: a half million, a hundred thousand, and a mere one thousand. Sometimes I was scheduled to inherit the largest amount, sometimes Monica and sometimes Gerry, depending on which was the favorite at the moment. Or rather, depending on which was least out of favor. Aunt Aggie didn't have any favorites outside of herself."

THE last remark was expressed with a cynicism which drew understanding smiles from her two cousins. Whatever emotions Mrs. Agatha Chambers' relatives were undergoing as a result of her death, grief obviously was not one of them.

"Let me get this straight now," Home said. "Mrs. Chambers was the aunt of all of you, but you're all of different parents?"

Gerald Rawlins nodded. "My mother was Aunt Aggie's sister. Monica's father was her brother. Irene is the daughter of her deceased husband's brother." He paused and added resentfully. "That makes Irene not even a blood relation of Aunt Aggie's, but she gets the pot of gold."

"On the other hand," Irene put in sweetly, "Aunt Aggie's money originally came from Uncle Andrew, and you're no blood relation of his."

The inspector broke up the side squabble by asking, "How come none of your parents were included in your aunt's will?"

"Our parents are all dead," Monica said. "I told you before we were the sole heirs."

Inspector Home mused a moment. "Did I understand correctly Miss Chambers currently is legatee of the largest amount?"

"Yes," Irene said promptly. "But if you think I whammed the old gal because she was getting ready to cut me off, forget it. Monica was the one she was mad at this time."

Monica said indifferently, "I imagine I was due to take a cut from a hundred thousand down to one thousand, if you like that for a motive. The only trouble with it is I could have waited a few months until Aunt Agatha got mad at Irene for something, and probably been back on top of the heap again."

Gerald Rawlins said nothing, apparently assuming the lack of motive he would have for killing his aunt just before she increased his legacy from one thousand to a hundred thousand was too obvious to require comment.

Inspector Home turned to Jerome Straight, the murdered woman's attorney. "Take it you were here to draw up a new will after the old lady properly bawled everybody out?"

The old lawyer frowned at the inspector's choice of words, but nodded his gaunt head. "I assume that was the reason I was asked to be present. Mrs. Chambers did not actually specify what she wanted when she phoned, but past experience led me to expect a change of will."

"And you?" the inspector asked, looking at Assistant District Attorney Alvin Christopher. "How'd you happen to be here, Al?"

The young man shrugged. "I'm afraid I'm as much in the dark as you are, Steve. When Mrs. Chambers phoned me yesterday and asked me to drop over at seven-thirty tonight on an important legal matter, I assumed she wanted me as a lawyer rather than as a member of the district attorney's office. But now I'm not so sure."

When the inspector merely looked blank, he explained, "I have a private practice in addition to my work for the D.A., you know. Naturally I thought she wanted me to do some legal work for her. But since discovering she already had a lawyer, I've

been wondering if she suspected someone wanted to kill her, and asked me over in my official capacity."

Home glanced at Jerome Straight and said slowly, "Maybe she intended to change lawyers."

Jerome Straight scowled at him. In a stiff voice he said, "I have no reason to believe Mrs. Chambers was dissatisfied with the legal service given her by Strong, Wilson and Straight. We've been attorneys for Mr. Chambers—and for his widow—for over thirty years."

"All of you?" the inspector asked curiously.

"Strong and Wilson are dead. I've been alone in the firm for twenty years."

CHAPTER TWO

The Long Knife

FURTHER questioning by the inspector divulged Aunt Agatha had set the meeting by mail a week previously, this much notice being necessary in order to give her three relatives time to get there. Irene Chambers lived in Chicago, where she was a dress designer, and it required an all-day train ride for her to visit her aunt. Mrs. Monica Madigan lived in Kansas City, which also involved an all-day train ride, and Gerald Rawlins came from Dallas, Texas, a trip of thirty-four hours by train. The latter had flown, however, and made it in only five hours.

All three exhibited ticket stubs to substantiate their methods of transportation. Inspector Home thanked them and kept the stubs. In their stories of traveling as they said they had could be checked, all three had iron-clad alibis, for Irene's train arrived at three PM, Monica's at four-thirty, and Gerald's plane did not get in till seven, just in time for him to rush over to his aunt's without even stopping to register at a hotel.

Gerald pointed to a suitcase standing next to the wall near the door. It still had half of a bright red baggage stub tied to the handle. "Brought my luggage along from the airport. Had trouble finding a cab and almost missed the meeting. I didn't get here till a quarter of eight."

"Forty-five minutes?" the inspector asked with raised brows. "Not more than twenty from the airport here."

"If you can find a cab," Gerald agreed.

Unlike the three cousins, Jerome Straight proved to have no alibi whatever. He said he had not been feeling well, had not gone to the office that day, and since he lived alone in a bachelor apartment, could not prove what he had been doing at the time of the murder.

The inspector seemed about ready to wind things up for the night and tell the whole group to go home, when Gerald Rawlins revealed there was another person scheduled to have attended the meeting who had never showed up.

"Adrian Thorpe," he said. "He's president of the company I work for. The Fibrolux Plastic Corporation of Dallas. Aunt Aggie's company, really, for she was majority stockholder. Ad was supposed to get in on the noon train, but I guess he must have missed connections somewhere."

"Any idea why he was invited to the meeting?" Home asked.

Gerald shook his head. In a voice indicating no love was lost between him and Adrian, he said, "Ad is a protege of Aunt Aggie's. She thought he was some kind of a business genius and always voted him in as president at the corporation's annual meeting. She could just as easily have picked someone in the family, if she wanted."

Since Gerald himself seemed to be the only one of the family actively connected with the business, by "someone", he obviously meant himself.

The inspector said, "Since you and this Adrian Thorpe were both coming from Dallas for the same meeting, how come he

traveled by train and you came by plane?"

"I couldn't get away so soon. We were having the annual audit and I'm treasurer of the company. So Ad went ahead and I caught a plane at the last minute."

Something in the young man's tone did not seem to me to ring quite true as he made this last statement. I could not quite decide why, except his voice suddenly seemed to contain an element of reluctance. Sedalia apparently noticed it too, for all at once her voice boomed out.

"What's the rest of it, young man?"

Gerald threw her a startled look.

"Out with it," she pursued. "What was it that held you up?"

"You a mind reader?" he asked. Then he shrugged. "The whole thing will be in the news eventually, I suppose. Adrian had been dipping in the company till. I was held up because the audit showed a hundred-thousand dollar shortage." He smiled rather bitterly. "So much for Aunt Aggie's judgment in proteges."

Jerome Straight looked startled at this announcement, but neither Irene nor Monica exhibited the slightest perturbance. This struck me as strange, since a hundred-thousand dollar shortage in an inheritance of mine would have made me quite angry. Seemingly it struck the inspector as strange too.

"You ladies don't seem upset over the losing the money," he remarked.

Both raised their eyebrows, but it was Monica who replied.

"Fibrolux Plastics wasn't part of our inheritance. Aunt Aggie had that all tied up so nobody could get at it."

Jerome Straight cleared his throat. "Fibrolux Plastics was founded by Mr. Chambers," he said ponderously. "On his death a few years back Mrs. Chambers intelligently recognized she had no business sense and placed Adrian Thorpe in complete charge. He had been first vice president under Mr. Chambers for years and is a very able executive. I must say I am shocked to learn he is a thief. Mrs. Chambers felt the business would suffer if on her death the stock fell to her nieces and nephew and they voted in . . . ah . . . someone else as company president. So she placed her shares in perpetual trust, the dividends to go to her heirs, but voting power to remain with the administrator of the trust."

"And who is the administrator?"

"At present I am," the lawyer admitted.

Gerald Rawlins broke in. "Listen, I been stewing over something ever since we arrived and found Aunt Aggie dead. But it's a kind of rought deal to accuse somebody of murder."

Nobody said anything, waiting for him to go on, but he merely self-consciously wiped his red face with a handkerchief and looked embarrassed.

SEDALIA broke the silence. "If this Adrian Thorpe arrived on a noon train like he was supposed to, he had plenty of time to get over here and bash the old lady. That what's on your mind?"

He looked worried. "Yes," he admitted. "But I just can't imagine Ad killing anybody. Frankly I'm not too fond of him, but I want to be fair. Ad just plain would be incapable of murder."

"His limit's embezzlement, eh?" Sedalia asked. "Young man, our prisons are full of people who seem incapable of crime. Your aunt know of Thorpe's misdeeds?"

Reluctantly Gerald nodded. "I phoned her just before I caught a plane."

"I think," Inspector Home said, "we better put out a call on Mr. Adrian Thorpe." He looked at Gerald. "Happen to know where he generally stays when he's in town?"

Gerald shook his head. "Different hotels. One of the better ones as a rule. The Statler, Lennox or the Sheridan."

Home turned to one of the silent policemen. "Phone headquarters to put out a pickup order on Adrian Thorpe. Get a description from this guy." He jerked a

thumb at Gerald. "Then phone the major hotels and find out if anybody that name is registered. Phone's in the hall."

A few moments later the inspector had the other policeman take down the local addresses of the three relatives and Jerome Straight, warned them not to leave town until they received clearance, and released them. By my wrist watch I noted it was only shortly after nine.

"We still have time for the last half of the concert," I suggested to Sedalia.

She put an ivory-tipped cigarette in her mouth, watched me thoughtfully as I touched my lighter to it, and then shook her head as though she failed to understand me. She did not even bother to reply.

When the others left, Alvin Christopher had stayed behind, awaiting the results of the policeman's phone survey of the hotels. He did not have a very long wait, for in a few minutes the man in blue entered the room.

"Second try, Sir," he said to the inspector. "Thorpe's registered at the Sheridan, and as far as they know he's in his room right now. I told them not to ring his phone, because we'd be right over."

"Good. We will." He looked at Sedalia and the assistant D.A. "Coming along?"

Both decided they would.

The manager at the Sheridan Hotel was very helpful. He personally assisted the inspector in questioning the desk clerk, who was very helpful in turn. The clerk said he came on duty at noon, and shortly after coming on Adrian Thorpe had phoned from Union Station for a reservation. He had not actually arrived to claim the room until shortly after seven, however.

"Number six-twelve," he finished. "I believe he is in now, if you wish me to ring."

"We'll go up," Inspector Home said. He looked at the slim, debonair hotel manager. "Got a pass key?"

"Oh yes, of course," the man said. He fluttered off ahead of us toward the elevators.

On the ride up he smiled nervously at the inspector and said, "If this is an arrest, you'll make it as quiet as possible, won't you, Sir? We're always glad to cooperate with the police, but there's no need of the other guests knowing."

"Be as quiet as possible," Home conceded, and added, "If possible."

Through an open transom we could see there was light in room six-twelve, and a radio was playing moderately loud. But no one answered the hotel manager's repeated knock. Finally he smiled at all of us nervously, slipped a pass key in the door and pushed it open. He stepped aside to let the inspector enter first.

The rest of us waited either side of the door to see if there was going to be any shooting, but when no sound came from the inspector, we all trailed in behind him. We found him thoughtfully staring at the figure on the bed.

Adrian Thorpe was about fifty years old, sparse-haired and slight of build, and with a shrewd, intelligent face. He lay on his back, his head comfortably resting on a pillow. His left arm lay at his side, and his right hand clenched the hilt of what seemed to be a hunting knife.

We could not tell how long the knife's blade was, for it was buried in his heart.

IT WAS after eleven when we finally got away from the Sheridan. We had to wait until the last police technician had finished his duties and until Inspector Home had questioned everyone he could think of, of course. At a murder Sedalia is like an alcoholic at a party: she is always the last one to go home.

She also had to be the one to make it a murder instead of a nice simple suicide which would have neatly ended the whole affair. At first glance it seemed obvious Adrian Torpe had killed Agatha Chambers when she confronted him with his chicanery, then checked in at the hotel and killed himself in remorse. But as I may have men-

tioned, Sedalia is constitutionally incapable of minding her own business.

"No suicide would lie on a bed and stick himself with a knife," she announced didactically. "Remember Ernest Fox, Steve?"

"That nutty kid doctor used to come to your parties?" the inspector asked. "He commit suicide?"

She frowned at him. "He wasn't nutty and he wasn't a kid. He was young, but he held a Ph.D. in abnormal psychology. His graduate thesis was on techniques of suicide, and it covered thousands of case histories. One of his conclusions was that suicide by stabbing is extremely rare, but when it is practiced, it always follows a definite pattern. The suicide *always* either sits or stands and *always* pushes the blade in with both hands."

Home gazed at her in amazement. Finally he said, "That's the silliest thing I ever heard in my whole life."

"Silly or not, it's a fact. Ernest pointed out that stabbing yourself is harder than it seems. It takes a lot of force to push a knife in your own chest, because you can't put the weight of your body behind the thrust or get the leverage you can get when you're stabbing at someone else. About the only possible way to do it is to put the point carefully between a couple of ribs and suddenly pull in with both hands. Ernest's thesis lists dozens of cases who *tried* it by stabbing with one hand, but they all either were discouraged by minor flesh wounds, or after cutting themselves all up, finally got down to business and did it his way."

In spite of himself Home seemed impressed. He walked over to take another look at the body, muttered something about it being up to the coroner, not up to him, and cast a mildly irritated glance back at Sedalia.

I am afraid I experienced vindictive pleasure at the inspector's expression. After all, it was his fault we were not at a concert instead of in the same room as a corpse.

When a plainclothesman began looking through the dead man's single suitcase, Sedalia said, "Turn your photographic memory on that, Hank."

Obediently, I walked over and watched the man empty the suitcase of clothing, then return it again and latch the case. I saw nothing which seemed as though it could have any possible bearing on the killing, but what there was I filed away in my mind. Without further direction from Sedalia, I followed the plainclothesman around as he made a thorough examination of the rest of the room.

The inspector gleaned very little information from either the hotel personnel or nearby residents. No one had heard a thing, and aside from the desk clerk and the bellhop who had carried Adrian Thorpe's luggage up, no one even remembered seeing the man. Until Sedalia broke in with a question, the bellhop was able to offer no information other than that he had left Thorpe alone in his room.

"How many bags he have?" Sedalia asked.

"Two," the bellhop said promptly. "A suitcase and a small traveling bag."

This naturally instituted a complete researching of the room, but no traveling bag was found.

When we finally got away Sedalia did not mention the case until we got all the way home, knowing I like to concentrate my whole mind on driving when I am behind the wheel. Following our usual ritual, she waited until I had prepared myself a nightcap and poured her a beer before speaking of the evening at all.

Then she asked, "What was in Thorpe's suitcase?"

"Two shirts," I said promptly. "Two sets of underwear and socks. Two handkerchiefs, one cravat, one pair of pajamas and a dressing gown. One small linen laundry bag for dirty clothes."

"Any dirty clothes in it?"

I shook my head.

"No razor or toilet supplies?"

Again I shook my head, this time in a somewhat startled manner. "Those must have been in the missing traveling bag."

"Yes," she mused, "but he wouldn't have put dirty clothes in it when he had a laundry bag for them."

For a moment I puzzled over this remark, then caught up with her reasoning.

"That fixes the time as almost immediately after he arrived, doesn't it?" I said. "After a thirty-four hour train ride, the first thing he would do when he finally got to his hotel room would be to take a shower and change clothes. Yet he was fully dressed except for overcoat and hat. And not having changed linen means he had not showered and redressed."

Sedalia smiled indulgently. "You're developing a logical mind, Hank. Now apply it to these three mysteries: what was he doing from the time he arrived on the noon train until he reached the hotel at seven-fifteen, why is his traveling bag missing, and why was there no luggage check stub tied to the suitcase which was left?"

One at a time I turned these questions over in my mind. For the first I arrived at a reasonable but unprovable answer, but on the last two nothing even resembling an answer developed. By summoning up a photographic image of the suitcase the plainclothesman had examined, I did recall no stub was tied to the handle, but the information meant nothing to me.

I said, "If Thorpe actually was the killer of Mrs. Chambers, he must have gone straight to the house from the station. Afterward perhaps he simply wandered around in remorse for a few hours."

"Lugging two bags with him?"

I thought this over. "Perhaps he checked them at the station when he arrived, then returned for them just before going to the hotel."

She nodded. "Possible. Now the second question."

I shook my head.

Sedalia looked surprised. "A simple one like that, Hank? Obviously the killer wanted something in the bag, but it was either too large to carry without awkwardness, or so distinctive it would have attracted attention. So he simply took bag and all. No one notices a person leaving a hotel with a traveling bag."

"All right," I conceded. "Now why was no luggage check tied to the suitcase?"

"That I don't know the answer to either," she admitted. She rose abruptly. "Get me up at eight, Hank. I want to be at headquarters at nine. And set the night lock on your way out."

She disappeared into her bedroom and left me to finish my drink alone. A few moments later I set her apartment night lock as directed, crossed our private hall to my own room and went to bed myself.

IN THE morning Sedalia went off to headquarters alone, taking a taxi, and left me to catch up on her correspondence, write checks and supervise the cleaning maid who was due that morning. She returned shortly after the maid left at two, dragged me from the study and had me pour her a beer.

"Just to bring you up to date," she informed me, "Steve Home contacted the main office of the railroad by phone, and the railway stubs Irene Chambers and Monica Madigan had seem to let them out. At least *someone* used the tickets originally attached to them on the runs they say they were on, and possession of the stubs seems to indicate they were the users. Gerald Rawlins is out too. Not only does his stub match the airline ticket for the flight he says he was on, his name was on the passenger list."

I said, "All this is assuming Mrs. Chambers died at one PM?"

"It's more definite now. They found a neighborhoom tea-room where she had lunch at twelve. An autopsy showed she died about an hour later. Something to do with the rate of digestion."

I thought this over. "That seems to leave only Jerome Straight as a suspect."

"The old lawyer? Not necessarily. There's young Alvin Christopher."

"The assistant district attorney?" I said in surprise. "You certainly don't suspect him!"

"I suspect everybody. It might even be someone we don't even know about as yet. Possibly even that old standby, the tramp prowler."

The way she expressed the last remark, I knew she actually gave it no credence at all, and her next comment proved I was right.

"The second murder pretty well knocks out the possibility of a prowler, though. I'm pretty sure the killer is one of the people we met last night." Then she looked at me curiously for a moment and said, "I've got some chores for you, Hank."

I braced myself for the worst. Whenever Sedalia's plans for me are exceedingly unreasonable, she refers to them as "chores".

"Mrs. Monica Madigan is staying in room seven-twelve at the Sheridan. Coincidently, it's immediately above the room in which Adrian Thorpe was murdered. Irene Chambers is at the Statler in room thirteen-twenty-seven. Gerald Rawlins is there too, in room three-sixteen. Jerome Straight lives in apartment C of the Midway Apartments at Eight and Laurel. Alvin Christopher lives with his mother and a sister at 1712 Brigham Road. I want you to search all those places."

I sighed, went to my room and slipped my wallet-sized burglar kit into my pocket. I knew there was no use arguing, because I had argued too many times in the past. The fact that entering other people's homes without permission terrified me, and I had given up a successful career as a burglar nearly twenty years before in order to avoid a nervous breakdown, failed to touch Sedalia. She would have made the searches herself if she knew how, and she had no patience with timidity in others.

WHEN I returned to Sedalia's apartment, I asked listlessly, "What am I looking for?"

"A railroad baggage stub. The kind that ties to the handle of a suitcase."

The assignment failed to surprise me. My first five years with Sedalia I spent in a state of constant surprise. Since then nothing has been able to surprise me. "Because Adrian Thorpe's suitcase had none tied to the handle? You think the murderer killed him just for a baggage stub?"

When she only grinned, I said irritably, "Maybe there never was a stub tied to it. Probably he just stuck it under his berth instead of checking it through."

She shook her head. "The lack of a toilet kit in the suitcase indicates he carried it in his hand bag. There was nothing in the suitcase he needed on the train. Possibly he carried both pieces of luggage with him, but the obvious thing for him to have done was to check through the larger piece so he wouldn't have to bother with it. Why the murderer removed the tag, I have no idea, but there's an excellent chance he did remove it."

"All right," I said. "If I find the stub the first place I look, may I stop there?"

She nodded. "But if you don't find it at all, I have a second chore for you. Go back to the same places and leave one of these envelopes at each place."

She handed me five small envelopes, unsealed. Dubiously I opened one and found nothing except one of Sedalia's engraved calling cards. But on the back had been written in ink, *The murderer is invited to call at 3:00* PM, *Sunday.*

Without enthusiasm I asked, "Just where at each place do you wish these left?"

"Leaning against their telephones, so they can't fail to see them the first time they answer the phone."

"I see," I said. "Against their telephones. I'm glad I asked, because I might have done something silly like dropping them in their mail boxes."

"After they are asleep," she went on. "Be sure they are in bed asleep before you leave any cards."

For a minute I stared at her. "You mean you expect me to enter these people's rooms while they are actually in them?"

"Probably Alvin Christopher and Jerome Straight have their phones somewhere other than their bedrooms," she reassured me.

I continued to stare at her. "And the three who live in hotel rooms? You suppose their phones are down in the lobby somewhere instead of right next to their beds? Within *grabbing* distance."

"Two of them are women," she said impatiently. "If they awaken, they won't grab you. They'll only scream. Don't be such an old maid."

So I stopped being an old maid. I took a drink to steady my nerves and started out.

I do not like to talk about the illegal entries I am sometimes forced to make as an employee of Sedalia. Neither my skill at burglary nor my ability to find *anything* when I search a room are talents of which I am proud, but I must admit I have few peers at either.

During the first round I made I was lucky in finding no one home at any of my visits, and I finished by six o'clock. I found three baggage stubs: one attached to an extra suitcase in Mrs. Monica Madigan's room, and white airline stubs tied to Gerald Rawlins' suitcase and satchel. Irene Chambers apparently had brought only an overnight bag and had not checked it through.

I assumed none of these stubs would count, but in the forlorn hope that they might, I phoned Sedalia before starting the second round.

She said they did not.

The second round took me until two in the morning because I had to wait for everyone to go to sleep. Although I encountered no actual difficulty, the experience of entering five occupied bedrooms, one possibly occupied by a murderer, is something I do not care to dwell upon. Suffice to say all five had bedside phones, in spite of Sedalia's suggestion that two of the visits would be easy, and by the time I disposed of the last note I was a nervous wreck.

When I arrived home Sedalia was still sitting up waiting for me, and hall door to her apartment was open. I walked by, ignoring her, slammed the door of my own room and went to bed.

Later I discovered it was four-thirty in the morning when the shots sounded, but at the time all I knew was that it was still dark. There must have been eight of them, spaced so closely they sounded like the roll of a heavy drum.

I came awake sitting up, not at all uncertain as to what had awakened me, as you sometimes are when it happens in the middle of the night, for at least half of the shots sounded after I was fully awake and aware of my surroundings. They came from Sedalia's apartment across the hall.

Automatically I reached for my bed lamp, pulled the chain, but nothing happened. In the darkness I swung out of bed, groped my way to the wall and clicked the switch to the ceiling light.

Again nothing happened.

THERE is something panicking about unexpected darkness. I am not afraid of the dark . . . at least not much. But being unable to dispel it unnerved me more than the shots had. I make no claim to bravery, but I am morally certain I would have rushed into Sedalia's apartment had I been able to turn on the lights, for exasperating as she is, I have a certain fondness for the woman. As it was I managed to get my bedroom door open, but then I stood straining my eyes at blackness, unable to move a foot outside my room.

I was almost relieved when a flashlight glared into my eyes from the door to Sedalia's apartment. But the relief was short-lived. Flush against the side of the flashlight, and protruding beyond the lens perhaps two inches, was the muzzle of a black

automatic. Later, after the police examined the slugs found in Sedalia's apartment, I learned the gun was a .38 caliber, whatever that means. But I know nothing of guns, and had I been asked to describe it, I would have said the hole looked about the size of a shotgun's bore.

Imagination, no doubt.

With the light directly in my eyes, I could see nothing beyond it, not even the hand holding the gun. The person holding the flashlight stepped toward me and I stood frozen to the spot. Then the intruder backed down the hall, both the light and the gun still centered on me. Except for my head moving to follow the retreat in fascination, I made no movement whatever.

At the end of the hall the light suddenly winked out, the front door pulled open and then slammed shut. From outside a key turned in the lock.

It was at least a minute before I was able to do anything but stand there and shiver. My inability to move was sheer fright, I confess, but the shivering was at least partly due to the cold, for I sleep with a window open and it was freezing in the room.

Then I turned, tripped over a chair, finally made my way to the window and pushed it closed. Fumbling at my bedside stand, I found my cigarette lighter and by its glow located my robe and slippers. Holding the lighter aloft like a torch, I shuffled across the hall, flicked the switch just inside Sedalia's door and for the third time was rewarded by continued darkness.

"Sedalia!" I shouted.

From somewhere beyond, her muffled voice called, "Is he gone, Hank?"

I felt a flood of relief. At least she was still alive. "Yes!" I yelled. "Where are you?"

I moved toward her bedroom, reached it just as a door bolt clicked back, and in the wavering light Sedalia opened her bathroom door. I had just time to see she too wore a robe and slippers when my lighter sputtered and went out.

"There's candles on the mantel in the front room," Sedalia said matter-of-factly. "And a paper of matches between them."

Turning, I groped through darkness again, located the candles in their holders and lighted both of them. With one in either hand I returned to Sedalia's room.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The killer found my card and took direct action, just as I expected," she said smugly. "After you went to bed I phoned each suspect, then hung up when they answered. They couldn't miss seeing the card when they answered the phone, of course. Four were simply puzzled, but the fifth, being impulsive, immediately assumed I was accusing him of murder."

"How do you know the murderer is impulsive?"

In the flickering candlelight her eyebrows raised. "I thought it was obvious. Adrian Thorpe was killed because he knew who murdered Agatha Chambers, of course. Possibly he even witnessed the crime. Both murders have all the earmarks of sudden impulse, rather than long planning. I guessed he would immediately attempt to kill me, so I conveniently left both my apartment door and the outside door unlocked for him." Parenthetically she added, "I am using the masculine pronoun only for convenience, you understand. The two women are still suspects."

"How did you manage to survive all those bullets?"

Again she smiled a trifle smugly. "I built a dummy of pillows in my bed, built another bed on the bathroom floor and locked myself in."

"My God!" I said. "And he fired all those shots at the dummy?"

In the dim light from the candle flames she looked thoughtful. "No. Our killer is a little smarter than I anticipated. Apparently he . . . or she . . . discovered the dummy, realized it was a trap of some kind, and tried to shoot off the bathroom lock. Fortunately it was bolted as well as locked,

because I think the shots managed to wreck the lock."

I looked at her in a sort of outraged awe. "And just what do you think you've accomplished by almost getting killed?"

Sedalia wagged her head reproachfully. "You have no imagination at all, Hank. Not one of our suspects lives less than a twenty-minute taxi ride from here, providing a taxi can be found at all this time of night. We now proceed to phone each of our five suspects, which should require no more than five or six minutes, and Presto, the one not home is it!"

CHAPTER THREE

Drink and Be Merry . . .

TAKING one of the candleholders from my hand, Sedalia walked majestically through her front room and out into the hall. After setting the candle on the telephone stand, she consulted the phone book, placed the receiver to her ear and reached a finger toward the dial. Then she frowned, moved her finger to the rest instead and clicked the bar up and down.

Lowering my candle slightly, I peered at the floor. "Your killer has been smarter than you anticipated a second time," I remarked dryly. "The cord's cut."

Some of Sedalia's smug assurance faded. "Quick! Downstairs to the lobby booths! We'll both start phoning and still make it."

Rapidly she moved down the hall to the front door. I waited where I was, knowing what she would find because I had heard the key turn as the intruder went out.

"It's locked!" she called, a note of urgency appearing in her voice.

Turning, she cupped her hand in front of the candle flame to keep it from blowing out and raced back to her apartment door. She disappeared in the direction of the kitchen, reappeared again a moment later.

"The back door, too! And the key's gone." She stared at me, suppressed rage in her expression. Then her eyes widened. "Your kit! Get it fast and get one of these doors open."

I shook my head. "Sorry. You may recall I installed those locks myself as a special precaution against murderers because of your peculiar affinity for getting them mad at you. I can get them open, but it will take me the best part of an hour."

"Take the hinges off!"

I shook my head again. "They are center-hung. You can't get at them from either side unless the door is open. And the doors are three inches of solid oak. It would even take too long to chop through with a fire axe, which we don't possess anyway. I thought of everything when I made those doors safe."

"Everything but this!" she yelled at me. I have never seen Sedalia so frustrated.

"It wasn't I who left the doors unlocked," I reminded her. "And has it occurred to you the killer may be sitting right outside the front door waiting for you to get it open and barge out? I don't know what you're going to do, Sedalia, but I'm going to throw the inside bolts on both doors, see if I can fix the lights, and go back to bed. I'll open the doors in the morning."

For a long time Sedalia simply glared at me. Then her sense of humor suddenly came to her rescue and she burst out with a roar of laughter. She was still chuckling when she walked into her bedroom and slammed the door.

It took me some time to track down the trouble with the lights. After replacing a fuse in the box over the kitchen door only to have it promptly blow, I began checking light sockets. Finally I discovered the killer had inserted a penny in one of the lamp sockets in the hall. I removed it, replaced the fuse a second time and went back to bed.

I slept until eight, prepared breakfast and served it to Sedalia in bed, then went to work on the locks. By nine-thirty I had both doors open, had called the phone com-

pany from the downstairs lobby and had received a promise the phone would be fixed by noon.

At ten Inspector Stephen Home arrived.

"What's wrong with your phone?" was the first thing he asked.

"Sedalia underestimated a murderer," I told him, and explained what had happened.

The inspector frowned. "That explains all the phone calls I got at home this morning. Got me out of bed. Supposed to be off on Sundays, you know."

Striding into Sedalia's front room, he stared at her, the frown still marring the normal placidity of his face. Sedalia looked up with an expression of supreme innocence and offered him a drink.

"At ten in the morning?" he asked. "Sedalia, what put such a crazy idea in your head?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Crazy? If it weren't for Hank's silly locks, it would have worked, and then you'd think I was brilliant."

"Still think you're brilliant," he said shortly. "Always did. But you can't go setting yourself up like a target. And you've got to stop using Henry as a burglar. With his record, they'd send him up for life if he ever got caught."

"Oh posh! I'd take the rap for him."

The inspector shook his head wearily. There was a time when he would have given Sedalia a tart lecture on lawbreaking being just as wrong when your motives were pure as it was when you indulged in it for personal gain, but that time was as far in the past as my ability to be surprised. As a policeman he could never condone some of Sedalia's unorthodox methods, but as a realist he knew the only way he could change her was to throw her in jail. If he was ever tempted to that length, he never showed it, but his restraint may well have stemmed from practical considerations as much as sentiment. Without overpowering evidence, it would have been difficult to jail a woman who called the governor, the mayor, the police commissioner and nearly every judge in the state by his first name.

CHANGING the subject, Home said all five suspects had phoned him that morning after getting nothing but busy signals from Sedalia's phone. Irene Chambers, Monica Madigan and Gerald Rawlins had been merely curious as to what the notes meant, which of course the inspector was unable to tell them, but Alvin Christopher had been angry, and Jerome Straight wanted to sue Sedalia.

"Couldn't simply have had Henry drop them in the mail boxes, I suppose?" he concluded.

"I wanted them to see the notes last night," Sedalia said, as though that excused everything. "On what grounds does Straight think he can sue me?"

"Couldn't quite make out. Defamation of character, maybe. Called him a murderer, didn't you?"

Sedalia shook her head. "I simply informed a number of people a murderer was invited to call at the PM today. The cards made no mention of who the murderer was. Incidently, Steve, you'll be here at three too, won't you?"

He stared at her. "You mean you really think he'll come?"

"Oh yes. Not as an overt murderer, of course. But as soon as the phone is fixed, I'll have Hank phone all those who got cards and tell them the invitation stands whether they ever killed anyone or not."

"Why?"

"Why gather them together? Self-defense, Steve. Now that my original plot failed, I want to assure the murderer it was only a trap, and I have no actual knowledge of his identity. I don't mind being a target for one night, but I don't want to spend all my time peering around corners."

The inspector changed the subject again. "Traced the knife to Adrian Thorpe. Bought in a sporting goods store on Seventh about three on Friday afternoon. Just a

few hours before the second murder. Clerk can't remember what the buyer looked like, but knives with six-inch blades have to be registered. Buyer gave his name as Adrian Thorpe."

I said, "So it was suicide after all!"

Both the inspector and Sedalia looked at me.

"Anybody can give a name," the inspector said briefly. "Hardly think anyone would have tried to shoot Sedalia if Thorpe was a suicide."

"We might find out which one of our suspects own guns," Sedalia said thoughtfully. "The killer wouldn't have been able to go out and buy one in the middle of the night, so he must have already owned the one he tried out on me."

I said, "He's not one of our five then. I don't know much about guns, but I know an automatic when I see one, and that's what our killer pointed at me. There is a shotgun at Alvin Christopher's house, a revolver at Jerome Straight's, and no weapons whatever in the hotel rooms of the other three."

"Could be carrying it with him," Home commented. For the third time he changed the subject. "You have any luck with your phone calls, Sedalia?"

"Some. I'll tell you about it at three. I didn't learn anything very startling."

"What phone calls were those?" I asked, surprised.

Sedalia said, "Some I made yesterday afternoon while you were looking for a baggage stub. Our local police don't seem to have a phone."

The inspector's face reddened. "We just don't waste taxpayers' money." He turned to me. "We wired for the same information she phoned about. Not in the habit of making private citizens run up their phone bills to gather police information, but the woman's too impatient to wait for a telegraphed answer. If I made a long-distance call every time Sedalia suggested it, be out of a job in a month."

"Who have you been phoning long distance?" I asked Sedalia.

"You'll learn about it at three," she said laconically.

UNDER the circumstances, Sedalia's Sunday afternoon party would have been a strained and uncomfortable affair even if she not had insisted I prepare a bowl of what she calls "Pale Dynamite". The recipe, in the event you ever wish to throw a drunken orgy, calls for two quarts of grain alcohol, cleverly disguised in two quarts of grapefruit juice, one gallon of sparkling water, a half pint of lemon juice, sugar to taste and the usual lemon rinds and cherries dumped in to dress up the bowl.

The resulting punch has a most innocuous taste, hardly seeming to contain any alcohol at all. But if you are adept at arithmetic, you can figure out from the formula its strength is roughly equivalent to one-hundred proof whiskey cut half-and-half with soda. The above quantity is sufficient to render eight normal drinkers unconscious.

As there were eight persons present, this would have been just the right amount, except that Sedalia and I both knew what was in the punch, and Inspector Stephen Home began to suspect after the second glass. Consequently only our five suspects eventually became thoroughly drunk, and the inspector merely grew gently wobbly.

The insidious thing about Pale Dynamite is that you can drink two or three glasses before you begin to feel any effect at all. After that you do not have to drink any more, for you already have in your stomach enough alcohol to constitute a full day's supply for an alcoholic. As straight alcohol is absorbed into the blood stream much more rapidly than liquor, you naturally become drunk more rapidly. Before you realize you have underestimated the potency of the punch, it is much too late to do anything except relax and enjoy your stupor.

I served it in our largest punch cups, and

by the second round the party noticably lost its sense of strain. Up to then Sedalia played the chattering hostess, keeping the conversation on a small talk level and furnishing most of it herself, which failed to cover the obvious fact that no one else was much interested in small talk. But as I circled the room to pour the third round, she got down to business.

As it happened, this timing was perfect, for though not a person in the room was more than mildly stimulated at the moment, each glass of punch carried the equivalent wallop of three normal highballs, and within thirty minutes all our guests except the inspector were destined to be thoroughly intoxicated. On the third round I got refusals from no one except Inspector Home, who frowned thoughtfully at the punch bowl as he shook his head.

"In a way this is a business meeting as well as a social gathering," Sedalia said when I had completed replenishing glasses. "As you probably all understand by now, if Hank made himself clear over the phone, the rather unorthodox invitations I sent out were designed to make the murderer of Mrs. Chambers and Mr. Thorpe panic. And as you also know, he did panic, attempting to kill me last night because he thought I knew his identity."

"He?" Alvin Christopher asked.

She waved one hand impatiently at the assistant district attorney. "Or she. As Hank has so frequently pointed out to me that I'm bored with the subject, the English language should contain some personal pronoun like 'hiser' to cover inclusive use of both sexes at the same time." She paused, then went on with a strange note of emphasis in her voice. "While my trap failed to catch the murderer, it did settle one thing. It removed all doubt that the killer might be someone other than one of the five of you who received cards."

A small stir went around the room and the guests glanced at each other with a kind of surreptitious fascination. The assistant district attorney weaved erect angrily.

"Do I understand you include me as a suspect?" he demanded.

Sedalia grinned at him. "You were with the group who discovered the body, and Mrs. Chambers had invited you to the meeting. You must have had some kind of connection with her, or you wouldn't have been invited."

"Before she phoned and invited me, I never heard of the woman," Christopher said hotly. "As a matter of fact I didn't even know there was to be a meeting. I assumed she wanted legal advice and it would be a private conference between the two of us."

"Relax," Sedalia said. "I haven't accused you of anything." She looked around at the group. "I really got you together for two reasons. The first is that I don't care to be a target for a killer, and I want the murderer to know I have no idea which of you five he is."

Monica Madigan drained her third glass. "Three of us have pretty iron-clad alibis. We could hardly have killed Aunt Agatha if we weren't even in town."

Sedalia nodded agreeably. "Alibis can be manufactured. If it was a premeditated murder, it would be strange for the killer not to have an alibi."

"Just how would I get hold of the stub of a ticket which was used on the four-thirty train from Kansas City if I weren't on the train?" Monica demanded.

"Any number of ways. You might have arrived much earlier, killed your aunt and then gone to the station to meet the four-thirty train. Perhaps you knew someone coming in on the train, and contrived to get his stub, or perhaps you sized up the male passengers getting off, approached one and asked for his used stub with the explanation it was on a bet of some kind. Or perhaps you simply saw someone throw away the stub and picked it up."

"I never heard anything so silly in my life!" Irene Chambers inserted.

"I'm not saying any such thing actually happened," Sedalia said. "I'm simply pointing out alibis can be manufactured."

GERALD RAWLINS rose to carry his empty glass toward the punch bowl, staggered slightly, looked surprised and set the glass down instead of holding it out to me for a refill. He returned to his chair walking rather carefully.

"It would be difficult to blow my alibi up in the same way you blew up Monica's," he said. "The airlines keep a passenger list."

Jerome Straight suddenly put in, "You remarked it would be strange for the killer not to have an alibi. I haven't, so that let's me out."

Sedalia exploded this self-interested reasoning. "I said if the murder were premeditated. In some ways this one has all the earmarks of a spur-of-the-moment crime."

Without amplifying this remark, she changed the subject. "The second reason I gathered you all together was to see if we could get a little light on information I got by long-distance phone yesterday. I made calls to people I know in Dallas, Kansas City and Chicago."

Who these people were she did not divulge, but I knew one of them was a mayor, one a circuit judge and one a police commissioner. Sedalia's network of influential friends throughout the country gave her sources of information almost superior to those available to the police.

"I learned some interesting things," Sedalia went on. "For one thing, Mrs. Madigan, I learned you did not divorce your 'stinker of a no-good husband,' as you termed him. He divorced you. I won't publicly disclose the grounds, but you remarked to your lawyer if your aunt ever heard the full story, she would cut you out of her will permanently."

Monica flushed. "My lawyer had no business violating a client's confidence."

"No," Sedalia agreed. "But what people tell often depends on who asks them. Anyway, that seems to give you an excellent motive."

Monica shrugged. "You'll have a hell of a time proving I wasn't on that four-thirty train, because I was."

Sedalia turned to Irene Chambers. "Apparently you were in no immediate danger of having your inheritance reduced, Miss Chambers. But it seems you have bad luck at roulette. I understand a character named Farewell Gus has given you just thirty days to raise the twelve thousand dollars you owe him."

Irene's expression was astonished. "How . . . how did you learn that?"

"Chicago's mayor is one of my closest friends. Apparently he put the whole police force to work digging up your history. In case you're interested, it took them two hours to learn everything you've done in the past ten years. Very efficient police department you have in Chicago."

"Apparently," Irene said. She finished her drink with a defiant gesture. "You'll have as much trouble proving I wasn't on the three PM train from Chicago as you have proving Monica wasn't on the other one."

Rising from her chair, she started to cross the room to where I stood next to the punch bowl. But after two steps a peculiar expression grew on her face. Carefully, she turned around, set her cup on an end table and resumed her seat.

"In Dallas I learned something too," Sedalia said, glancing at Gerald Rawlins. "Nothing nearly as sensational, but rather interesting. The auditing firm which went over the books of Fibrolux Plastics confirms the hundred-thousand dollar shortage and traced it to Adrian Thorpe, but they didn't report it to you. They reported it to a company official named Jonathan Toomey. Unfortunately, my informant can't reach Mr. Toomey until tomorrow."

Gerald waved one hand impatiently. "Jonothan is first vice president. Naturally they'd report it to the senior executive after

Ad. Jonathan relayed the information to me."

Sedalia shook her head. "That isn't the reason they gave. They said they would have dealt with the company treasurer except they couldn't understand how he had missed the shortage himself. It was pretty obvious."

Gerald's normally red face turned even redder. "A polite way of saying I didn't keep the books too efficiently, eh? Not too polite at that." Then he shrugged. "All right. So I'm a figurehead treasurer, and I don't look at the company books twice a year. Ad himself supervised the bookkeeping department while I played golf, if you want to know. Aunt Aggie insisted I work for the company, but she also refused to let me have any responsibility. So I said the hell with it, and let Ad run things."

"About the way I got the picture," Sedalia said.

CHAPTER FOUR

Somebody Dies Tonight!

FOR the first time, Inspector Home spoke. "Not sure exactly what you're trying to do, Sedalia, but seems to me you're counteracting your assurance to the killer that you don't know his identity. You're demonstrating you know how to dig things up, and letting him see you're a pretty formidable opponent. Suggest you turn over what you have so far to me and drop out of the case. Kind of short fuse, this killer seems to have, and I got an idea he won't wait till you catch him before trying to stop you."

This brought a sudden silence.

Then Irene Chambers said, "Thish is . . . ." She stopped, looked startled and tried again. "This ish. . . ." This time her halt was more abrupt. Her lips tightened and she sank back in her chair, obviously deciding to keep her mouth shut if she was not able to control it.

Slowly Jerome Straight rose from his chair, a peculiar half smile on his long, gaunt face. Opening his mouth wide, like an opera singer preparing for a high note, he took a deep breath.

"Wahoo!" he yelled.

Then, with all eyes on him, he carefully reseated himself, smiled benignly around at all of us—and went to sleep.

Monica Madigan struggled erect, stood swaying and said in an incredulous voice, "We been Mickey Finned! By God, we been Mickey Finned."

Staggering slightly, she crossed the room and grabbed both my arms to hold herself erect.

"Henry," she said reproachfully. "You didn't have to spike my drinks. I love you —I've always loved you!"

I looked at her in horror. Sedalia threw back her head and roared with laughter. I glared at her bitterly.

"So now what are your plans?" I asked. "What did you expect to accomplish by getting everyone in this condition?"

Sedalia's amused glance took in her guests. Jerome Straight was asleep. Irene Chambers was sitting dignified but glassy-eyed with her hands sedately folded in her lap. Alvin Christopher was looking puzzledly at a package from which he was having difficulty extracting a cigarette. Only the inspector and Gerald Rawlins were still more or less in possession of their full faculties, the inspector because he had stopped at two glasses of punch, and Gerald apparently because he had a large tolerance for alcohol.

"You must admit tongues were loosened a bit," Sedalia said. "But I do confess I hadn't thought of what would happen beyond the present point."

This I might have known. When Sedalia had an idea, she went ahead with a single-mindedness of purpose which took no regard of possible consequences. And now that we had a house full of intoxicated people, she was entirely capable of blithely

going out for a walk and leaving me to handle the situation as best I could.

Monica's hands on my arms were beginning to lose their grip and her expression was suddenly sleepy. Holding her erect, I looked down to where Sedalia was sitting.

"I suggest a mass napping period," I said. "Suppose you let Miss Chambers have your bed, and I'll put Mrs. Madigan in mine. The rest of the guests can distribute themselves on couches and the daybed while you carry Mr. Straight into the guest room."

Sedalia nodded agreeably, rose and heaved the gaunt-faced lawyer into her arms as she would a baby. I started to lead Monica into the hall when Sedalia called after me.

"Don't stay too long, Hank. I think Mrs. Madigan is after you."

Refusing her the satisfaction of a reply, I led the sleepy woman to my room, let her sink back on the bed and removed her shoes. Her eyes stared up at me dreamily.

"Why'd you get me drunk, Henry?"

I said stiffly, "It was Sedalia's idea."

"But now that I'm drunk and practically helpless you take me to your bedroom. You didn't have to get me drunk, Henry."

I felt myself blushing furiously. Rising from my seat on the bed, I strode to the door. As I pulled it shut behind me Monica emitted a mocking little laugh, and I realized she had deliberately been amusing herself by teasing me. For some reason the thought made me furious. Not that I would have expected a woman as attractive as Monica to seriously throw herself at a man a quarter-century her senior, but no man likes to have a woman laugh at him. At that instant I would have been glad to learn Monica was the killer.

In Sedalia's apartment I discovered Irene Chambers and Jerome Straight had been safely bedded down. Alvin Christopher lay on the daybed in the front room, and Gerald Rawlins was stretched full-length on the couch. The assistant district attorney was already asleep, but Rawlins was puffing on an unlighted cigarette and making a desperate effort to look sober. When I entered the room, the cigarette dropped from his hand, he smiled at me foolishly and closed his eyes.

"Think I'll run along," Inspector Home said in a ponderous tone. "Wife expecting me for dinner, you know."

He moved toward Sedalia, weaving slightly, started to make a slight bow, thought better of it and walked out into the hall to obtain his coat, brushing the door jamb on one side as he went out. Accompanying him to the front door, I found his coat in the hall closet, held it for him and handed him his hat.

"Are you all right, Inspector?" I asked.

"Quite," he said with dignity, unsuccessfully fumbling with the door knob.

Reaching past him, I opened the door, took his arm and guided him to the elevator. I pressed the signal button and waited with him as the car rose ten stories.

When the elevator door opened, I asked, "You're not driving, are you?"

He shook his head. "No. Perfectly capable if I was though. Took a taxi." He peered at me suspiciously. "Don't think I'm drunk, do you, Henry?"

"Oh no," I said.

"Never been drunk in my life."

He entered the elevator, carefully pushed the down button, and stared at me owlishly as the door closed between us. Feeling mild relief at having disposed of at least one intoxicated guest, I returned to Sedalia's apartment.

AT FIRST I didn't see her, because I did not glance down at the floor. I walked right past where she was lying, glanced in her bedroom and saw Irene Chambers sleeping on her bed, walked through the dining room and peered into the guest room where Jerome Straight slept, checked the sun room and finally the kitchen.

When I found her none of these places, I called, "Sedalia!"

There was no answer. Perhaps she had gone up to my room for some reason, I thought, or into the study. I was puzzled rather than worried when I went back into the front room.

But this time the moment I entered the room, I saw Sedalia. She was stretched out face down just to one side of the front door, and I had walked right past her. My heart stopped for an instant as I saw the bright red staining the massive golden coils of her hair and forming a minute pool on the floor next to her head.

One glance at the heavy fire tongs next to her body explained what had happened. With a sickening sense of realization, I knew one of our five guests was shamming drunkenness and was actually as sober as I. The instant Sedalia had turned her back, the murderer had struck her with the first weapon handy, then reassumed the appearance of being in a drunken sleep.

Moving to Sedalia's side, I felt her pulse and was amazed to feel it beating strongly. Immediately I ran to the door, intending to phone the house doctor from the hall, but I stopped when it occurred to me this would put Sedalia beyond my line of vision.

Grabbing her by the ankles, I dragged her face down out into the hall. Anyone trained in first aid would have frowned at this procedure, but I considered it less dangerous than leaving her out of sight, where the murderer might decide to employ the fire tongs once more and make sure of the job. Then I picked up the tongs so as to have a weapon in case I needed it and dialed the switchboard.

"Send a doctor to Miss Tweep's apartment at once," I said. "It's an emergency."

The house doctor, a fussy little man with horn-rimmed glasses arrived within five minutes. He removed bobby pins carefully and unwound the two long braids which reached to below Sedalia's waist when they were not coiled around her head. Gingerly he felt the gash he found underneath all the hair.

"Probably only a mild concussion," he said. "She'd be dead if it weren't for all that hair. It made as good protection as a football helmet. I don't think she's in serious danger, but I'd suggest we play safe and get her to a hospital."

Sedalia picked that moment to groan, sit up and clutch her head with both hands.

"Are you all right, Sedalia?" I asked inanely.

Her eyes opened but remained pinched with pain. Dazedly she looked at the tongs I still held.

"Hank!" she said in amazement. "Did you clout me?"

"Of course not. Are you all right?"

She smiled bitterly. "Course I'm not all right. My head is split wide open and I think I'm going to die." Struggling to her feet, she stood swaying. "But first I'm going to make somebody pay for this headache."

"You shouldn't be standing," the doctor said. "We're going to get you to a hospital."

"Nonsense," Sedalia said in a stronger voice. "I'll be all right soon as I eat a few aspirin. Hank, let's find out which of our guests is playing possum."

But we were unable to find out. We even had the doctor examine them all, but his only conclusion was that all of them could either be unconscious or shamming. We did find proof that one of them was sober, however, though which one it was impossible to tell. A vase on the end table which had been between Jerome Straight and Irene Chambers contained the contents of at least two punch cupsful. And since this end table also contained a cigarette box on which all our guests had drawn freely, I recalled everyone had been near it at some time or other with a cup in his—or her—hand.

We were right back where we had started, with five suspects.

THREE aspirins and a small strip of adhesive tape were all the medical attention Sedalia would accept. The aspirin apparently eased her headache, but it had no effect on her disposition. When the house doctor insisted he would not be responsible if she refused to go to a hospital, she growled that he did not look very responsible anyway, and shooed him out of the apartment.

When the doctor had gone, I said fearfully, "Now we're alone with the murderer again. The minute we relax there may be another attempt to kill you."

"Who's going to relax?" she snapped at me. "I have no intention of turning my back again, and if any killers want to get tough, they'll end up without an unbroken bone in their bodies."

"Why did you turn your back in the first place? What happened anyway?"

Sedalia fitted an ivory-tipped cigarette in her holder and I held a light for her. With her milk white complexion and her long braids hanging down either side of her face, she looked like a little girl blown up to six times normal size.

"I was starting to clean up," she said. "I had carried some of the glasses out to the kitchen, and when I came back in to the front room I opened the hall door to look out and see what was keeping you. I heard something behind me, started to turn, and the roof fell in."

I thought a minute. "Then Mrs. Madigan is eliminated at any rate. She wasn't in the apartment."

"Depends on how long you were gone. She could have sneaked down from your room while I was in the kitchen, hidden in my bedroom, clouted me with the fire tongs and got back to your bed before you returned, if you took very long to let the inspector out."

I thought again. "It must have been three or four minutes at least. Possibly even five. The elevator was on the first floor and I waited with the inspector until it came up and he started it down again."

"Then nobody is eliminated."

Again she made a rapid tour of all our guests with me trailing behind her. Only this time she carefully searched each one.

"What are you looking for?" I asked. "The baggage ticket again?"

"Weapons," she said shortly. "Long as they're unarmed, I can handle any one of these characters. Or all of them put together for that matter."

Finally satisfied that none of them possessed firearms, Sedalia moved a chair into a corner of the front room from which she could see both slumbering occupants and at the same time keep her eye on the apartment door, the door to her bedroom and the door to the dining room.

"Now bring me a beer," she said grimly.

I did not much care to leave her alone. Not that I feared for her safety now that she was alert to possible danger. On the contrary I felt that any overt move on the part of the killer would probably be his or her last. But I myself am not particularly athletic, and I doubted that I would be a match in a death struggle for any of our guests with the possible exception of the elderly Jerome Straight. In spite of self-assurance that the killer could have no possible interest in me, I kept glancing over my shoulder all the time I was alone in the kitchen.

As quickly as I could, I got a tray and glass from the cupboard, opened a bottle of beer and got myself back into the front room, where Sedalia could protect me as well as herself, if necessary.

Nothing further of interest transpired, however. About seven o'clock our guests began waking up completely sober, another of the peculiarities of Pale Dynamite. Just as the concoction brings on intoxication more rapidly than any other drink with which I am acquainted, so does it wear off more rapidly. Its effect seems to be to shoot a large quantity of alcohol into the bloodstream at once, producing quick and

thorough intoxication. But as soon as the alcohol in the blood is burned up, revival starts, for there is none left in the stomach to replenish the bloodstream, as there would be with some more slowly absorbed liquor such as whisky.

Jerome Straight was the first to rejoin us, a fitting thing since he had also been the first to depart from consciousness. He appeared in the doorway from the dining room, blinked at us grayly, looked faintly nonplussed at Sedalia's hanging braids, then took in the sleeping figures of Alvin Christopher and Gerald Rawlins.

"I was going to say I was sorry for making a spectacle of myself, Miss Tweep," he announced in a stiff voice. "But I see I was not alone. Was there something in the punch?"

"A little alcohol," Sedalia said laconically.

He moved across to the hall doorway, turned to survey us both with unmistakable disapproval. "Thank you for an enjoyable party. I'll leave now."

I said, "I'll help you with your coat."

"I'll find it," he said coldly, and passed through the door.

In a few moments we heard the outer door open and close.

"Now if you would turn your back and get attacked again, we could eliminate Jerome Straight from the field," I suggested.

"Shut up," Sedalia said amiably. "I'm thinking."

AND she remained with her brow puckered in a thoughtful frown as the remainder of our guests awakened, bade her subdued good-byes and departed. After Jerome Straight, their order of awakening was Monica Madigan, Irene Chambers, Gerald Rawlins and Alvin Christopher. Except for the elderly lawyer, none of them seemed to harbor any particular animosity for having been trapped into intoxication.

When the last guest had departed, I threw the front door bolt and began to prepare dinner. Sedalia was still seated in the front room, thinking, when I called her at eight.

"You know, Hank, I've been wondering why the killer took such a chance to get rid of me. I don't think it was just Steve Home's remark about my being a formidable opponent, because waiting until night to make a second attempt would have been safer than with all these people around. The only answer I can see is that I must have said something this afternoon which made the killer think I was closer to an answer than I actually am. So I had to be stopped at the very first opportunity."

I said, "I don't recall your saying anything particularly revolutionary aside from your description as to how Monica Madigan could have built an alibi."

"Perhaps that's it," she said slowly. "In my blundering way perhaps I described exactly what she did."

In spite of still being rankled by Mrs. Madigan's laughing at me, I felt it only fair to point out an item which seemed to me to eliminate both women from the murder of Adrian Thorpe at least.

"Don't forget the person who bought the knife found in Adrian Thorpe was a man," I reminded her. "Doesn't that tend to eliminate the two women as suspects?"

She shook her head, causing her braids to jiggle. "Thorpe himself may have bought it as a souvenir, and the killer merely have seen it in his room and grabbed it up as a handy weapon. Our murderer has a tendency to use whatever is convenient, as witness the employment of fire tongs twice. Or perhaps the killer stopped a bum on the street and hired him to make the purchase. There are too many possibilities to make the purchase of the knife by a man mean very much."

"Then have you tentatively settled on Mrs. Madigan?" I asked.

She rose to come to dinner. "I haven't tentatively settled on anyone. Aside from

suggesting how the Madigan woman could have framed an alibi, I can think of one other thing I said today which might have forced the killer to act fast."

"What was that?"

"My announcement that I expected to hear from Jonathan Toomey, the first vice president of Fibrolux Plastics, tomorrow."

"You mean he might tell you something which would disagree with Gerald Rawlins' story?"

"That's a possibility," she agreed as she moved into the dining room. "But you may recall the other night Jerome Straight said something about Mrs. Chambers leaving her Fibrolux stock in trust with Mr. Straight as the administrator. If we can get hold of Jonathan Toomey tomorrow, I think I'll inquire just what Jerome Straight's connection with the corporation is beyond his voting power as administrator of the estate. It would be interesting to know whether under the terms of the will he could vote himself in as president of the corporation."

I held Sedalia's chair for her. "Well at least we can wait till tomorrow before worrying about any more murders," I said philosophically.

"Think so?" Sedalia asked. "Bet a nickel the murderer tries to kill me again tonight."

On this pleasant thought we sat down to our Sunday night supper.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fire Down Below!

IN SPITE of Sedalia's grim prophecy, I went to bed without worrying about any attempts the murderer might make that night. My ease of mind was entirely due to our specially constructed doors, of course, and not because I disagreed with Sedalia that he might make another attempt to kill her. With their inside bolts thrown even I could not have gotten through those doors from outside, and I doubted that our killer was a more accomplished picklock than I.

It never even occurred to me the killer would be insane enough to try to burn down the hotel.

The most infernal clangor I ever heard brought me out of a sound sleep. It sounded like ten thousand alarm clocks going off at once, and it took me from bed and out into the hall in my pajamas.

By the time I had switched on a light in the hall I realized the sound was coming from the elevator lobby and I also realized it was the fire alarm for our floor. Ducking back into my room, I got on my robe and slippers and returned to the hall just as Sedalia burst from her apartment pulling a robe over her nightgown.

"It's the fire alarm," I said before she could speak, and started toward the front door.

"Wait, Hank!" she called sharply.

It is frightening to be on the tenth floor of a hotel when a fire alarm goes off, and my face must have been pale when I stopped and turned, for Sedalia gave me the same sort of reassuring smile mothers give children frightened by thunder. The smile embarrassed me and I attempted nonchalance by feeling in my robe pocket for a cigarette. I offered her one, but she shook her head.

"Let's not go off half-cocked, Hank," Sedalia said. "There may be a killer sitting out there with a loaded gun. What time is it?"

I glanced at my wrist watch. "Three o'clock."

"Phone the switchboard and find out if there's really a fire before you start unlocking any doors."

I nodded, and to show how unperturbed I was, returned to my bedroom for my lighter and lit my cigarette before going to the phone. Then I laid the lighted cigarette on my bedside ash tray and returned to the hall carrying the lighter in my hand. I was reaching for the phone when it rang. I dropped the lighter, picked it up again and answered the phone.

"This is the switchboard," said a feminine voice. "There is a small fire in the hotel, but nothing to get excited about. Please listen carefully and don't get excited."

I said, "I'm not excited."

"The management wishes all personnel to leave the hotel in as orderly a manner as possible. There is little danger that the fire will reach your apartment, but we don't wish to take any chances. Please leave by the fire escape instead of using your elevator."

"If there is no danger, I think we'll stay right here," I said.

The woman's voice sharpened. "I'll have to ask you to get out of the building at once. The management cannot be responsible—"

"Where is the fire?" I interrupted.

"Right below you. But there is nothing to get excited about—"

I said, "We'll stay here and hope you can put it out."

Suddenly her voice lost control. "You old fool! The whole ninth floor is in flames! Either get out of there or burn!"

The line went dead and I slowly replaced the receiver.

"We have to get out," I told Sedalia, and added hopefully, "Our killer wouldn't burn up a hundred people just to get at you, would he?"

She was stooping over and feeling the floor. "Feel this, Hank."

I bent and followed her example. The floor felt slightly warm.

I said, "I haven't smelled any smoke yet. Maybe they'll get it under control."

At that moment a wisp of smoke drifted from my bedroom. Both of us rushed to the door at once. I got there first, saw the cigarette I had laid down had fallen from the tray and the doiley of my bedside stand was smoldering. Carrying it into my bathroom, I threw it in the drain.

"We've got enough trouble without you starting additional fires," Sedalia snarled at me.

Going to my open bedroom window, I pushed it farther open and leaned out to look down at the floor below. I could see no sign of fire, but at that moment sirens began to sound in the distance.

Drawing my head back in, I said, "I'm going to phone the switchboard once more before we rush out to get shot by a murderer."

When I returned to the phone the same woman I had talked to before answered immediately.

"Yes?" she said, and then the phone went dead. At the same instant the alarm in the outer lobby stopped clanging.

Attempting to keep my voice steady, I said, "Apparently the wiring is going out. Maybe we had better do something before the lights go."

"If we only knew which door the killer was watching," Sedalia said.

"Maybe he isn't watching either," I said without any conviction.

Sedalia's eyes were narrowed in thought. "If he were waiting at the front door and we never opened it, he would be trapped if the elevator went out. My guess is that our murderer is now sitting on the fire escape, so let's try the front way."

Since almost any action seemed better than staying where we were and roasting, I accepted her reasoning without question. Before I could weaken, I ran to the front door, drew the bolt and threw it open. I was met by a haze of smoke which set me to coughing.

Behind me Sedalia muttered through a handkerchief thrust to her face, "I don't see any flame or any killers. Get moving."

Lacking a handkerchief, I held an edge of my robe across my face and ran toward the elevator. As usual it was on the ground floor, and as I pressed the button and watched the floor indicator slowly rise, my eyes began to smart from the smoke.

The indicator stopped halfway between seven and eight. Frenziedly I pushed the button again, but the needle did not move.

And then all the lights went off.

THERE was no point in waiting longer. By mutual accord we stumbled back into the apartment and I locked and bolted the door. The last was simply reflex action, for if we were unable to get out the front way, there was certainly no way for a murderer to get in.

In pitch dark we felt our way along the wall to the door of Sedalia's apartment, groped through the front room and dining room into the kitchen and eventually arrived at the back door. Here we both paused and I could hear Sedalia's heavy breathing, as though she had been running uphill.

"Think we can afford to wait until it gets really hot?" I asked into the darkness.

Sedalia said, "Feel the floor again."

Stooping, I pressed my palm against the floor and found it noticeably hot. Having had no previous experience with fires, I had no idea whether this could have been caused by radiated heat from a blaze not necessarily right underneath us, or if the ceiling below was actually on fire. But I had a mental vision of the floor suddenly bursting into flame, crumbling beneath our feet and plunging us into an inferno.

"Let's get out of here," I said. "I'll go first."

I threw the bolt, started to pull open the door, and Sedalia said tensely, "Wait!"

I stood holding the door a quarter inch open.

"All right," she said.

Not understanding what was on her mind, I pulled the door wide, letting moonlight mixed with smoke pour into the room. Then turning to look at Sedalia, I saw her poised with a kitchen chair over her shoulder, ready to hurl it through the door at the first indication of anyone awaiting us on the fire escape. But the platform outside was bare.

I started to step through the door, but Sedalia said softly, "Hold it, Hank."

Then she peeled off her robe, draped it over the chair and tossed the chair out onto the fire escape. From the roof overhead an automatic spat bullets in a chattering roar.

I had just time to see the chair dance on the platform like a crazy thing as bullets smashed into it, then I had slammed the door and thrown home the bolt.

"Let's stay here and roast," I said in a quavering voice.

"You might as well get the candles again," Sedalia said calmly.

So while Sedalia repaired to her bedroom for another robe, I located the same candles we had used approximately twenty-four hours before and made a little light in the front room. Then we sat down, Sedalia with a beer and me with a high-ball, and conversed as though neither of us had a care in the world. Sedalia sounded entirely calm, but in the dim light of the two candles I could not make out her expression very well, and perhaps she was as frightened as I. If she was, she was exceedingly frightened, for I have never experienced such panic in my life as I did during the next forty-five minutes, as we sat there talking while the floor gradually grew so hot we could feel the warmth on our feet even through a thick rug.

"Do you really think the murderer set this?" I asked.

Sedalia took a long pull on her beer. "Obviously. It would be too much of a coincidence for him to be on the roof otherwise. If we don't burn up, we've definitely got him now."

"Why do you say that?"

"He wouldn't go to such desperate lengths unless it were not absolutely essential to remove me tonight. He's not making these frantic attempts because he simply fears me as an opponent. The only possible reason he could be so desperate is that he can't afford to let me talk to Jonathan Toomey. So, by the process of applied logic, if we live to talk to Toomey we'll have the answer."

"Then our killer is Jerome Straight?"

"I don't know," Sedalia said. "We'll never know unless we get to talk to Fibrolux Plastics' vice president."

WHEN nearly a half hour had passed we suddenly heard a sound something like that of a huge vacuum cleaner. I was trying to classify the sound when there was a roaring immediately under our feet and the floor began to vibrate.

"The floor's giving way!" I yelled, leaping to my feet.

"It's just a fire hose," Sedalia said matter-of-factly. "They're playing a stream of water on the ceiling downstairs."

I sank back in my chair feeling foolish, hope beginning to form in my breast that we would get out of our situation after all.

The hope materialized, for about fifteen minutes later a pounding came at the kitchen door. We went back to the kitchen together, and after satisfying ourselves that a fireman instead of the killer was on the fire escape outside by shouting back and forth through the door, I threw the bolt and let him in.

Incredibly, Inspector Stephen Home was with the fireman.

"Desk sergeant got me out of bed when a report on the fire came in," he announced in explanation. "Knew you lived here and thought I'd want to know. You all right, Sedalia?"

"Just fine," she said. "Have a beer, Stephen?"

The inspector shook his head, not even seeming surprised by the invitation. The fireman, an axe in one hand and a flashlight in the other, made a tour of the apartment and came back looking disappointed that he had found nothing to chop.

"You people should have gotten out," he said. "Might as well stay now, though. The danger's over."

"Anyone hurt?" Sedalia asked.

"Woman sprained her ankle on a fire escape. Nobody burned, though the floor below here is pretty well gutted. Lucky the whole she-bang didn't go up. Somebody poured gasoline all over the hall downstairs and pitched a match in it."

He went out the way he had come.

"Our killer was on the roof a little while ago, Steve," Sedalia said. "This was started to smoke me out apparently. He fired a number of shots and ruined the kitchen chair I threw out on the fire escape."

"Noticed it," he said. "Guessed something like that happened when I saw the holes in your robe. Checked the roof before I came in here, but there's four other escapes he could have taken down."

Suddenly, for no reason at all, an odd memory item popped from my subconscious into my conscious mind. This happens to me sometimes. I have what is known as a photographic memory, being able to reproduce in my mind vivid images of things I have seen in the past, for example whole pages of printed matter. Once the talent earned me a living on the stage, and now it is of occasional service to Sedalia.

I said, "Sedalia, what does this mean? Friday night when we were at the scene of the first murder, Gerald Rawlins pointed out his suitcase standing in the hall and remarked he had not had time to park it anywhere because he had come straight from the airport. It had a bright red baggage stub tied to its handle. But later when I searched his room, the stub was white and he also had an additional bag with a white stub."

In the flickering candlelight Sedalia looked at me for a long time. Finally she said, "Have you been carrying that in your mind long, Hank?"

"Not consciously," I said.

"It's a good thing," she told me grimly. "If you'd mentioned it right after searching Rawlins' room, the case would have been solved right then." She looked at the inspector. "No wonder the killer couldn't afford to let me talk to Jonathan Toomey. Now I know what to ask Mr. Toomey."

But she refused to tell us what she intended to ask, insisting she had no intention of accusing anyone of murder and arson until all the evidence was in. Instead she talked the inspector into having all five suspects picked up and at his office at nine in the morning, at which time she would make her long distance call to Dallas and then present the inspector with his murderer.

"The fire put my phone out of order again," she said. "So this call will have to be at public expense."

Whereupon she shooed the inspector out via the fire escape and we went back to bed.

WHEN we arrived at headquarters the next morning, we found the five suspects already gathered together in the inspector's office. Sedalia greeted them all courteously, borrowed the inspector's phone and put in her call to the Fibrolux Plastics Corporation in Dallas. While waiting for this she asked the operator to get her the Statler Hotel.

Then she handed the phone to Inspector Home. "When you get the clerk, ask what time Gerald Rawlins registered on Friday."

No one said anything as Home asked the question, grunted at the reply and hung up. He glanced at Gerald Rawlins.

"Desk clerk says he didn't check in till about nine, which would be shortly after we released him after we questioned everyone at Mrs. Agatha Chambers' home. But he phoned for the reservation from the railroad station at twelve-fifteen."

"That ties it up," Sedalia said. "We won't even have to wait for Jonathan Toomey's verification." As the inspector reached for the phone she added quickly, "But don't cancel the call. We'll need the evidence. While waiting I'll tell you how Mr. Gerald Rawlins performed these murders and why."

Everyone turned to look at Gerald Rawlins, whose face had turned deathly pale, but who managed a cynical smile. He made no comment, simply staring defiantly at Sedalia as though daring her to go on. Sedalia obliged him.

"Rawlins managed to distort the picture of what really happened a bit," she said. "But it was not really clever planning. It was merely incredible luck. What actually happened, of course, was not that Gerald phoned his aunt to disclose the hundred thousand dollar shortage, but Adrian Thorpe phoned her. Gerald was on a train at the time, en route to the family meeting.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE BAT FLIES LOW

By Sax Rohmer

That the safety of the world was at stake the fabulous Egyptologist never doubted. . . . And so, in strict secrecy, began the trek across the world to seek out the mystic source of evil which bridged the eons. . . . And kept the ancient dead of Egypt awake and restless in their ageless tombs.

You will find this great fantastic mystery in the October issue, on your newsstand now. Don't miss it!

FAMOUS fantastic MYSTERIES 25c

In spite of Gerald having fixed the books to make it look as though Thorpe was the embezzler, Mrs. Chambers knew her nephew well enough to put the blame where it belonged. Consequently, when Gerald arrived at his aunt's house, he was met by a denunciation and Mrs. Chambers informed him he was not only permanently going to be cut out of her will, but a member of the district attorney's office would be present at the meeting that night to take him into custody."

She turned to Alvin Christopher. "That's why you were invited, Mr. Christopher."

"Wait a minute," Inspector Home said. "If Rawlins came in by train, how did his name get on the airline passenger list?"

"That was the incredible luck. Either he had originally planned to go by plane, made a reservation and later decided to go by train and turned his reservation over to Adrian Thorpe to use, or perhaps Thorpe had asked Gerald to buy him a plane ticket and Gerald absent-mindedly made the reservation in his own name. Whichever it was, there is no doubt that it was Thorpe who rode the plane on a reservation made in Gerald Rawlins' name, and Gerald came in by train.

"The phone call from the station making a reservation at the Sheridan for Adrian Thorpe was made by Gerald, of course. At the time Gerald didn't know he was going to commit a murder in less than an hour, and was merely doing Thorpe a favor. No doubt Thorpe had asked him to make him a reservation, knowing he would have little time between the time his plane was due in and the time of the meeting. Another example of Gerald's incredible luck was that the desk clerk at the Sheridan later assumed it was Thorpe himself who phoned for the reservation.

"Mrs. Chambers was killed in blind rage, without premeditation, but after committing the crime, Gerald did his best to wriggle out of it. Remembering the plane reservation was in his name, he tried a desperate plan. He bought a hunting knife, registering it in Thorpe's name, then went to the Sheridan, waited until Thorpe was alone in his room, walked in and killed him. It was a simple matter to get Thorpe's airline stub from his pocket, substitute his own train stub and remove the baggage stubs from Thorpe's suitcases so that he could later attach them to his own. But in his first panic after killing his aunt, apparently he left his suitcase in the hall, where it remained all the time the police were investigating. Unfortunately, for Gerald, it still contained the red railroad baggage stub, and Hank noticed this.

"The handbag which disappeared from Thorpe's room of course contained the evidence of Gerald's embezzlement. No doubt the auditors will be able to put it together again, now they know what to look for.

"Finally, the reason Gerald had to get me out of the way was that he knew I intended to talk to Jonathan Toomey. On a routine police report by telegraph, where the police are chary with words in order to save the taxpayers expense, there was an excellent chance the only information coming from Dallas would be a verification that the audit showed Thorpe guilty of embezzlement. Certainly it would not have mentioned anything about the modes of transportation used by Thorpe and Rawlins. But Gerald knew if I personally talked to Toomey by phone, it would inevitably come out that Thorpe had flown. For it was Thorpe Mr. Toomey turned the auditors' report over to, not Gerald. At the time Gerald was halfway between here and Dallas on a train."

Sedalia took a deep breath. "Got anything to add?" she asked Gerald Rawlins.

"Yes," he said in a tight voice. "I'm sorry I didn't swing those fire tongs a little harder."

At that moment the inspector's desk phone rang.

"Here's your Dallas call," he said, handing it to Sedalia. ◆ ◆ ◆

GOOD COMPANY

By

HARRIET CRITTENDON

Luther had never known what tripped him. . . .

Wealthy Mrs. Lucullus would certainly be a splendid match for him, Mr. Owensby thought. On the other hand, there was the peculiar passing of the late Mr. L. . . .

MR. OWENSBY, who still cut a fine figure, paused outside Mrs. Lucullus' brownstone. He saw the ruffled marquisettes flutter and he postured, in order to give the lady an eyeful. Perhaps it was a bit silly, at his age, but certainly no sillier than her coy postponement of her answer to his proposal of marriage.

Still, she had a large enough nestegg left

her by the demised Mr. Lucullus to afford a bit of silliness if she fancied it. She could also afford Mr. Owensby. He did not put it to himself quite that way. Rather he felt it would be a fair exchange—his obtaining a long-term lease on gracious living, while the lady would snag a rare matrimonial prize, offered to no other female.

He mounted the stoop and rang the bell. It pealed faintly, but nobody came.

He eyed the fluttering curtains obliquely then with open disgust. For the flutter had been caused by a gray and black striped face with yellow, indolent eyes. If there was anything besides working for a living that made Mr. Owensby squirm with distaste, it was Mrs. Lucullus' cat, Undy. Mrs. Lucullus, when asked whether the name was short for underwear, would smile with elephantine slyness, or possibly shyness—Mrs. Owensby could never be sure which it was—and say "yes," but somehow Mr. Owensby always had the feeling that there was some other, secret, significance to the name.

Nor did he believe in her pretended sympathy for him when that brute of a cat sharpened her claws as if preparing to do battle with Mr. Owensby. True, the cat never did, perhaps because she usually looked right through him, as if he didn't exist. Once she'd bumped into him, apparently intending to walk right through him.

Another black mark against the animal was the power it was allowed to wield over Mrs. Lucullus. He remembered the midsummer evening, not long ago, when he had taken Mrs. Lucullus for a ride to Long Island in a rented car.

After they had dined, they found themselves stranded at an all-night garage when the car broke down. The repairs, the garageman stated, would not be finished until eleven o'clock at the earliest.

"Oh goodness!" Mrs. Lucullus exclaimed distractedly.

Remembering that she always insisted on being back home around midnight, Mr. Owensby taunted her jovially:

"Surely you can afford to miss out on your beauty sleep this once?"

"I suppose I shall have to," she agreed absently. "Excuse me. I must phone home."

She plowed toward a phone booth in the rear of the garage office.

Mr. Owensby was not in the habit of eavesdropping on people's phone conversations, but the way she slammed the booth door shut, though the temperature in the office hovered around 90 degrees, proved her desire for privacy. Mr. Owensby could not figure, for the life of him, the reason for privacy and the apparent urgency with which she wanted to get in touch with her home which housed only her elderly maid, Greta, and the cat.

HE STROLLED casually toward the back of the booth, and put his ear to the partition.

"Greta," Mrs. Lucullus was saying breathlessly, "I dislike asking you to stay up until twelve tonight, but if Undy isn't served her big meal of the day between twelve and twelve-thirty she does not eat properly. Warm up the cooked fish in the refrigerator and place it in her dish. It's the black one with her name on the rim. . . . Yes, it's in the pantry. And be sure you place her meal on the fifth step from the top of the cellar stairs. She simply doesn't enjoy eating anywhere else."

Mr. Owensby did not mention that he had overheard her instructions, but he did not forget them. It made him more determined than ever to force Undy's removal.

Mr. Owensby's word had usually been law to the ladies he'd gone with in the past, so he naturally assumed that when he told Mrs. Lucullus that he wanted her to get rid of the beast, it was as good as done. But here was Undy, a week or so after his request, still in possession of the premises. That Mrs. Lucullus should have ignored his wishes, even though she may have thought he was joking, seemed quite impossible.

It seemed even more impossible that she shouldn't be waiting at the window. The lady should be eager to give him her consent to their marriage. He glanced at his watch. He'd told her he would arrive at four-thirty and it was fourty-thirty on the nose. He had actually been left to cool his heels. Unbelievable!

Mr. Owensby tried to feel nonchalant, but actually he yearned to reach through the half-open window and clamp his fingers around Undy's furry neck and squeeze harder and harder. Since he did not see how Undy was to blame for the lady's tardiness in keeping their appointment, he took a deep breath and restrained himself. Later he was to regret his self-control.

A chill foreboding shook him. What if Mrs. Lucullus had promised her annuities to some fortune hunter who had got in his bid ahead of Mr. Owensby? That, too, was impossible. He reminded himself of Mrs. Lucullus' many defects. No longer young —no beauty even in her prime—definitely on the silly side. . . . Where was the dratted woman?

Mr. Owensby would have felt even more indignant if he could have known where the lady actually was. Really all that she was doing was sitting at a drug-store counter, not half a block away, strawing up the dregs of her second strawberry soda, for sodas had a way of giving her Dutch courage. If she leaned to the right, she could see Mr. Owensby on her own front stoop. She ducked back nervously and ordered another refill.

Mrs. Lucullous was all of fifty years old before she could come and go as she pleased. Wasn't that silly?

SHE was a brawny-framed woman, but all her life long she had given in to anybody with gumption and a loud voice. Luther had been a good provider and good providers bossed their own homes. Her father had, and, like Luther, he had to know where she was going and why. Luther picked her clothes, her food, her activities. It was only right, she'd always felt, to give in to Luther's wishes on things, but he might have relented on a simple thing like her desire to own a cat. She'd wanted one ever since she was ten years old.

In the end, she had defied Luther—actually defied her own husband. She could not resist the shivering kitten in the doorway of a neighbor's house one rainy day. She had scooped it up and sneaked it into her basement under her coat. The Lucullus house was over a hundred years old and had not only a cellar but a sub-cellar as well. In the sub-basement was where Mrs. Lucullus kept her pet, slipping down the musty, steep stone steps to feed and pet the animal. Since Undy—short for Underground—remained just there, and Mr. Lucullus, though retired and with a tendency to examine his wine cellar frequently, never went to the sub-basement, the two never met. Until of course that time, the night before Mr. Lucullus died so suddenly.

Remembering the suddenness with which Mr. Lucullus had passed away, his widow ordered another refill of her soda, and, sipping it, felt much better. After Luther died, she had settled down to the comforts of widowhood. She felt rather guilty at putting it just that way, but the guilt didn't last. She brought Undy upstairs, bought her a leash and collar and took her for daily airings, harvesting smiles from the neighbors whom Luther could never abide.

Whenever she called: "Undy!" she had a sinking feeling that a voice from some heavenly loudspeaker might bellow down at her:

"Adele, that's no fit name for a cat. And you'd oblige me by getting rid of that animal. It's unhygienic."

Goodness. Undy washed more often than Luther ever dreamed of doing. Mrs. Lucullus bought a piano and took lessons. Neither Papa nor Luther could ever stand the idea of her practising, but Undy actually purred over the sounds that Mrs. Lucullus was able

to produce from the instrument. Goodness.

Undy even provided her mistress with friends. The city was building a new three-decker highway at the foot of Mrs. Lucullus' street. The long-term result would be fine but the short term one was to dispossess the mice that had lived contentedly in the waterfront warehouses for years. When word got around the neighborhood that Mrs. Lucullus' house was about the only one free of mice, Undy was in demand. Within a month, Undy had cleared every house nearby as thoroughly as a Pied Piper. When a delegation of neighbors called to thank Undy for her service, Mrs. Lucullus served tea and struck up many friendships. Why, it was at that reception for Undy that she had met Mr. Owensby.

She glanced guiltily through the drug-store window at Mr. Owensby, still cooling his heels. Then she heaved herself off the counter stool and plodded down the street to face him. She did not know why she was putting off giving him his answer. She'd be a fool to think she'd ever get another chance at a second husband half as nice and presentable as Mr. Owensby.

SHE panted up to him. "I owe you an apology for keeping you waiting."

"Not at all," he answered graciously, but she noticed—good gracious—how he had been nibbling at the end of his mustache in annoyance.

"But I really believed that you'd have found another home for that—that animal before this," he went on. "When you have a man around for company, you won't have to put up with a mere cat."

"Undy's such grand company," Mrs. Lucullus said. "I wouldn't dream of giving her away."

"Not even if I tell you I can't abide her?" Mr. Owensby asked with angry archess.

For the first time, Mrs. Lucullus realized that Mr. Owensby was actually serious about his ultimatum. Before he had always talked of it with a playful smile.

Undy stepped delicately from the window sill to the stoop. Mrs. Lucullus bent and picked her up, cuddling her against her cheek. Mr. Owensby shuddered slightly but on his lips was a confident smile. He was sure that Mrs. Lucullus was saying farewell to her pet.

But he was wrong. Mrs. Lucullus was whispering:

"Imagine getting rid of you, Undy!"

Goodness! She might as well try to get rid of the memory of that night when Luther had fallen down the cellar steps and broken his neck. That night that she'd wakened Luther and told him she'd heard burglars in the cellar, knocking over some of his wine bottles.

Luther had doted on his wine cellar. The idea of anyone tampering with a single bottle in it maddened him to the point where he forgot that he would be no match for a burglar. He picked up his cane—the heavy one that his shaky, aging limbs needed of late—and descended.

(Continued on page 108)

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE . . .

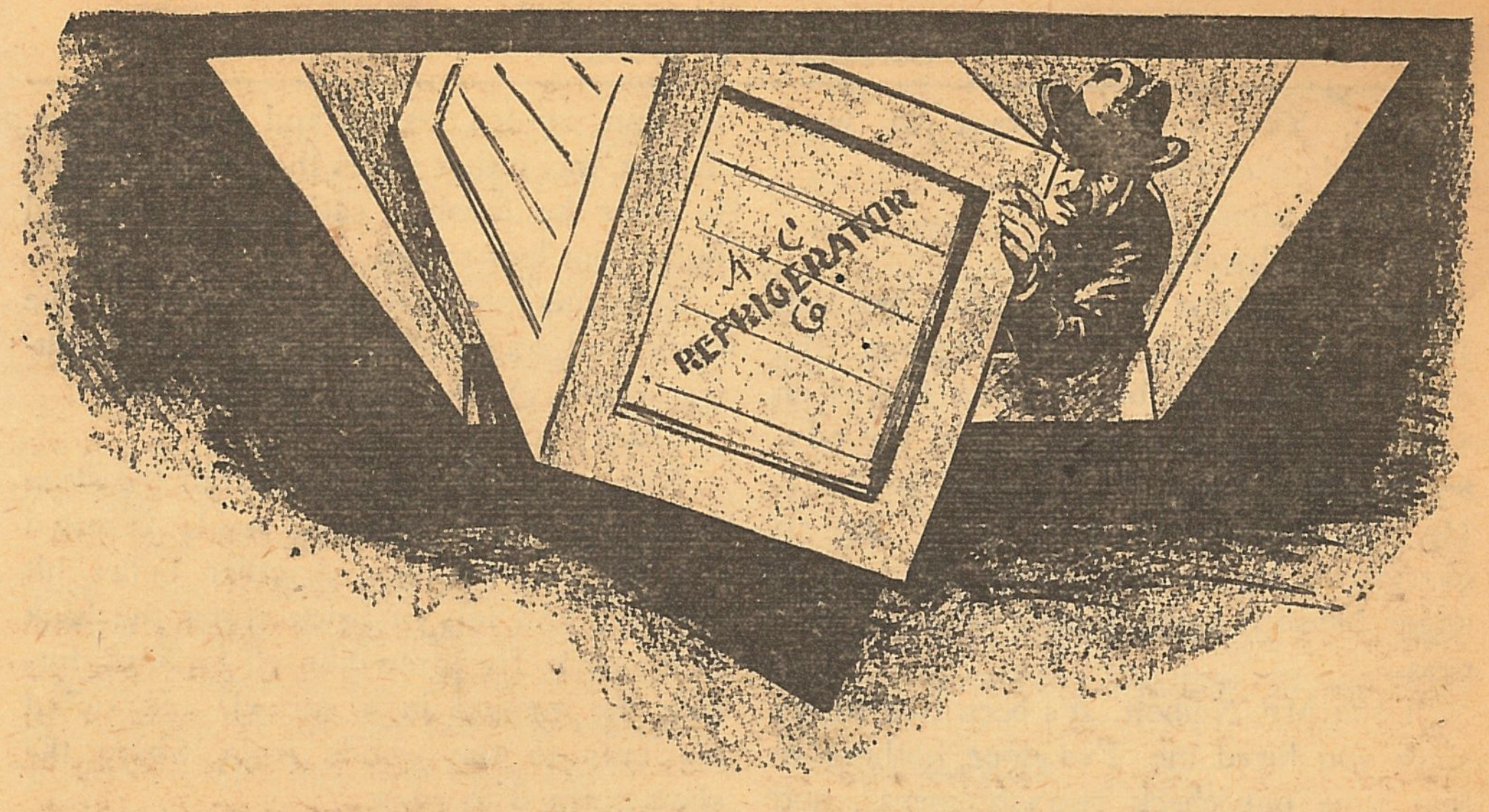
In asking for a divorce, an Indianapolis woman testified that her husband had beat her, breaking her jaw and blackening an eye, because he found out that she smoked.

The judge leaned over and asked, "Does your husband smoke?"

"Oh, yes," came the reply. "He smokes cigarettes and a pipe, and he chews too."

The judge banged his gavel and said, "Divorce granted."

—Helfer



DON'T LOOK NOW...

By DON PRINGLE

Jerry had a fine job. Good pay, no work, and lots of healthy exercise—running for his life!

AT NOON, Jerry Winton went into the warehouse office and laid a sheaf of invoices on Mr. Neibolt's desk. "I finished checking the shipment," Jerry said. "Nothing missing and nothing damaged. Shall I put the stuff away?"

Mr. Neibolt looked up, a smile broadening his plump face. He always smiled but his eyes never did. It occurred to Jerry that Mr. Neibolt's face looked amazingly like those of the rag dolls, that had come in with the shipment, with their painted smiles and dull black, button eyes.

"Let Gus, the clean-up man, put the goods away," Mr. Neibolt said. "Gus knows where everything belongs. It's lunch time

He saw the crated refrigerator directly above him, sliding out. . . .

anyway. You wouldn't want to work through lunch time?"

"I mean after lunch."

"Let Gus handle it, kid."

Kid. Everytime someone called him that Jerry could almost feel the freckles that dotted his face like brown paint flicked on with a brush, and acutely sensed the adolescent gangliness of his bony six-foot body. He was twenty-four and looked like an overgrown high-school senior. A touch of anger brushed aside Jerry's inherent shyness.

"Look Mr. Neibolt. It's been two weeks since you hired me. I've done nothing in that time but check two shipments, and keep the inventory book up to date. All in all I haven't worked a half hour a day. I'm not an eager beaver but I would like to be kept busy."

Mr. Neibolt's smile faded. His fat fingers drummed the desk top for a moment. He pursed his lips thoughtfully then he got an envelope from his coat pocket, and a razor blade from the desk drawer.

"Okay. You can put the stuff away. All the toys and the heavy stuff upstairs."

Before turning away, Jerry saw what Mr. Neibolt had started to do. It was an odd thing, considering that his boss was practically throwing away forty-five bucks a week by hiring him.

From the envelope which he had apparently addressed inaccurately, Mr. Neibolt was trying to salvage the three cent stamp.

JERRY got his lunch bucket, and went outside in back of the warehouse. He sat down with his back to the brick wall. His first sandwich was half eaten when he heard Mr. Neibolt drive away from the front of the warehouse. He left the same time every day. He'd spend the morning in the warehouse, and the rest of the day in his dry-goods store uptown.

Munching a ham sandwich, Jerry raised his eyes to the woods two hundred yards away. He ate out here everyday liking the autumn painted leaves, and the crisp air. Today, was rather warm though, and shortly after he finished eating, the sun had lulled him half asleep.

Something buzzed past his ear, hit the brick wall, and went away with a diminishing whine. A dragon fly, he thought.

Crack!

The sound of a gunshot jarred the sleep from his mind. Surprise made inverted V's of his eyebrows. Another bullet hit the wall and bits of brick stung the back of his neck. He threw himself forward, hitting the ground in a sprawl, and raised his eyes to the woods from where the shots seemed to come.

The woods was too distant and too dense for him to see more than a few feet into it. He watched, motionless, his heart beating a savage tattoo against his ribs. He saw no one.

After a few minutes he got up. He looked down at his hands and they told him how afraid he had been. His fingers had dug convulsively into the ground, and he held chunks of sod. His freckled face took on a sheepish grin as he let the sod fall. For awhile he had *acted* like an eighteen-year old, and thought like one too. He had actually thought someone was deliberately trying to shoot him. That couldn't be true, of course.

Who had any reason to kill him? The bullets must have been fired by a careless hunter who'd shot at a squirrel without looking beyond his target.

He had gone back to work, and was starting up the stairs to the second floor with an armload of rag dolls when he heard a car stop in front of the warehouse. He didn't think it was Mr. Neibolt, but it was. His boss had never come back to the warehouse after lunch before.

"What's the matter?" Jerry said. Mr. Neibolt had taken one step through the doorway, halted, his mouth hanging open. He couldn't have looked more surprised if he had seen a ghost.

"Matter?" Mr. Neibolt's short, fat body stiffened. "I was going to ask you the same thing. Your face is white as paper. Are you sick?"

White! Had the nearness of those bullets affected him that much? There was still an uneasiness in his stomach. *Kid.* He was acting like one all right. Now he felt his face get warm as he blushed. He told Mr. Neibolt about the shots.

"So you figured it was some hunter up there," Mr. Neibolt said and smiled.

"Not at first. Those shots came so close I thought someone was trying deliberately to shoot me. If any one had any reason to kill me I'd have lit out of there fast."

"Hunters get pretty reckless. I wouldn't eat out there anymore, just to be on the safe side." Mr. Neibolt started back out the door then stopped and turned around. Still smiling, he said, "I nearly forgot. I came down here to tell you you'll have to work tonight."

"Tonight? How late?" Jerry thought of his movie date with Marilyn at seven.

Mr. Neibolt shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Till ten or so. Another shipment's coming in sometime before then. Taking on a full inventory before Christmas, you know. I'd ask Gus to be here to receive it but he's a part time employee and I don't like to impose on him."

"Sure, I'll work tonight." Jerry made a mental note to phone Marilyn and tell her the date was off.

After taking all the toys upstairs, Jerry started to work on the floor rugs, and the crated refrigerator. The warehouse was uniquely designed to take the heavy goods to the second floor with a minimum of manpower. The ceiling's center for its entire length, had been cut away to permit the heavy stuff to be hauled up by a pulley arrangement.

When he finished, Jerry went into the office and phoned Marilyn. They had been engaged six months but his heart still fluttered when he heard her voice.

"Darn it. I wish you were going to the movie with me. It's a mystery film. Seeing it alone I'll get goosebumps," she said.

Jerry grinned. Marilyn was a character, a very lovable character. She loved mystery films though they scared her silly, and she was as superstitious as a medieval Irishman.

"I've had enough mysteries for one day," Jerry said lightly. "Someone took two shots at me while I was eating lunch behind the warehouse."

"Jerry!" Marilyn't voice was a thin wail. "I knew something like that was going to happen."

"You knew it?"

"Yes, only I dreamed that you—you were killed!"

Jerry laughed until he was weak. "Look, Marilyn, you've been having d r e a m s about me ever since we met. Once you dreamed I died in an airplane crash. Another time you dreamed I became a champion prize fighter."

"Oh, but this dream was different, Jerry. I don't know what happened to you. In the dream, I mean. A voice kept saying over and over, Jerry's dead. Jerry's dead. I woke up shivering and crying."

"The shots weren't deliberate," Jerry said. "They came from the woods in back of the warehouse. I didn't see anyone but it must have been someone shooting at squirrels and the bullets just happened to come near me."

"But you don't know for sure. Maybe someone tried to kill you, and they might try again."

"What reason would anyone have to kill me?" Jerry laughed and added jestingly, "Maybe it was Mr. Neibolt who fired those shots. He knew I ate out there every day. He could have driven up to those woods without me seeing him. A road circles it. Maybe he wants to keep from giving me my two-week paycheck."

"Don't eat lunch out there any more, Jerry. I have to hang up now. I'll drop in

and see you on my way to the movie."

Jerry put the phone down, then got out the inventory book and wrote down the identity and quantity of the goods he had put away. Keeping that book up to date was one of his few duties. Some job, he thought. Work a half hour or so a day, and get paid for eight. And for an employer who took pains to salvage a three cent stamp.

HOURS later, when Jerry was sitting in a big easy chair by the office, he heard the front door open. He glanced at his wrist watch. Exactly five. The time, and the dragging footsteps he heard, told him it was Gus, the clean-up man. Jerry looked up and watched him come down the corridor which was formed by two rows of steel pipes which held up the bisected ceiling.

Gus was ancient, withered like an apple bitten by many frosts, and he walked by sliding his feet along, as though he was walking on thin ice. Near-sighted, he didn't see Jerry until he came up to him.

"Hello there young fella. How come you ain't going home? Those other days you're going out when I come in."

Another shipment's coming in some time tonight. I have to be here to receive it."

The old man frowned and peered at Jerry. "Another shipment? Neibolt didn't tell me nothing about that. Usually he tells me. What's he figuring on doing? Cornering the market? Bet he would if he could. A regular tightwad he is. Pays me two bucks a week to clean up and take care of the furnace. Worth more'n that I'd say. So you're going to be in here at night?"

"That's right, until ten or so."

"You ain't the scary type like that last fellow are you?" the old man asked.

"The last fellow? I didn't know anyone had this job before me."

"Yep." Gus gave a shrill laugh that actually made the steel ceiling supports ring. "This other fellow, he was about thirty, I guess. He was here three weeks then up and quit. That was a month ago. I'm working in here one evening and he comes in looking for Mr. Neibolt who wasn't here. Says he wants his paycheck, that he wouldn't work here no more for anything. Says the place is jinxed."

"Jinxed?" Jerry leaned forward in the chair, his mouth suddenly dry.

"Yep, that's what he said. He told me that he was in here late two nights straight and both nights just as he's walking down that there corridor to go home, a refrigerator falls down from that cut-away ceiling and just misses him. What do you think of that?"

Jerry barely got the words past the sudden tightness in his throat. "I'd think the place was jinxed, too."

"'Tain't nothing of the sort," the old man waved his gnarled hands deprecatingly. "When this fellow—Joe was his name—was telling me this I smelt whiskey on his breath so I put two and two together. I knew refrigerators came in both those shipments. Right away, I figured he was drunk both nights, and put those refrigerators up there on the edge of the cut-away, and they just happened to fall off when he was a-walking by."

Jerry drew a breath of relief. "Yeah, that would explain their falling."

"Oh, this fellow didn't think so. He waved his arms around crazylike and said he only had one drink both nights. Said the place was jinxed, or else someone pushed those refrigerators down to kill him."

Jerry's voice went thin again. "He must have been drunk all right."

"Sure. I told him—who would want to kill a rum pot like him? He went out of here waving his arms again like mad. And I can tell you he didn't walk under that cut-away ceiling when he went."

Jerry turned his head and looked up. Light filtered down through the skylights

in the roof but the recesses beyond the edge of the cut-away were dark. He could make out two of the crated refrigerators, set back a couple feet from the hole's edge. They were shadowy, ominous.

"He must have been drunk all right," Jerry said again. And to his own ears the words sounded more like a question than a statement. And if he had just one hint of a reason for someone to kill him, and the former employee, he would have been convinced that the refrigerators had been pushed down, that the bullets were fired at him purposely.

"I'm going out to eat. I'll be back in an hour," Jerry said and started for the front exit.

Gus cackled and said, "Don't walk under that cutaway. Them refrigerators weigh close to three hundred pounds. Wouldn't want to scrape you up off the floor."

Jerry ignored the jibe but his scalp crawled as he went down the corridor, and Marilyn's words echoed in his mind: *"Jerry's dead. Jerry's dead."*

GUS was gone when Jerry returned. Heavy shadows lay about the vast room like black drapes, blotting out all but outlines. The floor lamps, neatly arrayed in rows, were like a platoon of soldiers standing at attention; the sofas like huge animals curled up for the night. Above all, was the rectangular cut in the ceiling its edges silhouetted by the faint light streaming down from the skylight.

As Jerry looked at it, he thrust out his jaw belligerently. *There's no motive!* He He went to the wall switch and turned on the lights. Then he sat down to wait for Marilyn. It was nearly seven-thirty when he heard the front door open, and the brisk clatter of her heels. His heart beat faster at the sight of her; small, beautifully-formed, her black hair in an upsweep that brought out all her prettiness.

During supper he had convinced himself that the bullets that missed him so narrowly, and the falling refrigerators, were purely accidental. Or he thought he had. Now, as Marilyn started down the corridor under the cut-away ceiling, fear raced through him like an electric shock. He opened his mouth to tell her to change her course. No words came out. And then she veered off, and made her way up to him among the floor lamps.

"Am I that breathtaking?" she said, her black eyes sparkling.

Jerry realized his mouth was still open. He closed it, bent down and kissed her. Her perfume smelled dainty and springlike.

"That was nice," she said. "Your kisses are nice even in gloomy places like this. I'd like it better in a movie balcony though."

"Duty calls before love," he said.

She wrinkled her nose prettily. "I must leave right away. One of my girl friends is going with me. She's waiting outside. I dropped in mainly to give you this.""

Marilyn opened her pocketbook and brought out a small silver horseshoe about twice the size of a fifty cent piece. GOOD LUCK was emblazoned on it.

"Why, you little witch. You have that dream in mind and you think that charm will keep me safe," Jerry said.

Marilyn smiled impishly. "I don't believe in charms. I just don't believe in tempting fate. I'm really very practical. See this big safety pin on back of the horseshoe? It can serve the same purpose as a hat pin—to keep wolves away."

The safety pin was two inches long, and sturdy. He grinned wickedly, "Forewarned is forearmed."

Ordinarily, he would have kidded her and not worn the "good luck" piece, but her eyes were as solemn as a child watching for Santa Claus as she pinned it on his shirt.

"There, you're safe from all harm. The goblins can't get you now. Give me a kiss for my efforts, and I'll hie myself off to that mystery film, and get those delightful shudders."

"Don't you have a four leaf clover for me too? And how about a rabbit's foot?"

Marilyn's eyes became serious. She said, "I know my superstitions are silly. But everyone is superstitious to some degree. Even famous people. Please keep the horseshoe pinned on. You may laugh at it all you like but wear it anyway. Now give me my kiss."

He kissed her, took her arm and led her to the door. Silly, but he didn't like tempting fate either; he took a devious course to the door.

Back in the office he ran his fingers over the horseshoe thoughtfully. A lot of good it would do if someone was seeking to kill him. But it was crazy to suspect those accidents as murder attempts. Certainly no one could have a motive for killing him—and the former employee.

THE front door banged shut. He looked up. Marilyn again, he thought.

"Is Jerry Winton here?" a voice said loudly.

Jerry went out of the office. A man stood at the end of the corridor, a briefcase in his hand. "I'm Winton," Jerry said.

The man came up and shook Jerry's hand energetically. "I'm George Pace, agent for the Acme Casualty Company.

"Insurance? I don't think I want any insurance," Jerry said.

"You've already got it. Didn't Mr. Neibolt tell you he insured you?"

"Insured me?"

"Yes, he took out a policy on you two weeks ago. He had a policy on another fellow who worked here. The man quit and Mr. Neibolt said he wanted that policy dropped and one taken out on you. I went out to your home a couple times to get your signature on the policy stub which has to be sent into the insurance company. But signature or not you've been insured for two weeks. I saw the light in here as I was driving by. Usually the place is dark at this time. Thought you might be here."

"How does this policy pay off?" Jerry asked and clasped his hands behind his back to hide their trembling.

"It pays thirty-five a week for loss of time due to any accident. Doctor and medical bills. It's an expensive policy, one of our best."

"I mean the death benefits. What does it pay off for accidental death?"

Pace smiled. "That needn't interest you. If you get killed accidentally the money goes to Mr. Neibolt. That may sound odd but, as an employer, he has an insurable right under the law. The accidental death indemnity is twenty-thousand."

What motive could anyone have to kill me? The insurance agent handed him a pen and the insurance stub. Jerry signed it, his fingers so numb he could hardly form the letters. He watched the agent leave and his heart seemed chilled to inactivity by the coldness that had crept about it.

He stood there for a long time. Now that he had discovered a motive it seemed incredible that Mr. Neibolt was a would-be murderer though everything indicated that he was.

The falling refrigerators was the clincher. He could believe the bullets were pure accident, even knowing about the policies. Employers frequently insured their workers. But the two refrigerators stretched coincidence too far.

Get out of here, his thoughts said.

Halfway to the door his mind got hold of something that made him slow down. As the idea developed a blush spread over his face, deepening until it blotted out his freckles.

That explains those falling refrigerators, he thought. The guy was drunk, as Gus suspected, when he hauled those crated refrigerators upstairs. Only, those crates didn't fall just as he walked under them, not two nights in a row. That would be too much of a coincidence even if he had put them on the edge where they might readily fall. Drunk, he must have handled

those refrigerators so clumsily that they fell *when he was hoisting them.* Then he concocted the yarn that someone must have pushed them down, to keep from getting blamed for their damage.

The theory wasn't entirely satisfactory at first, but he argued the doubt from his mind.

He went back to the office. Before going in he jauntily flipped the wall switch, darkening all but the office. *Now* he was acting his age.

Several minutes later he heard a faint creak, much like the opening of a door. *Mice,* he thought, but his hands started to shake.

"Mice," he said aloud. His mind said, *footstep.*

Get out there and turn those lights on! Prove there's no one there. He pushed the chair back from the desk noisily, stood up, and forced his reluctant legs to carry him out the office door. He turned right and edged through the blackness, groping along the wall for the switch.

Soft rapid footsteps behind him! He started to turn. Something hit the top of his head with terrific force. His last thought, as he fell was the memory of Marilyn's words. *Jerry's dead! Jerry's dead!*

Consciousness crept slowly back. A dull pain throbbed where he had been hit, and the back of his head felt as though it was being rubbed with sandpaper. Then he realized he was being dragged by his feet, his head sliding across the floor. Above him he saw the cut-away, and a thin crescent moon through the windows in the roof.

He stopped moving. The hands left his ankles. His heels thumped loudly on the floor but he felt no sensation in his legs or feet; his whole body seemed anesthetized by the blow on the head.

Retreating footsteps. He tried to raise his head and couldn't. Footsteps on the stairs. Seconds later, he saw a human form, silhouetted in the faint moonlight, moving above him, along the edge of the cut-away. The figure stopped directly over him, and then stepped back from the hole's edge.

Jerry was not fully conscious. Comprehension did not come to him until he heard something of great weight sliding across the floor above. *A refrigerator!* Fear raced through him. He tried to move, to drag himself beyond the edge of the hole. His muscles would not respond.

Then he saw the crated refrigerator, directly above him, sliding slowly out from the edge of the hole. The top of it began to lean out. And then it toppled and started down.

Panic prodded his lethargic muscles. He rolled over on his chest, and started to roll again when the crate hit. Then he felt its terrible weight on his back and legs. He thought it had fallen directly on him until he realized it had hit the floor first on its side, and then rolled over on him.

His fingers scrabbled vainly for a grip on the smooth floor as he tried to pull himself free. He tried to roll it off by twisting his body.

The crate did not move. He was pinned fast.

He heard footsteps coming down the stairs. *Don't move. It may appear that the box scored a direct hit.* He lay his head down on the floor between his outstretched arms, knowing that his one chance for life was to be thought dead.

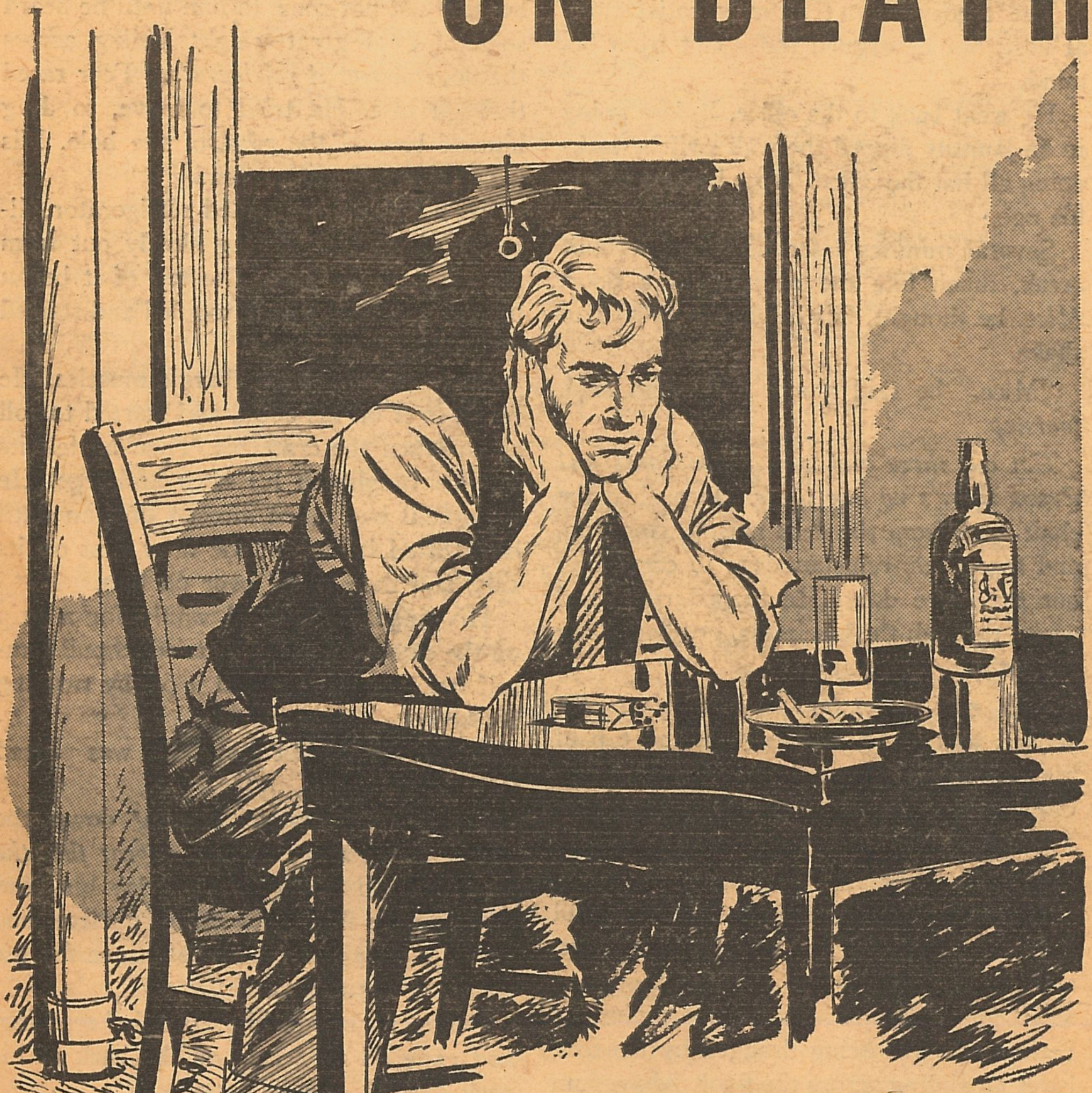
Footsteps beside him. Harsh breathing, and expelled air warm on the back of his neck.

And then his one chance for life was gone; he felt fingers circle his wrist, feeling for the pulse.

Mr. Neibolt's voice was raised in a sharp curse. And then he was moving away, his shoes hitting the floor fast and hard. Jerry didn't even get a chance to whip his arms back to make a grab for him. A match flared in the darkness. Without moving his

(Continued on page 113)

DOWN PAYMENT ON DEATH



By HERMAN LANDON

One day, Nona's memory would come back to her, and she'd remember seeing Garvian kill her sister. Till then, it was up to Garvian to keep anyone else from paying the last penalty for the murder!

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He heard a cool, drawling voice. "Drop the cannon, Garvian!"

THEY said he was a murderer, but he was a likable youngster for all that. He was only twenty-two and looked even younger. Rumpled hair, bloodshot eyes and the twitching of muscles in his haggard face showed that his nerves were in a bad way.

Just a kid, Stanley Garvin thought. And he had a good honest face. But an honest face, he grimly reflected, wouldn't help Tom Breslin very much when he was brought to trial for the murder of Orchid Leigh.

"You don't know me," the kid said as they sat side by side on the cell cot. "Why should you bother about me?"

"Because you're in a jam and you need a friend. Think you could trust me?"

Tom Breslin looked him over. He saw a limber, well-groomed figure, a hard-chipped jaw, a recent scar that might have been slit

by a knife or a bullet, eyes that were deep and gray and a little bitter, and thick dark hair with premature threads of gray. The inspection ended in a wondering look. Maybe Tom Breslin felt what others had felt, that the real Stanley Garvian was hidden deep under the skin.

"I can't figure you out," he said slowly, "but you look like a square-shooter."

"Good enough. Now, you fell for that dame—fell hard. You were a kid fresh from the country. You gave her a new thrill. Then she started two-timing you. It burned you up."

The kid hung his blond head. "Guess I went crazy," he muttered. "But I didn't kill her. I swear—"

"Save it for the jury. I know you didn't kill her. It's a frame-up, and a pretty one. You need a good lawyer."

"I've got one," said Tom Breslin, frowning. "Amos W. Faber. Guess he's smart enough. But I—I don't like him."

Garvian started. "Faber? He going to defend you?"

"Well, he came to me and offered to take my case. When I explained that I didn't have much money, he said to forget it."

Garvian frowned. Faber was clever, wily and expensive. "It doesn't make sense, kid. Faber doesn't work for his health. Tell him he's fired. I'll get you an honest lawyer, and it won't cost you a cent."

Tom Breslin tried to grin. "You don't make sense, either, Mr. Garvian. Why should you dig into your own pockets—"

"Skip that!" said Garvian harshly. Then his face relaxed. "Buck up, kid. It's a bad rap, but we'll beat it."

"How?" asked Tom Breslin, but he sounded less hopeless. "Going to turn magician and pull the real killer out of your hat?"

"Later, maybe. Just now it's enough to prove you innocent. A good alibi would do it. But of course you haven't got one."

"But I have. And it's funny." The kid laughed, and it was good to hear him. "At first I couldn't remember where I was that night. Then, early this morning, it suddenly came to me. It was old Doc Merritt's birthday, and I had dinner with him."

Garvian took a long, deep breath. "And who is Merritt?"

"Great old scout. Came from my home town. He's a widower; lives all alone. Doc Merritt cooked the dinner, and then we sat in his study and talked. I was there from seven in the evening till a little after midnight."

GARVIAN heaved a sigh of relief. "Orchid was murdered between ten and eleven that night. Dr. Merritt will remember the little birthday dinner. It's perfect, kid."

"Think so?" asked the kid eagerly. "Mr. Faber didn't seem very enthusiastic when I told him about it this morning."

"I know," Garvian growled. "That's Faber all over. He wants to beat a case by smart tricks—nothing so simple as an honest alibi. Have you told anybody else?"

"No. Mr. Faber said to keep it under my hat."

A deep frown creased Garvian's forehead. "All right. I'll see Dr. Merritt myself." He stood up and gave the prisoner a slap on the shoulder. "Get a good night's sleep kid. I'll smash this frame-up and have you out of here inside of twenty-four hours." He looked at his watch. "That means not later than half past ten tomorrow night. It's a promise."

Tom Breslin grinned. His eyes were a little moist. "You're a good guy, Mr. Garvian. I was pretty low. I needed a friend bad. Then you came, and you believed in me right away. You didn't even ask me if I was guilty or innocent. You just—"

His voice faltered, and wonderment mingled with the new hope in his eyes. Garvian gave his hand a firm, warm squeeze, rapped for the guard, and hurried away.

He couldn't explain how he knew the kid

was innocent; he couldn't tell Tom Breslin that he himself was the murderer of Orchid Leigh. . . .

FACE muscles taut, he went briskly down the stairs. The long scar in his cheek twitched, and somehow he looked like a man who had scars on his soul as well as his body.

"It's a promise," he repeated under his breath.

Out in the open, his face changed. He moved with an easy, swinging stride, showing no sign that he was a man living on borrowed time and that his sole ambition was to spend his remaining days excitingly and die fighting before Nemesis overtook him and strapped him in the chair. Any kind of death but that!

Lieutenant MacKim of Homicide, big and broad and youngish, with a homely, nut-brown face, sat in his office with feet propped on his desk. Garvian sat down.

"I've just seen Tom Breslin," he said.

"Nice lad," said MacKim. "Too bad he got whimsical with a gun. What's on your mind, shamus?"

"Just how bad is the rap?"

"Plenty bad. The kid was nuts about the girl, and he was broke. When he caught her cheating, he got crazy as a hornet. We've got witnesses to swear he threatened to bump her, and when we raided his apartment we found some of her jewelry in the bottom of his trunk. We found the gun, too, and the microscope says the murder bullet was fired from it. There's more. Want to hear it?"

"No thanks. That's enough." Garvian stared down at the carpet. His thoughts went back to a mad night. He had been mad enough so that he might have dropped the gun as he fled. But it was a mystery about the jewels. "It's four and a half months since the murder," he added. "You have been a long time getting around to the kid."

"Wrong, shamus. We've had him and two other guys under suspicion all the time. We were pretty sure the jewels hadn't been fenced. The killer must have come to his senses and realized they were hot. So we played a hunch, got three search warrants, and found the stuff in Breslin's rooms. Finding the gun too was just a bit of extra luck."

"Or an extra touch to the frame-up."

"Have it your way. If you're trying to clear the kid, I'm for you. I like him."

Garvian scanned his homely face. "You're a queer cop, Mac."

"Yeah, and you're a queer shamus. You're deep. You've got plenty of dough, a bunch of rich friends, and a valet to press your pants. You need to be one of these consulting criminologists, an armchair sleuth sitting at mahogany desk. Then, about four and a half months ago—"

"Lord! Must I listen to the story of my life?"

MacKim ignored his protest. "You went berserk, stripped off your kid gloves and went into battle, going up against some of the toughest mugs in town. You've stopped some hot lead since then, you've knocked off a few bad guys, and in your own crazy way—"

Garvian feigned a yawn. "Oh, shut up!"

"In your own crazy way you've done a lot of good. Sometimes, though—" MacKim paused and his eyes almost disappeared behind his lids. "Sometimes I think you're out to commit suicide, from the way you tear around meeting bullets, half way. And it started four and a half months ago. . . ."

He leaned back, his slitted eyes intent. "Four and a half months," he repeated. "That's when you began to play rough. Just about the time Orchid Leigh was murdered."

Garvian smiled bleakly. "And that," he asked as lightly as he could, "adds up to what?"

MacKim said nothing, just looked at him. The room seemed very still just then. At

last MacKim broke the tension. "Nothing, I guess," he grinned. "That's why I say you're deep."

GARVIAN'S taxi stopped, and he alighted outside a grimy apartment building, climbed the stone steps and saw Dr. Merritt's sign on the first door in the hall. He pushed through a small, dark reception room and, guided by a streak of light under a door in the rear, went over and knocked. After the third knock he swung the door open and then walked in.

The room, small and cluttered, smelled and looked like the study of a doctor making an uncertain living from colics and childbirths. A lamp burned on a desk disfigured by ink spots and cigar burns. A man sat in front of it, very still, his gray head resting on his shoulder, as if he had fallen asleep.

Garvian bounded forward. The man was indeed asleep; would be asleep for ages to come. The thin bang of hair hanging down over his forehead almost touched the blood-smeared hole in the center. The face was kindly, also tired—tired of life, Garvian thought.

His eyes turned cold and harsh. The man was Dr. Merritt, of course. The bullet that had torn the hole in his head had also torn Tom Breslin's alibi to shreds. The murder, coming at this time, could not be just a coincidence.

Garvian smiled ironically, the way a man may smile when fate slips the noose around his neck. It had seemed so simple. Dr. Merritt would have produced an alibi for the kid, and Garvian would have exposed the frame-up and seen that its perpetrators were punished. It was different now. The kid had his promise, and he would make it good at any cost, even at the cost of a confession and all it meant.

His head lifted; he whirled. His ears, keener than most, had caught a slight sound from the rear. There was another door back there. He threw it open, stared into a girl's startled face.

"Stan!" she cried, husky-voiced. "Stanley Garvian!"

He kept staring at yellow-haired Mona Leigh. She was warm and soft and vital, yet it gave him a weird feeling to look at her. She was the half-sister of the girl who had died that delirious night four and a half months ago. She was also one of the reasons why Stanley Garvian was living on borrowed time.

She was explaining before he could ask a single question. Her voice was a husky contralto. "I was out motoring with friends. When I got back, there was a phone message. It said I was to come here at once. Matter of life or death. When I got here —" She shivered and bobbed her head in the direction of the dead man. "It—it was awful, Stan. And then I heard somebody coming. I couldn't know it was you. I ducked in here. . . ."

He pushed her farther into the room and closed the door. It was a bedroom, and a single light burned in a wall fixture.

"Did you know Dr. Merritt?" he asked the girl.

"I—I don't think so. Not unless he's one of my lost memories." She sighed. "There are so many!"

He nodded. It was the second time her eyes had been shocked by violent death. She was a fine girl, the very opposite of the fast-living and sultry Orchid. Mona, just recovering from an illness, had rushed into the room just in time to see both the murder and the murderer. Then she had fainted dead away, and afterward her entire past had dropped out of her memory.

Amnesia, the doctors called it. They were sure she would recover her memory, though it might take months. In the meantime only Stanley Garvian knew the secret that was locked up in her brain.

That was why it gave him such an uncanny feeling to look at Mona Leigh. She had loved her half-sister despite all her faults. Some day the dead memories would awaken, and then she would hate him,

loathe him. She would point a finger at him and say, "You're the man! You killed her!"

A TWISTED smile hung on his lips. He shouldn't have meddled in Orchid's affairs, tried to make her mend her ways—even if it was for Mona's sake. And he shouldn't have chosen that particular night to counsel her—that night she had been drinking. But he hadn't realized she'd whip out a pistol in her anger. It was when he was trying to take it from her that Mona had come in. He could still hear Mona's shout:

"Stan—don't! Oh, my God. . . ." She didn't know how it was.

Then the crash of the gun, Orchid's crumpled body, and Mona sinking to the floor in a faint. Her shout had plainly told what her eyes had seen—and what some day she would remember. And she had seen just enough—no more and no less—to make a case of first degree murder. She didn't know that Garvian had not touched the trigger. Some day she would remember she had loved Stanley Garvian. But in that same instant she would mark him as her sister's slayer. . . .

And now he had that uncanny feeling again. Slim and tense Mona stood before him in her gray tailored suit, her eyes dim, the warmth gone from her face. "But what does it all mean, Stan?"

"Don't know. But it seems to tie up with Orchid's death."

She pondered, shook her head hopelessly. "Poor Orchid! I have no recollection of her—only photos and snaps and what people tell me. I know she was murdered, and that's all."

"But you know the police have made an arrest?"

"Yes, I saw it in the papers. Somebody by the name of Tom Breslin." Her mouth turned firm, a little hard. "If he did it, I hope he is punished."

"The murderer will be punished—some day. But Breslin didn't do it. It's a frame-up. Dr. Merritt would have given him an alibi. That's why he's dead."

"Alibi? Oh, I see. But how awful! If he didn't do it, I mean. Is there nobody else who can save him?"

"Yes, one other person—maybe two." Garvian's eyes held a strange light. "The murderer could confess. Then—then it's just possible there was an eyewitness."

"An eyewitness?" Her voice sounded faint and hollow in that little room. "An eyewitness to Orchid's murder?"

"Maybe. It's just a theory I've been playing with."

"But you—you look as if you knew. You are so strange at times, Stan. I don't understand you."

"No wonder. We were more than just good friends once. Then—you know what happened. You had to get acquainted with me again."

"But this eyewitness. Who could it have been?"

HE SAID nothing. Her blue-gray eyes, gazing at him so intently, played weird little notes in his brain.

"Stan!" she cried, clutching her throat. "Why do you look at me like that? You don't mean—"

The words hung suspended in a deep electric silence. "Stan!" she gasped. "What is it? I feel as if—as if a shutter in my brain were going to swing open and bring something—something horrible to light."

She shuddered; her face was white and strained. He stood in a trance, watching her, and those weird little notes in his brain grew louder.

"Stan—" Her mouth opened; there was a groping, unearthly look in her eyes. He knew what was happening. The ghost of a remembrance was stirring in her brain.

She uttered a little scream. She beat her temples with frenzied fists. "It's awful! It's in here! It's like a shadow moving—two shadows!"

Two shadows! Orchid and her murderer!

"Oh—" She whipped her hands to her eyes. "What is it, Stan? Is it Orchid and —and the man who killed her? Did you—did you mean I—I was the eyewitness?" She shuddered up to him, pressing close. "Yes, you did—you did! I know—"

He folded his arms around her, and the spell of her clinging softness gripped him. Then, in a moment, it was gone. In a flash he saw it all—the curtain fluttering lazily before the open window, the blur of a face outside, the hand reaching over the sill, and in that hand a gun.

With a sweep of his arm he flung her from him. She gasped, fell in a sprawl, and he threw himself on top of her, shielding her. Then the room was full of crashes, thunder piled upon thunder, the snarl of bullets ripping into wood.

Garvian rolled over, snapped three bullets at the window. He hoped to hear a groan or a scream, but none came, only a swift patter of feet, then silence. He jumped to the window, but all he could see was a dark jungle of backyards and, as he looked down, a shedlike lean-to on which the triggerman must have stood.

He helped Mona to her feet. She leaned against him, shaking. He could feel the beat of her heart. She lay her head on his shoulder. The slim, trembling softness of her! The tremors running through his body! But he didn't fool himself. She was frightened, nothing else. She had forgotten all the rest. . . . His mouth twisted in sardonic humor. What a laugh for the gods if this girl he loved should hand him over to the executioner some day!

The old building was bursting out of its sleep. Doors were banging, voices shouting. Garvian stared at the bullet-riddled door—stared and shuddered. Just before the shots crashed, he and Mona had stood in front of it, he with his back to it and she facing him and pressing against him. But for a lightning move, those bullets would have lodged in Mona's flesh instead of wood.

"Stan!" she cried, her eyes tracing a line between the window and the door. "Those bullets were meant for me!"

Garvian shivered again.

"Don't you see, Stan?" She touched her head with its rumpled waves of yellow hair. "The killer aimed at my body, but his real target was my mind—my memory. He stood out there and heard me and watched me. I almost had a flash of remembrance—almost but not quite. He was frightened—frightened of what I might tell. So he tried to kill me. He didn't want me to remember —ever."

Garvian took a deep, unsteady breath. It sounded logical, but it was all wrong. Nobody but himself had any reason to worry about what Mona might tell when she recovered her memory.

"Anyway," he said, "he failed."

"Yes, thanks to you. You saved my life."

"I did it on borrowed time," Garvian said. But Mona, of course, didn't know what he was talking about.

CHAPTER TWO

Thing on the Bed

TOWARD morning the apartment quieted down. The body of the old, tired doctor had been taken away. Garvian stood by the fireplace in the study and tried to appease his nerves with a cigarette. Lieutenant MacKim sat on the edge of the desk, a big black umbrella on his knee, and scowled at him.

"You held out on me, shamus," he growled without malice. "Miss Leigh did, too. A couple of clams!"

For the tenth or fifteenth time Garvian looked out in the reception room. Mona was resting on the sofa, and a reassuringly big policeman was watching over her. He closed the door.

"Wonder why Merritt sent for her," he muttered.

MacKim opened the umbrella. The top

was motheaten, the metal fastenings rusted. "Good umbrella once," he commented. "Must have cost ten or fifteen bucks."

"But Merritt?"

"Queer old coot, from all I've heard tonight. Didn't like cops; thought they were all crooks. Maybe he had reasons." He closed the umbrella and nudged an elbow toward a paper lying on the desk. "Look at that."

Garvian opened the paper, and his heart gave a sharp lurch. The dead Orchid Leigh was looking up at him with her most alluring smile. Alongside the photograph was the story of Tom Breslin's arrest for her murder, and a few inches down the column a name was underscored in pencil. A date was similarly underlined.

The paper shook in Garvian's hand. The name was that of Mona Leigh, briefly mentioned as the murdered girl's half-sister, and the date was the date of the murder.

"Of course!" he cried. "Merritt had just read about the arrest. He remembered that the kid had spent the evening with him. Distrusting the cops, he decided to give the information to Mona Leigh as the person most intimately concerned."

"Maybe," said MacKim. "And maybe not. You have nothing but the kid's word for that alibi. Maybe he lied to you. Maybe Merritt's information would have damaged his case."

"Rats! You don't really believe that?"

"I believe in facts. I like 'em well done and served cold. You haven't got a single fact to support that alibi story."

Garvian choked back his exasperation. A clock was ticking in the study, nibbling greedily at his borrowed time. His twenty-four hour deadline had already shrunk to nineteen, and the outlook was a hundred times blacker than when he gave his promise to the kid. But a bargain was a bargain, and a code was a code. The kid would be vindicated, and as things looked now, Garvian would probably hit the oneway trail to the electric chair.

His mouth pulled down in a humorless grin. That wasn't the kind of death he wanted. He wanted to die in action, with guns crashing and bullets whining. . . .

Bullets! His eyes swiveled to the bullet-riddled door.

"Yeah," MacKim said, watching him, "somebody ruined a good door. You don't deserve it, shamus, but I'll play ball while you are playing poker. Those bullets were fired from the same gun that killed Merritt."

Garvian was still staring at the door when an officer walked in. "You've got company, sir," he told MacKim. "It's that shyster, Faber."

"Send him in." MacKim's big, homely mouth twitched as he slipped the umbrella out of sight under the desk.

Amos W. Faber walked in with his slouching stride and his habitual grin that was only a supercilious twist of the lips. His face was long and sallow and topped by a shock of gray hair. His deep, dry eyes glimmered with sour humor.

"Fire away," he said. "You want to ask some questions. I'm here to answer them. Shoot."

"Questions?" said MacKim innocently.

FABER glowered. "Don't stall, copper. You must know I called on Merritt last evening and was one of the last to see him alive."

"That so?" MacKim's broad face was an enigma. "What time?"

"About eight. I stayed only a few minutes, then went home. I got the news of the murder about half-past eleven. Expected you to send for me and fire a lot of fool questions at me, but you didn't. I went to bed but couldn't sleep. After tossing a few hours I got up and dressed, and here I am. Now what?"

"Why did you call on Merritt? But never mind; I know. You went to see him about Tom Breslin's alibi. How did you come out?"

"None of your business. It's a confidential matter between me and my client."

"Okay, Counselor. About eight, eh?" MacKim's voice dropped. "Maybe you called again—a little later?"

Faber's reply was a contemptuous snort.

"Tell me, Counselor," MacKim went on, "isn't Breslin the only penniless client you ever had? When did you go philanthropic?"

"Philanthropic—hell! I just like to put one over on you smart cops when you think you've got a perfect case."

"Yeah, maybe that's it. Or maybe it's that kid of yours—Jack. Just about Tom Breslin's age. Jack's no good—just a drunken, hell-raising, skirt-chasing bum, but you—"

"Why, you—" Faber was shaking, his face white with rage. "Damn you, copper! I'll—I'll—" He choked.

"I know. You'll murder me. Don't blame you. I was just thinking aloud. But you're crazy about that kid of yours—"

"Shut up!" Faber snarled, banging his fist down on the desk. "Keep my boy's name off your dirty tongue."

"Okay," said MacKim soothingly. "I just had a hunch that maybe you got to thinking how you would hate to see your own kid in the fix Tom Breslin is in, and so—"

"And so you're crazy!" the lawyer jeered.

"Yeah," was MacKim's soft answer, "crazy enough to think you came here looking for something. Didn't you?"

Faber was calming down. Suddenly his eyes were expressionless as soot spots. "Maybe," he said tonelessly.

"This it?" MacKim hauled out the battered umbrella. "It's got your initials on the handle, but they're so worn you can hardly see them."

The lawyer took the umbrella. "Yes, that's it. Hardly worth lugging back." He tucked the umbrella under his arm. "Well, so long, masterminds."

He walked out and slammed the door. MacKim rubbed his chin. "Damned funny, shamus."

"All the funnier," Garvian observed, "because we haven't had a drop of rain in a week."

"But the funniest part," MacKim said, "is that the umbrella was wet when we found it in the reception room."

"Wet?" Garvian stared, frowning, into space. Then he shrugged and feigned a yawn. "Maybe somebody held it under a shower. I'll take Miss Leigh home. You know where to find me."

"Sure," MacKim grinned. "I can always try the morgue."

The sun was just rising over the roofs when Garvian and Mona stepped out. It was swollen and red, as if it had had a bad night. They taxied to Mona's apartment, stopping on the way to buy a morning paper. The automatic elevator made unearthly noises at that early hour. They got out on the seventh floor, and she fished her key out of her bag.

"I'm coming in," he told her. "I want to stretch out on your sitting room sofa and study the weather reports."

With a wan smile she gave him the key. He took his gun in his right hand, unlocked the door with his left, and went in ahead of her. He raked the dusk with eyes and ears, then flicked on the hall light and went on to the sitting room. The shades were down. He snapped on another light.

"Stay close," he told her, opening the bedroom door. Again his senses probed a roomful of dusk and silence. He felt like a fool but couldn't throw off the sense of menace that had been with him all night. His hand groped for the button but fell away without touching it. He jerked, smothered a gasp.

That thing on the bed, almost shapeless in the gloom, yet suggesting a human form!

He took a step forward, stopped. A warning tingled in his brain. Behind him he heard Mona's choking cry, and then the room exploded like a bomb, and his head

burst with it into a million fragments.

HE WAS sitting on the floor. The shades were still down, but a little sunlight was trickling in. He groaned and stared groggily at the bed. The thing was still there, but it was only a bundle of clothes shaped into rough semblance of human form. It had thrown him off his guard for an instant, and then someone hidden in the room had jumped on him with a blackjack. Despite all his care, he had been fooled by the simplest kind of trick.

He heaved to his feet, staggered into the sitting room, pressing his hands to his splitting head. He looked about for a slim shape in a gray suit and with hair the color of buttercups, only softer and warmer.

Suddenly a cry burst from him. An icy realization swept the stupor from his brain, leaving only the pain. He raged through the little apartment, out in the hall, went hurtling down the stairs. A man in overalls was sweeping the lower hall. Garvian shook him, and his eyes jumped whitely in his face.

"No, boss. I ain't seen nuthin'. I don't know nuthin'."

Garvian rode the elevator back to the apartment, rummaged the pantry, took a stiff swig from a bottle. Life and sanity flowed back into his body. Anyway, there had been no such ruthless execution as had been attempted last night. If the intention had been murder, wouldn't they have killed her outright? Maybe somebody had had a second and saner thought.

He went to the telephone, got Lieutenant MacKim out of bed, and told him what had happened. MacKim swore and promised to do all he could. Trying to collect his badly shattered wits, Garvian went to his own apartment, bathed and shaved and dressed, swallowed some breakfast and drank several cups of black coffee.

He was on his fifth cup when he remembered the paper he had bought on the way to Mona's apartment. He had bought it on a hunch, a blind hunch suggested by an old battered umbrella that had been out in the rain. His aim then had been to expose the frame-up and fulfill his promise to the kid. Now that aim was coupled with the burning necessity of finding Mona.

Mona and the kid. . . . The frame-up, the murder of Merritt, the volley of bullets, and now the abduction of Mona—weren't they all parts of the same plot, even though he couldn't see the connecting links?

"Just a chance," he said to his fifth cup of coffee.

He got the newspaper, spread it out on the table, turning to the detailed weather report. Not a drop of rain had fallen in the city or environs; no threatening skies could have induced the most rain-shy to reach for an umbrella. But there had been local showers within a radius of a hundred miles, and they had been particularly heavy at one point.

He took a map, drew a circle around the point, studied it carefully. It didn't suggested much, but his blind hunch was riding him hard. It was the only lead he had. Just before noon he was tooling his high-powered roadster out of the thick traffic, and two hours later he was in a hilly region showing signs of a recent heavy drenching. For hours he skipped back and forth over it, circled around it, stopping everywhere to ask questions.

The sun was sinking, and his hopes with it, when suddenly he jammed down hard on the brakes. He was on a narrow side road, and a rotting and scarcely legible turn-off sign pointed to an even narrower road angling off into the woods. A memory rang like a little gong in his brain. With a low, excited laugh he swung the car into the road marked by the old sign.

IT WAS only a couple of ruts with a weed-grown ridge in between, and it was a hard uphill climb. About a mile farther on, he knew, was a rambling log structure, big as a mansion. Years ago a man had

built it as a week-end hideaway for himself and his bride. The newspaper wags had called it "Faber's Air Castle." Then the wife had died in giving life to a son, the man had closed the place and never gone near it since, and the wags had changed its name to "Heartbreak House." Then people had forgotten it.

There was a hard thumping under Garvian's ribs. Presently he swung the car out of the ruts and drove it in among the trees where it was hidden from the road. He examined his gun and went on afoot, his feet sinking deep in mud. Someone else, he saw, had walked the same rutty road, though in the opposite direction.

Someone, perhaps, who had carried an old moth-eaten umbrella!

The woods opened, and he looked out over an immense lawn with tall weeds crawling all over it. On the farther side, with its back to the woods, stood Heartbreak House. With its windows and doors boarded up, it looked like a slowly crumbling tomb.

Garvian made a long detour and came up on the house from the back. Now there were signs of life about the old tomb. A rear door stood open, the boarding had been removed from several windows, and a man was tinkering with a car outside the garage. The man didn't look up as Garvian skipped lightly across the backyard.

A little breeze followed him inside, and then the house closed in on him with its shuttered gloom and moldy smells. With flashlight and gun he prowled silently from room to room, excitement and a sense of danger tingling in his senses. At length he climbed the staircase. It was even darker up there, but he saw a streak of light under a door.

He walked in, and his eyes popped in surprise. The big room with its two windows was flooded with the light of the setting sun. A young man, handsome in a weak and dissipated way, sat at a table, drinking. One end of a long chain was noosed around his ankle and secured with a padlock; the other end was fastened by a welded loop to a steam pipe coming up through the floor. The chain was just long enough to permit free movement about the room.

Riddles knocked in Garvian's brain. The young man was Jack, the rapidly rotting apple of Amos W. Faber's eye. Jack Faber a prisoner, chained up like a mad dog in the love mansion his father had built!

"What's this?" Garvian asked, a little dazed. "A snatch?"

"Thash right." Jack's mouth loosened in an alcoholic grin. "Sure—a snatch. Ish that a laugh, or ish it a—a sob? When in doubt, laugh. Thash me!"

His whiskey laugh rang out, and he raised his glass, but it never reached his lips. He tried to focus his wabbling eyes on a point near the door. Garvian started to turn, but he felt a hard jab in the small of his back and heard a girl's cool, drawling voice: "Drop the cannon, Garvian!"

Garvian's muscles rippled like snake coils. His impulse was to jump and risk a bullet from the gun prodding his back. But he throttled the impulse. Today his life wasn't his own. It belonged to Mona and Tom Breslin. He had no right to die. He dropped the gun. He saw the flash of a hand as the girl swept it up. The pressure on his spine relaxed.

"Turn around," she told him.

He turned and faced the gun leveled at him. He also faced a shapely young thing in black and orange lounging pajamas. Her hair was shiny jet; her eyes a wicked black. Her big mouth was hard just now, but he could tell it had known softer moments.

"Where is Miss Leigh?" he asked; and in the next moment he gave silent thanks to the blind hunch that had sent him on the trail of the umbrella. He knew now that Mona was in the house. Her eyes told him even before she spoke.

"Don't worry," the girl said. "She's all right."

He stared at her hard and somehow he believed her. The tightness at his throat relaxed.

"How did you find this place?" she asked.

"An umbrella showed me the way."

"Great humorist, aren't you?"

He looked around. "Bright idea, keeping Jack a prisoner in a place owned by his old man. You're one of the snatch gang, of course—" He broke off, frowned. She didn't look like a gun moll or a gangster's playmate, though he had an idea she could play with either kisses or bullets. There was something amiss. The setup was deeper than it seemed. And there were pieces that didn't fit.

She looked at him with hard, wise eyes. "Crazy about your blonde, aren't you, Garvian? Yes, I can see you are." She paused, and now there was a small wisp of warmth in her cynical eyes. "And that," she added as if thinking aloud, "makes it tough as hell for you."

HIS spine shivered. He knew what she meant. He glanced at the gun in her unswerving hand and at his own larger one bulging in her pajama pocket.

Suddenly she asked, "Tell me, who killed Orchid Leigh?"

"Orchid Leigh?" he gasped. "What has that got to do—"

"Who killed her?"

His mind spun giddily. The murder of Orchid? What did she care about that? What did it have to do with the snatch, with the whiskey-guzzling prisoner before them?

His brain and body felt a jolt, then he stood stunned. It came to him with a shock and a flash, and it was so simple after all. The question she had just asked was the key to the whole riddle. Her eyes had told him the rest, those strange, wicked eyes with their furtive glimmers of softness.

"So that's it," he said, hollow-voiced. "I see—"

The sudden vicious twist of her mouth stopped him. "Yes, you see!" she snarled. "You're too damned wise to live—you and your blonde both!"

She crouched, eyes blazing, breathing like a maddened she-panther. Her finger twitched on the trigger, and he leaped and dropped to the floor, rolled over and over, bounced up again, made a flanking leap, and struck her on the chin with his fist.

It wasn't a very hard blow, but it stunned her. While Jack gaped and gibbered, he eased her falling body to the floor, thrust her gun into his pocket and took his own gun from her pajama pocket. Now to find Mona. The flash that had solved the riddle for him had also told him how desperate was her danger.

Something stopped him, a brassy something winking up from the floor. He snatched it up. It was a small key, and it must have fallen out of the girl's pocket. He looked at it, then at the padlocked loop at Jack's ankle. He slipped the key into the lock, made sure it fitted, then pulled it out and plunged into the darkness of the hall.

There he stopped again, lifted his left foot, and wth a firm twist removed the heel. It was hollow, and he slipped the key into the cavity, then snapped the heel back in place.

"An ace in the hole," he muttered. Jack, as he saw it now, was the human pawn in this game of conspiracy and murder.

He ran from room to room, flicking his flashlight into corners and over moldering walls. The passage turned, and then the floor felt less solid under his feet. Perhaps a flimsily constructed addition intended for servants' quarters. . . . A door stopped him, the first locked door he had encountered.

He looked through the keyhole, saw a light, and crashed through the obstruction with a heave that tore the socket and hinges from the frame and slammed the door back against the wall.

"Mona!" he shouted thickly.

Fast asleep, she sat in a stuffed armchair, her face haggard in a tumbled cloud of yellow hair, her breasts pulsing in a slumber too deep for mere exhaustion. He pried an eye open, swore. They had given her an opiate. But the fresh air would soon revive her.

He swept her up from the chair, one arm under her shoulders, the other under her knees, the gun in his hand. For a moment he waited, listened. The house was quiet—*too* quiet. The line of his jaw tightened. He started to swing around.

"Goin' places, pal?" a voice asked.

Garvian sucked in his breath, made a quarter turn, then froze. The corner of his eye caught a glint of steel.

"Toss your heater over here," the voice advised, "and put the dame down. Can't you see she's dyin' for sleep?"

Garvian clenched his teeth. The temptation to wheel and shoot it out burned in his brain and shook his body. But not with Mona in his arms. He flung his gun toward the doorway and dropped Mona back in the chair.

"Come again," the voice said. "You've got Kay's rod, too."

Garvian threw the gun from him with a shrug. So the black-haired fury's name was Kay. He turned around just as the man in the doorway scooped up the two guns. He was a chunky man with a whitish face and small eyes peering out from under a squashy hat brim—probably the same man who had been working on the car.

He had a good-natured grin, but Garvian wasn't fooled. A killer, and as dangerous as a rattlesnake.

The room was dingy, entirely different from the others he had seen, with plain, cobwebbed board walls, a tattered carpet, and a mattress on the bed that looked as if the squirrels had ravaged it. A big oil lamp, all glass, burned on a rickety table.

"Now what?" Garvian asked.

"Now we wait," said Chunky.

It was a long wait, and Chunky's alertness didn't relax. The gun in his hand seemed a part of him. Mona stirred fitfully in her drugged sleep.

Garvian stiffened. Footfalls sounded in the hall, coming nearer and nearer. Then Kay walked in, graceful as a jungle creature.

On her heels came the man Garvian had expected—Amos W. Faber!

CHAPTER THREE

The Killer Speaks

SHOULDERS slouching and head waggling, the lawyer came forward, stopping a few feet from Garvian. "Hello, snooper."

"You're late," said Garvian.

"The damned cops," Faber muttered. "They had a tail on me all day. Couldn't shake him till after dark."

Garvian's brows went up. So MacKim too had been suspicious about the lawyer. Then he saw Faber's eyes swing to Mona's face, and his nerves drew taut again.

"Damn it!" Faber muttered. "You've doped her. I wanted to ask her something."

"She got violent," Kay explained, digging her hand in Chunky's pocket and retrieving her gun. "We had to quiet her."

Faber breathed hard. His haunted eyes rested on the yellow cloud swirling about Mona's face.

"I know what you wanted to ask her," Garvian said. "She couldn't have answered."

"No?" Faber turned to him and pulled out a .38 revolver. His mouth pulled down in a grimace. "Maybe you can."

Garvian's eyes were on the gun. Merritt had been killed with a .38—the same .38, he believed, that was now clutched in Faber's bony hand. The lawyer's prints were on it, and the ballistic test would do the rest.

"It's about Jack, of course," Garvian said, fighting the quavers in his voice. "Jack

is your life, your heart, the only one—"

"What do you know about him?"

"I know what I saw. First it looked like a snatch. Then I saw the love light in Kay's eyes—the love light and the terror. Then I knew." A chuckle came up from his quailing heart. "Love's a damned funny thing, Kay. It makes fools of the wisest. You're hard and tough and bad, but you're too good for that drunken heel—" He broke off, seeing the black fury in Kay's eyes. "You asked me who killed Orchid Leigh," he said to the girl. "You were desperate to know. Well, Jack didn't kill her."

Save for the lawyer's raspy breathing, there was a dead silence in the dingy room. Then Faber said, "Go on."

"I'll try." Garvian was talking against time, against fear. "The day after the murder, Jack woke up and discovered he had Orchid's jewels and a gun in his possession. He had been so drunk he didn't know where he had spent the night or what he had done. He might have done anything—even murder."

Garvian waited until he caught Faber's spasmodic nod. "I suppose Orchid had been playing with him, too. Anyway, there was the evidence the police were looking for—the jewels and a gun of the same caliber Orchid had been killed with."

"And the blood!" Faber croaked as if unaware he was speaking. "The blood on Jack's sleeve."

"So there was blood, too. . . . The gun, the jewels and the blood. And Jack couldn't explain. It looked as if he had murdered Orchid in an alcoholic frenzy. Maybe he thought so himself. And you, Faber, hid the evidence and told Jack to keep his mouth shut."

Again he waited for Faber's nod. "Kay knew the secret. Maybe she wormed it out of him. Anyway, it was safe with her. Nothing happened until the other day when the grapevine tipped you off about the three search warrants."

Garvian hesitated. MacKim hadn't told him much about the three search warrants. But he could make a guess now. "Jack was named in one of those warrants, Tom Breslin in another, somebody else in the third. Breslin had been crazy about Orchid and threatened to kill her. He didn't seem to have an alibi. That made him your ideal scapegoat. Just before the raids, you took the evidence out of hiding and planted it in Tom's rooms."

Garvian's voice was thin and hard with contempt. "But Jack worried you. Maybe he was drinking again. He might shoot off his mouth and wreck the plot. You sent him out here with Kay to keep an eye on him, whiskey to keep him happy, and a chain to keep him put. Breslin was arrested, and you offered to defend him, intending to throw the case and make sure he went to the chair. Nice work, Faber.

"Then hell popped. Breslin had an alibi, after all. He told you about it yesterday morning. It bowled you over; you forgot all your tricks. In your panic you decided Merritt had to die, but you wanted to wait till night. In the meantime you drove out here to see Jack and Kay."

GARVIAN glanced at the three guns—Faber's, Kay's and Chunky's. He remembered seeing Chunky tinkering with the car in the backyard. "When you were ready to go back, the rain was coming down in torrents. The car wouldn't start. You had to walk to the station and take a train. You took the only umbrella in the house, one that had been here for years."

Despite taut nerves, Garvian laughed. "It was late when you got back to town. You went straight to Merritt's house, still carrying the old umbrella, and shot him with a silenced gun. There was no commotion. You hung around a while, and you were outside the window when Miss Leigh and I were talking in the bedroom. You heard—and you went crazy with fear."

Faber shuddered, groaned.

"Yes, you went crazy, Faber. Any moment a name might burst from Miss Leigh's lips. Jack's name! So you shot!"

He paused. Faber's choking gasps were loud in the stillness. His gun wavered, but there were two other guns, and they were held in steadier hands.

"The bullets went into the door. You went home, a little saner, maybe. But something had to be done about Mona Leigh and her frozen memory that might come to life any moment. Your brain wouldn't work. You wanted time to think. You had an inspiration. You would snatch her and tuck her away in Heartbreak House till you could decide. You expected I would take her home, and when I did—"

He stopped dead. Faber wasn't listening. With a thick shout and a mad light in his eyes, he swung his gun close to Mona's heart. "The name!" he snarled. "What is it!"

Garvian stood in a smothering trance. His palms burned in tight fists. If he made the slightest move, Faber's gun might go off. "She can't tell you." He forced the words out hard and sharp. "But I can."

"You?" Faber turned, cheeks sagging with the weight of passions. "Well, tell me! The name?"

"That's it—the name! That's what you want to know." A load of ice dropped from Garvian's chest as the gun swung away from Mona. "You and Kay are almost sure it's Jack, but you think there is one chance in a thousand it isn't. Well, the thousandth chance wins."

"Wins?" Kay cried, brittle-voiced. "You mean—"

"I mean Jack didn't kill her. I can only guess what happened. Maybe he staggered in after the murder. Maybe he fell over the body, getting the blood on his sleeve."

The beat of hearts was almost audible in the silence. Then Faber asked: "If Jack didn't kill her, who did?"

Grim humor glimmered in Garvian's eyes. "I killed Orchid," he said bitterly.

A STUNNED pause, then Kay's scornful laugh and Faber's harsh mutter of incredulity. Garvian caught Mona's stare. Her eyes, still in a half-stupor, were asking him why he had told such a ridiculous lie.

"Let me explain," he said. He tried desperately, realizing too late that he had told a simple truth too strange for belief.

"Lousy liar!" Kay cried. "Trying to save your blonde!"

Sweat drops shone under Faber's grey shock of hair. His sunken eyes smoldered on Mona. "She knows," he mumbled. "But she'll never tell! She'll never send my boy to the chair!"

Garvian tried one more argument. "You're crazy, Faber. You've already made a bad mess. Another murder—"

"To hell with that! It's my boy!"

Garvian clamped his mouth tight. No arguing with those smoldering fires in Faber's eyes.

"Stop talking," Kay cried. "You know what's got to be done. It's for Jack."

Her voice was hard, but Garvian saw her eyes shrink away from Mona and himself. Something in Kay rebelled against the thing that had to be done.

"All right," Faber said. "Go release Jack. We want to be ready to move as—as soon as this is over."

Kay slipped out. The knocking under Garvian's ribs grew harder. Faber stood in front of Mona, gun lifted, his chest laboring like an old worn-out bellows.

The lamp! The big glass lamp, its bowl two thirds full. It hypnotized his eye, and then his eye dropped to his left foot. He trembled. It seemed ages now since a vagrant inspiration made him slip the key into the hollow heel.

"Faber!" His voice cut like a whip. "If you shoot, your son dies!"

Faber's mouth jerked open. For a scrap of time, blind terror dimmed his burning eyes. Then laughter cackled in his throat.

"You're bluffing! He'll die if I don't shoot—"

Garvian's hand moved like the wink of an eye, banging down on Faber's wrist. The gun plunked to the carpet, and Garvian whirled toward the lamp. An awful chance, but still a chance. . . . Just a second too late he saw Chunky swing up his gun. The gun blasted, and a bolt stabbed Garvian's head with burning pain. It jarred him, blinded him. Desperately he clutched a thin thread of consciousness. The lamp, the one awful chance. . . .

HE GRABBED it below the bowl, hurled it at the wall. Glass crashed and showered the bed; darkness plunged down over a stunned pause. Then Faber yelled, Chunky swore in his stolid way, and the tiny flame of a cgarette lighter flickered in Garvian's hand.

"Hell!" said Chunky. "The guy's gone nutty."

There was a sputtering, a sizzling, a sudden burst of flame and smoke. Faber stood paralyzed, teeth chattering. Garvian, with Mona in his arms, shoved him out of the way.

Kay rushed in, breasts heaving, her face white. She jammed her gun into Garvian's back.

"March, you heel!" she snarled. "Jack's room!"

"Better let me plug him, baby," Chunky suggested. "The guy—"

"Shut up!" she cried hoarsely. "And get going!"

A lamp burned in Jack's room, and a clock ticked on the mantel. Garvian put Mona down in a chair. Kay jabbed the gun hard against his spine.

"The key!" she cried. "Where is it?"

Garvian kept his twisted smile. "The key?" Faber echoed.

"The key to Jack's chain. It's gone. I'm sure Garvian's got it. It's a trick."

"I warned you." Garvian spoke evenly despite pain and tight-strung nerves. "The part of the house we came from is kindling. The flames will soon be here. I don't think you have a phone, and it's miles to the nearest town."

Grayness sank deep into Faber's face. Jack's weakly handsome face looked as if something had suddenly sobered him.

"Search him!" the girl shouted to Chunky.

Chunky searched while Kay bored her gun into Garvian's back. It was a thorough search as far as it went. But no key came to light.

"He hid it somewhere," Kay cried. "Make him talk."

"Sure," said Chunky. "I just love to soften up a tough guy. Keep the bead on him, baby."

He started to strip off his coat. Garvian wiped the blood from his eye. In the distance he heard the crackling of flames and, just across the room, the ticking of a clock.

"Listen, Faber." His voice, though hoarse, had a cutting edge. "I don't soften easily. It's going to take time. The fire won't wait. If I should faint—"

Faber gave a throaty squeal. "Leave him alone!" he bawled thickly. "Break that damned chain. Get a chisel—"

"Where?" asked Chunky. He lifted his head, listened. "We ain't got much time, the way it sounds. Wouldn't do no good, anyhow. But maybe a few slugs. . . ."

He dropped the chain, aimed the gun and triggered. A round of bullets smacked the chain. The links jumped and clattered, but the slugs bounced off. Chunky shook his head, reloaded the gun, then went over and studied the padlock. He took a knife from his pocket, opened out a small blade, dug the point into it.

"Careful," Garvian advised. "If the point should break off and jam—"

Kay, behind him, gave a horrified gasp. "Stop it!" she flung at Chunky. "I know a better way. Keep him covered."

"Okay, baby." Chunky came forward, his heavy automatic leveled. "Now what?"

"This!" Kay's harsh, evil laugh rang out, and a cold cramp fastened on Garvian's heart. The gun she had been digging into his back was now pointed at Mona's heart. "Talk, wise guy!" she shrieked. "Talk fast! I'll count, and you'd better get it out before I come to ten. One—two—three—"

MONA shuddered farther back in the chair. Garvian looked at Chunky, at the sultry shine of elemental passions in Kay's face, at the gun in her hand.

"—four—five—" She swung her head around. "Think I'm bluffing, Garvian? Six—seven—"

"Yes, bluffing." Garvian dragged a laugh up from his suffocating chest. "Rotten bluff, too. You mean to kill her, but not till Jack is free. If you kill her now, Jack will burn to a cinder—"

"Eight," Kay spat out. She threw a black, murderous glare at Garvian. "Nine—"

Faber let out a groan. The sulphurous glare in Kay's eye froze to horror. She threw her gun down with a slam.

"You win, damn you! Name your price!"

Garvian picked up her gun. Wild waves of relief, giddiness and pain swept over him. "I want your gun, too, Chunky. And yours, Faber."

They looked at Kay. She nodded. Two guns clattered down at Garvian's feet.

He looked out in the hall. Far in the back, streaks of fire glared sullenly in rolling clouds of smoke. He swung back into the room and went over to where Mona sat. "Try your legs," he said, helping her up. "You're all right. Go out and wait for me in the garage."

She went out, her slim body swaying a little. With Kay's gun in his hand, he motioned her and Chunky to a corner.

"Hurry!" Faber croaked. "Tell us what you want."

"I want your confession, Faber. Your confession of the Breslin frame-up and the Merritt murder. All the details. If you lie or leave anything out, I'll know it."

Faber looked at Jack, at the chain, at the bannerets of smoke swimming in the air. "And if I do as you say?"

"You will burn for the Merritt murder. The framing of Breslin was your worst crime, but—"

"Hell with that! What about my boy?"

Garvian's grim mouth slackened. "Jack won't burn, here or anywhere else."

The lawyer looked at him with desperate intensity. "Somehow I believe you, snooper." He slumped into a chair, jerked pen and paper from his pocket, began to write.

Garvian stood behind him. Faber was holding nothing back. He was writing for his son's life.

The lawyer scrawled his name and threw down the pen.

"The key?" Kay cried. "Hurry!"

It took only a minute for Garvian to extract the key from the hollow heel and unlock the loop at Jack's ankle. "All right, Kay. You can have him. Beat it."

His voice didn't sound like his own. His feet didn't seem to touch the ground. Heartbreak House was roaring, laughing. That was it—laughing! Garvian laughed, too, laughed delirously. And as he laughed the gun was jerked from his hand.

"Didn't think you would get away with it, did you, snooper?" It was Faber's voice, Faber's old sneer.

"Got you, snooper!" he cackled.

Garvian tried to dodge, but a hole in the carpet caught his foot and tripped him. He fell in a sprawl. Faber, grinning hideously, was taking aim. But he didn't shoot. There was a pause that seemed like a hole in time. Feet pounded in the stairway. Faces crowded into the doorway, and one of them was MacKim's.

"Drop your gun, Faber!" a voice rapped.

Faber didn't drop it.

A blast tore through the smoke-choked air. Faber jumped, gave a queer little bleat. The ugly leer was blotted from his face. He

went down slowly, jerkily, like a ship sinking.

"Through the head," someone said. "Dead as a mackerel."

HE WAS lying on a broken-down cot in one of the two rooms over the garage. A country doctor, fetched by one of the local officers MacKim had brought with him, had dressed and bandaged his wound and given him something to ease the pain.

MacKim had been reading Faber's confession. His neck was an angry red. "Of all the damned, rotten, scurvy tricks! I thought he acted funny last night. I tailed him all day, then lost him about ten miles from here. Finally I found an old-timer who told me about this place and— Well, he's dead now, and the lad is in the clear."

"Sure, Mac?" Anxiety rasped in Garvian's voice. "There mustn't be any doubt —not the slightest."

"There won't be," said MacKim grimly. "The lad will walk out of jail with bells on. He'll have millions of sympathizers."

"Thanks, Mac."

Silence fell between them. MacKim came over and looked down at the bandage. "Another scar," he said musingly. "Somebody ought to pin some medals on you, shamus."

"Rot!" said Garvian. He felt very drowsy of a sudden. "I'm only bribing the fiddler. I want him to keep playing so I can dance a while longer."

"Dance!" MacKim grumbled. "You're dancing your way to the grave. Some day you will fall in."

"Most likely." Stanley Garvian smiled dimly. "Next time, maybe. . . ."

Mona Leigh came in from the other room. He could hardly keep his eyes open. There seemed to be several Monas, several heads of yellow hair, and all those heads held a secret. He had that feeling of weirdness again. But the lips were smiling, and the smiles were warm, and he was terribly sleepy. ◆ ◆ ◆

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(Continued from page 82)

Mrs. Lucullus wondered how she had ever had the courage to refrain from warning him that she always set Undy's dinner in the black dish on the fifth step from the top of the cellar steps, that Undy always came up from the sub-basement to eat it around midnight, as she'd been trained to do, and that the twenty-five watt bulb at the landing—Luther was so parsiminous about the electric bills was too dim for anyone to see the steps very clearly.

But then, what a fuss he would have made it he'd known she had had a secret pet down there all those months!

Luther could just have stumbled over his own feet, there on the dim cellar steps, but then why had she heard Undy give that howl if Undy hadn't got between his feet?

Luther had never known what tripped him. Only she did. She and Undy. This secret knowledge was a bond that was quite unbreakable. And yet—as Mrs. Lucullus gazed down at Mr. Owensby's elegant appearance, she admitted to herself that she might live to regret sending Mr. Owensby about his business. Mr. and Mrs. Owensby. She turned the words in her mouth and they had a pleasant taste on the tongue. And yet—what if she found Undy a good home somewhere in order to marry again, only to discover that she had made a bad bargain?

What if Mr. Owensby proved to be of the same stripe as Luther?

No need to put up with him for long, Undy's purr seemed to say. The formula had worked before, so why not again? She need only inform Mr. Owensby that she had given Undy away, but in reality secret her pet once more in the sub-basement. And then—if her second husband proved to be an unendurable bother. . . .

She was tempted to say "yes" to Mr. Owensby's proposal, and he saw it.

"Yes?" he prompted.

But something had occurred to her. She

recalled the frightful emotional strain she had undergone in keeping Undy hidden from Luther . . . of the even more frightful trouble she had gone to planning things neatly so that it would look like an accident. To go through it all over again—if it proved necessary—was more than she could face, at her age. No use fooling herself—dispatching Mr. Owensby, who was a younger, spryer, smarter man than Luther, might require even more trouble and strain on her nerves. No, her nerves simply would not take it.

"Yes?" Mr. Owensby repeated.

"I wouldn't give Undy away for anyone, ever," she said.

He was biting not only his mustache but his lip.

"It means giving me up for a mere cat. Is that your final word?"

"I'm afraid it is. She'll have a home and affection from me as long as she lives."

If Mr. Owensby had been a cat himself, he would have pinned back his ears, from shock. As it was, he turned and descended the stoop, quite certain that she would get off her high horse and summon him back. She had to. The law of gravity might slip its clutch but never the law of a widow clutching at a second husband as desirable as he. But he kept on walking and Mrs. Lucullus kept on being silent. At the corner, he turned. She still stood there, cuddling the cat against her cheek.

Something told Mr. Owensby that he would have made the boat—Mrs. Lucullus' annuities—if only he'd strangled that blasted animal. Reached right through the open window, on his arrival, and squeezed and squeezed—and then disposed of the body before Mrs. Lucullus returned.

And he was absolutely right. He would have known it if he could have heard what Mrs. Lucullus was whispering into Undy's furry ear.

"Imagine any creature being better company than you, Undy Lucullus!" ◆ ◆ ◆

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(Continued from page 8)

dow," Mr. Martine explained, "but Mr. Hendricks was called away by some kind of accident in his family."

"Yes, I know," the other replied. "His wife was injured by an automobile."

A message started scribbling on the teletype inside the teller's cage: *Hendricks asked me this, and I told him it was okay.*

It seemed to confirm what Mr. Martine had just said. The welcome, "How do you want it?" came from the teller.

"Oh, just give me forty-six fifties," Martine replied carelessly.

The teller pushed the money through the opening and the crook walked casually out, just $2,100 richer than when he came in. He gave a hundred dollars to his confederate, which left a clear profit of $2,000. The balance of the original five thousand, just two hundred dollars, remained in the account.

Business at the bank went on as usual. It wasn't until Hendricks phoned about the trick which had been played on him, and to report that his wife hadn't been out of the house that morning, that the fraud was discovered. This gave the crook about a half hour to make his getaway.

A month later he tried the same trick in Seattle. But this time the teller didn't rush off to his "injured" wife. Instead, he signaled the bank's officer. So the story had the usual ending—a long term in prison for a clever crook who was smart enough to think up a brand new one—but not smart enough to realize that, once the trick was known, it was as worthless as a German mark of the First World War.

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The Editor

(Continued from page 47)

she dictated, "I did not mean to kill Mr. Cowan, but he tried to cheat me. He promised me two hundred dollars to take his wife's car and make it look as if she hit somebody with it. When he tried to give me only a hundred dollars, I got sore. I didn't mean to kill him. Now sign it."

Dave looked at her and said with horror, "You did drive that car last night. You wore his hat."

"And left him dead drunk and sleeping at the wheel so the police would find him there when they came." Then furiously, "It was just my luck that he had to come to and stagger off someplace before they came! But this will do as well. Sign it."

Walt Cowan stirred in the chair and said thickly, "She'll kill you if you do!"

The girl cried brightly, "So you came to again! Always at the wrong time. Only this time it doesn't matter." She edged closer to the fireplace, found the poker with her foot and kicked it toward Dave.

"It doesn't make any difference if you sign it or not. Pick up the poker," she ordered. "Hold it firmly."

He bent over slowly and picked up the poker. He did not dare do otherwise. That crazy, dancing light was a flame in her eyes. Walt Cowan tried desperately to raise himself in his chair, but he had no control of his arms or legs.

"Now drop the poker, Mr. Kerry," she said quietly. "That's right. You may leave now. Turn around and walk slowly through the doorway."

Dave turned. An awful cold drove through him. He knew just what was going to happen as surely as if he had seen it all before. When he reached the doorway, she would shoot him in the back. Then she would pick up the poker, careful not to smudge his fingerprints, and kill the helpless Cowan with it.

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to think, Dave stammered, "But I don't see why you did all—"

"You don't have to see," she interrupted impatiently. "But for your information, I wanted his money. Are you walking?"

Dave knew why she wanted to kill him in the doorway. It would look as if the dying Cowan had shot him while he was fleeing. She would, of course, leave the gun in Cowan's dead hand.

HE TOOK a step, dragged his foot forward into another step, took a third step—then left his feet in a dive at the wall, slapping at the electric switch. He dropped to the floor as the room plunged into darkness. An instant later, an angry orange tongue of flame leaped out of the roar of her gun. He sprang across the room, reaching to overturn the chair in which Cowan lay, knowing that she would turn the gun on the helpless man next. The gun spat again and he heard the *thunk* as the bullet struck the heavily upholstered chair. Something rumbled on the uncarpeted floor and nudged his leg. The whiskey bottle. He snatched it up and flung it across the room. It hit the opposite wall with a shattering crash. The orange tongue of flame licked three times in that direction. The darkness and the noise and that darting, searching tongue of fire and the deadly *thunk* of the bullets made the nightmare almost complete. Then, in the sudden, compressing silence, he heard a dry *click, click, click,* and it was a moment before he realized that it was the hammer of the gun falling on spent cartridges.

Dave tried to leap up from the floor, where he lay with Cowan, but from somewhere the man had found a frenzied strength, and he clung to Dave while the girl's frantic feet scurried across the floor. For a moment her terrified silhouette hung in the doorway, and then she was gone. The car roared, spat gravel from spinning wheels, caught hold and fled.

"There's no phone," said Cowan thickly. "Anyway, it would do you no good to tell the police because I would say you lied."

"She tried to kill us!"

"And you want to punish her. You want a happy ending. This *is* a happy ending, my friend. Her terrors will punish her. This is a happy ending for my son. His mother merely went away, and not to jail as a frustrated murderess. And this is a happy ending for me," Cowan's tongue was thick and his muscles were sodden, but his mind was clear. "I loved her once, and it would be punishment to think of her behind bars. Your happy ending, my friend, is that you proved yourself resourceful and that even in the midst of your own danger, you thought of my danger. So for whom do you want a happy ending, the police?"

Dave looked through the window at the dark road down which the car had fled. Perhaps Cowan was right. Perhaps this was a happy ending. ♦ ♦ ♦

(Continued from page 89)

head, Jerry saw Mr. Neibolt near the office door, holding the match before him and jerking his head back and forth as he searched the floor. Jerry knew he was looking for the weapon he had knocked him out with, to finish killing him.

Jerry slid his hands down under his own shoulders and pushed savagely. Slowly, inch by inch, he raised himself until weariness robbed his arms of power. Sobbing, he was forced down again.

He felt something press painfully into his chest. The "Lucky" horseshoe Marilyn had pinned to his shirt. Sweet, superstitious Marilyn.

A sudden thought made him work his hands under his chest and unpin the horseshoe. Then he saw Mr. Neibolt pick up an arm's length of pipe, and start toward him. Jerry kept his cheek to the floor, and his breath was locked in his throat as he

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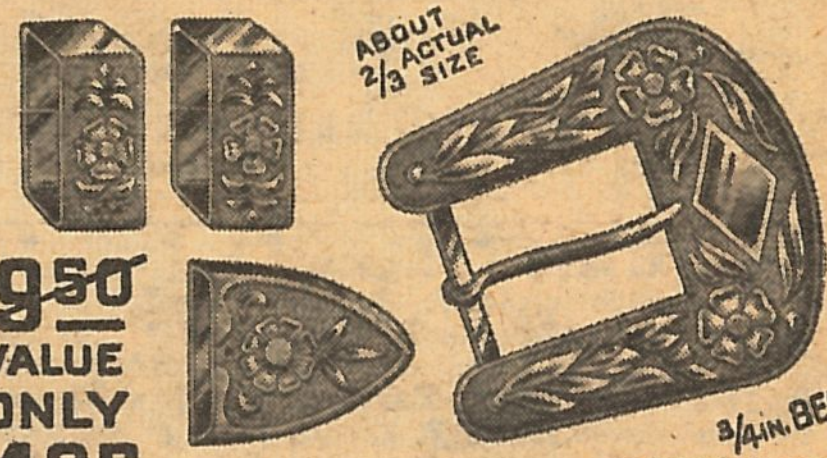

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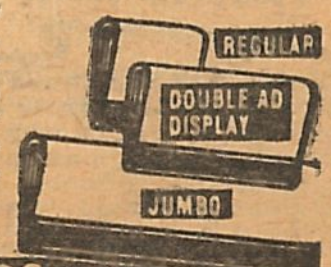

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watched Mr. Niebolt's legs. And then Mr. Neibolt halted. Jerry could see the shoes glistening in the light of the match.

A prayer on his lips, Jerry drove his right hand forward aiming the open safety pin, on back of the horseshoe, at Mr. Neibolt's calf. A shrill scream came as the pin sank in. Mr. Neibolt bent down to make an instinctive grab at his leg. Jerry yanked the pin out and whipped his hand up desperately. His finger hit Mr. Neibolt's face and then he had a handful of hair. He yanked savagely. Mr. Neibolt hit the floor beside him. Jerry pulled him in close and got his left forearm on Mr. Neibolt's throat. He bore down.

Jerry knew he could not hold him more than a few seconds. He closed his eyes and brought up his right hand. Mr. Neibolt struggled wildly to get out from under the forearm. Jerry forgot everything but the pressure of that forearm, and the up and down motion of his right hand, as he tried to stab the pin into Mr. Neibolt's chest.

Up and down, up and down. How many times he drove the pin he did not know. It dawned on him slowly that Mr. Neibolt had quit struggling, that he hadn't moved for a long time.

After a while he got his forearm off Mr. Neibolt's throat, and pawed around for the length of pipe. He found it. After a long pipe as a lever.

He got to his feet. His back gouged by splinters of wood throbbed painfully as he made his way in the darkness to the office. After he phoned the police he turned on the warehouse lights and went back to look at Mr. Neibolt.

The fat, little man was lying on his back. And, on the left side of his chest, held there by the safety pin imbedded in his heart, was the horseshoe. It looked almost as though Mr. Neibolt had pinned it there himself. The words on it sparkled, seemed to dance in the light:

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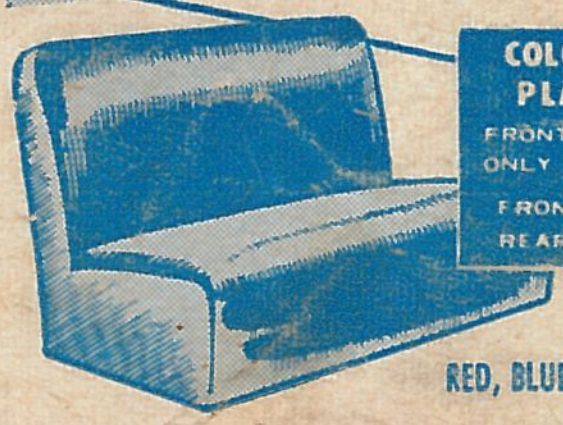

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