

THE GHOST WALKS —
AND SHOOTS AND TALKS!

GEM

DETECTIVE

25

CENTS
FALL

ATOMIC ACTION MAGAZINE

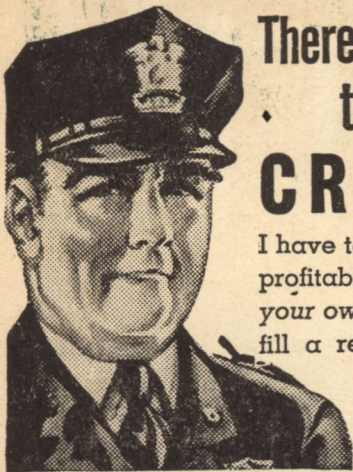


ONE MUST DIE

BY

ENKEN REAVES HALL

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GEM DETECTIVE

Vol. 1, No. 1. — ATOMIC ACTION MAGAZINE — FALL, 1946

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Publisher

RAYMOND W. PORTER
Editor

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The Letter Death Wrote

By BRUNO FISCHER

When you try to help an old flame, don't be surprised
if you get burned.

I WAS knotting my necktie when the doorbell rang. Bert yelled from the bathroom: "If that's the tailor with my tux, pay him, Mike."

I went to the door. It wasn't a tailor. It was Karen Weber. There was a time I would have lost my breath just looking at her dark beauty. Now I only scowled at her.

"Aren't you inviting me in, Mike?" Karen asked.

I fingered the untied necktie dangling from my collar. "Sure, Karen—only I'm in a terrific hurry."

Karen swept past me across the foyer. Just inside the living room she stopped. Bert Young was through with his shower and had started to shave. I knew this because Bert couldn't hold a razor in his hand without his tenor bursting loose. His off-key interpretation of Loch Lomond filled the apartment.

"So Bert's in?" Karen said, suddenly very grave.

I didn't like this one bit. Everything between Karen and myself had ended months ago. She had accepted it without emotion and had gone on to other men. She knew that Fran Barton and I were to be married.

"I'm in a hurry," I muttered again.

Karen didn't seem to hear me. She stood listening to Bert singing, then suddenly swung to me and put her

hands on my chest. I squirmed inwardly. I would hate Bert to see us like this—or, in fact, for him to know that Karen was visiting me in the apartment.

"Mike," she whispered, "I'm in trouble. I'm being blackmailed."

I felt somewhat embarrassed; it was like looking into a room you weren't supposed to. But I also felt relieved. She was probably going to ask a favor, which was legitimate coming from an old flame.

"Where do I come in?" I asked.

"I need your help. You're not only a friend; you're a lawyer. This man wants five thousand dollars in return for some letters."

"What letters?" I muttered.

"Letters I should have known better than to write." She watched my face anxiously. "I don't have to tell you what's in them, do I?"

"No," I said. I preferred not knowing. "Who has the letters?"

Karen's mouth opened just as Bert stopped singing. She waited until he let go with Home on the Range. Then she said: "John Sherman."

I think I jumped a little at the name. Though I shouldn't have been surprised. About a year ago I'd met Sherman at a small informal party in Karen's apartment. He had seemed to be just another of Karen's respectable youngish bachelor friends, like

Bert and myself. Six months later Karen had come to me and had asked me to defend him in court. I had found out then that John Sherman was a rather slick confidence man who had been involved in some shady stock manipulation.

I don't like taking such cases, especially when I have a pretty good idea that the guy is guilty; but Karen had insisted and in those days I hadn't been able to refuse her anything. I had managed to get him off with a mere three-month sentence.

"Didn't Sherman go to Philadelphia after he got out of jail?" I asked.

"He came back a few days ago after he got hold of the letters. He's back at his old house at 39 Maple Drive." Her palms were again on my chest. "He demands five thousand dollars. I haven't that much."

I wondered how I could squirm

out of a loan. I needed every cent I had to furnish a home for Fran and me.

But Karen didn't want money. She said: "All I've been able to raise is two thousand dollars. John Sherman refuses to take it from me. But you, Mike—"

"Wait a minute," I broke in. "He was your pal. You asked me to take his case."

Her red mouth went crooked. "He wanted to be more than a pal when he got out of jail. I turned him down. That's one reason for the blackmail. The other—well, you know what he is."

I knew. A smooth article. From confidence man to blackmailer is only a single step.

"I see," I said. "You think he owes me a favor for getting him off with only three months when he ex-



I should have known that he wasn't asleep, but the shock of the moment did not let me think.

pected to serve a couple of years at least. But look, Karen, blackmailers have no sense of ethics or gratitude."

"You're a lawyer, Mike. You know how to handle these things. He insists on having five thousand dollars by tonight and I have only two thousand and I'm frantic. You're the only real friend I have."

I found I was holding the ends of my necktie and sawing my collar with it. "Okay," I said.

Karen took a fat roll of bills out of her bag and handed it to me. The top bill was a twenty; probably the others were no larger. She said: "He expects me at once, Mike, so please don't delay."

"Tonight?" I looked at my watch. "I can't go tonight. I'm taking Fran out to dinner at seven-thirty."

She again moved in close to me, and in my nostrils was the heady perfume of her hair. "Mike, it has to be tonight. John Sherman said he'd wait till nine. After that—"

Her voice broke off as Bert reached the end of the song. He wasn't starting another, which meant that he had finished shaving. Any moment now he'd come out.

"You said 39 Maple Drive," I whispered. "That's not so far."

"Then you'll do it?"

"I'll do that I can," I told her. "Don't count on too much. I've had practically no experience bargaining with blackmailers."

"You're a sweet man," she said and rose on her toes and gave me a quick kiss on my mouth. A kiss of gratitude, nothing more. Then the door closed softly behind her.

STUFFING the two thousand dollars into my pants pocket, I went to the phone and called Fran's house to tell her I would be a little late. There was no answer. Well, there was still twenty minutes left and Fran might be planning to get home just in time to meet me.

I was hanging up when Bert

Young, wearing nothing but a towel, came out of the bathroom. "Did my tux come?" he asked. He was going to a banquet thrown by the bar association.

"That was a salesman," I told him.

"Man?" He frowned at me. "Sounded more like a woman to me." So he had heard her voice!

"All right, a saleswoman," I said. "She was selling—magazines."

His gaze lay flatly on me, and I busied myself lighting a cigarette so that I wouldn't have to meet his eyes. "You were a pretty long time getting rid of her." Bert turned to go into his room and stopped. "You know, Mike, she sounded a lot like Karen Weber to me. That same husky quality in her voice."

I laughed. "Can you imagine Karen selling magazines?"

There was no answer, of course. It was a joke, and however feeble, Bert should at least have smiled. He didn't. He gave me a searching look and then, without another word, padded on bare feet into his room.

I finished dressing. Just before I left the apartment, I phoned Fran's house again. Her mother answered.

"I just got in myself, Michael," Mrs. Barton said, "and I found a note from Fran that says she'll be late."

"Didn't she come home from the office?"

"She had to in order to leave the note, and I see that she changed her clothes. But the note doesn't say where she went. Only that you should wait here till she comes back."

Ordinarily I would have been somewhat annoyed, but now Fran's lateness was good news. It avoided complications. "I'll be a little late myself," I told her.

MAPLE DRIVE was a quiet tree-lined street of neat detached frame houses. As I rolled along in my car looking for number 39, a sense of absurdity came over me. The setting for the business of blackmail

seemed more properly a remote ramshackled house in an atmosphere of hush-hush and mystery.

Yet why not here? What better blind could a blackmailer want than a modest house on a street reeking of respectability?

Number 39 was halfway down the block. I stopped my car, but I did not get out at once. From where I sat I could see that two side-rear windows were lighted. John Sherman was at home, waiting for Karen and five thousand dollars. How would he react when I arrived instead? Would he risk admitting to me that he was a blackmailer? Would he accept only forty percent of his price?

A car came up the street. It swung behind me and up the driveway between Number 39 and the house next door. A woman called out from that other house: "Is that you, George?"

Abruptly the two lighted windows in John Sherman's house went dark.

I was puzzled. The lights had gone out as if the arrival of the car and the sound of the woman's voice had been a signal. Of course that might be only coincidence, and I realized then that the palms of my hands were sweating. Dealing with blackmailers was hardly in my line.

No other light went on in number 39. Did that mean that John Sherman was about to leave his house? One could hardly haggle with a blackmailer in the street; I would have to get him before he came out. I hurried up to the house.

My hand was on the bell button when I heard soft footsteps inside. I pressed the button. The bell tinkled inside and then faded away into dead silence. No light went on anywhere as far as I could see. The footsteps did not come forward to the door or retreat; they had simply ceased to exist at the moment I had rung the bell.

Carefully, I turned the knob. The door swung inward, and at that same moment I heard a soft scurrying.

An animal could have made that sound—or a person moving on tip-toes. And then in the house a door opened and closed so quietly that I would not have heard it except for the deep silence.

What the devil was going on here? I was frightened and at the same time angry. I struck a match and saw that I was at the beginning of a long hall. There was a door at my right, but that was open. The closed door was at the end of the hall.

I found myself struggling with the impulse to get out of there. But the money was a lump in my pocket and Karen depended on me. Maybe John Sherman thought I was a cop. I had to let him know that I wasn't.

The match burned out. I lit another and moved down the hall. Outside I could hear garage doors being opened—no doubt by George, the next door neighbor. But this house maintained its stifling stillness. The match lasted until I reached the door at the end of the hall.

"Sherman?" I called, standing in darkness.

No response. I heard the car go into the garage, and then all I heard was the thumping of my heart. I said under my breath, "What the hell!" and pushed the door in.

Blind darkness surrounded me. I said again, "Sherman?" and when there was still no answer, I struck a match. At the edge of the dull periphery of light, I saw him seated in a deep armchair. His head was slumped forward on his breast. He appeared to be asleep.

I should have known then that he wasn't asleep, but the shock of the moment did not let me think. I turned, looking for a light switch, and found it beside the door. Light poured down from the ceiling.

John Sherman was dead. I knew it by the sagging limpness of his body, by the looseness with which his head hung from his shoulders. And when I stepped to the chair, I saw the hole

in his cheek where the bullet had entered, and the thin trickle of blood to his chin.

It was not a big hole. The gun must have been small, but not so small that it hadn't killed him instantly as he sat in the chair.

He wore a smoking jacket and slippers. A tall man with a sleek face. Alive he had been smooth as silk—a super-salesman of fraud. He had been a natural victim for murder.

IN SUDDEN panic I straightened up. John Sherman couldn't have been the person I had heard in the hall a minute ago. The lights going out, the footsteps stopping and retreating, the soft closing of the door—all that meant that the murderer was still in the house. He had been about to flee when I had entered, and my presence had forced him back to this room.

Tensely, I glanced about the room. The two windows were both closed; more than that, locked on the inside. So there could have been no escape out of that room. As for the rest of the room—it was a small, study, containing a desk, a sideboard, a couch, several chairs beside the one in which the dead man sat. And a door which probably opened into a closet.

A person who has killed once will kill again to protect himself.

Without any sign of hurry, any sign that I knew the murderer was hiding in the closet, I turned to the hall door. Then I stopped. My eyes had fallen on a woman's handbag on the desk.

It was black patent leather with lucite initials, exactly like the one I had bought Fran Barton a couple of months ago for a birthday present. The initials said: "F. B."

I didn't believe it. I stood staring down at the handbag, telling myself that the initials meant nothing. And that neither did the appearance of the bag. Yet, as if by themselves, my feet took me to the closet.

My breath stopped coming as I gripped the knob. In back of my mind I knew that I was asking for death by opening that door, but I knew also that it would be a kind of death for the rest of my life unless I made sure who was in there. I yanked open the door.

Fran cowered in the shallow closet. Her head came up.

"Mike!" She came into my arms and clung to me.

I remained rigid. I said hoarsely into her hair: "What are you doing here?" And I thought: *Now that Sherman has turned to blackmailing, he wouldn't limit himself to one victim. He was too enterprising a crook. He would make a going business of it.*

"The same thing you are, I suppose," Fran said miserably. "But he didn't tell me you would also be here."

I put my hands on her shoulders and held her away from me so that I could see her face. Cruel lines of fear about the eyes and mouth marred its loveliness.

"Now let's make sense, Fran," I said. "Why are you here?"

Fran glanced at the dead man and shuddered. "That's John Sherman, who was once your client. Why would he want to do that to you?"

"Do what to me?"

"He phoned me this evening just as I got home from the office. He told me that he had proof that you had killed Bobby Hauck and that—"

"Who's Bobby Hauck?" I cut in.

She stared up at me, uncertain, bewildered. "He was the little boy on my street who was killed last month by a hit-and-run driver. I remember that it was only a few minutes before you called on me, because when we left the house together there was a big crowd in the street. John Sherman said that he had proof you were the one. He said that he wanted money and that if I came here at once he would show me the proof."

I was stunned. But I tried to use my reason.

"Why would Sherman contact you instead of me?" I demanded.

"But he did get in touch with you, darling. Why else would you be here? He said that you had turned him down and that he was giving me this chance to save you from the police. He warned me not to tell you. I didn't know what to do. I decided that it would do no harm to see if he really did have proof."

"Listen," I said. "I never killed anybody. I never ran over anybody. I never heard of Bobby Hauck."

"Then why—" Fran's eyes were again on the dead man. "Then why did Sherman insist I come here? And how do you know of him and why did you come here?"

"Not for myself. Sherman was blackmailing a—a friend of mine. There are some letters the friend wrote." I tapped my pocket. "I have the money here."

It sounded unconvincing, but a lot less so than Fran's story. Her eyes were clouded with disbelief. "Mike," she said, "you can tell me the truth. I don't care what you've done. I love you."

Bitterly I laughed. "That's right, put it on me. You tell me a cock-and-bull story and then—"

"It's true!"

"Is it?" I said. "Why would Sherman bother to bring you here when he had nothing on me? He was blackmailing you for something you did."

I stepped around Fran and walked toward the dead man. This time I passed behind the desk, and for the first time I saw that the drawers were open and papers were strewn on the floor.

"I suppose you didn't do this?" I said, nodding down at the papers.

"Of course I did," Fran admitted. "I came in and—" Her eyes went wide again. "Mike, you don't think I killed John Sherman?"

I would rather have cut off my right arm than say what I had to say. "What else am I supposed to think?"

"MIKE!" I felt her hand on my forearm. "When I rang the bell, there was no answer. I found the door unlocked and came in. I found John Sherman exactly the way he is now. I was terribly frightened, but I realized that the police would look through his papers and find whatever it was proved you were a hit-and-run driver. So I forced myself to remain and look through his desk. Then a car drove up next door and I became panic-stricken and switched out the light. I was going down the hall when the bell rang. I couldn't know it was you. I was afraid I would be blamed for the murder. Then the street door opened and the only way I could go was back to this room."

Her voice weakened toward the end; her shoulders were huddled. My heart twisted; I yearned to take her in my arms. But I remained where I was, saying, "What did you find in the desk?"

"Nothing which meant anything. I searched for less than a minute. Then I realized that of course he wouldn't keep blackmail material in his desk where anybody could find it. I was about to leave when I heard the car."

I stood there thinking dully that she was lying. The only thing that made sense was that she had acted exactly the way the person who had murdered John Sherman would act, and when she was caught she told a preposterous story of why she was here.

A mutter of voices drifted into the room. George, the man who lived next door, must have finished putting away his car and had entered his house.

I said tonelessly: "All right, Fran, you get out of here."

"Darling, you don't believe me!"
"Never mind that now. Beat it."

She started for the door and stopped. "Are you staying?"

"I'll be along in a minute." I bent down behind the desk and looked for a possible secret compartment. I wasn't so much interested now in Karen's letters. It was more important that I find and destroy whatever blackmail club Sherman had held over Fran's head.

Next door George and his wife must have come into a nearer room, for I could distinguish their words now. A woman said shrilly: "I know it was a shot."

"Nonsense!" George replied. "You heard a car backfire."

I heard steps in the room I was in and looked over the top of the desk. Fran was coming back to listen to the talk next door.

"It came right from the house next door," the woman was insisting. "I was going to call the police. I was picking up the phone when I heard your car and I decided to wait for you. And something else happened. As soon as you drove up the driveway, the lights went out."

"So what if Sherman put them out?"

"But there was a shot, George," the woman said. "Right outside this window."

"Why didn't I hear it if I was just pulling in?"

"It was a few seconds before. Maybe half a minute before I heard your car."

I stood up behind the desk.

Fran was distractedly clawing at the catch of her handbag. "I know what you're thinking, Mike—that I was in this room at the time that woman says she heard the shot."

The arguing voices next door drifted into another room. I said: "Beat it, Fran. She'll persuade him to call the police."

Fran didn't stir. "Mike, I heard that same sound, but it wasn't made by the shot that killed John Sherman. He was already dead. The sound

came from outside, from the driveway. I was searching the desk when I heard it. It almost scared me out of my wits. But I heard nothing after that, so I told myself it was a car backfiring. And that's what it must have been."

The more she tried to explain, the more guilty she sounded. Which meant that I had to get her out of here before the police arrived. I started around the desk.

A frightening thought checked me. "Your fingerprints! Mine, too. Fran, did you touch anything beside this desk and the doorknobs?"

"I don't think so," she muttered. She was swaying as if too tired to remain on her feet.

"You go," I said. "It'll take me only a minute."

I took out my handkerchief and went back behind the desk. When I finished wiping the desk drawers, it struck me that paper also held fingerprints. I crouched behind the desk staring down in helplessness at the scattered letters which Fran had touched. There was only one way—I'd have to take them with me. And as I was scooping them into a pile, the handwriting on one sheet leaped up at me.

Karen's handwriting! One of the letters I had come here to buy from John Sherman.

I picked it up. It was dated a month ago and the salutation read: "Dear Bert."

So what? Karen and I no longer meant anything to each other. The way was open to Bert, my roommate, my closest friend. But Karen had written something to him that was highly dangerous to her.

"Did you find something?" Fran asked.

She was still in the room, standing over me.

"For God's sake, Fran!" I said. "Haven't you the sense to get out while you can?"

"Let me help you." She stooped

beside me to help gather up the letters.

"Fran, the police—"

SOMEBODY was coming up the hall. Neither of us had heard the street door open, but there was no doubt that our flight was cut off. It was too late to unlock a window and push a screen out.

I slipped an arm about Fran's waist and whispered into her ear: "If that's the cops, don't tell them the crazy story you told me. Let me do the talking."

"Suppose it's the murderer coming back?"

The footsteps turned into the room.

Fran uttered a sigh of relief that was edged with hysteria. "It's only Bert."

Only Bert; Coincidence could be stretched too far for reason. I had found the girl I was to marry with a blackmailer—with his murdered body, at that—and now here was my best friend. He had stopped on the threshold and was gaping at Fran. He wore his tuxedo, but he hadn't gone to the banquet. He, too, had stopped off to see John Sherman.

"Fran here?" Bert said as if he couldn't quite believe that he saw her. "But I thought—" Then he saw the man in the chair. He moved swiftly and then turned to look at me in horror. "Dead! Mike, you didn't do it?"

"No." Warily I was watching him. "What are you after, Bert?"

"I guess I'm a dope," he said uneasily. "I was sure that was Karen's voice in our apartment. While singing, I listened through the bathroom door. I didn't hear much of what you two said, but I caught an address. I thought—" He paused and then decided to plunge. "Hell, Mike, I didn't want you to hurt a swell girl like Fran. It sounded like funny business when you refused to admit it was Karen, so I decided to walk in on you and Karen and bawl you out."

In the circle of my arm Fran stiffened at the mention of Karen having been in my apartment. Even now, at this moment, she could feel jealous of another woman.

Bert's voice turned dry. "But I hardly expected to find that it was only Fran with you—and a murdered man." He gestured toward the chair. "A friend of yours?"

Karen's letter to Bert was still in my hand. I glanced down at it and my mouth went crooked. Evidently Bert wasn't telling the truth any more than Fran. This letter was the connecting link between Bert and John Sherman and Karen. But then where did Fran fit in?

"He was a blackmailer," I told Bert. "Fran and I found him dead when we arrived. And I found this letter. Do you remember it?"

Bert looked down at the letter and then into my face, his brows creased. "Sure. Karen wrote it to me. How did you get hold of it?"

"It was in this room."

"You mean the blackmailer had it?" His frown deepened.

I stuffed the letter into my pocket. "All right, we can discuss it later. Chances are the guy next door phoned the police. None of us can afford to be found here."

Bert said urgently: "Why didn't you say that before? You don't know how quick those prowl cars come."

"Take Fran," I told him. "I'll be right behind you."

I stayed in that room only long enough to gather up the pile of letters and wipe the two doorknobs. Then I followed. Light spread down the hall from the room I had just left, and I saw their two shadows at the street door. The taller one, Bert, peered through the glass and then turned.

"There's a prowl car outside," Bert said hoarsely.

It was my fault. I should have got Fran out of here as soon as I had.

heard George's wife urging him to call the police. Now it was too late.

"THIS way," I whispered and turned into the open doorway on my left.

That was the living room, vaguely illuminated by the light which flowed across the driveway from the house next door. I paused and reached for Fran's hand. It was cold in mine and trembled.

Bert had gone ahead, picking his way between dimly seen furniture, with Fran and me at his heels. We passed through a dining room and entered the kitchen.

Bert had stopped. "There ought to be a back door," he whispered. It was darker here than in the other two rooms. He fumbled matches out of his pocket.

"My car!" I said suddenly. "It's parked in front of the house. How'll I explain it?"

"We'll think of a story later," Bert said and struck a match.

The back door was at the other end of the kitchen. The three of us moved as one. We had almost reached it when it opened.

We froze. At the same time I heard the front door open. We should have guessed that the police would cover both exits. And the match in Bert's hand showed the blue uniform coming through the door.

"Stay where you are!" the cop ordered.

Bert's match went out. He cried, "Run!" and threw himself at the cop.

I had to yank Fran violently to get her started. We leaped past the dark tangle of the two struggling men and got through the door and found ourselves in a back yard. Light from the house next door reached us here, showing us a low wooden fence fifty feet ahead.

In the house the cop called in a strangled voice: "Harry! I got one. Two went out the back."

As I helped Fran over the fence,

the letters fell from my hand. I took precious moments to scoop them up. Then I was over, too, and in darkness Fran groped for my free hand. We raced between two houses to the opposite side of the block.

When we reached the street, I had to hold her back from continuing our wild flight. "We're all right, Fran. Not even the cop got a look at us, so nobody can prove we were there."

"But your car in front of the house!" she panted.

I said nothing. We were out of the hands of the police, but our problem was a lot bigger than that. We had each other to face. We walked slowly, trying to look casually dignified, while breath was restored to our lungs.

Then Fran said: "But we needn't worry about your car. Bert will say he borrowed it from you."

"Maybe."

"I don't understand you, Mike," Fran said testily. "It's plain that Bert sacrificed himself for us. He thought it better that two of us get away than that all three of us get caught. Besides, he must know that they can't prove he was the murderer."

Up until ten minutes ago I would have assumed that Bert was that kind of friend. But since I had found John Sherman's murdered body, love and friendship had lost their meaning, moral values had become warped and distorted. And there was no sense to any of it. The letter Karen had written to Bert was the only bit of reason in the nightmare. It, at least, was understandable motive for fear and murder.

I stopped under a street lamp and dug the letter out of my pocket. I hadn't had a chance to read it before. Now Fran and I read it together.

And that letter wasn't understandable either. Because all that Karen had written was that she was still too fond of me to love Bert.

"I didn't know Bert cared for Karen," Fran muttered.

"I didn't either."

The last paragraph read: "And so, Bert, I think it best that we don't see each other again. I suppose it was cruel of me to use you only as a man with whom perhaps I could forget Mike, but it's no good. The torch I carried for him is still burning too brightly. I'm sorry." And it was signed: "Karen."

"Why should Sherman have that letter?" Fran said in bewilderment. "I can't see where it's blackmail material."

"It isn't." I took a cigarette. "Sherman hadn't been in town long enough to organize a far-flung blackmailing business. He still owed me fifty dollars for legal fees, and three weeks ago he wrote me from Philadelphia that he was broke. He was staying with a woman named May Anderson."

"Mike, hasn't Karen a friend in Philadelphia by that name? I met her once in Karen's place."

"That's right."

We were walking again. After a full block of silence, Fran said: "It's that letter that made Bert think you and Karen were carrying on an affair behind my back. Were you, Mike?"

"No." I flicked the cigarette into the gutter. "Fran, we've gone only three blocks. You go back to the police."

"Mike!"

"It's our one chance," I said. "Get a cop or two and bring them to Karen's house."

FEW PEOPLE keep their doors locked when they are at home. Karen Weber was not one of them. I shoved the door open and strode into the living room.

Karen was kneeling in front of the fireplace. With a gasp, she leaped to her feet.

There was a tiny blaze in the fireplace. I rushed forward. Karen's

body blocked me; her fingernails raked my face. I grabbed her around the waist and flung her aside.

She was coming back at me as I reached into the fireplace. I got a nasty burn by crushing out the flame with my hands, but it didn't matter. I straightened up as she reached me and held the charred letter over my head and thrust out my other hand. Resistance went out of her. She sagged against the table, and her dark eyes were pure venom.

"This is luck," I said. "I thought there was a chance that you still had the gun, but this letter—"

About half of it was burned, the top half, but what remained was enough. It was in Karen's handwriting and her name was signed to it. The body of the letter mentioned May, telling her that the police had no idea that she, Karen, had run over and killed Bobby Hauck, and that May must never mention a word to anybody.

"So that was it!" I said. "I suppose May Anderson was with you in your car."

Karen was completely crushed. "May was visiting me. While I was driving her to the station, the boy ran in front of my car. Nobody saw me hit him, so I didn't stop."

"Just like that." It seemed incredible to me now that I had cared for her. "Then after May got on the train, you learned that the boy had died. You were afraid May would talk, so you wrote her this letter. And Sherman, who was staying at her house in Philadelphia, got his hands on it."

"I didn't know he was there. I sent the letter special delivery. He signed for it and saw my name on the envelope, and because he's a heel, he opened the letter and read it. He hated me because he wanted me and I couldn't stand the sight of him. Besides, he was broke and needed money." Her eyes softened. "Mike, you won't tell?" she pleaded. "I

trusted you to get the letter for me."

I laughed. "You had the letter when you came to see me this evening. You had just come from Sherman's house where you had paid him the two thousand dollars for the letter, which was all he knew you could pay. But you knew that a black-mailer was never satisfied. Maybe he wanted more than money; he wanted you. He didn't need the letter. He had only to tell the police and they'd get a full confession from May. So when he handed you the letter in return for the money, you shot him and took back the two thousand dollars and came to my apartment."

Karen said sullenly: "Prove it."

"You thought you'd be safer making somebody the fall guy for the murder. And you hated Fran and me for the same reason Sherman hated you—I preferred somebody else. You phoned Fran, made your voice sound masculine, pretended to be Sherman. And you dropped the letter which you had written to Bert in the desk and which somehow you got back. The police, when they found it and Fran and me there, would link motive to us through it. You were out to involve us in every way possible."

She only glared.

"You were crouching in the driveway when Fran arrived," I went on. "You knew I'd get there any moment. You fired the gun into the air so that the woman next door would hear it and phone the police, and later would testify that she had heard the shot while we had been there. Probably she had been out when you had fired that first shot which had killed Sherman. Then you came home to destroy the blackmail letter."

Karen walked away from me as if to leave the place, but she turned be-

hind the table and faced me in scorn. "You call that proof?"

I glanced down at the charred letter in my hand. "Killing somebody with your car and leaving the scene is considered murder. They'll get you for at least one murder." I let my shoulders droop wearily. "But the police are looking for us for Sherman's murder. They saw us leave the house."

That opened her up. Whatever I might do to her now, she would have her revenge on me, and she had to let me know it.

"If I can't have you, Mike, Fran won't have you either! You'll either hang or rot in jail. And I did that to you and Fran. I'm glad."

"Thanks," I said quietly. "I was hoping I could worm a confession out of you."

"A lot of good that or the letter will do you." And she opened a drawer in the table.

Karen hadn't yet got rid of the gun with which she had murdered John Sherman. I was in motion before that small revolver was in sight, and I was sprawled across the table and was knocking her arm aside before she could pull the trigger. The shot went into the ceiling. Then I had her wrist between my fingers.

The door slammed open and two cops charged in. Fran had obeyed my instructions to the letter. They flung themselves at Karen and I removed my hand from her wrist.

"Did you hear her confession?" I asked as I got off the table.

"I'll say we did. And this gun will help."

Fran was standing in the doorway. I went across the room and took her into my arms.

(THE END)

ANOTHER EXCITING NOVELETTE BY
BRUNO FISCHER APPEARS IN THE
CURRENT ISSUE OF CHIEF DETECTIVE

BROTHER COP AND BROTHER RAT

By Donald Bump

When Tom learned the hiding place of a desperate criminal he simply went after him, for Tom was a policeman — but it wasn't so simple, after all.

IT WAS one of those small rooming-house hotels that hovered around the main section of the city. Police Sergeant Tom McAvoy paused in front of it for a moment, then pushed open the door and stepped inside. He kept his gun hand tense.

His eyes asked a question of the clerk who stood up behind the desk. The clerk jerked his head toward the corridor behind him.

"Room Thirteen, end of the hall," the clerk said, in a half-whisper. "He's been in there all day. I recognized him from the papers." He looked behind McAvoy expectantly and his eyes widened as no one else followed.

"You alone?" he asked.

The Sergeant nodded.

"It's Jed Slivers!" The clerk was incredulous. "He's dangerous."

Again Sergeant McAvoy nodded and started toward the corridor, but stopped as the clerk moved toward him.

"There's a reward out for him, isn't there? I read about it—"

McAvoy stopped, his fists clenched. He wanted to grasp this bony skeleton in front of him by the neck, shake him until his eyes bulged and those spectacles fell off from that long nose.

He took a deep breath. "You'll get your reward," he said. "Now shut up. And get back to your desk. Or under it."

He moved into the dark hallway, his shoes silent over the dusty floor. Someone was laughing in a room on his right, the sound of a bottle clinking against a glass, a woman's voice blurred through the door. He felt a contempt rising in him. Let them laugh, the filthy bums, laugh and drink and make love, while a man went to his death.

He forced himself to breathe deeply again, and his lungs stifled against the odor of decayed wood, and the dusty unswept floor. He stopped as his foot scuffed against a warping board, listened. There was no sound ahead. He must control himself, be calm, cold-blooded about it all. Jed Slivers deserved all that was coming

to him, and more. One death could never atone for the two prison guards killed in his escape, the shopkeeper in Detroit lying dead, or the callous murder of the clerk in Sullivan's Junction, shot in the back for no reason at all as Jed and his gang were leaving.

He moved forward again, cautiously, his hand on his gun now. The dim light seemed to drive the shadows back on themselves, make them thicker along the walls and floor.

For years he had followed the career of Jed Slivers, the career that had started in small-time robberies and worked itself into a well-paying racket. Jed had tried almost everything at least once, from stolen cars to slot machines.

The police had followed his career, too, tried vainly to pin something definite on him, until finally they had caught him smuggling dope. McAvoy had cursed to himself and smiled a little bitterly as he read of Jed's being captured and sentenced to the state penitentiary. Perhaps, he had thought, the career of Jed Slivers was at an end now.

Then the escape, and Jed had started in all over again, robberies, and petty thefts, followed by murders and finally a reign of terror that had made his name a by-word throughout the middle west. He had gathered a small gang around him, but one by one the federal agents had tracked them down. Three of them had paid with their life already. Now there was left only Jed, the ringleader.

McAvoy knew he shouldn't be going in here now, alone. He should have passed the information on to the lieutenant and waited for instructions. Probably it would cost him his job, but he would face that part of it when he came to it. Because after all it was his job, his alone. There was one thing none of the other police knew, not even the federal agents, who knew most every-

thing. Slivers' real name was McAvoy; the man in room 13 was his brother.

ROOM 13. He was in front of it now. Slowly he drew his service revolver, held it steady, and then with one quick motion his hand grasped the knob, threw open the door. The occupant had been sitting on the edge of the bed, his head buried in his hands. When the door burst open he made one startled movement under the dim light, then froze as he saw the gun in the policeman's hand.

Sergeant Tom McAvoy looked him over, and death and the chair stared back at him from the two frightened eyes.

"Hold it, right where you are. And get those hands up. High."

He held his voice cold, impersonal. "Coppers!" Jed gasped under his breath. His hands trembled slightly as he raised them above his head. "What do you want with me? I haven't done nothin'."

"Quit stalling, Jed. And walk over here by the door. And keep those hands where they are."

Something was dawning in those two burning eyes, a gleam of recognition and with it a last glimmering of hope.

"I know you," Jed said slowly. "You're Tom. You're my brother—Tom. A copper." He spoke faster now, louder. "You must be him! I'd know that voice anywhere, and that scar on your face—"

"All right. So I'm Tom. And you should know that scar. You gave it to me yourself, when we were a couple of kids. Remember?"

"Tom! You're not taking me in?" "Why shouldn't I? You're just a dirty crook, dirtier than most of 'em."

"But, Tom—I'm your own brother! You're the last person I've got in the world, Tom. All the rest of the world is against me. They've hunted me, followed me, they'll kill

me if you take me in. You know that, Tom. It'll be the same as though you killed me, yourself, killed your own brother. Tom, for God sakes, for our mother's sake, give me a break!"

"Shut up! And stand up."

But Jed remained huddled on the bed, and the fear of death seemed to draw the features in until only the skull of a man was visible under the yellow light.

"Tom, you remember our mother—you remember when she was dying. I wasn't supposed to hear, but I listened, anyway. She called you in, Tom, and I listened at the door. She said, 'Always look after your younger brother, Tom. He's wild, but he isn't really bad,' she said. I heard her. She said, 'Promise me you'll always look after and take care of Jed, and help him if he should get in any trouble.' Those were her very words, Tom. And you said, 'I promise, mother.' Tom, you can't break that promise."

"Cut the sob stuff. And get up. You forfeited any promise I might have made a long time ago. All that's left for you now is the hot seat. Come on, get up. I've wasted enough time on your blubbering."

Tom moved toward the front of the bed, motioned toward the doorway with his head. The revolver remained steady, motionless, unrelenting.

Slowly Jed rose, his feet dragging the floor as he moved to the center of the room.

"Did you ever think how it's going to feel when you walk that last mile, Jed? And when they strap you in the chair? You should have thought of those things, Jed. A long time ago. All right. That's far enough. Hold it right there."

As Tom started toward the motionless figure he stumbled and fell against the chair, heavily. Jed gave one last, frantic look over his shoulder and made a dash for the doorway.

The gun in Tom's hand spoke once,

and the running figure went down in the hall, like a sack of grain thrown from a wagon. One leg kicked convulsively, then was still.

Tom got up, managed to guide the revolver back into his holster, and stood looking down at the dead man.

"It had to come sometime, Jed," he muttered. "You could never have got away. And even if you had, it would have been to be hunted, and starved, and tracked down, from city to city. The weeks in the jail awaiting trial, and the courtroom, and the people, hating you, or curious, or just being amused while you fought up there for your life. And you couldn't have won, Jed. The verdict, and the judge passing sentence. Then the appeal, and the appeal denied and more weeks of waiting, alone with the four bare walls and the fear of death inside you. You always were a coward, Jed, even when we were kids. Sitting in a dark cell and biting your fingers and seeing the trees through the bars you can't break. Sleepless nights, and death playing with you like a cat with a mouse, tortured by a hope that you know is hopeless. The final despair, the sinking feeling in your stomach, and your legs giving out from under you as they half carry you to the execution. Perhaps a last minute reprieve, and more waiting, and the same thing all over again. I saved you from all that, Jed. I kept my promise."

(THE END)

"The Hanging Sisters"

By THORNE LEE

Appearing in the current issue of CHIEF DETECTIVE is one of the best pieces of writing ever to appear in a detective magazine.

On the couch a terrified girl was having noisy hysterics



"Perhaps I know Rancho Feliz too intimately to notice its bright dress," he said. "It may look gay to you, but it isn't. It's little short of a house of horrors."

When Lola Castro had talked that way I'd put it down as a combination of feminine hysteria and Latin emotionalism. Hearing it now from the lips of this cold-eyed man of science started mice running up and down my backbone.

Hubert Maxwell and I were to be week-end guests at Rancho Feliz but strictly speaking both of us were making professional calls. He would see his patient, Alene Castro, invalid wife of Lola's brother Jon, co-owner with her of the big valley ranch. I was there to—well, what was I there for? I was wondering, as Maxwell braked the car in front of the terrace. To interview a client I'd been asked to defend on a murder charge? A mur-

der that hadn't been committed yet? A totally fantastic idea.

Then as Lola Castro smiled a welcome at me I knew quite well why I was there and it had nothing at all to do with murder. Or so I thought—then.

I'd been telling myself for days past that Lola couldn't be as lovely as I remembered her. I'd been a little bit right at that. She was lovelier. Which made her something quite out of this world. I couldn't decide what it was about her that was so unusual for when I looked at her, the world started whirling crazily. Her voice, I thought then as she spoke to us, it was like the round deep notes of an organ.

"How nice of you both to come. Hubert, I do believe Alene is some better. She's been so cheerful all day."

"That's good," he answered, com-

ONE MUST DIE

By Ennen Reaves Hall

She expected her brother to kill her, and she retained a lawyer to defend him if he did.

CHAPTER I

HUBERT MAXWELL turned the car from the paved highway, down a tree bordered lane, and I had my first glimpse of the Rancho Feliz buildings. In spite of myself I shuddered a little. The slanting rays of the late afternoon sun was turning the red tiles of the roof on the big house into blood. Blood that seemed to be spilling down the white face of the old plastered adobe house.

The morbid thought irritated me. What had gotten into me that I should be having such heeby-jeebies? But I knew the answer, even before I saw the slender figure of Lola Castro waiting for us on the flagged terrace in front of the sprawling old casa. Ever since that dark-eyed senorita had visited, the week before, the private sanctum in El Paso where I commune with the shades of Blackstone I had been subject to all kinds of vagaries. Perhaps it was the strange story she told me, her still stranger request. Perhaps it was the girl herself who had proved so disturbing.

For the first time during the sixty mile drive from El Paso Hubert Maxwell looked at me with something

other than acute distaste in his eyes. "Rather gloomy looking, isn't it?"

Gloomy certainly wasn't the right word. Nothing as extravagantly colorful as that red-roofed, white walled house, guarded by tall sentinels in brilliant green that were the screen of poplars around it, could be called gloomy. One might shudder at sight of an Apache in full war regalia, but he'd never complain about his melancholic appearance.

I decided the new gleam in Doctor Maxwell's eyes might be hope. Maybe he didn't want me to like Rancho Feliz. It had been plain to me from the first that he hadn't welcomed my company on the drive. It had been at Lola Castro's request that he'd offered me the lift, and I'd never met him until he called for me that noon.

"I'd hardly call it gloomy, Doc," I answered with a blitheness I did not feel. "It's almost as gay looking as a Mexican fiesta."

His frown might have been partly due to my lack of respect in addressing him as "Doc." He was past forty, with slightly graying hair and full sensual lips, with eyes that made me think of a surgeon's knife. And yet, I was told, he had a perfect bedside manner, and an enormous practice among wealthy, neurotic women.

pletely monopolizing Lola's hands. "I'll take a look at her directly."

"Take it now, Doc," I urged. "I have some business to discuss with my client."

He released her hands reluctantly, and went inside. Lola smiled at me as we took chairs on the terrace.

"Then I am your client, Mr. Dulaney? You will take the case?"

"What case?" I was watching the odd play of light and shadow in her satiny hair and wondering if that was the source of her attraction. Or was it her gorgeous eyes, large and as soft and black as smoke drifting from a green wood camp fire? "Has your brother shown definite symptoms of a homicidal craze since you talked to me?"

"Please don't joke," she begged, though I hadn't been. "Jon isn't crazy. Whatever happens you mustn't think that. Or let others think it."

"Then what shall I think?" I asked her, bluntly. "You come to me asking that I defend your brother in the event that he kills you, or causes your accidental death. The only reason you offer for such a possibility is that several generations back an ancestor started a fad of killing a woman in his family and ever since the Castro men have been unable to break themselves of the habit."

HER HURT look shamed me for my levity. "I'm sorry you came if you persist in looking at it that way, Mr. Dulaney," she said, with her air of odd dignity.

"The Castro curse is no joking matter with us, I assure you. I know beyond doubt that Jon is destined to kill me. Because I don't want him to have to pay a penalty for something he can't help, I came to you so you would understand and be prepared for the time he would need you. But unless you accept it with an open mind—"

"But, Good Lord," I broke in. We had been all over that the week before in my office and I was feeling again

my utter helplessness in trying to cope with such reasoning, "if you really believe your life is in danger let's do something! You're too young, too lovely, to sit and calmly talk of being killed!"

She stopped me with a look of carefully controlled impatience. "Do what? Are you Almighty, Mr. Dulaney, that you can stop the hand of fate? I've explained to you—"

"I know," I broke in brusquely, not wanting to hear again such fantastic utterances from her realistically beautiful lips, "You told me that gibberish about the great-great grandfather who two-timed his love in Mexico City and got saddled with a curse in revenge. She told him he would kill the woman he loved most and he used the curse for an alibi and knocked off his wife. What's that got to do with you and your brother?"

The rich color left her face, leaving her cheeks like alabaster. The only sign that I'd gotten under her skin. I started sweating a little and wishing the rough words unsaid, true as they were. Lola Castro had that effect on you when she turned the dark lamps of her eyes on full power.

"It's got everything to do with us, Mr. Dulaney. The curse said all the men of the Castro family would kill the women they loved most. And all of them have, to date. That ancestor you ridicule killed his wife, a Castilian noblewoman; his son killed his mistress, a famous dancer; my grandfather, denied his cousin for his second wife because of this very curse, killed both himself and the girl; and my father, though he idolized the American girl he had married, caused her death. A hunting accident, but he killed himself in terrible remorse over it. His remorse, if you can understand, was for having married her. I explained all this to you last week."

She had. And, as on that other day, I felt a tingling along my spine at this saga of death. But a lawyer, more than anyone else, can't indulge in supernatural bunk. Logic is to

him a sacred trust. So once more I tried logic.

"All that proves nothing at all, Lola, except that the men of the Castro family are undoubtedly men of violent passions. Doubtless they would have yielded to the impulse to play rough with their girl friends, even if the old girl with a curse hadn't started them thinking that way. But your brother, you tell me, is a decent guy, devoted to his wife and wrapped up in his work on your farm. Unfortunately he was driving the car that overturned in a rainstorm one night a few months ago and injured his wife. But, following your own line of reasoning, doesn't the fact that she wasn't killed indicate the curse is broken?"

"It might," she said, wearily, "except that Jon hasn't been himself since. He's morose and ill tempered, almost violent at times. Not at all the kind brother I've always known. He's like a man driven and tormented by evil forces. When he thinks I'm not aware of it he watches me queerly and there is torture in his eyes. Alene says he mutters my name in his sleep and he's told her of terrible dreams in which he killed me. She is frightened for me and has begged me to leave."

In spite of my vaunted logic I felt sweat popping out on my face. "Then why don't you?" I fairly begged. "Why stay and invite trouble?"

"But don't you see?" Her gesture and voice indicated a near end to the patience control program. "No one can run from fate. If it's me, running away can't stop it. And if it should, Alene would be left. And she's helpless."

"Mr. Dulaney, you must understand this much." Her hand reached impulsively toward me and I lost no time grabbing it. The soft strength of it was like holding on to the fine edge of sanity. "I haven't asked you here to find some way of helping me. There is no way. I only wanted you to meet Jon, to understand, in case

he—kills me. It is Jon you must be prepared to help—when he needs it."

"You're asking a lot," I said. "Any man who would harm a lovely hair of your head deserves the hottest hot-seat the devil and Edison could devise between them."

She pulled her hand free, suddenly and decisively. "Hubert Maxwell told me you were a good lawyer, Mr. Dulaney. In that case you won't condemn a man without a trial. You'll wait and try to know and understand Jon."

So Maxwell had sent her to me! That was news. More puzzled than ever I decided to play the game out blindly, just as the cards fell. Silently I followed her into the cool, quiet house.

WE ALMOST fell over a fellow reading in a chair by the window. I wondered if he'd overheard our conversation until I saw the window was tightly closed. And when he looked up at us and blinked in an odd, near-sighted fashion I knew at once that he was a book worm, the kind that sees and hears only what's pushed under his nose. I almost smiled as my eyes followed my thoughts to the proboscis in question. A very red nose, with unmistakable signs of hay fever.

Lola stopped and introduced Howard Wilson, Alene Castro's brother. She identified me only as a friend of hers, Wallace Dulaney. I was so pleased with the classification and the warm sound of my first name on her lips that I seized the youth's unresponsive hand and pumped it enthusiastically. Which act seemed to bring on a near panic for he threw himself into a routine of contortions and grimaces until I dropped his hand and watched him dive for a handkerchief of small-bedsheet proportions. Through its folds he mumbled hoarsely that he was pleased to meet me. But there was certainly no sign of his pleasure in his woebegone face.

As we left the living room Lola

murmured, "Poor Howard, he has hay fever terribly."

"Does he live here?" I asked.

"He's been here since Alene's accident. He's a great comfort to her. He can't get out much, you know, from early spring until late fall. So he spends a great deal of time reading and playing cards with her. We're glad to have him for she won't have a nurse. She hates them."

It struck me that she'd used a good deal of breath explaining Howard. Then I realized she was really apologizing for him and I put him down for a sort of pensioner, or charity guest.

"We'll go in and see Alene," Lola went on. "But I want to warn you, Mr. Dulaney. Don't let her see that you pity her. She has a queer antipathy to being an invalid and resents any inference that she is different from others. And she really isn't, except that she can't walk. A spinal nerve paralysis from her injury, you know."

I whistled under my breath. No wonder Lola Castro didn't seem concerned about what happened to her. Living in a house with a guy who nursed a phobia to kill, a woman with a crippled body and a warped mind, and a perpetual guest with hay fever! A house of horrors, indeed!

CHAPTER II

The Patient

NOTHING Lola had said had prepared me for Alene Castro.

I went in rather expecting to see a feminine replica of the slight and anemic Howard, wearing frilly negligee and a martyred expression. Instead I saw a vividly blond wheel-chair Venus, dress and make-up and hair-do radiating a party atmosphere.

But Alene Castro would have radiated that in a cotton nightgown. She was that type. Her eyes, the color of wood violets, were almost feverishly alive in her too-still body and her

gorgeous hair was too beautiful to have come out of a bottle. I thought of flames from a burning cedar log as I looked at it. I thought of things any man would think of as I looked at Alene Castro, but I never thought to pity her.

We talked a while of this and that—mostly night club life in El Paso and Juarez, of which I could tell her a little—and then Maxwell and I went upstairs to our bedrooms. Only the middle part of the house was two-storied and there were three bedrooms up there. The front one the doctor always used when there, he said. Of the two back rooms, one was Lola's and I was to use the other.

Both these rooms had their own baths and both had a second door opening onto a balcony that ran the width of the upper story. One of those iron railing things such as all the old *casas* once had, where lovely *senoritas* leaned over to wave encouragement to wooing dons below. Delighted, I went out onto my balcony for an eyeful of view.

There was a patio below, of course. Cool and restful looking, with a Chinese elm or two for shade, flowers and evergreens and a bird bath, and the usual table and chairs. At one end of the balcony, beyond Lola's room, narrow stairs led down to the patio. I began feeling a distinct irritation against whatever had given me the impression that Rancho Feliz was a gloomy, depressing old place. It was charming and restful and I liked it. I even began liking the people I'd met, including the fishy-eyed sawbones and the drippy book worm. But I expected Jon Castro, the guy with the yen for violence. I hadn't seen him yet but he didn't fit in anywhere in my category of likes.

And just then I saw him. High, angry voices pulled my gaze toward the open end of the patio, enclosed only by a board fence in which was a small gate. Above the low wall I saw the heads and shoulders of two men. One wore a soft-brimmed felt, the

other the wide straw of the Mexican laborer. The face under the felt was mad as hops and matched the voice I'd heard.

"I'm warning you for the last time, Pedro," he was yelling, "you stay away from my drainage ditch."

"But, Senor," the Mexican's voice was wheedling, "joost one leetle feesh! Surely you weel let Pedro catch the one leetle feesh for the seek *muchacho*."

"Not a damn one, Pedro!" The man's voice was rising and in ratio his temper, I knew. "Damn it, you know I'm trying to stock that ditch with bass! You let me catch you down there again and I'm going to thrash hell out of you!"

The man turned and came striding through the gate and I knew that I was looking down at my host. The face was much like Lola's, but lacking in her calm composure. Volcanos smoldered in Jon Castro, one could see at a glance. And erupted at the least provocation. His eyes still blazed and the riding quirt in his hand kept swishing angrily at his leather boot tops as he crossed the patio toward the house. He fitted exactly the picture I'd built up of him—an ill-tempered guy with an inflated ego—but not at all Lola's picture of a poor harassed creature who was being kicked around by a revengeful ghost.

LATER on I modified my first opinion of him a little. When I met him in Alene's sitting room he seemed to have shucked off a part of his ill temper along with his riding clothes. He now wore a cool, white suit and an air to match. Not until I mentioned that it was my first visit to the New Mexico section that El Pasoans refer to as the "upper valley," did he thaw out and unbend a little.

"And what do you think of our valley ranches, Mr. Dulaney?" His tone practically dared me not to be impressed.

I thought them miraculous, and said so with enthusiasm. In the five years I'd lived in El Paso all my outings had been in the barren sand hills with a gun loaded for pheasant. After that, seeing what the ranchers had done with their dobe fields had been like exploring a new world. A world where a good genii had waved the magic wand of water and caused the desert to bloom in an exotic way.

From the time we'd left the Pass, through the Franklin Range, and took the back road that followed the Rio Grande for the rest of the way it had been the same. Miles and miles of brilliant green alfalfa fields, checkered with the lighter green acres of young cotton in stiffly straight rows. Here and there orchards in full bloom made a splash of pink and white in the vistas of browns and greens, and weaving through it all was a thread of delicate orchid that was the tamerisks in bloom along the drainage canals. Often we'd had a glimpse of the Rio Grande, just a flash of silver behind a filigree of green formed by the lacy fronds of desert willow, mesquite and tornillo. It had all been colorful and interesting and I'd reveled in it. I told Jon Castro that, and he was pleased. He even offered to take me on a tour of his six hundred acre ranch the next day. His and Lola's.

Then he added, still a little stiffly, "I'm really afraid Lola owes you an apology for asking you up this weekend. She must have forgotten the date. Our household is so disorganized you may be a little neglected."

At my look of inquiry he explained further. "It's the fifth of May, you know. The *Cinco de Mayo Festival* of the Mexicans. That means that most of our help have already gone to town and the rest are chaffing at the bits to be off. By way of compromise we've had to move dinner forward an hour. I hope you won't mind."

I assured him I didn't, but I began to feel a little uncomfortable. Looked

as if Lola had picked a poor time for extra guests.

Alene said, and I thought her interest touching under the circumstances, "But Jon, didn't I hear you say you had to water tonight? Surely Poncho will stay and help you."

"Poncho miss a *fiesta*?" Castro's laugh was short, but indulgent. "You should know better than that, Alene. I can manage alone, of course. But the devil of it is the water won't be down until midnight so that means a whole night out for me."

Then for my benefit he added, "You know we ranchers have to take the water when it comes or do without another two weeks. By then the young cotton would start shedding its leaves and the alfalfa be too dry to cut. But try to make a Mexican care about such things as that when it's festival time."

I offered, a little lamely, to help and his answer held a little pity for my ignorance.

"Irrigating may have an interesting sound, Mr. Dulaney, but it's far from being an interesting job. Certainly not one I'd subject my guests to. I don't do it myself when I can avoid it for it's a nasty chore and our spring nights are still cold. Aside from that, no one could help me who doesn't know just where my boxes are and how the system works. But thanks, anyway."

Turning back to Alene he touched her bright hair affectionately. "But don't worry, darling, I'll take it easy. I'll flood the alfalfa first and leave the cotton for Poncho in the morning. If he gets back by daylight. It's the row crops I hate worst," he added to me, "they get all clogged up and have to be opened every so often. We flood the alfalfa by tablets and that's a little less messy."

We talked on about problems of the valley growers, markets and water rights and things like that. Evidently bored by the subject, both Maxwell and Wilson had left. I could hear

them talking in the other room. Probably about Wilson's hay fever.

While I talked with Jon Castro I was studying him. A dynamic cuss, capable of going to great lengths to get his own way, I decided. Like most men of violent passions he was all right until he was crossed. We got along because I agreed with everything he said. By the time he rose and excused himself I was pretty well convinced that he was far less dangerous than I'd been led to believe. Just a guy with an overdeveloped peeve.

Lola had already gone to see about the dinner so when Castro left I was alone with Alene. She lost no time in jumping me and all the warm lights in her eyes were now icicles.

"Mr. Dulaney, I know why you're here. Lola brought you to spy on my husband, didn't she?"

Caught off guard all I could say was, "Spy is an ugly word, Mrs. Castro. I don't like it."

"And I don't like Lola going to a stranger about our family skeleton, either. If she's trying to make trouble for Jon. . ."

"She isn't," I interrupted, firmly. "She'd like to save him trouble. She thinks he has an obsession to do her harm. . ."

Something very ugly lay cold and naked in her eyes as she took the words from me. "She knows it's me or her. All Castro men kill some woman in their family. Lola's afraid it'll be her since he failed with me."

ALL PATIENCE deserted me and I exploded. "Good Lord, Mrs. Castro, this isn't the Dark Ages. It's the twentieth century and all this bunk about a family curse gives me a pain in the neck!"

She said something then that shut me up. It was too ghastly true.

"It don't matter in the least what you think about it, Mr. Dulaney. It's what Jon thinks that counts. He's been taught to believe in it."

The appearance just then of a maid with a tray and the muted chimes of a dinner gong were a welcome relief. I mumbled excuses and got out of there as fast as I could. So fast I almost overturned the well-laden tray. Very well laden, I thought, for an invalid. No wonder Alene Castro didn't look the part.

I got to the other room in time to see the vanishing figures of Maxwell and Wilson and trailed them to the dining room, a depressingly dull room crowded with heavy oak furniture. Disappointment filled me as I thought of that cool, light patio and I had the bad manners to say to Lola, "I was hoping we'd eat in your charming patio."

She glanced at Howard Wilson as she answered, "We sometimes do. We will before you leave."

Wilson added explanations, not at all reluctantly, "I'd likely be sneezing all the time if we did. The pollen in the air, you know. I think it's from the alfalfa blooms. I notice I'm always worse just before Jon starts to cut."

Maxwell asked, without the slightest degree of interest, "Do you plan to go to Ruidosa this summer? You'll probably be better in the mountains."

"Jon wants me to try it," Wilson said. "But I hate leaving Sis. Do you think it will be safe, Doctor Maxwell?"

It seemed to me Hubert Maxwell stole a covert look at Jon Castro, just coming in, as he answered Wilson. "I'd try it. We can send for you if necessary."

I'd been listening to them with only half my attention. The rest of my mind was noting the nervous attitude of the Mexican woman who served us. She was in a hurry, no doubt about that. But there was something more urgent than impatience in her dark eyes as she served Jon Castro, setting dishes before him with the same nervous reluctance with which she might feed a man-eating lion.

There was fear. A sullen, resentful fear. But for Lola only a loving solicitude.

I felt irritation rising in me again. So even the servants were in on this murder conspiracy stuff! It was ghoulish. Pretty soon, I thought, they'd have me believing in ghosts and curses and such bunk. I decided I'd have a lot more talk with Jon Castro before I left and if I bumped into any murder obsessions I'd do something about it, no matter what his wife and sister thought.

Lola, Maxwell and I were smoking of the terrace when the last truck load of Mexicans left. Shortly after Jon Castro came out, dressed in rough clothing and high rubber boots. Lola looked her surprise.

"You're starting early, Jon."

His reply was given curtly. "I'm going to check Ray Hollis' boxes before I start to work."

"Oh, no, Jon!" Lola half rose, alarm flooding her face. "Please don't go there!"

"Why not?" He swung on her angrily, all his careful manners forgotten. "If he's stealing water from me I've got a right to catch him at it! And no matter what you say, Lola, I know damn well he is!"

He strode off toward the garage and I could almost hear the angry swishing of a quirt again, even though he was empty handed. He was dynamite, that guy, when he was mad. Which, I was about to decide, was most of the time.

Lola offered quiet apologies for the little scene. "Jon is hot-headed," she said, quietly. "He persists in thinking a neighbor has been stealing water from him. I'm always afraid they'll have serious trouble over it."

Afraid. I wondered if that was Lola's pet phrase. She certainly overworked the word. I began feeling more than a slight impatience at her resigned attitude. What brother Jon needed was a good slapping down!

Hubert Maxwell left us to go in and check Mrs. Castro's temperature before she slept. I smiled a little, thinking what a pleasant job he ought to find that and how it might be handy, Alene not liking nurses. Nurses could chart temperatures. Or maybe the suspicion was born of wistful thinking. I definitely wanted Hubert Maxwell's interests to be somewhere other than in the lovely girl beside me.

CHAPTER III

Fearful Caterpillar

DUSK had long since settled down softly, as only dusks in the southwest can do. Lola and I grew quiet, listening to the stillness around us. Such stillness that when an insect rustled through some dry leaves nearby I jumped nervously and the doleful cry of a mourning dove sent a chill along my backbone. I moved impatiently, telling myself I just wasn't used to the country.

Beside me Lola spoke, as though reading my thoughts. "You see? You feel it, too. Something sinister and threatening in the very air."

She turned her head toward the high, gaunt sand hills that loomed like ghostly shadows along the horizon and shivered. "Once I thought this the most peaceful and happiest place in the world. Even its name means happiness. But something has spoiled it."

"It's just in your mind," I told her. "Your brother is nervous and off temper. Who wouldn't be with a wife in the condition of his? Forget that family bogey-man, Lola, and stop tormenting yourself with fear."

It was sound logic and she seemed to be listening. But after I'd talked myself hoarse all she said was, "Jon has changed. And I am afraid of him."

It grew chilly and we went inside.

Howard Wilson was there reading. He got up directly and said he was going to the kitchen and make coffee for Alene, a nightly custom, it seemed. Would we join them in a cup? We would and waited there until he came back in, laden with a tray of steaming cups, cream and sugar.

"We'll have it in Alene's room," he said, and headed that way. I pushed past him to open the door. Thinking he was expected, I neglected to knock, but just pushed the door open, stepping inside to allow Wilson and his tray to pass.

I hadn't played fair, I saw at once. The doctor hadn't had warning to quit kissing his patient. He did so, immediately and expertly. By the time the others were in the room he was a safe distance away, wiping his nose quite nonchalantly. And, I knew, wiping off some very vivid lipstick he'd collected.

But I found the incident—then—no more than amusing. If poor Alene Castro could find a brief interlude of pleasure in flirting with her doctor, who was I to care? But I was glad Lola was behind me and hadn't seen what I had.

The coffee was hot and good but didn't seem to add a thing to the gayety of our little group. As soon as Howard Wilson had taken away the tray, balancing it deftly in one hand while he used his handkerchief with the other, I suggested turning in. Both women looked grateful and agreed.

Ordinarily I'm a sound sleeper. Not even a guilty conscience can keep me awake very long. But that night, sleep eluded me. Wide-eyed I lay in the darkness, listening to the silence—a silence louder than any noise I'd ever heard. A sort of brooding, expectant silence, as though something portentous was due to happen any moment. Nerves, I thought, disgustedly, and cursed myself for letting the morbid ideas of two wom-

en, however lovely, get hooks into me.

Finally I gave up. Without turning on a light, not wanting to disturb Lola, I slipped on a dark robe and went out on the balcony. I almost fell over a chair and eased down into it gratefully.

There wasn't any moon but the stars were bright as only stars of the desert states can be. Even in the darkness which the shadow of the tree threw across the patio I could dimly see outlines of objects down there. Hunkering down in my chair I let myself go in day dreams that were built around a girl with beautiful eyes and screwy ideas.

A sound made me look up and I thought I was going to get a break. Lola Castro had opened the door to her room, quietly. She'd heard me stumble over that chair, I thought, and was coming to join me. But before I could move or speak she started swiftly down the stairs. I could see her moving shadow, hear the faint slapping sound of the slippers she must be wearing. I sat back, disappointed. She was just taking the back stairs to the kitchen for something.

Wondering if she'd be angry if I had the nerve to follow her, I leaned forward to watch her. As if in answer to my thought a silver-toned clock somewhere in the house struck a single note. I'd heard a similar note a while back so knew it was one o'clock. Pretty late to be asking for hospitality.

Then I realized I'd been wrong about Lola going to the kitchen. Instead, she was crossing the patio toward the little gate in the rear. And she was in a big hurry wherever she was going. She was running and there was something definitely furtive in the way she hugged the shadows and darted through the gate.

I SAT ON, thinking of a lot of good reasons why a girl might go trot-

ting out into the night like that. Some one sick down at the Mexican quarters? But there were no lights, and little chance that they were back from the Cinco de Mayo festival. To the fields to help her brother irrigate? But Jon had said that was too nasty and cold a job for his guest. Then certainly he wouldn't permit his sister to help. And Lola, so short a time ago, had told me she was afraid of her brother.

Try as I would, nothing seemed to account for the oddly furtive manner of the girl, unless it was a clandestine appointment somewhere. A lover? The thought was like a cold wind blowing over me. Yet—what else? Over and over I wrestled with those jealous thoughts. It grew cold out there, with the wind moist from the full irrigation canals, but to save my life I couldn't pull myself up from that chair. I had to wait for Lola to come back if it took all night.

But it took far less than that. As a matter of fact the silver-tongued clock had just chimed the next half hour when I saw her coming through the gate. She was still running, but with less furtiveness and more speed. She took the stairs without pausing and disappeared into her room before I'd made up my mind whether or not to speak to her. Though I waited, no light appeared. Just a faint sound, like a muffled cough, then silence.

After a little I got up, almost too stiff to move. I went on into my room, not caring anymore about disturbing anyone. I was disturbed myself. Disturbed as hell. Yet I really didn't know what about. Just to be sure the rest of the household wasn't involved in Lola's jaunt I opened my door into the front hall and listened. No sound anywhere, except the very unfastidious snoring of the fastidious sawbones across the hall. That, at least, was definite and real enough. I smiled sourly as I closed the door and crawled back into bed.

But not to sleep. At first, sitting out there on the balcony, my thoughts of Lola Castro had been like holding cold hands near a warming flame. Without warning the flame had gone out and the hands were colder than ever. And the thoughts that lay with me the rest of the night made poor bedfellows.

I slept toward morning. And overslept. It was after nine when I finally rolled out and hurried down stairs. Breakfast—and Lola—were waiting for me in the patio.

"Howard seldom gets up in time to eat with me so I thought we'd have it out here," she said, almost shyly. I said nothing, after a brief good morning, and was relieved that the doctor soon joined us. I didn't feel like talking. I had kinks in my joints from that damned balcony, and kinks in my disposition.

A Mexican came to the table, big straw hat in his brown hands. "Excusame, Senorita, but Juan the deetch rider is here and asks for why did not Senor Jon use the water last night? He say he moost send it on anyway by the noon hour."

Lola's spoon fell to her plate with a clatter and all color drained from her face. "But didn't he use it, Poncho? Surely he did. He went out before midnight and he hasn't returned."

Poncho's leathery face creased in new worry lines. "Only one tablet ees watered, Senorita. Me, I coome along the deetch before eet is day. I do not see Senor Jon so I theenk he ees feenished and I go to bed. Now Juan coomes and says the water, she ees not used."

Lola rose like a sleepwalker, her face chalky white. "Something has happened," she said, in a low, toneless voice. "Take men, Poncho, and look for him. Drag the ditch if necessary. And hurry!"

We hurriedly finished breakfast, a tasteless affair with Lola now sitting there white and still, not touch-

ing her food. Her smoky eyes were so sick looking that I began to feel a nauseating horror of some dreadful thing we were waiting for. The thing that was written in her white face.

In an hour the men were back. I saw them coming up the lane and went to stand beside Lola, my hand reaching for hers. She clung to me and moaned softly, "Help me, Wallace." For we could see what it was they carried so carefully.

Jon Castro was dead. The ditch rider said he had found the body drifted against the head gate below. Hubert Maxwell gave it as his opinion that Castro had drowned at least eight hours before.

I didn't get it at first. "The ditch isn't wide," I said, stupidly. "And surely Castro could swim a little. Looks like he might have gotten out when he fell in."

Hubert Maxwell gave me an odd look. "He didn't fall in. He was hit over the head and knocked in. An unconscious man can drown quickly."

I felt as if I'd been hit over the head, too. Murdered! Jon Castro was murdered! The man from whom they all feared violence had met violence. Questions began hammering at me but I closed my mind to them, not wanting to see them dragged out into the open.

Lola came to me, her eyes nothing but black smudges of pain in her chalky face, and asked me to go with her to tell Alene Castro. I didn't relish the job but I went, after asking Maxwell to follow as soon as he'd finished his grisly chore.

Before we reached her door we heard sudden, sharp screams and I almost sighed with relief. Then I noticed there was fright, rather than grief, in her voice and heard the words she was crying, hysterically. "Take it away, Howard! Take it away!"

We opened the door, to see Alene hunched far over on her couch, her

face registering unholy terror. In the middle of the room Howard, on his knees, was wrestling with a caterpillar about an inch long. He scooped it triumphantly onto a paper as we came in and Alene relaxed and said, shakily, "I guess I'm allergic to bugs and insects and such things. They simply give me the heeby-jeebies."

But she took our news in her stride. No hysterics. Just a few shuddering sobs and a wailing cry. "O, my poor Jon! I knew something like this would happen!"

Doc Maxwell came rushing in with a sedative ready and Howard kept fluttering around her like an old woman telling her to be brave. His concern and devotion to his sister was genuine and touching but I couldn't quite shake off the cynical notion that she hadn't been dealt the knockout they thought. Alene would think of Alene without being reminded to.

She was still capable of dealing punches, too. No sooner had she given her promise to Howard to be brave then she raised her beautiful, tear-drenched violet eyes to Lola and moaned, "Oh, Lola, why did you do it? We all know you were afraid of him but we were trying to help you."

Wanting to slap her down I granted Lola first privilege and waited. But all that lovely little enigma did was gasp like she'd had cold water in the face, turn and dash from the room. When I'd gotten bones back in my legs I followed but she was nowhere in sight.

SO I WENT back to the patio, poured myself a cup of cold coffee and sat there, facing facts. And the facts weren't pretty things to face. I'd been brought to Rancho Feliz on the pretext of meeting a man I might some day be called on to defend for murder. That man had been murdered, and the girl who'd asked me to defend him was out on a mysterious errand at the approximate hour of his

death. And she'd acted guilty as hell ever since the Mexican foreman had asked about Castro. What did it all mean? And just where did it leave me? I could see the box car type headlines announcing a prominent El Paso attorney held in a murder mystery—if there was a mystery. Quite a few people would enjoy that immensely but among them wouldn't be "Dulaney and Dulaney, Attorneys At Law"! My pompously proud senior partner would consider I'd dropped a block buster right in the middle of the reputable practice he'd built so carefully through fifteen years! And explaining a beautiful girl had found me a willing dupe wouldn't help matters a bit.

Then I saw Lola coming down the outside stairs, looking like a fugitive from the gallows, and I knew my biggest worry wasn't for Dulaney and Dulaney! That girl was standing right on a time bomb, whether she knew it or not. One look at her face and I decided she knew it. I went over and met her at the foot of the stairs.

She was carrying a newspaper-wrapped bundle in her arms and hadn't seen me. When I spoke her name she jumped, almost fell down the remaining two steps and dropped the bundle. The paper broke and I found myself staring down at the contents spilling out there at my feet. A muddy, bedraggled house coat and a pair of soggy, mud-caked huaraches! Things that had been in an irrigated field not many hours before!

I looked from those incriminating garments to Lola Castro's fear-stricken face and did the most impulsive act of my life. I stooped and rewrapped them quickly, then asked her quietly, "Where were you taking them, Lola?"

Her answer was hardly more than a fearful whisper. "To the furnace in the basement."

"That would be foolish," I told her.

"We must find a better place than that. Trust me with them, Lola. And get someone you can trust and have the prints on these stairs wiped off."

It was collusion and I knew it. But I knew Art Temple, county prosecutor, too. A politician who was out to build a record of convictions. I couldn't drop the ball right into his hands before the game had hardly started. And I had to hear Lola's explanation of things. She'd have one, I was trying to believe. She had to!

So I took the bundle back upstairs and into my room. There I carefully ripped open a pillow, wrapped the shoes in a bath towel and stuffed them in among the feathers. The robe went into the other pillow and when I was through there wasn't a goose feather left to tell the story.

CHAPTER IV

A Fishy Smell

GOING back downstairs I observed they were scrubbed from top to bottom, but already nearly dry. Lola was waiting for me at the table with a pot of fresh coffee. She poured me a cup and her hand shook so the cloth all around was spotted.

I said, without dodging about, "You're on a spot, Lola. Want me to help you?"

She nodded, dumbly. So I probed on. "Then let's start right. Where did you go last night? And what happened?"

After a moment she whispered tensely, "I don't know."

I tried again. "Look, Lola. Maxwell has phoned the county attorney and he'll soon be here. He has ways of finding out what he wants to know and he'll certainly want to know a lot of things. How can I help you if you won't trust me?"

She just looked at me helplessly and repeated, "But I can't tell you where I went. I don't know."

Patience deserted me. "Next you'll be telling me you don't know whether or not you killed your brother," I lashed at her. "Aren't those your muddy clothes I just saw?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I found them this morning, in my bathroom. That's why I know I went somewhere. But I don't remember wearing them, I don't remember getting up. I don't remember anything between the time I went to bed last night and woke up this morning."

She stuck to that. She expected me to believe it. And when I kept hammering at her she broke down pitifully. "I must have gone to the field, Wallace. But I don't remember. Maybe I even hit Jon!"

Her eyes were tortured and I saw she was on the edge of a breakup. I saw, too, what Art Temple could do with her in no time flat. In her present mental condition a moron could have her signing a murder confession, with grand larceny and arson thrown in for good measure. But I couldn't see her as a killer. I believed she was mistakenly trying to protect someone else. The man she'd gone to meet? The idea gagged me.

I left her and hunted up Hubert Maxwell. "Lola's hysterical," I told him. "Couldn't we give her something to make her sleep until Temple gets here?"

He was no fool, that doc. He looked at me shrewdly. "Just until Temple comes? Or longer?"

"A little longer wouldn't hurt," I admitted. He reached into his morocco case and fumbled around, then said. "I forgot. I gave a full bottle to Howard last night for Alene. I'll get you some."

In a moment he was back with a couple of gray tablets. "Drop them into a cup of hot coffee," he suggested. "They're tasteless and they'll do the job."

After a little persuasion I got Lola's promise to go to her room and drink the coffee I'd send her. I

poured it myself, dropped in both tablets, and heaved a sigh of relief when I saw the girl bring down the empty cup.

Art Temple didn't let any grass grow under his feet getting to Rancho Feliz. And he came with blood in his eye. With him were the Dona Anna County sheriff, two wooden-headed deputies and a coroner of like ilk.

Jon Castro had been a prominent county rancher and it was written all over Temple's handsome mug just what he expected to get out of this. Publicity, the petty politician's meat. And I knew he wouldn't give a damn who went into his sausage mill just so a conviction came out.

To make it worse, Temple was no friend of mine. I'd won two cases against him in his own court at Las Cruces and there'd been the look of the elephant in his eyes when the last was over. It was still there as he looked me over coldly and as sharply as though expecting to see murder weapons behind my ears.

"So you're on the job already, Du-laney? Looks like somebody here has reason to be scared. And plenty!"

"A strictly off-the-record social visit, Temple. I came up yesterday with Doctor Maxwell." But Heaven help me, I was thinking, if he found out what was behind that visit. If he could find out! I was getting anxious to know myself.

DISREGARDING Temple's scowls, I tagged along when they went to visit the probable scene of the murder. There it wasn't hard to reconstruct the crime. One tablet of the alfalfa field was flooded and the water box closed. The water had gone down enough to leave the muddy area around the box exposed and if you know dobe soil you know the rest. Every foot print around that box was as plainly preserved as if set in cement. And the footprints told the story.

A very ugly story of a killer who waited in the tall grasses close by until Jon Castro came up and stooped over to close the box. Then, before he had straightened up, a blow over his head had knocked him senseless. The rest was easy. His sprawling body had fallen right across the lateral ditch bank. Anybody could roll him on in. Anybody—even a slight woman!

By then I was feeling pretty sick and a cold shaking had started deep inside me. For every one of those prints, except those of Castro himself, were those of a woman! A woman wearing heelless slippers, probably huaraches!

Poncho pointed out the murder weapon. Castro's own shovel! It lay half across the ditch bank, well out of the water, and on the back of the metal scoop was human hair and blood matted with the mud.

"He leave eet steeking up in the mud—so!" The Mexican pointed out a slit along the bank that a shovel blade might have made. "Always we steek the shovel in the mud so we not lose eet in the water."

Castro's lantern lay there, too, in enough water that the flame had gone out when it dropped from his hand as he was hit.

"How long does it take to water a tablet this size?" Temple asked Poncho. With the Mexican's answer the last flickering flame of hope in me died down. "A leetle more than the hour, Senor. And the water, she coome down at the midnight."

Then Castro was killed between one and half-past. The exact time that Lola Castro had taken that muddy walk! I braced myself for Temple's next question, knowing what it would have to be.

"What women were on the place last night? Did all of them go to the festival?"

Poncho's answer was so long in coming and given so reluctantly that it was damning from the fact that he

was trying to keep it from being. "The Mexicans all go, *senor*. I know of none but the *senorita*, Lola, and the *sek* one who stay, though there are many who could have coome."

"This dame headed straight for the house," Temple pointed out, grimly. And uselessly, for the prints were plain as a chart. The woman must have gotten panicky after knocking off Castro for she'd taken a short cut right across a corner of the muddy field, instead of following the ditch bank path to the lane.

"We'll go talk to Miss Castro." Temple glared at me as though daring me to object.

Right then I was wishing I could talk to Miss Castro myself. I'd ask her what kind of fool did she take me for. Nobody put over a cold-blooded killing like that while walking in their sleep! And what I was up against now was trying to justify myself in concealing evidence and incriminating knowledge. Everything in my code of ethics forbade it. But it was hard to knife Lola like that while she was in her present condition. I'd have to wait a while.

Back at the house a crowd of excited Mexicans, chattering and wailing, were congregated outside the patio. We had to push our way through them and a lot of them crossed themselves at sight of us as though we were death stalking by. As maybe we were.

Like most residents of the border states I only know enough Mexican to get by but I gathered the gist of what they were saying among themselves. Exactly what Alene Castro had said—that it was a thing they'd been expecting. And there was heart-break in their soft voices as they murmured the name of Lola Castro.

ONCE more I sat in the patio drinking the cold coffee the excited servants had neglected to remove. And wishing to hell it was

something more bracing. If a guy ever needed a drink I did right then but I didn't know the household well enough to go looking for it.

Temple had been inside for a long time, it seemed to me. He'd made a point of going in alone, and there'd been nothing I could do about that. I was still in the *status quo* of a house guest, no more.

Poncho came in hesitantly, his face glistening from sweat that exertion hadn't produced. Seeing me alone at the table he came over. "You are the freend of the *senorita*, Lola, *senor*?"

"Si," I said, softly, knowing he had something to tell me. But at first I didn't get it. He'd dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Then I theenk you should know, *senor*, that Pedro ees here. He ees verree scared and he smells of fesh."

"Fish?" I was uttrly dumb. "What's fish got to do with Miss Castro?"

"Not weeth her, *senor*. Weeth heem, the dead one. He has told Pedro he weel make the trouble if he feesh in his deetch. Put Pedro has been feeshing." He lowered his voice still more and added a word that brought me out of my chair like a shot, "Last night, *senor*."

Just then I saw Temple coming out of the house. And he was carrying a gleam in his eyes that could mean only one thing—he had a certain Wallace Dulaney right where he wanted him, under his heel. All that was left was the squashing.

I just had time to mutter to Poncho, "Don't let Pedro get away. Lola's in a spot, Poncho." I was banking on the loyalty of the Mexican, something on which you can seldom go wrong.

Poncho shuffled off and Temple sat down opposite me. That gleam had brightened into spot-light proportions.

"Pretty smart, aren't you, Dulaney? But this time you've outsmarted yourself. You've gone too far."

"That so?" I used my best poker

technique. "How far have I gone, Temple?"

He waved aside my offer of cold coffee. "Too damned far. And now let's call the turn. Are you dealing yourself cards in this game? Do you expect to defend Lola Castro?"

I drew a long breath and plunged in, right up to my neck. "If she needs defending, I will."

"She'll need it," he said, grimly. "As soon as she wakes from that double dose of knock-out drops you gave her I'm arresting her for the murder of her brother. And I mean murder."

"On what grounds?" I parried. "You haven't much to go on."

"I've got all I need. Motivation—Lola Castro was deathly afraid of her brother. She had reason to be, judging from all I've heard. But she didn't wait and kill him in self-defense. She waylaid him last night and killed in cold blood because she was afraid to wait! It was the perfect opportunity—all the servants gone and even the laborers and their families, the water coming down at midnight and forcing Castro to be out there alone using it." He laughed unpleasantly and added, "And in the house, one of the state's best defense attorneys waiting to jump to her defense."

I muttered a dry, "Thanks. But all this isn't evidence. It's unsupported theory."

"Sez you. Those footprints do a nice job of supporting, Dulaney. And in case you didn't notice there was a trail of dobe mud across the patio. And there were muddy prints up these back stairs, leading right to her door, until she ordered a hurry-up job of scrubbing before I got here. And somewhere there are some muddy clothes. Shoes, at least. When I find them my case will be complete. Maybe you can help me about that, Dulaney?"

Somebody, apparently, had done a lot of talking. Grudgingly I con-

ceded that they usually did when Temple got hold of them. "How would I know anything about any damn shoes?" I stalled.

"How indeed?" His voice had gone gooey with sweetness and I itched to slap him down. "Maybe the same way you knew you'd be needed here today. Maybe Lola Castro told you, just like she told you she was going to kill her brother and for you to be on hand."

"You're crazy," I said, but my hands were moist with cold sweat.

His crooked grin twisted his face into an odd grimace. "But not that crazy, Dulaney. Not crazy enough to believe that your being here was just a coincidence. You're a busy man, you don't go in for girl-chasing, and you never saw Lola Castro till last week and never saw the rest of the family till yesterday. So what does that add up to?"

"I'll tell you." He leaned towards me, his grin so one-sidedly broad, his foppish mustache seemed to be tickling one ear. "It adds up to collusion. Or we can make it complicity and accessory before the fact. Not pretty words, any of them. But, then neither is fratricide."

It looked like he had me hooked. In words plain enough for a moron to understand he was telling me to get out while I still had the chance. If I stayed in and defended Lola Castro I'd have another job. I'd be defending myself in disbarment proceedings!

I'm human. That's why I sat there sweating a minute or two, thinking of what I was letting myself in for. There was only a small chance I could save Lola's pretty neck. It was a cinch I was fixing to hang myself, professionally speaking. Why not throw all my cards in his lap, face up? It would be the easy way out of a nasty mess that threatened to throw off plenty of stink before it was over.

But I didn't. I got up, telling him

off in words of one syllable. "Go to hell, Temple. If you've lost any shoes, find them. And when you do, let me know."

CHAPTER V

Power of Suggestion

I STARTED off, ready to hear what the guy that smelled of fish had to say. Before I'd gone ten feet Hubert Maxwell and a guy came out of the house and walked over to Temple. The guy was young but so thin you could have counted his ribs. A lunger, I knew at once. I heard Maxwell say, "This is Ray Hollis, Mr. Temple. He's heard about what happened last night and wants to talk to you."

Temple nodded. "Sit down, Hollis. What's on your mind?"

Hollis sat down. So did I for that name had aroused my interest. The young man was plainly agitated. And so was I for I was remembering about the scene on the porch the night before. And that Castro went off in a huff to see Ray Hollis.

"Are you going to arrest Lola for her brother's murder?" Hollis blurted out.

Temple was cautious. "That might depend on what you have to tell me. What do you know about it, Hollis?"

"I know she didn't do it," he said. "She couldn't have. You don't know Lola or you couldn't possibly think—"

Temple interrupted him, which was just as well. Hollis had already spoiled anything he might have to say in Lola's defense by being too eager. "I have to remind you, Hollis, that it isn't what I think that matters in a court of law. It's facts. Unless you know some facts bearing directly on what took place in the field last night you're wasting my time and yours."

"But I do. I know who killed Castro and it wasn't Lola. It was a

Mexican he called Pedro. They quarrelled about the bass Pedro took out of Castro's drainage ditch."

I heaved a great sigh of pure, unadulterated relief. A break in the clouds at last. A break? Hell, it was a rainbow. For Ray Hollis was still talking his beautiful language.

He was telling Temple about going over to where he knew Castro was working the night before. He admitted he'd gone there looking for trouble. Earlier in the evening he'd seen a lantern light along his lateral ditch bank. At first he assumed it was the ditch rider, though he'd told him to bypass him on the water, since he was operating on a shoe string and using as little as he could get by with. But later he'd got to thinking about it and had gone down to look over his boxes, just to be sure there were no leaks, as Castro was claiming. He'd found them all open a little. He knew then that Castro had been the one he'd seen, and that he'd opened his boxes so his fields would be wet the next day and he could accuse Hollis of stealing water.

At this point Temple had interrupted, plainly a non-believer. "And just why would Castro try to frame you like that?"

Red flamed in Hollis's sallow cheeks, spreading clear to his eyes. I tensed myself for his answer, knowing somehow what it would be. And it was just that bad.

"He hated me," Hollis admitted. "He knew I—liked Lola. But because I haven't either health or money he didn't want us to be—friends."

There was nothing of relief in the breath I sucked in then. The rainbow was gone, the clouds blacker than ever. And the grin on Art Temple's face was one of devilish glee.

"So Castro didn't want you marrying his sister? Go on, Hollis. What happened after you got to Castro's field? You and him fight?"

"No. I found him over by the

drainage ditch, saw his lantern. But he never knew I was there. I got close enough to hear voices, him and this Pedro scrapping about some bass the Mexican had seined from the ditch. Castro was mad as hell. He made Pedro throw the fish back in and said he'd throw the Mexican in if he didn't get out and stay out."

"And then?" Temple purred. "You and Castro fight then?"

"No." Shame crept into Ray Hollis's voice. "I cooled off, I guess. I remembered the doctor had told me fighting might bring on a hemorrhage so I decided to skip it. I just left without saying anything."

"Then why do you say Pedro killed him if you didn't see him do it?"

"Because I saw him following Castro over to that box. The tablet was already flooded and I knew Castro was heading there to close it. I was far enough ahead they couldn't see me, but just as I reached the lane I looked back and saw the lantern bobbing along the tablet border. And a little distance back of that was the shadow of the Mexican, sort of skulking along. He must have come up behind Castro and struck him. There was nobody else."

"Nobody else," Temple said softly, "except a girl hiding in the grass beside the ditch which you may or may not have seen. Frankly, Hollis, your story stinks. Either you're making it all up or just telling the parts you think might help Lola Castro. But it hasn't helped."

"He's not making it all up." I decided it was my cue to talk and told of the scene I'd witnessed the day before. "And Poncho says Pedro is here now and smells of fish. That means he kept the bass he got or the scent wouldn't cling to his clothing. You smell of fish, Temple, because you've cleaned them and got blood on yourself. Yet Castro made him throw the fish back. Unless he was sure Castro wouldn't bother him

again, how would Pedro dare to do more seining?"

Temple got to his feet. "Show me."

Poncho was waiting by the kitchen door, his black eyes agleam. In answer to my question he fairly beamed his pride. "Of a surety I have heem, senors. He ees locked tight in the furnace room."

We trooped down the basement stairs and Poncho took a key off a nail and unlocked a door. But on the threshold he gasped queerly and started backing out, crossing himself. "Por Dios! Por Dios!"

Pushing past him we saw what he had seen. A Mexican, sprawled on his back on the floor, who no longer smelled of fish-blood. He now smelled of death and of his own warm blood that still trickled from an ugly wound in his throat.

THERE was no grin of any kind on the face Temple turned on Ray Hollis. "So you make sure he won't give the lie to your story before you spring it, eh, Hollis? It's easy to accuse a man of murder after he's dead."

Hollis was plainly too frightened to do more than stutter and stammer weak denials. Above him sounded Poncho's wails. "He ees okay when I breeng heem down here! I tell heem I geeve the tequilla eef he tell what he saw last night. He ees scared so in the door I just geeve the poosh and lock heem in."

But nobody is listening to Poncho. Everybody is tearing that basement apart, looking for a murder weapon. They found it so soon that I smelled a plant. It was a strong, thin letter opener and it looked deadly feminine. And it had been tossed into the ash receptacle under the furnace grate. Either a dumb trick—or a smart one!

Leaving Temple browbeating a very scared Hollis, I slipped out to the kitchen and made a quick cup of coffee. I found things easily. In fact, someone had left things handily

about from a previous making. I took the back stairs to Lola's room, a steaming cup in hand. Time she was coming out of that Rip Van Winkle, and definitely. But there was relief in the thought that at least I knew where she was when Pedro was killed.

My mistake. When I pushed open her door I stood staring at the empty bed, feeling my head floating around the room out of reach. Lola had awakened without my help. But the question that was beating an anvil chorus in my dim-wit brain was: When? I lost a few seconds listening to that everything else but musical racket before I came to with a bang. What if Temple got hold of Lola before I did? I went out of there and down the hall stairs like greased lightning.

At that, I missed the boat. There were voices in Alene's room and loudest of all was Temple's. I hit the door like a charging bull and stopped short. They were all there and Temple had the floor. He had just interrupted Lola, Alene and Howard Wilson in the act of drinking coffee.

Temple was turning the stained paper knife over and over in his hands. He grinned fiendishly as he said to me:

"Guess I can manage without those shoes, Dulaney. Miss Castro has just confessed this letter opener belongs to her. She kept it in her private desk, in the library."

"But, good God," I cried, "she doesn't know where you found it! She doesn't know it was used to kill a man!"

"Doesn't she?" Temple smiled smugly, wrapped the dagger-like knife in his handkerchief and stuck it in his pocket. Exhibit A.

A look at Lola would have cracked a stone wide open. Her dark eyes were blank and lusterless, just two burned holes in the white sheet of her face. And her voice was heart-breakingly tired as she answered my look.

"It's my letter opener. But I never killed anyone with it. Why should I kill poor Pedro? Except for his habit of taking whatever he wanted he was harmless."

"But dangerous," Temple smirked. "If he was in that field last night as Hollis says, he saw your brother killed. By the light of the lantern in Castro's hand he probably saw your face. Either you or Hollis, or both, wanted him dead before he started talking. I'm arresting you, Miss Castro, for the double murder of Jon Castro and Pedro Gomez. And you, Ray Hollis, for complicity. And you, Dulaney," his eyes shot poison in my direction, "I'll take care of later. Please be ready to leave within an hour, Miss Castro."

SO THAT was that. I turned and went back upstairs for two reasons. I wanted to think and I had to lay my aching head down while I tried it. And I wanted it lying on those damned shoes while I decided what to do with them. I knew Temple planned to spend the hour he'd given Lola ransacking the house for them. He still wanted them, no matter what he said. That paper knife was bad enough but not conclusive. Anyone could have taken it from her desk since it was unlocked. But those huaraches were something else again. I didn't dare try to clean them there. Dobe mud is the stickiest stuff in the world and Castro's had enough red clay in it to stain. And Temple was too smart to give me a chance to dispose of them.

In the next room I could hear small sounds as Lola moved about, getting ready to go to Las Cruces. To go to jail! The thought brought goose bumps out all over me. How did a girl like Lola Castro go about getting ready to go to jail? It didn't do any good for those pounding demons in my head to keep reminding me that she must have known how to go about killing her brother. And Pedro.

Hadn't I seen her myself? And where was she when the Mexican was killed? Howard Wilson said he'd met her in the lower hall, not far from the basement door, when he came out of the kitchen with the coffee. She admitted it, but couldn't remember how long she'd been awake. Just like she couldn't remember where she went last night. My God, was she a fiend in human form that she could kill and then forget so easily?

There was a tap on my door, then Hubert Maxwell pushed it open and came in. He sat down, put a cigarette in his mouth and forgot to light it.

"What are you going to do about Lola, Dulaney? With two charges against her she hasn't a chance for bail."

I groaned. Was he telling me? "And with her sticking to that crazy story that she doesn't know where she went last night I haven't got the chance of a snowball in hell of doing anything about her."

"How do you know it's crazy? Dulaney, haven't you ever heard of self-hypnosis? Maybe Lola did do something in her sleep last night that she doesn't know about."

I sat up, all attention. "You mean she might have gone out and killed Castro without knowing it? But that's the bunk, Doc!"

"How do you know?" he came back at me. "Suggestion is a powerful force and it's a scientific fact that men have been thrown into trances by the use of it. For months Lola has lived with the fixed idea that she was in danger of being killed. She and Jon both believed in that legendary curse. Perhaps the idea took such complete possession of her mind that a fear psychosis developed and created in her subconscious the desire to kill in self-defense. Last night she yielded to the urge. Today, her subconscious mind having been relieved of its burden of fear, she actually has no remembrance of her deed."

I sat stunned. Could that be what was back of Lola's inexplicable actions? Though I was no student of mental science, I knew most anybody could pack around a phobia or so without being marked. Maybe they could get you down, like Doc was saying. In that case I had something to work on, maybe. At least I could sell myself the idea that she wasn't a cold-blooded, lying killer.

"But Pedro? That wouldn't account for killing him?"

"Hollis," Doc said briefly. "He's in love with her, thought he was helping. Poncho said he saw him taking Pedro to the basement."

That put Hollis on the spot and he didn't look like a killer to me. But to hell with Hollis! I had to help Lola. "It'll be a hard nut to crack before a jury but it looks like all we got. Can I count on you, Doc?"

"To the limit," he said, briefly. I decided I'd better start liking the guy. If he hadn't put solid ground under my feet he'd at least given me a rock to stand on.

In the next room Lola started crying. I couldn't take it. I went down into the patio for a smoke.

CHAPTER VI

The Muddy Slippers

PONCHO must have been waiting for me. He looked plenty bothered. He wanted to know if it was true that Temple was arresting Lola. When I had to admit it was he shook his head vigorously, his voice full of reproach.

"She no keel, that one. She has the tender heart. She no keel even a leetle bug."

Blooie! Like a stroke of lightning I knew this simple Mexican was right. Subconscious baloney! All the fear psychosis in Christendom couldn't make a lousy killer out of a girl gentle and sweet enough to inspire such loyalty in her servants!

If all that thought suggestion had brought on any murder trances it had been in some mind more receptive to cruelty than hers!

Yet, hadn't I seen her? With that, the merry-go-round began again. But suddenly it halted on a thought. Had I seen her? Maybe I was under some thought suggestion influence myself! Just because I'd seen a woman coming out of Lola's room, wearing her clothes, I'd been sure it was her. Suppose it wasn't?

"Poncho," I fairly begged, "think hard! Could there have been any other woman on the place last night? Someone who wanted to fool us into thinking she was Lola?"

"There was only the senorita Lola. And the seeck one." He lowered his voice to add, "But the seeck one hates her, senor."

The sick one! Could Alene Castro be playing games? She was the oddest invalid I'd ever seen. She kissed her doctor, gave a man ideas just by looking at him and ate a field hand's rations. Maybe she even walked when nobody was looking? She did a good job of jumping at sight of a caterpillar!

The idea was so fantastic I might have dropped it if we hadn't suddenly had our ear drums nearly burst by the yelling of some Mexican kids right outside the wall. We looked over to see what the excitement was and I jumped at the sight of something a boy held by the tail. Something that looked like a cross between a lizard and a dachshund. Evil-looking eyes glittered in the ugly head, the broad back was splotched with orange and green and black, the tail was short but sharp, and four oddly spraddled, short legs made it look like something in an alcoholic's nightmare.

Beside me Poncho laughed. "A water dog, senor. Not so bad as she look."

I relaxed. I'd heard of the creatures, a species of salamander, found around the irrigation ditches. But

harmless, though horrible enough to make anybody jump.

Anybody! The thought got a firm grip on me and wouldn't let go. Especially a woman who had hysterics at sight of a fuzzy caterpillar.

Taking out a two dollar bill, I showed it to the kid. "Just what I want for my collection. Bring it along to the house and the bill is yours."

He was willing. Without meeting anyone I took him to the closed door of Alene's room, told him to poke it in and shut the door quickly. He complied, took the bill, and scampered off. Heart pounding, I waited. But not for long.

Piercing, blood-curdling screams suddenly split the air. They brought running feet from all over the house but I waited till they were all very close before I threw the door open. I wanted to be sure Art Temple would see what I would see. Maybe—

He saw it. They all saw it. A water dog in the middle of the room, blinking its beady eyes in confusion at the fuss it had started, and dodging the books Howard Wilson was chunking at it. While on the couch a terrified girl was having noisy hysterics. But she wasn't jumping up as I'd expected! So I hadn't proved a thing.

So now where was I? For one thing, the center of a ring of accusing eyes as people crowded into the room. Maxwell rushed over to his patient, hypo needle ready. Temple glared at me as though I was an even lower species than the salamander. At that, I did feel like I could crawl under its belly.

"What goes on?" Temple barked.

Picking up the poor creature by the tail as the boy had done, I carried it to a window, pushed up the sash, and tossed the thing out.

"A water dog goes out," I said, bitterly. "It was all a mistake."

Howard Wilson sneezed and jerked the window back down. No fresh air

fiend, that guy. Alene's pitiful sobs grew quieter and Maxwell motioned us all out of the room.

IN THE library he faced me coldly. "What were you trying to do, Dulaney? Kill my patient?" But there was a funny gleam in his eyes, as though he knew exactly what I was trying to do.

Howard Wilson charged in, bristling like an angry porcupine. There was shocked incredulity in his red face as he pawed the air with his big hankie. "You actually did that on purpose? Scared a dying girl like that? Why, you lousy rat, you might have killed her!"

Dying? I looked around and saw confirmation in their faces. Lola answered me, sadly. "I thought you understood, Wallace. It's just a matter of time, Hubert says."

I looked at Doc and he nodded. "But, of course, these nerve injuries can't be predicted with complete accuracy." Which left him a point for retreat, I could see.

Temple stopped me as I left the room. "Better give up, Dulaney, and grab that insanity plea the Doc wants to hand you. I'm willing to meet you half way. A manslaughter charge ought to look good from where you're standing."

So Maxwell had been blabbing! I suddenly decided the sawbones had done a lot of talking, first and last. And it was all about theories with little of fact. And murder was a cold, hard fact. I looked from his fishy eyes to those of Lola Castro, tortured by doubt and fear and I had one more fact at hand. Lola Castro was not a murderess. To let her live believing herself one, under any circumstances, would be more cruel than the death penalty.

"Go to hell!" I told Art Temple. "And take Hubert Maxwell and his screwy ideas with you!"

As I got out of there I heard

Temple telling Lola they'd wait till after dinner to start. A half-hour reprieve. I knew Temple wasn't caring about eating. He wanted more time to find those shoes. That gave me just that long to find a fiendish killer if I was to keep Lola from the ignominy of jail and the attendant publicity. A killer, I was by then convinced, who was just as close to my nose as the shoes were to Temple's. But much better hidden!

I thought of the things my killer might be hiding under as I sat alone in the patio again. Invalidism? The best M. D. in El Paso said not. But in spite of the fact that my trap had failed to catch her, I couldn't see Alene Castro as a dying woman. She'd make a very lively corpse, I thought callously. I had a vision of Doc, wiping lipstick off his mouth, and I knew what was wrong with the picture. Doc's eyes, last night, had registered several degrees of rise in temperature above his normally 32 degrees or below. That meant that what Alene Castro was giving out had all to do with living, not dying.

The Doc came out and I called him over. He beat me to the punch. "Look here, Dulaney, I think you're making a mistake about Lola. Temple's willing to compromise now but if you push him too far. . . ."

"There'll be a nasty murder trial," I finished for him. "And that wouldn't be so good for you, would it, Doc? Not if I called in specialists to prove there is little or nothing wrong with Alene Castro. The newspapers will love that part about you kidding the family she was dying, just to keep on getting fat fees. And that part about kissing her will have half the husbands in El Paso locking their doors in your face. It looks to me like you're behind the eightball, my friend. But if you want to talk compromise, I'm listening."

He threw in the sponge. Quick. "You won't believe me when I tell you why I did it, Dulaney. Not for

Alene, nor the fees. It was really for Lola's sake."

"That's a hot one," I jibed. "I can't see you scorning the fees. But go on."

"It was an actual obsession with Jon Castro that he was fated to kill either his wife or his sister. Before he married he was sure it had to be Lola. After that accident, a few months after their marriage, he decided it was Alene and that her death from it was inevitable. I let him keep on thinking it, afraid that he might revert to his first idea of its being Lola if he knew Alene was recovering. He really was a dangerous neurotic on that one subject, due to the power of suggestion. Maybe I should have had him sent to an institution but he was entirely normal in every other respect—"

"And that would have stopped the fees," I put in. "What did you tell Alene?"

"The truth. That it was a temporary paralysis that she might get over any time. But she begged me to keep on deceiving Castro for she was afraid he might turn on her if he knew she would live. But you're all wrong, Dulaney, thinking she might be responsible for Castro's death. She's not that much improved. Besides, she's nervous and sleeps badly. Howard gave her two sleeping tablets last night, on my orders. She never knew a thing all night."

Two sleeping tablets. "In coffee?"

Doc nodded. "He usually gives them that way. Why?"

I controlled my impulse to bay like a blood hound. "What about Wilson? What does he think about Alene?"

"The same as Castro—that she can't get well. Alene wanted it that way. She was afraid he might tell Jon the truth. Besides, she liked having Howard about to wait on her and spoil her. He'd stay on, a sort of pensioner on Jon's charity, as long as she needed him. But the boy hasn't a dime of his own and he's proud and

only his sister's need would keep him under the circumstances."

I was glad somebody liked the drippy Howard. I wished I liked the man before me better but he was all I had.

"Listen, Doc. It looks now as if both our professional reputations are about to take a toboggan ride to hell and gone. What do you say about a mutual benefit movement to stop the landslide?"

He was listening, so I talked. When I got through he looked at me like I'd been a microbe under glass. "You got nerve enough to try another bluff? One just backfired on you."

I stood up. "A drowning man is justified in continuous straw grabbing, Doc. One might prove to be a log. I'll see you in exactly ten minutes, Doc."

THAT didn't give me long to get all of them in the library together. But it was long enough. But I was about to run out of good excuses for keeping them there when Doc Maxwell walked in. He carried two large pillows under his arms and as they all stared at him he said to Temple, and I must say he said it well, "I think, Mr. Temple, that I've found something you've been looking for."

Temple was out of his chair in a rush, beating his hands against those pillows. "Shoes!" he almost yelled, and feathers began flying. "Maxwell, how did you find them?"

Doc said, in his own stiff way, "I never looked but I thought it might be. I happened to notice feathers blowing through the hall and I was curious. I looked in the nearest room and there were more under things. It struck me as odd because the maids clean carefully every day. Then I examined them and saw they'd both been opened. So I brought them along."

Temple was so excited he could hardly get the pins out and the pillows open. Feathers began flying in his face and covering his clothing but

he paid no attention. In his hands he held a pair of mud-caked huaraches, while a mud-stained robe lay over a chair.

"Yours?" he asked Lola, viciously triumphant. She nodded, not meeting my eyes.

Temple turned to me, his grin an ugly slash in his face. "Maybe you'd better ask her why she hid them like this, Dulaney. She might not remember if I ask her."

"Maybe she wouldn't," I said, "for maybe she didn't hide them at all. I didn't hear Doc say where he got those pillows."

Doc said it then, coolly, distinctly. "I got them in Howard Wilson's room. You can see the loose feathers in there yourself, Temple."

The shocked silence in the room was thick enough to slice and spread with butter. Howard Wilson broke it with a sound that seemed a cross between a groan and a scream.

"But that's ridiculous! I never saw those things before!"

I took up a shoe and laid it alongside Wilson's foot. "You could wear it. Your foot's quite small. Sure you didn't wear them to the field last night, Wilson?"

His face was a sight to behold. "Why would I wear them? They're a woman's clothes."

"Sure. And that made you look like a woman, didn't it? In short, like Lola Castro. Unless somebody looked close and saw the glasses you wear. Which is what poor Pedro did when you stepped into the glare from the lantern. Which is why you had to kill him today before he had a chance to tell it. Lucky you were just going to the kitchen and make coffee for Alene, wasn't it? There was plenty time to run down to the basement, kill the Mexican and get back to the kitchen and finish the coffee making."

While I'd been talking Temple was examining the robe, which was what I'd gambled on his doing. I almost grinned as he took a large handker-

chief from the pocket of the garment. A handkerchief plainly marked with a H. W. It was still slightly damp from use and Temple said, tightly, "Looks like you're not bluffing this time, Dulaney."

Howard cracked at sight of that. Which was something else I'd gambled on. "Damn you, Dulaney!" he yelled. "You're framing me. I know I never left any handkerchief in that pocket! And I never put those things in my pillows. You got them out of Lola's bathroom."

He stopped too late. "Give a man rope," I laughed. "Wilson, how did you know Lola found those things in her bathroom this morning? We certainly never broadcast it. Must have been because you put them there yourself. And you felt safe, making free with Lola's things that way because you knew the two sleeping tablets you dropped in her coffee last night would make her sleep very soundly. As soundly as Alene slept. Just to be sure about that, Doc."

But Maxwell already had that bottle of tablets. "Six gone," he said. "Two for Alene, two for Lola, and two we borrowed this morning. It checks, Dulaney."

"How about motive?" Temple asked, and I could tell he wasn't going to be so hard to sell. "Far as I can learn Castro and Wilson got along all right."

"He treated me white," Wilson said, tightly. "Why should I want to kill him?"

"So you'd be free to sneeze when and where you wanted to," I told him. "Doc says living off Castro griped you. With him dead, Lola convicted of his murder and your sister, as you thought, about to succumb to her injuries you'd find yourself inheriting a ranch worth about three hundred thousand dollars. Men have been killed for much less."

"Damn you, Dulaney!" Wilson's voice was like the snarl of a wild animal and he was no longer a mild little man with hay fever. He was a cor-

nered rat and he was going to fight like one. In his hand had appeared an automatic and he had it pointed right at Lola's heart. "You're so damn smart maybe you can tell what I'm going to do now! I'm going to splatter some high class blood around this room when this bullet smashes into a white-faced snob that thinks she's better than anyone else! I wanted to see her rot in jail while I lorded it over everybody here like she's been doing. But rotting in the ground will be all right, too! And then I'm scrambling and if anybody tried to stop me they'll have their guts splattered around with hers!"

I WAS standing right beside a window. At the first sight of that gun I had an inspiration. With no betraying movement of my body I reached back of me and began easing up the sash. By the time Howard finished his speech and reached the door I had it about half way up. He raised the gun a trifle, tightened his finger—and sneezed!

But I'd seen the sneeze coming. With the first spasmodic blink of his eyes I jumped. It was only about eight feet and I've long legs. And long arms. My first blow knocked his arm aside so his bullet plowed harmlessly through an overstuffed divan. My second swing caught his chin, and the floor caught him! By the time Temple and the officers hauled him up, all the fight was out of him.

I told him grimly: "Sneezing and killing don't go so good together, Wilson. In case you're interested, it was a sneeze that put me wise. You sneezed in Lola's room last night when you got back from the wet field and you've been at it all day. You shouldn't have gotten your feet wet like that."

"Don't worry about him," Temple said. "It's nice and dry in the county jail."

HE was grinning broadly and almost humanly as he took his prisoner away.

Lola was white faced and shaking. "He hated me!" she breathed. "He actually wanted to kill me! I can't understand it."

"I can," I told her. "I can even almost pity the guy. He longed to be rich and important and wanted to be noticed and he wasn't. So he turned into one of Doc's phobia cases and started taking out his gripe against life on you. Incidentally, he was your Rancho Feliz ghost, Lola. Between him and Alene, your brother never had a chance to forget what he thought he had to do. Alene was scared for herself and kept the idea before him that you should be his victim. And before you. While Wilson made capital of it to further his own purposes. Between them they had Jon pretty well stuffed with ideas, and when he was cross and ugly with you it was his subconscious desire to be decent that was battling that other yen to hurt you and—Oh, hell, Doc, you take over. You know all about things like that. It's too deep for me."

Doc gave me a funny look. "You seem to be doing all right. And since you recognize the power of thought suggestion on Jon, why not try it out on Lola?"

With that he went to take Alene's temperature, which suited me fine. Even fishes love, in their peculiar way, I suppose.

Lola looked after him, puzzled. "What does he mean, Wallace?"

"To answer that I must know two things," I answered. "Do you love Ray Hollis?"

"No," she said, promptly.

"Do you love Doc Maxwell?"

"Certainly not."

"Then here's what Doc means. If I keep telling you over and over that you love me, pretty soon you'll be believing it."

She smiled and said a beautiful thing. "I'm willing to believe it now."

The Ghost Walks— And Shoots and Talks!



CHAPTER I

Whispers From the Grave

"THIS," said Rex Ware, "should build up reader-interest!" He ran rapid fingers through his tousled black hair, zipped the paper from the typewriter, and handed it to his comely wife.

Sheila Ware examined it under the desk lamp. The sheet was headed *Ware in Hollywood (1)*, which was the name of his syndicated column. She read:

"Movieland has its mysteries. In lonely canyon in the Hollywood Hills there is a great, sprawling house, nestled amidst heavily wooded grounds. For more than a year no one has entered this place. The personal effects and bric-a-brac of its owner, Scoby Vance, still lie as they did on that tragic day when he was dragged to an untimely death by a Malibu rip-tide.

"Readers of this column will recall that this strange situation was provided for in Vance's will, and is destined to endure, by the weird provi-

Scoby Vance was one of the greatest actors on earth, and he rehearsed diligently for a role on the "Other Side."

By Glenn Pierce

sions of that document, for two more years. At the time the will was probated, the common opinion was that Vance persisted in death in playing one of the eerie roles he so loved to portray in life, and the matter was regarded as a rather grisly joke by a beloved actor who lived his parts. The heirs were all well-provided for, and did not live in the vicinity, so the will was not contested.

"But now Hollywood is wondering if perhaps there was not a deeper reason for Vance's strange request. Was he, like Conan Doyle and Houdini, interested in the great question of return from the Other Side? And did he provide this gloomy mansion as a stage, set for his return?"

"For strange things have happened recently in that lonely canyon. A well-known local real-estate broker the other evening saw through the fog a dim light shining from an upstairs window, above the unkempt shrubbery of Vance's great estate. And the nearest resident, half a mile down the ravine, has reported hearing the bell in the clock-tower tolling mournfully at midnight.

"There have been scattered requests for an investigation. All I have to say is—watch this column, and leave it to your reporter!"

Sheila returned the paper. She was a starlet until Mr. Ware had swept her off her feet. Since that time, she had used her popularity in the industry as a source of information for *Ware in Hollywood*.

"Well, Cookie," she regarded him suspiciously. "I suppose this means ghost-breaking, will-breaking, and law-breaking."

Rex winked at her and yanked the cover over his typewriter. He af-

fected baggy, ape-shape sports coats with full-cut gabardine slacks—and only his closest friends knew that he wore this informal attire because it concealed the slight twist to his walk that a mortar shell on Saipan had bestowed upon him. "Law-breaking will be involved only to a degree. Only to a degree. No one need know, however—"

"—except the readers of your column," she finished, her eyes twinkling. "Oh, it'll be just a family secret."

"Delilah," he said, looking at his wristwatch. "It is now nine ten o'clock. I shall go to the Vance menage, climb the barrier, get in the house if I can, hang around until midnight, then return and write up my experiences. It'll be safe but thrilling, and the fans'll eat it up."

"Well," Sheila sighed. "Life with Ware is nobody's picnic, but I'm tough. When do we start?"

He grinned and shook his head. "You could never negotiate the wall with your hoopskirts and bustle. Besides, you're too fat. No, you will await me on the corner of Sixth and Seventh, as per usual. And look up a lot of frightening adjectives in the thesaurus. I'm liable to rush in speechless and gasping, hair on end, gibbering with fright. At least, I'll do my level best to work up a frenzy. Then the column'll sound inspired."

He pulled on a sport coat over his polo shirt, leaned over the desk, planted a quick one on her cheek, then looked suddenly haggard. "Gad, woman," he said, "you thrill me." He came around the desk, took her in his arms. Then he dashed for the door.

"Rex!" said Sheila suddenly. "Wait!"

He turned, brows lifted. She was staring at him strangely.

"I—I have a queer feeling," she confessed. "You—you don't suppose there's anything sacrilegious about breaking a will, do you?"

"Aw, listen, honey," he grinned. "Don't get the jumps—until you get a grass skirt. Those bells and lights are just middle-class imagination working overtime. There ain't no ghosts—but this thing is a natural for a hard-working young sprout like me. Scoby Vance played too many monsters and ghouls for his own good. I think he was a little tetched." He whirled on his heel. "Have some coffee ready," he said. "It's a damp nicht eot."

She shivered, then laughed. "Too many detective stories for yours truly," she said. "Tuck your shirt in, Pumpkin. You look like Bing Crosby."

He blew her a kiss and slammed the door behind him.

ALONE in the little office, with its gleaming chromium and shining maple, Sheila tidied up. Then she flashed out the lights and prepared to go to the "corner of Sixth and Seventh," which, in their personal code, was the home of Vera Vane, an ex-star of the silent era, a close friend, and a secret contributor to the column. It was through such priceless contacts that *Ware in Hollywood* had become the best-known and one of the biggest paid of the syndicated movie-chatters.

Sheila frowned as she emerged on the street. It was hard to believe that a short distance from these crowded night-spots lay, silent and cold, the forbidden house of a dead man.

Forbidden! She wondered again if Rex were doing the right thing, and once more that inexplicable clammy feeling doused her spirits.

So far, she and Rex had gotten a lot of fun out of their job. Only once had an uncomfortable shadow

darkened their prospects—the Cady affair, when Rex had criticized a good actor for drinking himself out of a career. Cady had threatened Rex, and for a time Sheila had been fearful that the liquor-sodden man might attempt violence. But Cady had conveniently dropped out of sight, and peace had returned to the Ware household.

Nevertheless, Sheila knew that beneath the glitter of Hollywood lay seeds of tragedy. Stakes in this city of grease paint were so high that the rules of the game were often disobeyed.

She pushed her coupe out winding Sunset Boulevard, through Beverly Hills, and into Westwood, where Vera Vane lived. Vera was one of the few stars of the silents who had sensibly salted away her profits in days of prosperity. But Vera was an exception. Hollywood was filled with abdicated nobility—resentful and on their uppers. It was just possible that one of these stood back of the weird events at the Vance estate.

At Vera's house—a pleasant Monterey near the University—she unburdened herself, hoping to be cheered by the older woman's cold logic. But to her surprise, Vera looked troubled. She was a stately woman with majestic gray hair, and her features retained much of the beauty they had once possessed. Like many others, she had been driven from her throne by the talkies. She sat now, a slim and graceful figure, in the comfortable Spanish living room of her big house. Thru the window glittered the lights of the University on its knoll.

"I wish he hadn't gone there, Sheila," Vera said. "Scoby Vance was a good friend of mine, and a grander person you'd never want to know, until—"

"Until what?" Sheila leaned forward.

Vera hesitated. "The last six months of his life, Scoby was differ-

ent, somehow. I don't know how to describe it, but he seemed to have a premonition of approaching death. At least he talked a lot about it, and when anyone called, he'd always show one of the pictures where he'd played a ghost, or some other supernatural monstrosity. I got so I didn't like to go over there. Once I sat near the projector, and I heard him mutter to himself—"That's me, a ghost! Scoby Vance, a ghost!" I didn't call after that."

Sheila nervously knotted her handkerchief. "If—if he were a little touched, as Rex said, he might have—have made arrangements to keep his house empty. Traps, and things like that."

"That's entirely possible," said Vera. "But there's no use worrying, and it's much too late to do anything now. The chances are, everything's all right, and Rex'll come whooping in here about twelve-thirty with nothing more exciting to tell about than wind rustling in the leaves. Now I'll see about some coffee."

"Thank you, Vera. I'm ageing, I guess. Jittery nerves," Sheila said.

It was much later when the doorbell rang. Sheila jumped nervously.

"Who can that be?" Vera wondered. "It's after ten."

In a moment the maid returned. "Mr. Sherman Wall," she announced.

"Oh, to be sure." Vera's face lighted. "He mentioned that they were taking late rushes at the studio and he might drop in on his way home." She bent toward Sheila with affected kittenish air. "He's my latest boy friend," she chuckled. "Used to be Scoby's secretary. Scoby got him his first part."

"Is it serious?" Sheila queried, smiling.

Vera grimaced. "He is, but I'm not." A shadow darkened her pleasant features. "No romance for Vane at this late date." She sighed.

Mr. Wall entered with all the suavity of an undertaker and tossed his

hat familiarly on the sofa. "Hello, Vera, and—oh, yes. Mrs. Ware. I met you at a beach party last summer. Do you remember?"

"I'm afraid I don't." Sheila smiled and regarded him rather critically. Although she failed to recall their personal meeting, she was familiar with Sherman Wall's screen portrayals.

He was thin and gangling, and his forty years had silvered his temples. His head was small and looked even smaller because of the receding chin and bulbous, watery eyes. His voice, surprising in such a scrawny frame, was a rumbling bass, and he was a natural for supporting roles in the wilder types of comedy.

"Do sit down," Vera urged. "We were just worrying about Rex Ware. He's prying around Scoby's house, trying to get a story about the ghostly noises."

Wall looked surprised and serious. "That's bad," he said.

"Well, I didn't think it was so good, either," Vera admitted.

Sheila laughed nervously. "You don't think there's any actual danger, do you?"

He pursed thin frog-like lips. "Only legally, of course," he said. "One can get into trouble breaking the provisions of a will." But he cast a sidewise glance at Vera which meant something far more. Sheila caught it, and it chilled her.

"Well, I'll make some more coffee." Vera rose hastily. "Rex'll want some when he comes in." She went to call the maid, but in the library, she paused, finger thoughtfully on chin. Then she went to a small table, opened the telephone book to the front page entitled "Emergency Calls," to pencil a circle around the police number.

She appeared uncertain of her action, as if she thought it silly—but yet was driven to it by some queer and powerful urge. But she drew

back with a gasp as she reached the proper page.

The police number was *already* circled—crudely, with a heavy pencil, in a slapdash style that Vera knew was not her own.

She looked up. The window was open, and the drapes were fluttering. There was a scratch on the sill, as if someone had climbed over it.

Vera swallowed, stood for a moment in puzzled thought, then returned to her guests.

TEN MINUTES before Sheila Ware arrived at Vera's Westwood home, Detective-Sergeant Maginnis, on the desk at the Hollywood precinct station of the Los Angeles Police Department, unhoisted his aching feet from the blotter as the phone-bell shrilled.

For a dweller in the movie colony, the sergeant was physically unprepossessing. In fact, he looked more like some old, decrepit character actor, so long out of work that he had lost faith in the casting office. His eyes stared forth from drooping bags, and his jowls sagged in such a hound-like manner that they almost betrayed his profession.

Yet he was quick of comprehension so quick, in fact, that he immediately knew that the voice speaking to him over the phone was but poorly disguised.

"Yes," he rumbled. "This is the police station. What's wrong?"

"Do you remember Joe Cady?" the voice asked.

Maginnis' little eyes darted. "I should say I do. Movie bit player who disappeared three years ago. We've still got him on the books."

"Well, you won't have to look any farther."

The sergeant gripped the edge of the desk and half rose. "Are you Joe Cady?" he barked.

"No. Joe's dead. He was killed in the old Vance place. His killer's over there now."

"Is the killer dead too?"

"No. Very much alive. And you're going to be surprised to find out who he is. Goodby."

"Wait! Who are you—"

But the phone clicked in his ear. Fiercely, he jiggled the hook. "Operator! Operator! Where the devil are you, operator? Oh, er—trace that call that just came through. Yes, this is the Hollywood precinct station." He hesitated, knowing the call had probably come from a pay phone. He jiggled the hook. "Operator, never mind that trace!" He pressed a buzzer, and spoke into an office diaphragm. "Al, get a squad car pronto! We're going after Joe Cady's killer!"

CHAPTER II

The Ghost Walks

MEANWHILE, Rex Ware, his cheerful whistle drowning the wails of his tires as he roared up the twisting canyon road, saw the lights in the scattered hillside homes disappear behind him one by one. At this higher altitude thin fingers of fog lay wraithlike across the road, like strips of an unwound shroud. There was a chill in the air, and Rex shivered involuntarily and snapped up his collar.

The lights were gone now. The walls of the ravine became steeper, then suddenly widened into a tiny amphitheater. Here and there in the dry roadside jungle appeared the rustic surface of an ivy-covered brick wall, surmounted by the dull palings of iron grillwork. "Here we are, brother," Rex murmured. "Now where's that gate?"

He found it in a moment, its iron shield still proclaiming the dead man's name in rusty letters. Rex parked and got out. With the silencing of the motor an almost oppressive quiet ensued. "Go to it, buddy," he encouraged himself. "The

scairter you get, the better column you'll write."

Automatically, and without much hope of success, he tried the gate. It was locked, and clanged dully. The wall, however, offered no difficulties. After feeling carefully on top for the bits of broken glass, barbed wire, and other pleasant obstructions that many estate owners planted on their property barriers, he grasped the iron palings and pulled himself upward.

Balanced precariously, he looked behind him. The little flatland in which the Vance estate rested was hidden from the lights of the valley below by a black escarpment on the other side of the road. No sound of life reached it. Alone in its bereavement, it had waited in this gloomy vale for a year without life, without movement.

Rex shivered suddenly, and felt for the flashlight in his pocket. He kept remembering Scoby Vance in a picture called "The Death Watch," and he was trying to forget how the man had looked. The makeup man had done a good job on Vance that time, he reflected. He could still see the hunched, dreadful little figure, with its filed teeth, its staring eyes, and bristling hair. Scoby Vance had been a master of his trade.

Carefully, Rex dropped to the ground inside the wall. Dead leaves crunched beneath his feet. He switched on the flashlight. Before him, almost invisible in the gloom and nearly hidden by the unkempt shrubbery, lay the dark, sprawling house. He pushed toward it, dry twigs grasping his clothes insistently, and snapping like so many paper caps. He crossed a patch of what had once been lawn, but what was now a heavy layer of grass.

Almost at the door, he halted and gazed behind him. A car had started from farther up the canyon and zoomed downward past the Vance property with a grating of gears and a flash of yellow. Spooners, probably.

He didn't bother to try the front door, but confined his operations to the side and rear. The door to the service porch resisted his efforts, but the side door, much to his surprise, responded to the master-key which he inserted, and swung silently open.

"Gloomy Acres," Rex muttered, and the sound of his voice returned in a startling echo. And it was a good name for the house of Scoby Vance. The woodwork was stained dark, and the furniture, as he could see when he flashed the beam around, was of that heavy, roughly-finished Spanish style so popular in the early thirties.

The door had apparently opened on a study, for the light disclosed a big desk, with its chair pushed half-way back, as if its owner had left only temporarily. There were papers scattered on the blotter, again giving the impression of interrupted work. Rex went over and examined them.

"Well, snap my upper plate!" he exclaimed. Scoby Vance had been annotating a script when death called. The title was at the top—"Grave Robber," and Rex recalled that the story had been later shelved by the studio because of failure to find anyone to take Vance's part. The pencil lay there, covered with a film of dust, and beneath more dust, the typescript showed dimly. Rex bent over it. One sentence had been underlined.

"I am a spirit—the spirit of the man you killed."

Suddenly Rex felt uncomfortable. A thought struck him—a thought which he did not for a moment take seriously, but which nevertheless knotted his vitals with cold insistence.

Had Scoby Vance underlined that sentence before his death, or . . . after?

REX TRIED to reassure himself. He shrugged and chuckled, but the sound echoed eerily. He focussed his attention on the common-places

disclosed by the flashlight beam—the dry, black powder in the open inkwell, the stains on the desk blotter, the tarnished bronze of the desk set. He noted the dim outlines of a picture on the dark wall above the desk, and raised the beam to examine it.

He immediately wished he hadn't, for the light revealed a studio still of Scoby Vance in one of his more terrifying roles. The man had been a master of makeup, and the sloping brow, the sunken temples, the pale flesh drawn back from snarling teeth, gave a terrifyingly accurate impression of a cadaver inhabited by some malignant spirit.

Although Rex immediately looked away, he felt that the picture was staring at him from the darkness. He cleared his throat nervously and advanced into the cavernous living room.

Here also the suddenness of Vance's death was evident. This was a room whose owner had just left. A newspaper, opened to an inside page, lay on a reading table. On the big leather chair next to the table a figured smoking jacket lay, sprawled carelessly as if its owner had tossed it there before a sudden departure. On the floor were slippers, just as Vance had stepped out of them, and nearby, also on the floor, stood a glass, half full of brandy.

Rex gazed at it, musing on the immutability of time and mortality—then suddenly gulped—

In a year's time, that liquor should have evaporated!

He stared at it again. Of course, maybe the glass had been full when Vance placed it there, but he couldn't imagine anyone drinking brandy in brimful tumblers. If Vance were that kind of a drinker, no wonder he'd sunk in the Pacific.

Was it brandy? He crouched on his hands and knees to sniff the contents. As he did so, he froze to stillness.

His hands were on the thick rug,

and he felt someone walking. He listened closely. Even the sound was faintly evident—the slow, measured tread of a heavy body. So dim was it that Rex realized it might even be on another floor, or in the basement.

He grinned weakly. "Christmas Carol stuff," he mused. "Now all we need is the clanking chains."

He rose silently to his feet. Common sense to the contrary, he felt an almost irresistible urge to run screaming from that haunted place, to slam doors behind him, scramble over the wall, and drive madly to the middle of Hollywood Boulevard, where lights were bright and people were alive.

He calmed himself with an effort. This was silly, senseless— But what a column he'd write!

He listened a moment longer. The sound died away, then rose again. Could it be water in long unused pipes? He'd settle that right away. He started to the kitchen, and he found himself treading silently, almost as if he feared someone might hear. He grinned again, but even in the dark he realized that it was but a sickly effort.

The dining room had an even more morbid air than the study. High-backed chairs were lined against the heavy, Spanish table, their shadowy shapes almost alive in the flashlight's glare. A centerpiece—a shallow, dark dish with a frog and water-stains—contained colorless, dessicated sweet peas. He touched one; it crumbled to powder.

He made his way around the table, and stopped again. All the chairs were pushed under the board—save one, the chair at the table's head. This was set back at an angle, as if someone sitting there had been suddenly disturbed and had left the room. Rex swallowed uncomfortably; he had never suspected the power of his own imagination.

He pushed open the swinging door into the kitchen, and it creaked on

dry, protesting hinges. The creak sounded friendly—it was understandable, mechanical, not like the rest of the house. The kitchen was large, but, like the other rooms, had small window-area. He marveled at the way Vance had brought the gloom and terror of his roles into his own life. He flashed the light on the white-tiled sink, located the faucet, and turned the handle. A dry whistling sounded, indicative of long-empty pipes filled with heat-expanded air. No, this did not explain the sound he had heard.

He stood there, one hand on the tiles, listening. For a moment, he could hear nothing. Then again—soft and measured, low and firm—came the sound—the tread of a walking man.

MAN! OR was it? Rex felt the hair on the nape of his neck rise uncomfortably. The wild desire to shout again overcame him, but he controlled it. His nerves were at such a point now that he knew he would flee from the sound of his own voice.

But these steps. . . . He tried to be logical: he knew they weren't made by anything supernatural; and if their cause were something explainable, it would calm him to find out what it was. He was uncomfortably conscious of that "if." Somehow, he felt that to obey the rules of logic, it should not be there.

Where was that noise coming from? He listened again, tried to place it. He concluded that it was not emanating from the second floor, that it was rising from below. The cellar! But how to get there—

He examined the kitchen walls. There was no door here. He quickly retraced his steps through the dining room and living room into the spacious, tiled entrance hall. As he suspected, the triangular space beneath the stairs framed an undersized open-

ing. This, then, must be the door to the basement.

He turned the knob, but it resisted. Locked. Deliberately, trying not to notice the trembling of his fingers, he pulled out his ring of keys, and tried one or two. The same master-key that had unlocked the study door was successful here.

He pulled it open. A damp, musty smell reached him—the smell of basements everywhere. But mixed with it was something else, something he could not identify. He thought for a moment, and placed it with something of a shock. It was the same odor that permeated the city morgue, minus the medicinal unguents.

After all, was it necessary to go down into that forbidding hole? He clamped his jaw tight. Yes, it was—for his own peace of mind. The weird sound had ceased, but he would trace its source.

A cobweb brushed his face as he started down. The stairs were narrow, lined by grimy plastered walls. He descended carefully, directing the light closely before him, for the steps were narrow.

Halfway down he stopped and attempted to pierce the gloom ahead with his feeble torch. The stairs were straight, and at their foot he caught a glimpse of gray cement floor, stretching off into the darkness. At one side a table leg was in evidence, a square, ordinary thing which reassured him by its very homeliness.

But at the other side—

He snapped a hand to the wall at his left to steady himself, and his heart, already thumping, leaped to his throat. For the light disclosed a human foot—the foot of a prostrate man, encased in an old brown shoe, the leather mildewed from the winter's dampness.

He descended the rest of the steps three at a time, and stood over that awful object. Awful it was. For the

man who lay there had been shot a long time ago.

Rex stared a moment longer. "Jeepers!" he breathed. "What have I stumbled into—"

He didn't know even then. As he listened, the stealthy tread began again—soft, steady, and terrifying. Only this time there was no doubt as to its location. It was in the same room with him—in the gloomy, musty basement.

It was an effort for him to flash the light away from the corpse, to have that evil thing invisible beside him in the darkness. But he managed it, and when he did, he froze.

There, advancing toward him with spiderlike rapidity, with the shambling, shuffling, even gait which had sounded before, came a hunchbacked, fearsome monster—a grinning apparition with bristling hair and pale, dead flesh drawn, corpse-like, away from pointed teeth. As he watched, stunned with terror, the thing raised long, bent, ape-like arms, and sprang toward him, screaming horribly.

He stood his ground for but a second more. Then, echoing the creature's cry, he sped up the stairs, through the living room, bumped and upset the chair at the study desk, slammed out the door, and raced through the shaggy shrubbery toward the wall—the last barrier between him and sanity.

Even as he ran, the realization came to him that the specter he had seen was the same that Scoby Vance had played in his last picture, "The Death Watch." And the conviction was far from reassuring.

The shrub-clad wall was before him. He cast away the flashlight, and leaped. But blue-clad figures rose from the bushes, and he sprang into their arms.

He gazed into the stern, sagging, hound-like face of Detective-Sergeant Maginnis. "Okay, buddy," said the latter. "Just relax. We'll direct ye're movements from now on."

CHAPTER III

Specters From the Past

THE ROOM at the city jail was small and gray and close-walled. Sheila Ware sobbed as she faced Rex through the grill.

"Listen, honey," he said. "Don't do that. It'll just make it harder."

Obediently, she wiped her eyes. "Oh, Rex, what will they do to you?"

He grimaced. "They've already done too much as far as I'm concerned. Do you know how hard jail cots really are?" He shook his head glumly. "Did you write up the column the way I told you last night?"

She nodded. "I explained the whole thing. But the syndicate telegraphed this morning that they prefer not to release it until your legal status is cleared up."

"Is that so!" Rex snapped upright. "Why, the dirty dogs! I was counting on my spiel to give me public support."

Sheila looked scared. "Do you think you're going to need it?"

"Aw, now, listen, honey, don't worry. Everythings' going to be all right. Of course," he regarded the table darkly, "I've got some explaining to do. I told 'em why I was there, but they said my column article about Vance's house was just a blind, a cover-up."

Sheila noticed that the laughter-wrinkles around his eyes had disappeared. "But didn't they find any trace of—of that *thing* you saw?"

"Not a smidgin. The body was there—fella by the name of Joe Cady, a bit player who disappeared about the same time Vance did. He's the one, you remember, I took down the skids for drinking, and got a threatening letter for my pains." He scowled. "That, in fact, is what they're holding against me—they think Cady tried to beat me up, and I shot him. They claim I was just going back to the scene of the crime."

Also, my story about the spook didn't help any. Maginnis just said, 'Now tomorrow night you can tell me about the three bears.'"

Sheila swallowed. "They really think you killed Cady?"

Rex nodded gloomily. "Yep. And I'm the only one who has the least shadow of suspicion against him, so they're playing it for all it's worth."

Sheila dabbed her eyes and smiled waveringly. "I always said, life with Ware is nobody's picnic."

"How true, how true," he murmured, "especially if that's what they give me—"

"What!"

"Life, I mean." He forced a grin. "I was just kidding. Now you stiffen the old sylph-like figure. Don't let it droop with grief. A lot of girls' husbands go up the river for one thing and another, but I'll get out of this all right. And send the column, even if you have to fill it with any kind of drivel. Vera'll help."

"She's been swell," Sheila admitted. "She'll be down to see you this morning."

"Good. Now you go home and get some sleep. I'll be out of here as soon as that lawyer dishes up some habeas corpus, or something. Although, heaven knows, I've had enough corpses for one night."

VERA VANE appeared at noon, and her eyes, as she faced Rex through the screen, were serious.

"Give it to me straight, Vera," he told her. "What did you find out?"

She shook her head. "It's not so hot, Rex. They won't release you, even on bail."

"I knew that." He sounded impatient. "I mean, what's the general attitude?"

Vera hesitated. "It won't do any good to pull punches, so I'll be frank. You're on a spot, Rex. They're very nasty to your lawyer. They dug up your column in which you called Cady all sorts of names. I looked

them up myself, at the library. I must say, you were brutally frank."

"I was just trying to jolt him back to common sense. That lad had talent, but he was pickling it—"

"Do a man a favor, and he'll never forgive you," Vera quoted. "Did you keep the nasty letter Cady sent you?"

"It was in my file."

"Then the police have it now. They've been all through your stuff."

Rex swore disgustedly. "Any columnist has correspondence that would furnish motives for all the crimes in the book—"

Vera shook her head. "That doesn't help you."

Rex stared thoughtfully. "I wonder who did kill this Cady boy."

Vera hesitated, then spoke. "I was telling Sheila about Scoby Vance the other night—how he'd changed during the last months from a kindly, sensible person to a jittery queer. Everyone concluded that his roles were getting him. You know what happened." She looked at the floor.

"Yes," Rex said softly. "I know something nobody else knows—that you had his ring."

Vera nodded, sudden tears in her eyes. "Because he changed, I gave it back. And the day after that, he was drowned."

"We might as well change the subject," Rex said wearily. "It won't do any good to make these ghosts walk."

It seemed hard for Vera to speak. Her lips trembled. "Yes, it will, Rex. Especially in this case. I loved Scoby Vance—the old Scoby Vance—and I wouldn't do anything in the world to tarnish his memory. But he wasn't himself those last days, and I've suspected something for years, something that I've kept locked within myself."

Rex frowned, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I've been almost sure that Scoby Vance killed Joe Cady—and then committed suicide."

Rex gaped, his eyes flashed upward

with a sudden rebirth of their old fire. He gripped the table's edge and peered at her through the wire mesh. "Let's have it!" he breathed. "This might be my out!"

Vera took a long breath. "Do you know Sherman Wall?"

"I'll say! Thin, rat-faced son-of-a-gun— Oh, pardon me, he's a friend of yours. I forgot, Vera."

"He's not much to look at, I know," she admitted. "But he seems to have a kind heart. And he's been a real friend. He knew Scoby too—was his secretary before Vance got him into character roles. And one day I swallowed my pride and asked him why he thought Scoby had changed. He was reluctant to speak at first, then he hinted that Vance wasn't making most of his money from the screen—"

"Go on!" Rex commanded. "This is getting more interesting by the minute. I begin to see yours truly out on the street again."

"Well, I never understood it clearly, and Sherman wouldn't explain it, but I gathered from his innuendoes that Scoby was in some sort of an extortion racket with this Joe Cady. Sherman had resigned when he found it out and Scoby had smoothed his path in the movies, so he'd keep his mouth shut. That was the chief reason I broke up with him. If he'd been ill, or out of his mind, I'd never have left. The Vanes don't scurry off sinking ships—"

"I know that," Rex said kindly.

"But this—this was different. Even then I hoped that he'd see the writing on the wall and break off—if only to get me back. You see, I could flatter myself in those days." She smiled wearily.

"I get it!" said Rex. "Vance had a bust-up with this Cady, he shot him, and—faked a drowning. The isolation provision for his house—well, that was Scoby's well-laid plan for saving his own neck!" Rex grew more excited as he talked. "Then that pleasant little creature I saw

last night was Scoby himself. He's been living in his own house for a year—and nobody knew it. . . . He surely realized that it wouldn't exonerate him, even if the body weren't discovered. And he would be dead." He chewed his fingers. "Of course—they *did* find a corpse—"

"Yes, and what a corpse!" Vera shuddered. The clothes on the beach were all we had to go by. No one would have known it was a man, after that month in the Pacific—" She shook her head. "You're talking sense, Rex." She thought hard for a moment, then spoke again. "Last night somebody climbed in my library window and used my phone, Rex. And they apparently called the police. You say the police were there when you came out of Scoby's house—"

Rex nodded, frowning. "I don't see what that could have to do with it, but— Are you willing to dig up the past, Vera?" he demanded. "Because if you are—" But the puzzled frown still wrinkled his forehead. He stopped suddenly, chewing his knuckles. Suddenly he looked up and slapped the desk, so that the policeman at the door scowled warningly. "No! Listen, Vera!" He lowered his voice to a shrill whisper. "What kind of a car does Sherman Wall drive?"

"Pontiac convertible. Yellow. He rides with the top down most of the time. But why—?"

"Listen! I've got to get out of here! I just got a hunch—something terrific. I've got to get out of here, do you hear me?" He stared wildly at the gray walls, the dispassionate screen between them.

"Rex! Do calm yourself!" Vera warned. "This won't do you any good. I'll be only too willing to talk—"

"No, no! You don't understand! We're all wrong, all wrong!" He peered at her with flashing eyes. "Vera," he said softly, his voice

trembling, "I've the biggest scoop of my career—I *think*! Listen! They're going to take me up to the Vance place this evening—probably to try some third-degree stuff. Will you have a car with the engine running, standing in the loading zone at the south side of this bastille as they bring me out?"

She looked frightened. "But what—"

"And listen! This is very important! Write a note and put it in the glove compartment. Say 'Scoby, if you do not rise from the grave, an innocent man will die,' or words to that effect. And sign it!"

"Rex! Do you feel well—?"

"Never better! Vera, if you're the friend I think you are, you'll do this for me—"

The copper strode heavily toward them. "Long enough, folks; sorry," he boomed.

As he was led down the corridor, Rex gazed pleadingly over his shoulder. Vera stared at him for a moment, then, apparently settling the matter in her own mind, nodded almost imperceptibly. A wave of relief tingled the very roots of Rex's tousled hair. He grinned and disappeared around a corner.

CHAPTER IV

No Surrender

IT WAS Detective-Sergeant Maginnis himself who lumbered into Rex's cell after dinner that evening. He looked sadder and more hound-like than ever.

"Listen, jerk," he said. "Before you turned to crime you used to pay taxes, didn't you?"

Rex grinned cheerfully. "Such was my habit," he admitted. "Why? Are you thinking of collecting your salary direct?"

Maginnis remained unperturbed. "One reason taxes are so blamed high," he continued, "is that there's

so damn much waste motion. We got to eliminate some o' that."

"You'd better start," Rex advised, "by getting a girdle for your third chin."

"What I'm gettin' at," the sergeant drove on, tank-like, "is that you can save the taxpayers a lotta money by confessin' at once. How about it?"

Rex looked surprised. "I fear, sir, that I do not spik the Inglitch—"

Maginnis sighed cavernously. "Okay, okay. I didn't expect no results from a newspaperman. Come on. We're goin' for a ride. Are you walkin' quiet, or do I use the bracelets?"

"I shall go quietly, seregant," Rex agreed. "After all, the best we can do is to cooperate in this time of crisis."

The sergeant glared out the barred window. "I hate newspapermen," he reflected aloud.

They went down the elevator and entered one of the squad cars waiting in the cellar garage. Maginnis laid no finger on him during this time; neither did he threaten or urge. Rex perceived that this particular third-degree would not partake of strong-arm methods unless all else failed. They had recognized his fright of the night before, and planned to utilize his fear—which they thought was the natural nervousness of a killer at the scene of his crime—to break down his resistance and extort a confession.

In the police car, Rex breathed a silent sigh of relief when he saw that Maginnis was to be his sole companion in the rear seat. Two uniformed coppers sat in front, eyes grimly ahead. They zoomed up the ramp, swung out on Spring Street, rounded the corner toward Broadway. The streets teemed with early evening traffic—workers in the county offices and nearby city hall starting for home, apartment-dwellers going out to dine. Busses and street-

cars were crowded, sidewalks filled with hurrying pedestrians.

This was fine. Rex peered out the window. The car was nearing the yellow-curbed loading zone at the side entrance of the hall of justice. And—there it was! Vera Vane's tan Buick, empty, the driver's door open an inch, a thin bubbling of blue smoke from the idling exhaust.

Now for it! Rex felt his temples throb with sudden excitement. A bullet in the back—how did it feel? Maybe he'd know in a moment. The police car drew opposite the Buick, gaining speed in second. Rex glanced at Maginnis; the detective was sitting, lump-like, gazing out the opposite window.

Rex felt stealthily for the door handle, jerked it, and was almost flung out by the quickening speed of the car. He rolled over once, scrambled to his feet, jumped to the sidewalk, made the far side of the Buick, and slid into the driver's seat. The idling motor zoomed. . . .

He had made it! He drew in a shuddering gasp, and felt perspiration ooze on his brow. The police car had stopped, and traffic was piling up behind it. Maginnis and one of the coppers were already out, automatics in hand. But they dared not shoot—and Rex grinned. There were too many pedestrians, too much traffic.

And Rex became a swiftly-moving target. The street, happily cleared by the braked police car, lay before him, and he used it. The signal was against him, but it made no difference; a streetcar almost took off the rear licenseplate, but the car got through. Then up the hill and into the thinner-trafficked apartment district, tires screaming. A siren whined behind him, but traffic was still heavy enough. Rex kept on the back streets, joined the home-coming rush on Figueroa for three blocks, left it to spin over a narrow, winding park

road which led to the valley. Then out Riverside Drive to Griffith Park and the mountain road which led to Hollywood. He glanced behind him. No sign of the police.

He had escaped—miraculously. And yet, not such a miracle when one considered the element of surprise, the providential traffic, the neat planning.

Rex took a long breath, and concentrated on the job ahead.

GRIFFITH PARK closed at seventy-three, and a bar-gate swung across the drive. Rex stared at the padlock and chain, then backed the car and plunged through it. He grimaced as the car's shiny bow-grillwork crumpled sickeningly. But the gate swung on timber posts, and they surrendered without a struggle. The tires thumped over the fallen barrier, and Mount Holly was before him.

He had driven the scenic mountain road before, several times to see the view, once to propose to Sheila, never to set a speed record. He did that now, cutting curves, plunging around promontories, speeding down grades which needed no acceleration. His eyes were bright with a fierce excitement—and strangely, it was not the frenzy of the hunted, but rather that of the hunter—the news hound bay- ing on the trail of a great story.

He whirled over the crest, then down toward Hollywood, with its sparkling lights and busy night life. When the road forked, he took the right branch to Western Avenue, then, after a quarter mile, plunged again to the west on a little, bumpy, rutted dirt road which wandered leisurely over the hills toward the settled canyons back on Franklin Avenue.

His pace was not leisurely—far from it. The motor fairly whistled with exertion, the chassis thudded on flattened springs, the stench of burnt rubber rose in his nostrils as curves,

were met and mattered. He was thinking more calmly by this time, and the more he thought, the heavier his accelerator-foot became.

The situation was anything but admirable. Whereas before he had been a suspect—in a hot spot, to be sure, but with nothing more dangerous than circumstantial evidence against him—now he was guilty of escape, and had added to those same toils of circumstance the damning evidence of guilty flight in the face of trial.

All because of a hunch—the truth or falsity of which would make or break, not only his, but Sheila's life as well.

He switched off the car lights and crept along the road at a slower pace, peering out the window at the canyon below. The road branched here, and he turned down the left fork, but it soon degenerated into little more than a rain-rutted path, and after a moment of noisy jouncing, Rex abandoned the car and hastened forward on foot.

Far below him lay a dark, pocket-like ravine. In the little amphitheater to his left, protruding among the rank shrubbery like the last gesture of a drowning man, rose the wooden, pergola-like bell tower of Scoby Vance's estate. There were no lights, no sounds from that gloomy park, but Rex knew that police lurked in the darkness. As there was no road at the rear of the estate, Rex hoped that the guard would be lighter. And he hoped most of all that there would be no one in the darkened house.

There was one saving factor to the situation. The police were obviously still searching for him in the valley; no one had suspected his journey over the mountain roads to the Vance place—primarily because that would be the last place in the world a guilty man would wish to go.

There was no time for deliberation, no time to search for trails. Rex plunged down the mountain side, tearing his trousers on sage and

greasewood and holly clumps, scratching his hands on rocky ground when he slipped, sprawling flat from time to time when his hurrying feet found no purchase.

As he descended to the depths of the canyon, the going became more difficult. The shadows were deeper, the scrub heavier. And it was with more than a sigh of relief that Rex suddenly bumped into the rough brick of Vance's back wall.

Seeing it, he froze to silence, and listened. It seemed that he could hear someone walking in the distance—probably the police sentry at the front gate. There was obviously no one in the rear. Had there been, his headlong descent would long since have attracted attention.

He reached upward, grasped the iron palings which surmounted the bricks, and pulled himself quietly to the top of the wall. Balanced on the rim, he listened again. The faint burring of gears drifted to him easily through the silent mountain air, and he looked up to where he had left the car.

His heart sank. There—just a short distance behind the place he had parked—crept yellow headlights. The police! But how they had traced him up that mountain road and inevitably chosen the right fork was beyond his comprehension. However, the need for haste was apparent now, and he dropped within the enclosure.

As he did so, the headlights flashed out. Rex smiled stiffly. Maginnis was using strategy.

The shrubbery in the rear of the Vance mansion was thicker and even more unkempt, if anything, than that at the front and sides. Largely by feel, Rex detected the outline of what had once been a formal garden, now strangely long-haired and haggard. He advanced slowly, listening the while. Before he entered the house, he recovered the flashlight he had tossed into the shrubbery the night

before. He peered stealthily over the front wall, and nodded grimly. A white-sided police car was parked in the shadows, and seated on the running board, visible only by the pink glow from his cigarette-tip, was a uniformed cop. There was probably another around somewhere, and Rex was particularly silent in his retreat to the study door.

The key worked easily, as it had before. The house was in darkness, and this fed Rex's hope that perhaps there was no guard inside the house. Few coppers would care to sit inside a place with such a ghoulish reputation without some kind of a light.

He stepped within, not daring to use the flashlight beam. Obviously nothing had been touched since his hurried exit of the previous night. The chair by the study desk lay overturned, just as he had left it. By feel, he located the time-worn pencil, the dusty script. No, there were no policeman inside the house; it had been sealed, and the guard was there to see that it remained so.

He extracted the note from his shirt pocket—the letter which Vera Vane had written to the dead. He laid it carefully on the desk, and, shading his flashlight with his handkerchief, placed it so that the note lay under a bright oval of light. Yet there were no reflections; the house, from the outside, would still appear dark.

His preparations made, Rex stepped within the living room. His hand touched the big chair, felt the dead man's smoking jacket, cast on the chair in careless folds. He found another chair and sat down in the darkness. His hands gripped the padded arms tightly, and his heart thumped. There was so little time—and so much had to happen.

It was then that he heard the shuffling from the basement—the same sound that had brought him to the discovery of Joe Cady's body, the footsteps of the thing below.

CHAPTER V

Calling the Dead

DELIBERATELY, Rex Ware stamped upon the floor—three times, distinctly, slowly. "Scoby Vance!" he whispered. "Scoby Vance! Scoby Vance!"

Despite himself, he was uncomfortable. There was something inexplicably eerie in naming the dead man in his house of death. His whispers rang and echoed throughout the deserted chambers, and he shivered involuntarily.

But the result was as he had hoped—the shuffling in the cellar ceased.

The silence which followed was even more terrifying than the dreadful sound. For he knew that the creature which had made them—the hunched, misshapen, bristly-haired, fanged monstrosity which had rushed upon him as he stood over Joe Cady's body—was creeping up the cellar steps to see who was hindering his rest.

The thought was chilling. Yet Rex sat gazing into the black rectangle which marked the hall's entrance, watching the dim, shadowy shapes of the deserted furniture all about him. He held his breath and strained his ears to listen—and finally was rewarded.

Once more sounded that eerie shuffle—this time much nearer. It had a hollow tone, and Rex knew that its maker was ascending the narrow stair-shaft which led to the basement. The sound ceased, but was followed by a dull, oily click, as the cellar door opened. Rex's knuckles grew white in the darkness. If his hunch were wrong—

But he couldn't afford to think about that.

There was another step—a light tap upon the strip of hardwood floor between the hall rug and the living room broadloom. The creature was in the same room with him!

Silent as a statue, he watched and waited. A darker patch of shadow detached itself from the hall entrance, and glided swiftly toward that circle of light in the study. . . . At the door it paused, watching and waiting. Seeing no one, it advanced quickly, and bent the white note which Vera Vane had written to the Other World.

The reflection on the white paper illumined the apparition, and once more Rex felt a hysterical urge to shout and run. There was something incredibly awful about that hunched, inhuman thing, with the dim light shining on its cavernous, hairy features from beneath. As it read the note, Rex heard it suck in its breath, and saw the light gleam on the pointed fangs. The thing looked up, stared into the darkness, and sobbed deep down in its misshapen chest.

Rex rose silently. His lips were open, but the words never issued. For the back door clicked softly open, and he heard the distinct footsteps of someone walking quietly across the linoleumed kitchen floor.

The creature peered up like a hunted animal, and surprise made its face more horrible than before. The flashlight snapped out, and the gloom was even deeper.

The steps came nearer, paused on the threshold. Rex crouched in the darkness, uncertain of what to do. The thing in the study was also apparently at a loss. For a time there was utter silence, a silence filled with electrical tension.

Then a voice boomed forth—a heavy, resonant voice, controlled as only an actor or an orator can control his vocal chords. The words it uttered were immeasurably more awful in the darkness than had been Rex's whisper.

"Scoby Vance," the voice rang out, "I come to set you free!"

As the echo died away, the excitement suddenly left Rex's body. His heart slowed, the perspiration on his brow grew cold. For he had recog-

nized the voice. In an instant he knew that his hunch was correct.

Rex spoke. "Scoby Vance," he said sharply. "The man you have waited a year to kill stands before you now."

He rushed recklessly forward—not toward the monster in the study, but toward that dark shape at the dining-room door. Then footsteps scurried, spiderlike, behind him, and a thunderbolt—complete with lightning flashes—roared on the back of his skull.

"Scoby Vance—" someone yelled again.

As Rex sank into unconsciousness, a siren screamed outside.

HIS head whirled sickeningly, but things took shape. He felt a gentle hand on his brow.

"Darling," he said softly, reaching upward, "is it you?"

"Yes, sweetheart," said Detective-Sergeant Maginnis. "It is me. Only kindly get your thumb out of my eye before I konk you—"

Rex's eyes snapped open. His head still pounded, but he was no longer in darkness. Lights glared from all sides. The cavernous living room of Scoby Vance's house had lost its terror. He was lying on the rug—and around him were many people.

Maginnis was closest, his jowls sagging lower than ever. But in his eye was the quiet exultation of the faithful hound that has its quarry.

Behind Maginnis stood a slight, disheveled figure, his necktie torn, his collar gone. It was Sherman Wall. Rex hoped that it was his fist that had inflicted the purple bruise on the actor's cheekbone.

Behind Wall stood a short, stocky white-haired man, obviously an actor in the midst of removing heavy make-up. For padding still bulged his chest and shoulders, his skin still bore the corpse-like waxen quality of yellow greasepaint, and deep purple shadows were painted on his cheeks and eyes. In his hand he held a

bristly-haired gray wig and a set of pointed false teeth.

"Hello, Scoby," Rex grinned cheerfully. "How does it feel to rise from the grave?"

Scoby Vance snarled, and an angry flush showed even beneath the paint. "Damn fine!" he exclaimed. "And it feels even better to catch the guy that buried me in the first place!"

"Yes," Rex smiled contentedly. "I imagine that gives you a great deal of satisfaction."

"Why, you self-satisfied rat—" Scoby Vance plunged forward. But Maginnis, cat-like, was on his feet, holding him back.

It was then that Rex began to suspect that all was not going swimmingly. The thin, frog-like face of Sherman Wall bore a wicked smile. And no one was guarding him.

"Say, wait—" Rex struggled to get up. "I think you've got this all wrong—"

"I've got it all right for the first time in a year," Vance grated. "I wish you knew how it felt—oh, how I wish you knew how it felt—to be blackmailed out of your very soul, to lose the woman you love, to find a corpse and a lot of juicy evidence planted in your house so that you have to pretend to die and wait twelve-months—twelve godforsaken hellish months—to catch the killer!" His voice quavered with rage.

Sherman Wall stepped forward. Despite the awkwardness of his bruised features, he carried himself with stiff dignity. "You remember I warned you, Scoby," he boomed. "At the time I had no idea who it was that sent you those blackmail letters. I didn't know—until last night, when I saw this fellow drive up in his car. I recognized the car. Then it came to me in a flash—those letters threatened adverse publicity. Who could provide that better than a gossip columnist? So I called the police."

"Why didn't you identify yourself?" Maginnis grumbled. "And

what were you doing up here in this canyon, anyway?"

"Yes," Rex began excitedly. "If you—"

Wall interrupted, his resonant tones drowning Rex easily. "I'd seen those reports in Ware's column of ghostly noises, and I came up to investigate. The idea struck me that maybe events had occurred exactly as they have—that perhaps Scoby Vance wasn't really dead, that he had merely faked death in order to catch the man who was hounding him. And I thought if the reports were true, it was merely Vance's effort to get the killer to return to the scene of his crime."

"That's right," Vance broke in. "I left my clothes on the beach, hoping people would believe I'd drowned myself. As luck would have it, the police dragged up an unrecognizable corpse a month later—and of course everyone believed it was I. I've lived here all the time. There's an old man who lives in a shack up at the head of the canyon who brings me food and water. I've lived here with that corpse for nearly four hundred days and nights, hoping against hope that the rat who killed Cady and who maligned me to the woman I loved would show up—so I'd know who he was. My hunch was right; he did." He turned bitterly to Rex. "Your forgery of Vera's writing was good; I'll admit that. But why did you suspect I was alive?"

"I didn't—" Rex gazed wildly from one to another of the grim circle. A cold, panicky lump froze within him. "Listen! You've got this all wrong—"

But Vance went steadily on. "You probably suspected the same thing that Sherman did—that I was faking death. And you wanted me to come out of my hole so you could make it genuine. You sat there in the dark, waiting for me—and then jumped on Sherman by mistake."

"Then why were you here?" Rex

glared at Wall. "If you're so damned innocent—"

"Last night I met your wife at Vera's," the actor said. "She told me where you were. I was sure, then. When I heard you'd escaped from jail, I came up the mountain over the back way and found your car." His glibness was maddening.

"How did you know he'd escaped?" Maginnis asked quietly. "The news wasn't out. He's been gone only an hour."

Wall hesitated only briefly. "I—I phoned the jail to see if I could talk to Ware. I wanted to ask him if he'd be kind enough to keep Vera's name out of the case; she's suffered enough already. When I got there, he was gone—"

Maginnis turned sad eyes on Rex. "Well, young fella," he sighed. "Looks like this case is closed." He pulled gleaming handcuffs from a ponderous pocket. "We'll take no chances this time—"

Cuffed and struggling, Rex was dragged to the door, a uniformed cop on either side. "Wait!" he shouted. "You're making the biggest mistake of your lives! Listen, Vance—listen—"

"Come on, buddy," said one of the coppers. "You'll have plenty of chance to talk later. You better take a little time to plan out a good story."

Rex turned appealing eyes over his shoulder. Vance, still in the remains of his ghoulish makeup, slumped wearily; he seemed to take no satisfaction in the capture. But Sherman Wall grinned with feline pleasure. It was the sight of Wall's mocking face that sharpened Rex's wits and hardened his determination.

"Listen!" he cried in a last desperate attempt, wrenching his captors to a stand. "Scoby Vance—Vera told me that the reason she returned your ring was Wall's accusation that you were mixed up in some crooked scheme with Joe Cady. She's a friend of mine. I know her and respect her,

This rat Wall has been trying to marry her ever since he got you out of the way. It was he who blackmailed you—your former secretary, the man you made. You don't have to take my word for these things. Ask Vera. She's waiting for you—"

The cops grasped Rex's collar, but Vance commanded sharply, "Just a minute! If Vera actually said that—"

He stiffened suddenly. Sherman Wall was standing behind him, something hidden in his right hand. His bulbous eyes, as he peered over Vance's shoulder, were ominous. It was as if he glimpsed the shifting of the breeze—and waited tautly to see which way it would blow.

Rex talked fast. Maginnis' big hand still clutched his arm, but the sergeant waited. It seemed that he, too, felt something in the air.

"You were up here last night," Rex accused Wall, "for the reason you said—to investigate the noises. You figured that if Scoby were still alive, he'd have to be put out of the way. And that's why you came tonight—in spite of the police, in spite of everything. When I saw your yellow car last night, I didn't think anything of it—until I talked to Vera." Desperate, Rex swung to Maginnis. "He's got a gun in his pocket! He came here tonight to kill Scoby Vance!"

Maginnis made an imperceptible gesture, and two police glided swiftly to Wall's side. He struggled briefly, then surrendered as a gun was drawn from his pocket.

He forced a sneering grin. "Why wouldn't I have a gun—coming up here to the house of a crazy man at night—"

But Scoby Vance interrupted him. His purple-rimmed eyes were wide, and his body was hunched as he pointed a trembling finger at Sherman Wall's gangling, awkward body.

"You have a yellow car! Yellow—! By gad—" he swung to Maginnis, "the whole thing's come back to me

now. I remember everything about that night, a year ago. I'd been down to plead with Vera, trying to get her to reconsider. And I was bitter when I got back. Just below the house I was almost run down by some freak driving a big yellow roadster. He forced me over the curb, and I stopped and cursed him. But he kept on going—driving like a bat out of Hades. That must have been Wall, coming from his killing—"

Rex reflected later that if Sherman Wall had been anything but a coward, he could have bluffed it through. But he was as yellow as the paint job on his car—his evident tautness at Rex's first ineffective protest had proved that.

Now the cold hand of panic clutched him as it had clutched Rex a moment before. His gangling body tensed. Furtively, he snatched at the gun drooping in the policeman's stubby hand. He missed it, then—unpredictably—he turned and ran, his long legs loping rabbit-like toward the outside door.

There was a crash. The cops, led by Maginnis, rushed forward. Vance dropped sensibly to the floor—out of the way. Sherman Wall had tangled and tripped on the desk chair which Rex had overturned the night before. There was a booming shot from a police gun—then silence.

IN HIS chrome-and-maple office on the Sunset Strip, Rex Ware, whistling, zipped a sheet from his typewriter. At the head was the title, *Ware in Hollywood—(1)*. Sheila took it from him and read:

"There is one actor in Hollywood who lives his roles. And that man is Scoby Vance. Having died and risen from the grave innumerable times on celluloid, he managed it in real life, and in doing so, exposed a blackmail and murder plot which had kept Hollywood wondering for more than a year.

"Sherman Wall's anonymous let-

ters to Vance, his old employer and friend, demanded sums of money in return for keeping a campaign of adverse publicity out of the papers. Vance had a clean past, he feared nothing. But he well knew what havoc can be wrought with an actor's reputation. So, to save trouble, he paid.

"It was a mistake. The letters grew bolder, the sums demanded, ridiculous. Vance stopped payment and dared the blackmailer to do his worst, planning to drop temporarily out of the picture, if necessary, to see if he could discover the identity of his nemesis.

"Then yours truly placed his handsome form squarely in the center of proceedings. For a long time your roving reporter had watched Joe Cady tumble lower on the downward trail. Liquor started it, and perhaps some of you remember the way I scolded Joe in a couple of my columns for his sacrificing a promising career on the altar of Bacchus. Joe resented my interference, wrote me a threatening letter, saying that I had blasted his career. I denied this publicly, again praised his ability, again criticized his drinking. Joe phoned and invited me to meet him in the Hollywood Hills near Scoby Vance's home. I laughed and refused, told him that one of us licking the other wouldn't help the situation the slightest. He was still swearing when I hung up.

"Joe was working with Sherman Wall in his extortion racket, and he must have told Sherman what he intended to do to me. Wall, more cautious, ordered him not to do it for fear trouble might expose their business. When Cady refused to abandon his project, Wall—not knowing of my refusal to meet Joe—hurried up to the hills to make sure of his own safety. He realized then that Cady was getting beyond him, that he would have to be put out of the way. So he calmly killed him, and—

to increase his power over Scoby Vance—dragged the body into Vance's cellar. Then he phoned Scoby, told him that the finding of the body, plus the blackmail letters, would immediately brand him as a murderer. The worst had happened—a planted corpse, false evidence. Vance faced disgrace and ruin if it were found.

"So Scoby Vance played dead, hoping that somehow, sometime, the killer would return. This happened last night, and Sherman Wall and Vance changed places—the one to inhabit the grave he thought the other had long since occupied.

"Your reporter modestly congratulates himself on having had some slight part to play in Vance's resur-

rection. And despite his desire to spread it for all it's worth, he has decided not to obtrude the printed page in two private lives which have already experienced their share of hell. . . ."

Sheila, perched on the edge of his desk, looked at him soberly. "That's swell of you, Rex," she said.

He laughed and swung her onto his lap. "Baby," he said, "After all this tension, I think a big evening at the Mocambo is in order. What do you say?"

"I'm tired of canyon picnics," she smiled. "I'm for it."

He winked. "I've got a table for four. Mr. and Mrs. Scoby Vance will be there, too."

(THE END)

Like to Read Western?

If you do, try "Pardon My Pistol" by Rube Stratton in the current issue of Prize Western Magazine.

It's about a salty Texan, a peppery female, and two tough jail birds.

The opening scene is a little jail in the Lone Star state. There are mottoes on the wall about love and mother, a Bible on the table, and two cushioned rocking chairs.

If you wanted a bottle of pop, and had the nickel, the marshal would go out and get it for you. He wouldn't get you a bottle of beer, though.

The food was first rate. The marshal's wife cooked it, and there was always a big glass of cold milk and hot biscuits for breakfast and dinner. Corn bread for supper. Sometimes pie and cake and blackberry jam.

"You're a blame fool for wantin' to bust out of a soft spot like this," Frankie told Dal.

Frankie and Dal were the only two prisoners.

Frankie was about forty years old. His thick beard had the texture of a horse's tail and the color of the West Texas dust which whipped down the corridor. He said once a week was enough for any man to shave. He hadn't committed himself on how often he

thought a man ought to wash, but he didn't waste any water.

"So?" sneered Dal. "You don't want to get out of here?"

Dal was nineteen, slim, pale, and nervous. His hands were soft and feminine. He was fastidiously clean and well-dressed.

"If I could stay here the rest of my life, brother, I wouldn't want nothin' better," said Frankie.

"That's because you've never had anything better," said Dal. He couldn't keep the contempt out of his voice. He felt so much superior and so much wiser than the older man.

"No, but I've had somethin' a lot worse — and you're liable to get it too. Wait till you land in Huntsville or McAlester."

"Wait till I do!" scoffed Dal.

Frankie looked at him with wise, hard, sad old eyes. "You think you're mighty smart, don't you kid? I used to think that, too, when I was your age."

He squinted glumly down the corridor. "I don't like this scheme you've got cooked up with this gal. It just don't make sense to me."

"It will when it gets you out of jail," Dal said. . . .

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

This gripping book-length novel is in Prize Western Magazine, now on the stands

IF A BODY

MEET A BODY

By Henry Norton

The party lasted all night and a good time was had by all — except the guy with an ice pick in his brain.

ROY FERRIS switched the car lights off as he turned into the driveway, for sometimes Stella complained that they woke her up, shining against the white garage doors and reflecting into the bedroom. He let the car coast in, climbed out wearily, and closed the garage doors. It was still raining, a fine mist that seemed to float in the air without falling, although the sidewalks and grass were wet.

In the kitchen the clock said its customary six-fifteen. It was a hell of a time to be getting home, he thought wearily; just about the time he'd have been getting up back on their Eastern Oregon farm. But somebody had to work the graveyard shift. And no denying the extra pay for night work came in handy. Stell didn't mean to be extravagant, but money just seemed to flow through her fingers. After living on a farm, she got a big kick out of city life.

He stood for a moment in the middle of the small white kitchen; a big man, gray around the temples, with a strong, down-curved mouth, and skin reddened and roughened by

an outdoor life. Just now his eyes were heavy with fatigue and worry; his big shoulders drooped tiredly. It would have been nice now just to go to bed and sleep for a week. But he hated to wake Stell—she raised so much hell about it when he bumped into a chair or something and roused her from sleep.

He looked in the big ice box, and closed it again, disappointed, but not surprised in being so. He wasn't hungry—he'd stopped as usual at the shipyard cafeteria to eat something before he came home—but he'd hoped rather wistfully there might be a cold beer left of the dozen he'd put on the ice last night.

Well, he thought, he could lie on the davenport a while, if he remembered to take his shoes off. There was little chance of sleeping, with money worries on his mind, and the way things were going at the yard. He'd been a fool to bet his promotion on the way they were hanging steel on the graveyard shift right now.

He went into the front room, with its matching chair and davenport

Behind him Muller said:
"Drop it, Ferris!"



they were paying for, with its beige rug that showed every footprint, and was already beginning to show wear. It was about time for the morning paper, and he crossed to the front door without turning on a light. He turned the knob and the door came open. Well, Stella was always forgetting to lock the door. The paper lay flat on the porch, in front of the door. He picked it up, came back in and turned on a floor lamp.

Then he saw the man on the davenport.

The man was lying on his back, with an afghan drawn up tightly under his chin. His eyes were closed, and his skin was pale. His hair was black, stringy, and it lay in disorder about his forehead. As far as Roy Ferris knew, he had never seen the man before in his life.

His anger was sharp and quick, born of all the things that had been annoying him all day. The nerve of the guy, sleeping on their davenport. Hell, he hadn't even taken off his shoes!

Roy took him by the shoulder and shook him. The man's head rolled limply, and Roy felt a quick tug of disquiet. He shook the man again and muttered, "Come on, you bum. Wake up!"

There was no answer. The man's eyes remained closed, and Roy Ferris knew by then—knew without pulling the afghan down to expose the small bloodstain on the man's shirt front. Whoever the man was, whatever he was doing on the davenport, he wasn't going to wake up again.

HE COVERED the man again with the afghan, and went back to the bedroom at the rear of the house. He snapped on the ceiling light, lighting the room with a white, unpleasant glare. Stella stirred and mumbled in her sleep, and her body moved under the covers.

Roy went to the bed and shook her shoulder, feeling the warmth of it,

contrasting it with the shoulder of the man on the davenport.

Stella was awake now. She turned and sat up in bed. Her attractive face was heavy with sleep, her blonde hair tumbled over her white shoulders. Her eyes were narrowed and dark with anger. Her breath was still burdened with the sourness of liquor.

"Say, what's the matter with you?" she demanded.

"Wake up, Stell," he said. "It's important."

She glared at him suspiciously and sank back on the pillows, clutching the covers up to her. "What's the big idea, wakin' me up?" she asked crossly. "Roy, are you drunk, or somethin'?"

He said, "There's a dead guy on our davenport."

The anger drained out of her eyes, to be replaced by something not quite nice—a feral look, combined of sudden fear and hatred. Seeing it now made him feel a little sick.

"Wha—what did you say?" Her voice was choked.

He took her by both shoulders and shook her, savagely. "Stella, listen! There's a dead guy, layin' on our davenport. He's been stabbed, looks like. Do you know anything about it? Don't lie to me, now!"

She started to whimper then. "Roy, don't act like that. I don't know what you're talkin' about, honest to God. You—you're just tryin' to scare me into—"

"Do you, or don't you?"

She got out of bed and started to dress, swiftly, carelessly, talking as she did so. "Roy, we had a little party here tonight. Just Jeannie and Pete Erickson an' a friend of theirs. Nothin' wrong—we had some drinks an' that was all. I don't know about anybody bein' dead, honest to God!"

Her teeth were chattering when she stood up, and Roy felt a quick tenderness; a moment's concern. He went round the bed, put his arm

around her and pulled the tousled blonde head against his leather jacket.

"It's okay, baby," he told her. "I don't expect you to sit around an' twiddle your thumbs while I'm at work. You got a right to have some fun."

She trembled against him for a moment. "There ain't nothin' ever—wrong about it, Roy," she told him.

"Sure," he said. "Only, Stell, if you do know anything about this dead guy, for God's sake tell me, 'cause I got to call the cops pretty soon."

She said, "But I tell you I don't know anything about it. An' Roy Ferris, if this is one of your—" They entered the living room then, and her voice trailed off.

"You know him?" Roy demanded.

"It's that Chuck Conley," she said dully. "He's the one Pete an' Jeannie brought over last night. That's the only time I ever saw him before."

"Chuck Conley." The name had an odd familiarity about it, an elusive feel of recognition, but Roy could not pin it down. "Well what happened? How come him to still be here, an' them gone?"

"It wasn't nothin' like that," she said. "He was a perfect gentleman. Oh, you know, he made a few cracks, but no rough stuff. Only, I got sick an' went on to bed while they was all still here."

"You left them havin' a party in our house an' went to bed? What in hell was the idea? Why didn't they all go on home? Why didn't you tell 'em to go?"

"I was awful sick," she whimpered. "They brought some lousy rum. Jeannie said she'd take care of things an' lock up when they left."

"Well, you get them damn' Erickson's on the phone an' tell 'em to get over here, fast," Roy directed angrily. "An' tell 'em they better have a good story ready to tell the cops!"

THE POLICE arrived some fifteen minutes ahead of the Erickson's, two-way radio being what it is. First car to stop held two bored patrolmen who looked things over, sneered at Roy Ferris, and called the Homicide Bureau. In what seemed an impossibly small time, the car of Police Detective Horace Muller arrived on the scene.

Muller was short, heavy-set, and he wore a thatch of flaming red hair. He grinned pleasantly at the two who awaited him. Roy Ferris was composed and angry; his wife still looked dazed from shock and fright.

"Well, well, a defunct corpse," Muller remarked jovially. "I trust none of you good people had a hand in putting him to eternal rest?"

"I found him on my davenport," Roy said.

Muller looked at him keenly, with no relaxation of his grin. "And you didn't like that, did you?" he inquired gently. "So what did you do?"

Flatly, Roy said, "I called the cops."

Muller's grin got broader. "After you killed him?"

"Hell, I didn't kill him," Ferris said angrily. "I found the guy dead when I came home. I woke my wife up to see what she knew about it, an' then I called the cops. Try to make something out of that, wise guy."

"I will," Muller said. "Believe me."

You got the feeling that was what the technical men were trying to do too, and the medical examiner; all the ones who swarmed around the body, and through the house, and measured and dusted and photographed things in seemingly wild disorder. There was certainly a spark of pleasant excitement in the doctor's voice when he reported, "Hasn't been dead very long, Muller. No rigor on the muscles yet."

"How long do you figure?" Muller asked.

The medical examiner got unhappy

again. "Always trying to pin a guy down," he said. "There's a lot of factors to consider—the guy's health, how warm the room was, how much he'd had to drink."

"I know," said Muller. "How long?"

"Somewhere between forty-five minutes and an hour and a quarter," the doctor said. "It's a guess, but it ought to be pretty close. He was stuck with an ice pick or something, so there wasn't much external bleeding."

"What time did you get home, Ferris?" asked Muller.

"Six-fifteen," Roy said. "Half hour ago."

"What time's your shift over?"

"Five-thirty, but I stopped to eat."

"Where?"

"What the hell difference does it make?" Roy asked angrily. "A guy's got a right to eat after workin' all night, ain't he?"

"What I'm getting at," Muller said patiently, "is that this guy was stabbed between five-thirty and six. If you can prove you were eating at that time, it wouldn't look so much like you did the killing."

"It's a cafeteria," Roy said. "They don't pay no attention unless you order somethin' cooked special, an' I didn't." He added, "But hell, mister. If I can't prove I wasn't there, you can't prove I was!"

"The guy's dead. You had a motive."

One of the prowl car men stuck his head in the door. "There's a couple of characters out here say somebody told 'em to come over. They're pretty potted, if you ask me."

"That's the Ericksons," Roy said.

"Let 'em in, Joe," Muller told the patrolman.

"Now we'll see," said Roy with satisfaction.

seeing them now he realized just how much he disliked them. Pete was big, almost as tall as Roy and perhaps twenty pounds heavier. He had a roaring big voice and an obscene humor. Jeannie was small and dark; coquettish, but not in a way you could depend on. The few times Roy had been with them on parties he'd got the feeling she was trying to lead him on, so she could raise hell if he did make a pass at her. Not that he would; he was no chaser. Even Stella, quick to anger on most counts, had never accused him of that.

Pete was still drunk enough—the patrolman was right about that. His wife looked dazed and miserable—her eyes were bloodshot. Neither of them had been to bed, judging from their draggled appearance. Of course the rain may have helped that; they were both dripping from the short walk over.

Pete said belligerently, "What the hell's the—"

His wife's scream cut his speech off short. Muller had moved aside to let them see the body. It was not a pleasant sight now, with the clothing stripped away from the wound and the hard light of an IES lamp turned on full above it. Pete stopped talking, and got a little green around the mouth.

"That stopped your big yap, didn't it?" Roy said. "Now, what the hell went on here while I was at work?"

"Oh, so that's the angle!" Pete Erickson said. "Well, chum, Chuck Conley was alive when Jeannie and I left! So maybe you better tell what the hell happened after you come home an' found him here!"

"Shut up, you two," said Muller. "I'll ask the questions. Erickson, what time did you go home?"

"Right about five o'clock," Erickson said promptly. "Stella went to bed a while before that, so the three of us sat around an' killed the rum."

HE HADN'T ever cared a lot for Jeannie and Pete Erickson, but

"You left Conley here when you went?"

"Yeah," Pete said, and his heavy lips twisted in a smirk.

"Conley was okay when you left?"

"Sure he was. He was stretched out on the davenport, but he was awake an' feelin' okay."

Roy Ferris said, "Did he have a cover over him?"

He didn't know for sure why he asked that. The answer wasn't important one way or the other. Roy guessed it was just because he was curious to see if maybe Stella had been up and around after the Ericksons had gone. She might have come in and put the afghan over the sleeping man. She might have—

Pete said slowly, "I don't think so. Why?"

"Just wondered," said Ferris.

Jeannie Erickson said faintly, "What happened? How did he get killed?"

"Looks like somebody used an ice pick on him," Muller said cheerfully. "Who was this guy, anyway?"

"Didn't Roy Ferris tell you?" Pete said.

"What're you talkin' about!" Roy said. "I never saw the guy before in my life. What are you tryin' to pull now, fatso?"

"The hell you never saw him," said Erickson. "He's leaderman on the swing shift, same as you are on the graveyard. You had a bet on with him—the one that pushed his crew into hangin' the most steel this month was gonna get the super's job. The hell you never saw him!"

SO THAT was it—the reason Chuck Conley's name had struck the faint chord of memory. How could he ever convince them that he hadn't known the man—that it had been a wager relayed through others in the front office—that you could work in a place like the shipyard for a year and never know anybody but your own crew and maybe one or two

of the inspectors. He'd heard Conley's name, yes—but he'd never seen him, never met him.

He said, "Sure there was a bet, but I never saw the guy. It was all cooked up in the front office."

Stella said in a curiously muted voice, "Joe, were you bettin' your raise against—against this guy here?"

"I tell you it was nothin' but a deal," he told her sharply. "It was kind of a gag, to get the crews to workin' harder. The boss told us we'd both be taken care of. It wasn't really a bet at all."

"That ain't what Conley said!" Pete snapped.

"All right," said Muller. There was a speculative light in his eyes as he looked at Roy Ferris, a lurking glint of triumph. But his question was for Erickson.

"What did you and your wife do when you left here?"

Pete Erickson grinned and said, "Lessee. We only live a half block, so we musta got home a few minutes after five. Well, I was gettin' kinda hungry, so I started to make me a sandwich. An' about that time Jeannie got to feeling bad and went to bed."

Jeannie Erickson said pathetically. "Cold salmon and grape jelly! Ugh!"

"Good stuff," Pete said stoutly. "Anyway, she high-tailed for the bedroom. I heard the paper hit the porch about then, an' I got it an' read the funnies. Pretty soon Jeannie come out and we both had some coffee. I didn't see no sense in goin' to bed then, so I was takin' a shower, an' about then Stell called up an' said Roy was up on his ear an' to come right over."

Jeannie walked over and put her arm around Stella. "You poor kid," she said. "I don't blame you for callin'. Gosh, if my husband was a murderer I'd be scared to death!"

Stella said automatically, "You forgot to wipe your feet, honey. 'You're trackin' up the rug."

Roy said, "I gotta have a drink of water."

He went out into the kitchen and turned on the light over the sink.

Quickly he pulled open the drawer near the ice box. The ice pick was in its accustomed place. He picked it up by the tip and looked at it. At the place where the slender steel spike joined the handle, there were traces of a rustlike stain.

Behind him, Muller said, "Drop it, Ferris!"

Roy Ferris did not turn. He opened the faucet wide and held the ice pick under the stream. Muller came charging across the room and seized his arm. Roy was yanked half around, with one arm pinioned, but he still scrubbed at the ice pick with his fingers, holding it under the sluicing water until all sign of stain and all chance of finger prints had been erased.

Muller smashed his gun barrel down on Roy's wrist, and the ice pick clattered into the sink. But Roy had finished what he set out to do. He grinned mockingly, and the detective pulled his hand back again, ready for a dangerous instant to slam steel at Roy's face.

"You haven't helped yourself, smart guy!" he said angrily. "You may have destroyed the evidence on the ice pick, but you've cooked yourself with a jury. They'll convict you now, just for what you did to the murder weapon!"

Roy scowled at him. "Nuts," he said.

THE PATROLMAN named Joe came in and said, "What's the beef, Mr. Muller?"

"We're taking this bird in, Joe," said Muller. "Put some cuffs on him, before he destroys some more evidence. He just washed off the murder weapon."

"The hell he did!" Joe said. "You know, I had a kind of a hunch he'd

be the one. And I had a kind of a hunch he'd be tough, too."

"Then what were you doing when he sneaked out in the kitchen and got that ice pick?" demanded Muller. "If you had so damn' many hunches, why didn't you have sense enough to keep an eye on him?"

Joe's jaw dropped, and his face mirrored ludicrous hurt and indignation. He vented his bruised feelings on Roy's arm as he slashed the handcuffs into place.

"You're supposed to give the orders," he said.

"For Crysakes!" Muller yelled. "I suppose I have to tell you when to—"

"Cut it out, you monkeys," Roy growled. "Take me in, if you're gonna. But don't make me listen to any more of your hair-pullin'."

They went back into the front room. The medical examiner and the busy swarms of technicians had gone. Left now were the Ericksons and Stella.

Stella's breath was a harsh, indrawn rasp as she saw the glint of steel on her husband's wrists. "You did do it, Roy!" she said.

"Sure he did," said Muller. "That was plain, right from the start. He comes home, finds the guy either asleep on the davenport, or—well, say he's asleep. Anyway, it's a chance to get rid of a double rival; for his job, and for his wife. So he gets the ice pick, stabs him, and then figures he can get away with it by saying he didn't get home until six-fifteen. Only we don't fall for it."

Stella came to Roy and put her arms around him fiercely. "You hadn't ought to done it, Roy," she wailed. "He wasn't nothin' to me, an' we coulda got along without the raise. It wasn't worth killin' over, Roy!"

He twisted his manacled hands awkwardly to pat her shoulder. "Aw, don't cry," he said. "You don't

wanna cry, honey. It'll work out all right."

He wondered if Stella really appreciated what he was doing for her, taking the fall. ♦ She wasn't a bad kid—just flighty. This might do her good. It might make a pretty fine woman out of her.

"Well, guess we're ready," Muller said.

"I'll get Harry from out back," Joe said.

Stella sank into a chair and put her face down in her hands. Roy Ferris reached out his hands and took the paper from the radio. He looked at the front page a minute, frowning at something he saw. He turned to look at the floor. And then with a sudden exclamation he tossed the paper down on the rug.

"Erickson," he said, "didn't you tell us the paper came after you and your wife got home?"

"That's right," said Pete Erickson.

Roy pointed. "Then will you tell me what the hell your wife's footprint is doin' in the middle of *my* paper?"

SHARPLY, Muller said, "What's this?"

"Look for yourself," said Roy. "There's the paper—it's been folded up on the radio ever since I got it in. There's the track Jeannie made on the rug when she got here a few minutes ago. See if they ain't the same!"

"Now, wait a minute!" Erickson bellowed.

"She's the one that done it!" said Roy. "She pretends she's sick so she goes into the bedroom—then out the window an' over here. This Conley is asleep on the davenport; the door's unlocked. She comes in, step-pin' on the paper, gets the ice pick and kills him. Then she runs home, climbs back in the window, an' her husband don't even know she's been outta the house!"

"By God, Jeannie!" roared Pete

Erickson. "So I was right after all. You were nuts about the guy. That's why you kept askin' him to come out. It wasn't for Stella at all—it was for yourself!"

Erickson lunged at her, all the humor gone from his fat face now—nothing but killing rage in his deep-set eyes. Almost his hands were on her, and then Roy Ferris stepped forward lightly and smashed his manacled hands down on the back of the big man's neck. Erickson slumped to the floor at his wife's feet.

It took the police some time to sweat the truth out of Jeannie, but they did. And finally she told them:

"Sure, I was nuts about him. And he was nuts about me too—until he started getting a yen for this cheap blonde. I told him to watch his step; so when he decided to stay here and make a play for her, I decided to fix him. And I did, too! I don't care what you do to me now!"

* * *

Roy was just going to sleep when Stella asked him. "But honey, why didn't you ever tell 'em you wasn't guilty? You just let 'em put handcuffs on you without sayin' a word."

The question brought him fully awake, for it was an echo from his own mind. He stopped his answer just in time. What—tell Stella he'd been willing to die for her? Let her know that he had, thinking her guilty, been ready to go in her place down that lonely one-way road that is a murderer's end? Let her know that? My God, would she ever rule the roost then!

"It was psychology," he told her. "I knew the answer all along, but I hadda spring it just right to catch the babe off guard, so she'd spill. Women are all kinda dumb, see? It's all in knowin' how to handle 'em."

Submissively, she said, "Yes, dear."

(THE END)

TILL DEATH DO US PART

By Ken Norton

Butch, fresh out of Sing Sing, loved to play games; and somebody played mighty rough with the girl who had double-timed him.

IT'S A DOG'S life—being an ex-con out on parole and clerking for old Blood-And-Thunder Galt. Even law-abiding folks around the East End avoid him, and they don't have to take nothing off of him if they don't want to. But me, I've got five years hanging over my head; and old Ben Galt is the District Parole Supervisor.

He is tall and lean with sharp piercing eyes set in a stern forbidding face. Even his office on the second floor of the Sheehan Building is austere, depressing. I am sitting there late one afternoon hammering out dry-as-dust reports when I'd like to be down at Kelly's shooting pool with the boys. Outside it is drizzling rain and the sky is dark and threatening. The clock on the wall says three forty-five—just fifteen minutes till quitting time.

That's how it is when the phone rings. I start for it. Then old Galt growls, "Keep your nose out of what don't concern you! I'll get it." He got it all right—really got something to rave about. But he ain't the only one who gets it. I get it too—a shock.

Elsie, Butch's ex, is dead. She is shot through the hat-rack, and it is murder!

Butch is my brother, a parolee like me; and now the cops have pinched him. "Come on, Slug," Galt says.

"I'm not leaving you here to snoop through the confidential files."

I trail after him, too stunned to resent his insinuation. My think-tank has gone into a tailspin. Butch accused of murder! I can't believe it. But he's had plenty provocation.

Rode a bum beef, he did. And all because Elsie falls for Rogers, a jeweler. A dirty shame—the way they framed Butch for a stickup he didn't commit. Butch pulled seven and a half to fifteen. Elsie divorced him and married the jeweler, adding insult to injury, and lives high on the seventy-five grand Rogers collects from the insurance company for jewels Butch didn't take.

Yeah, I know. You've heard that one before. All right, go ahead and sneer. Say he's no lily. I admit it. Just the same it is a bum beef and you can't blame the guy. And when he and Elsie got hitched didn't Elsie say, "'Til death do us part?" Well, Butch has a right to insist on her keeping her end of the bargain.

Only it's going to be tough on Butch if he's convicted because they'll give him the chair, sure. Thinking of that, I am down in the dumps. But still something smells fishy.

I am rummaging around in my mind as I follow old Ben Galt down to the lobby. I know something is phony—something doesn't ring true



The guys with the wheeled stretcher load her aboard, cover her with a purple velvet shroud, and wheel her out of the side door into the drive.

and is arousing my suspicion. Then it hits me. The local law has not reported Rogers being defunct, and Butch is not one to take halfway measures—strictly a one-track mind, that's Butch. If he'd bumped Elsie, Rogers should be deader'n a mackerel.

I begin to figure maybe Butch isn't guilty. Maybe he took my advice. We are closer than most brothers, and I usually do the thinking for both of us because Butch can't be classed as bright. He's a big dumb bruiser and takes my word as Gospel. I always tell him you can't have both brains and brawn and I'm sort of scrawny, so he gets the idea.

Then, too, the day he got out of Sing Sing I talk to him like a Dutch uncle. "Butch," I says, "you've got to forget Elsie and that back-biting Rogers and what they did to you. Yeah, I know they gave you the dirty end of the stick, and they'd ought to be taken for a ride. But that's not for you," I says. "No, sir, they're not worth getting into trouble over."

Butch still has an ugly gleam in his eye; but he agrees I know best, so I let it go at that believing he will not do anything rash.

And now I am figuring maybe he didn't bump Elsie. Maybe some other citizen has something against her and is kind of pushing it.

WELL, I am still trying to dope this thing out when we crawl into a cab and head for the *res gestae*. Old Ben settles back against the cushions and gives me one of them penetrating looks which kind of makes the hair on the back of my neck bristle up. "Well, Slug," he sneers, "have you found an out for Butch yet?"

I do not say nothing because I know he is giving me the needle, and I do not wish to make the bald-headed old coot sore. He is not the kind of a gee it pays to get familiar with. For twenty-five years he is a

prison guard and learns to use his tongue like a lion-tamer cracking a whip. They do not send sissies to Sing Sing, so Ben Galt has lots of experience handling tough babies. But I cannot say I am fond of any of his methods. However, you've got to give the devil his due—and mean as old Ben is, he's nobody's fool. Sometimes I think he is a mind reader only I know better.

Out in the west seventies our cab pulls up in front of a little brown bungalow. A dead-wagon is backed into the drive and two patrol cars are parked across the street. On the sidewalk a gang of local yokels are holding down ringside seats despite the drizzling rain and a harness-bull which is on the muscle.

Ben gives the cabbie a nickel tip and we hie into the dump. The living room ain't very big and is packed with flatfeet. But because I do not get out in the sticks like this very often, fat-faced Donovan, who is now a detective lieutenant and no longer assigned to the East End Station, is the only copper present with which I am acquainted. It seems he is in charge here for he is ordering people around and bellowing at a little gray-haired police photographer to get busy and do his stuff.

Near the side door two white-clad gees from a local mortuary are waiting with a wheeled stretcher to haul the remains away. In one corner is an overstuffed chair and Rogers is parked there. He is a tall dark-haired bird and a fancy dresser. Although immaculate as ever, he looks like three days of rainy weather just now. I gun him suspicious-like, wondering if this is another one of his frameups. He is, not carrying on none. Just sits there like a dummy with a face a mile long and I decide he is either a damn good actor or this is on the legit.

I cannot see Butch, and I am wondering what's the score. Then the harness-bulls in front of me sort of

spread out to give the dead-wagon stooges a chance, and I see Elsie lying on the floor. She is decidedly dead and not very pretty now what with heavy makeup flaming on her bloodless face. A little blue spot stands out on her white forehead, and she is star-gazing with a vacant look in her lawn-colored lamps. Her hair is platinum blond except at the back where it is weltered in blood.

The guys with the wheeled stretcher load her aboard, cover her with a purple velvet shroud, and wheel her out the side door into the drive. Three harness-bulls follow them to spoil the local yokel's fun and things are not quite so crowded. Then I see there is quite some blood where the back of Elsie's head has lain, and I decide the bullet must've been dumfounded and made a damn sight bigger hole coming out than it did going in. That indicates premeditation and means first degree.

OLD BEN struts over to Lieutenant Donovan while I stay put near the front door. "Well," he demands, fastening his black shoe-button eyes on Donovan's moon face, "where's he at?"

The detective frowns. Apparently he does not like Ben's brusque manner any better than most folks do. "If you mean Butch Mason," he says, "he's down at the station."

"Then what the hell's the idea?" Ben growls.

Donovan's fat face turns a deeper red. "What do you expect? Think I can hold a dangerous character here to await your pleasure!"

Ben's eyes begin to snap, and I think sure he's going to bounce Donovan hard. But instead he lets it ride and switches over to another track.

"What evidence you got against Butch?" he asks.

"Plenty," Donovan says short-like. "Eyewitnesses, for one thing."

"What!" Ben roars loud enough to

awaken the dead. But I am struck dumb.

My ears ring; my brain is numb. I stand there gaping while the detective leads Ben over to a window opening onto the drive. I hear him explaining how Mrs. Milton Clark, the babe that lives next door, sees Butch enter the Rogers' bungalow, hears a scream and then a shot. She rushes out of her house into the driveway and looks in the window. Seeing Rogers struggling with Butch and Elsie lying on the floor, she wheels and runs to call the law.

"At least, that's her story," Donovan says, turning away from the window. "And the phone call checks. So does Rogers' account. It seems to be pretty much of an open and shut case. You see, Rogers won that struggle—knocked Butch cold, and we found him lying over there in front of the radio. We even have the gun with his finger prints on it."

That looks bad, I have to admit. But I am remembering a piece I read in a scandal mongering newspaper columnist's blurb. It seems this Clark babe is something of a social scion. Her folks live on Park Avenue and have got money to burn, so her goings-on rate publicity. I didn't know before that Elsie and Rogers live next door to this high-toned babe. But now I am wise and have found an out for Butch, so I loudly chip in my two cents' worth.

"I smell a rat," I announce.

Ben ignores me. He turns to Rogers and says, "You must be a pretty good dukester—Butch is a lot bigger than you."

Rogers is not one to brag. He looks up and manages a weak sort of a grin. "No," he says, "I can't say I'm much of a bruiser—never went in for that sort of thing. But bulk doesn't mean much to a person who doesn't know how to use it. Butch Mason is very clumsy or I would have been killed too." He sighs like

as if the compliment is poor compensation.

Old Ben stands there staring at him; and nobody is saying anything, so I try again. "I smell a rat," I repeat still louder.

Well, that kind of wakes the bald-headed old coot up and he looks at me. But still he will not give me the go-ahead. Instead he walks back to the window and guns the house next door.

Donovan stands near the radio, rubbing his chin reflectively and watching old Ben.

Finally the bald-headed old coot turns around and says to Donovan, "So Rogers saw the actual murder?"

"No." Donovan rubs his chin some more. "He isn't exactly an eye witness. But he is the next thing to it. You see," he explains, "Rogers was in the kitchen when he heard his wife scream and a shot fired. Naturally, he is alarmed and runs to see what has happened. He finds Butch standing over Mrs. Rogers' body with a smoking gun in his hand, and rushes him. The force of the impact knocks the gun out of Butch's hand, and Rogers lands a lucky punch knocking him cold."

"Well, that about cinches it," Ben growls, stamping over to the side door. "But I will check with Mrs. Clark for the sake of the record."

The law is dead certain Butch is their man. They have painted him blacker'n the ace of spades; and, what is worse, they are not questioning him; and when cops don't ask questions you'd might as well make up your mind they figure they have the same as got a conviction. But they are wrong this time, because I know who bumped Elsie and it ain't Butch.

I HAVE checked this thing from every angle and everything clicks—even the motive. And now I am thinking this Clark babe is due for

an uncomfortable session with old Ben.

But I am wrong. He hasn't got wise like I figure, and when the dame opens the door we step in out of the rain while Ben asks her a few routine questions. Then he stands there with one mitt on the doorknob telling her how sorry he is about having to disturb her. Yeah, even old Ben knows a good-looking chick when he sees one and can almost be human while he hands out a line of jive.

Although I am glad to know it is possible to put something over on him, I am disgusted. As we hike back across the drive, I decide I will have to tell the bald-headed old coot what is as plain as the nose on his face; and I proceed to do so, but definitely.

"You have now," I says, "turned your back on Elsie's murderess while an innocent man stands accused!"

"Yeah," old Ben grunts, ducking into the Rogers' living room. "And how did you arrive at that stupendous conclusion?"

So I tell him.

"If you would read something besides the obituaries or clean your ears out once in awhile you would know this Clark babe is a jealous dame who finds a woman's lipstick stained hankie in hubby's pocket and goes looking for hubby's love-light with blood in her eye and a roscoe in her satchel. You know how some dames are—when they say 'Till death do us part' they don't mean maybe. And you are not blind, so you should know Elsie is a sweet-looking dish."

Old Ben is not paying much attention, but Rogers is.

"So what happens? This babe knows Elsie is not above an illicit romance as she proves when she two-times Butch." I keep on. "Maybe the babe puts two and two together and gets three—Elsie, hubby and the green-eyed cat. So her suspicions are confirmed."

"That's a lie," Rogers shouts, bouncing up from his chair. "Elsie wouldn't do such a thing!"

"Okay. Okay," I soothe him. "But the babe thinks she did."

He don't have no answer for that, so I continue.

"Now Rogers is in the kitchen, Butch is coming up the front walk, and this side door is only a few steps from the Clark babe's side door. All she has to do is hie over, let Elsie have it, drop the gat, and scoot for home.

"Then what happens—Butch, being closer, barges into the living room first and picks up the lethal weapon; and you know the rest. Nice, eh?"

Old Ben don't answer right off. He is looking to see how it strikes the others. Except for the police photographer who is indifferent, it don't set so well. Rogers would like to see Butch burn and naturally he don't like the idea. But it is really Donovan which is fit to be tied. He is still sore about me stealing his car that time, and he does not care to be shown up by an ex-con.

Then old Ben Galt has to spoil everything. Much as Donovan hates to swallow it, he will put the pinch on this Clark dame if Ben keeps his yap shut. But he don't.

"There's only one thing wrong with the case you've built up," old Ben says, "and that is that Mrs. Clark isn't guilty. If you were half as smart as you think you are, you would know it was a man who murdered Mrs. Rogers because she was shot with a dumdummy bullet and dames don't know enough to prepare a slug that way."

Well, that kind of throws me for a loss. But I am still convinced this Clark dame is the guilty party, and if I can get around this dumdummy bullet business even old Ben will have to admit she is in the soup plenty. So I say, "Maybe she just happened to have a hollow-point cartridge."

Donovan is itching to take a crack

at me, so he sneers, "Any fool knows they don't make hollow-point shells for a forty-five automatic."

What he says is obviously true or he wouldn't know about it; and I am about to agree with him for a change when he continues. "I had a watertight case against Butch until you come sticking your nose into what doesn't concern you. Now the D. A. will be mad as hell when he finds out he has to fight to convince the jury and overcome the doubt your crazy theory will raise. I'll get even with you, don't worry!"

That just goes to show how dumb Lieutenant Donovan is. If he'd kept his big yap shut, I might have let the matter drop; but now I am wise and even though I can't prove the Clark dame knows how to dumdummy a bullet I will pass the tip on to Butch's mouthpiece.

Eventually the cops get through snooping and we ride down to the precinct station-house with them. Rogers goes along to swear out a warrant for Butch and it is not a gala affair.

AT PRECINCT headquarters we separate; Ben and I taking the elevator to the jail on the top floor, while the cops and Rogers begin negotiations for a murder warrant. We wait in the visiting room for a spell and then Butch comes in.

He is a big guy with innocent blue eyes; and the dames think he is the strong silent type; whereas he is just plain dumb. He is a fine physical specimen though, and if it were not for my personality I would be left out in the cold while he gets all the babes that come along.

Well, Butch no more than gets set down when old Ben jumps on him with both feet. The bald-headed old coot rants and raves and roars and finally comes down to earth and demands to know what Butch has to say for himself and then raves some

more when Butch informs him he "ain't done it."

"I didn't come here to listen to fairy tales," old Ben growls, "but I'll listen to your story just so I can prove you are a liar. Go ahead—shoot, but make it short."

"Okay," Butch says. "I ain't done it."

Ben waits for Butch to elaborate; but that's it, brother! Butch will not say another word, just keeps repeating, "I ain't done it." He is stubborn that way because I am always pounding it into his knob that these coppers don't mean him no good and if he says he didn't do it and nothing more he'll not get in no trouble.

Well, old Blood-And-Thunder Galt is getting madder by the minute. He raves 'til he's hoarse then croaks at me, demanding I make Butch talk. But I don't have no success neither. Butch just sits in the visiting cage and stares at us.

Old Ben is about to blow a gasket. He calls the turnkey and has us both thrown in the strong-box and goes off and leaves us there.

Well, this is not the first time I have been on the inside looking out; so I do not get excited. I flop on a bunk, thinking of what a swell time I could've had violating my parole; and here I am waiting to go back P. V. on a trumped-up charge of being an accessory after the fact.

After a while I get to wondering if some shady citizen has taught this Clark number how to dumdummy a bullet. I know Butch will not talk while in the clink, so I do not waste my breath. He is sitting on the opposite bunk counting his tailor-made cigarettes. He has fourteen which he decides to save, so he rolls a fag out of sack tobacco he got from the kangaroo court; and I am grateful they did not throw me in a bull-pen where I will get kangarooed and have to pay a buck to the court.

For half an hour I listen to Butch grumble. "Gee," he says for the ump-

teenth time. "I wish we had a deck of cards." That, I think, is the nice part of being dumb. Here he is slated for the hot-squat, and he's got nothing more important than cards on his mind.

Like I say, Butch cannot be classed as bright and he will not talk while in the clink. But he likes to play games, so. . . .

"What say we play a guessing game?" I suggest.

"Gee. Okay. That's fine," he says. "I know you'd think of sumpin'."

"Okay," I says, "guess who bumped Elsie."

"Ha! That's easy," Butch gloats, "Rogers done it."

"Rogers!" I am dumbfounded. It don't make sense—what motive could he have? "But—but how do you—" I catch myself in time. "Okay," I says, "guess who saw him."

Butch chuckles. "I did."

"Okay. Now this one's going to be tougher," I warn him. "Guess how come you see him."

Butch looks puzzled. Then he brightens. "Now I remember—he calls me on the phone to come see Elsie and he waits till I get there to bump her." Butch has a pleased expression on his pan like as if the gee did him a big favor, but I do not disillusion him.

"Guess who the coppers find laying in front of Rogers' radio," I continue.

"Elsie?"

"Nope. Guess again."

"Aw, gee, Slug, ask easy ones."

"Okay. Guess who Rogers had a fight with?"

"Aw—that ain't easy!"

I SEE I am getting nowhere fast. He don't remember being knocked cold. Anyhow I now know who the murderer is and have one clue that can maybe be traced. I am about to try another angle of attack when I hear keys jangle and the tread of feet, so I clam up and wait.

From the sounds of things it is a young army marching down the corridor and I am wondering what the score is when old Blood-And-Thunder Galt mopes into sight. The jailor, Donovan, Rogers and a platoon of flatfeet are trailing him.

Thinking fast, I jump him first. "Rogers is the guilty party," I announce, "because Butch says he saw him dump Elsie, and Butch don't know enough to lie."

"Yeah," old Ben growls, "so what?"

"So what!" I repeat. "Why..."

Just then I catch sight of the bracelets Rogers is wearing. That tips me off and the look on his handsome mug confirms my suspicions—the jig is up. . . . "But—but how did you get wise?" I stammer.

"Harrump," old Ben snorts, "You're dumber'n Butch! If you'd been looking at the matter with an open mind instead of trying to pin the beef on Mrs. Clark, you might've known Rogers was lying from the start."

I must've looked kinda blank 'cause old Ben continues, "I knew damn well Rogers was lying and decided to check up on him the minute he said Butch was clumsy. I attend the Warden's fight card at the prison every year and after having seen Butch successfully defend the heavyweight title of the institution for the last three years nobody can tell me he's clumsy and make me believe it."

"Yes," Donovan chips in, "and even though our lab man had found Butch's fingerprints on the butt of the automatic like Rogers intended, Ben had the inside of the gun checked; and Rogers' prints were found on the clip where he didn't think to wipe them off; and when we confronted him, he broke down and confessed that he was out to collect his wife's insurance."

This is pretty shrewd detection if you ask me but I don't let on. "Well, then," I says, "that Clark dame is lying when she says she saw Butch and Rogers fighting."

"No, she wasn't," Donovan says. "She was just mistaken. She saw Rogers carrying Butch in an upright position over to where he wanted him to be found, and jumped to the wrong conclusion."

"Well," I persist, turning to old Ben, "how come you to give Butch hell if you know Rogers is lying from the start?"

"Hell, I'm no wet-nurse," Ben snaps. "Don't believe in mollycoddling. Well, come on out of there and make room for Rogers," he growls as the jailer unlocks the door.

"And before you start squawking," he adds as I and Butch step out into the corridor, "I'll get Butch a pardon on that bum robbery beef as soon as I can see the Governor."

Well, all in all, I am figuring the bald-headed old coot isn't such a bad egg after all. You see, he's all bark and no bite. But even if he don't trip Rogers up, I will because I am on the right track all the time—remember, "till death do us part?" Well, Rogers lives up to his contract, see?

(THE END)

Did You Ever See A DEAD MAN WEARING A HATPIN?

Read the Story
in the Current
Issue of

CHIEF DETECTIVE

THE RAG MAN

By Robert Merrill Lambert

AMOS COLE waited anxiously, going over his scheme for the last time. Above all he must not attract undue suspicion to himself. One false word or action would give him away completely.

The black trunk loomed unnaturally dark and silent in the cool dark of the hallway. From where he sat on the porch steps he could see the darting shadow of a kingfisher circling overhead.

Expectantly, he scanned the countryside, fading out to a quiet indigo in the afternoon sun. For the third time he pried a bulging timepiece from a small, tight pocket. Two-thirty! And now a cloud of brown dust came hugging the green horizon, pursuing an indolent course along the winding dirt road.

The Rag Man was coming.

This collector of refuse was a prominent nonentity in the community. He was blessed with a name but usually identified only by his calling, and owned a dwelling assembled bit by bit from prolific county junk-piles. His wife was existent only in rumor, his lineage remote, his various pursuits an education in luxurious delinquency. He took what things were available, appropriated others, and brought forth his purse as a last resort. For as long as Amos cared to remember, the Rag Man had been traveling this road on Thursdays, scavenging the countryside, eager to bargain for assorted oddments tucked shrewdly aside against the few greasy coppers he relinquished in exchange.

With cylinders loudly protesting, his battered delivery wagon steamed

to a halt before Amos's white picket fence. Traces of gilt lettering still shone vaguely through blistered paint and a thorough sizing by the elements.

The Rag Man resembled a flapping condor as he stepped to the ground, his hair flung back in perpetual frenzy by wind and neglect. "Hi Amos," he waved.

From the shade of the porch, Amos regarded him narrowly. "Hello, Mat. what's doin'?"

"Same old stuff." Mat sauntered up the walk. His probing red eyes swept the house and the row of beehives beyond, then came back to fasten on Amos in mild curiosity.

"Where's yer niece, Amos?"

"Huh?"

"Where's Millie?"

So he had noticed her absence already. Careful now! "Millie?" Amos said vacantly. "Oh, yes, Millie's . . . er . . . gone. . ."

"Gone?" The Rag Man's face wrinkled into a frown. "She ain't been a-courtin', hez she?"

"Oh, no. Went to visit her Cousin May in Ramonville."

Suspicious relief plagued the Rag Man. "Thought you two was pretty much alone. Never knowed Millie had kinfolk."

"Oh, she has though. Cousin May. Slim lookin' church woman with freckles. Light yeller house. Dog named 'Tildy'—after a failin' aunt."

"Is Millie a-stayin' long?"

"Can't say fer sure. She's been thinkin' some 'bout a job in the city, too. Might go away fer good."

The Rag Man chewed his lip for

The trunk was very heavy,
Blood-red drops seeped from it—
And Millie was missing!



Amos saw the look in The Rag Man's eyes and whirled around.

a moment. "Got any papers today, Amos?" he said half-heartedly.

"Nope."

"Rags?"

"No rags—but there's somethin' else."

"Fetch it out an' les see."

"I've got a trunk—"

This brought a swift return of the Rag Man's business acumen. "I don't dicker in trunks—they're hard to get rid of. Nobody ever goes anywhur 'round here."

"I don't wanna sell, I want it delivered—I'll pay."

"Jake Tramble does truckin'."

"Costs too much. I figured you'd give me a break."

"Well . . . where'd ya want it ta go?"

"The old Elder place."

"Way out there? That tumble-down cabin by Swan Lake?"

"Yep. You'll do it, won't ya?"

"Fer a dollar I will, but what's the idea?"

The question was lost in the dissertation that followed the price Mat quoted. "A dollar! To Swan Lake? Why that's what Jake'd soak me!" Amos went on haggling until Mat said desperately: "All right then, six bits. Where'd you say Millie went again?"

"To her Cousin May's I told ya—church woman with a yellor house."

"Oh, so 'twas."

AMOS went into the hallway and pushed the trunk out to the porch. "Give me a hand, Mat, will ya?"

"Labor he wants, too," Mat grunted, bending his shoulder to the burden and easing it down the steps. The center of balance kept shifting with the movement. "What ya got in there—rocks?"

"'Tis heavy, ain't it?" Amos admitted.

The Rag Man's eyes narrowed a little. "Just about Millie's weight, I'd say."

The trunk went down with a crash between them. For a moment they faced each other, silently.

"I know what you're thinkin'," said Amos slowly. "That maybe I choked the girl to death an' put her into the trunk."

The Rag Man's jaw dropped helplessly, then leisurely worked back upward into a grin. "That's a mighty sharp sense o' hewmer ya got there, Amos. I swow ya give me a start. I was just remarkin', that's all."

Amos rubbed his nose condescendingly. They carried on for a few steps, set the awkward load down again.

"Supposin'—now just supposin' o' course—" Mat theorized, "Millie's body was shut in here. What in all tarnashun might ya have choked her fer?"

Amos mopped away ineffectually at his gleaming forehead. "Her money, o' course."

"Money?"

"What else—since we're just remarkin'?"

"I never thought she had any money."

"Oh, she has though. Midvale bank. Her father left it to her. Quite a pile. Stacked this high—in tens that would be. I'm her next of kin, too. Kinda crazy us talkin' like this, ain't it?—in all this heat."

A queer mirth reached down inside the Rag Man and threatened to disjoint his precarious frame. "You air a card, Amos Cole, and no foolin'. Talkin' so brash. When I stop to think about it I don't b'lieve you'd harm a skeeter 'less he flew down your throat in the dark. An' then you'd cough him out pronto an' dry him out in the oven, I'll bet."

Amos looked abashed. "I ain't no hand at violence, Mat. Kinda take after my ma, I guess—peace-lovin' an' gentle-like."

"Grab holt an' les go, killer," Mat chuckled hollowly.

It was an old trunk, loose at the

corners and covered with cobwebs and rust. They maneuvered it the length of the walk before resting again.

Still chuckling, Mat looked back toward the house. Something bright and glistening caught his eye in the glare of the afternoon sun. A trail of spattered red drops marked the progress of the trunk down the walk! Mat followed the spots with widening eyes to a dark wet lower corner.

Amos saw the look in the Rag Man's eyes and whirled around. "Don't be a fool, Mat!" he sparred quickly.

"I ain't color blind, Amos."

"Now listen, will ya! It's only a doe in this trunk. I shot it by mistake this mornin' up in the thicket. You know there's a heavy fine fer shootin' deer out o' season, an' specially a doe. You know the game warden'd have my hide—you know it, Mat, don't ya?"

"Sure, sure, I know," Mat said very slowly. "How much money did you say Millie had?"

"But that part was all just talk, Mat. You know how a feller'll kid along."

"Sure, Amos, sure. I unnerstan'. Now suppose I just lift this lid nice an' easy-like, an' have a little peek? Always did have a hankerin' fer venison."

Mat's fingers stole along the trunk to the rusty hasp. Amos had his hands to his face, swaying a little. The next thing the Rag Man knew he was staring down the barrel of a gun.

"All right you ol' buzzard, back away from there!" Amos commanded. "You guessed it all right—I was a fool fer arrangin' things this way. I figured you'd be dumb enough ta let me get by with it."

"Blood's a mighty convincin' business, Amos. Mighty convincin'. I can see where ya mighta fooled me if yer trunk'd been water-tight. You

aim to sink Millie's body in the old pond, don't ya?"

Lips drawn tight, Amos leveled the weapon. "Maybe I do, but you'll never blab about it, ya hear? After you drive me to the Elder place I'll take care o' you, too. I don't aim ta see my plans busted up that easy."

"**H**OLD on a minute," Mat put in shrewdly. "Don't get yourself in an uproar. I'm the Rag Man, ain't I, an' I'm here to do business. After all, that's what I deal in—rags, papers—old trunks."

"What are you drivin' at?"

"Ya know, Amos, I'm ashamed o' ya. A man o' your means kickin' about a dollar—an' with such a expensive trunk. Look now, I'll deliver this package to the Elder place an' fergit I ever seen it. An' all ya have ta do is show me the color o' Millie's money."

Amos considered a minute, his face growing dark. "No," he replied finally.

Confidence left the Rag Man's eyes. "Why not?"

"'Cause I never could trust ya, that's why. You'd just bleed me dry an' then turn me over when the cash was gone."

The Rag Man studied the gun, and the determined hand that held it. As Amos took a step towards him, he seemed to decide abruptly. "You can trust me, all right, Amos—look here." He reached into his pocket, held out something shiny in his hand. "Rekernize this?"

Amos accepted the object warily, backed away to examine it. "It's a gol' locket. Don't mean nothin' ta me."

"Open 'tup an' look at the pitcher."

Amos fussed with the catch.

"Why—that's June Ryerson! This trinket b'longs to her. What you doin' with it?"

"I was scared to get rid of it—'round these parts, anyway. She won't be needin' it no more."

"Are you tryin' ta say you kil—"

"Ah-ah! That's a strong word ta bring out in the open. Les just say you an' me's paddlin' the same canoe."

Amos returned the locket. "What did ya do with her?"

"Bottom o' Swan Lake. Now that we've laid out the high cards, it'll keep us both in line. More trustin' ya might say. We kin work on a partnership basis."

"I don't b'lieve it," Amos said. "You're tryin' ta trick me."

"I got the locket, ain't I?"

"Well . . . yes. But what did ya do it fer, anyway?"

"I wasn't intendin' ta kill her—but that's how it panned out. She was clippin' along the Mill Road in the dark, a-hummin'. Always hummin' she was—that's what give 'er away, like a bell on a cat. I grabbed her pocketbook all right but that chain 'round her neck was stronger than I figured. It wouldn't snap. She started to fight an' claw and the chain was sort of chokin' 'er. Then she begin ta scream an' I couldn't stand fer that. When I let go she kinda slumped down on the road—an' didn't move no more."

Amos looked thoughtful. "That sounds like you're tellin' it straight."

"Sure I am, seein' as we're partners. How'd it happen with Millie?"

"Not as easy as you had it," Amos replied. "Millie was mighty stingy with me—never treated me right. All the same it wasn't easy creepin' up on her in the dead o' night. She shoulda been asleep as I reached out fer her in the dark—but she wasn't, Mat, she wasn't—she was sittin' up in bed, wide awake, waitin'!"

"Wait—listen!" the Rag Man exclaimed.

Faintly at first, gaining volume with nearness, a voice humming sweetly floated in from the road. His fearful eyes darted first to the trunk, and beyond to the telling red stains on the sidewalk.

"Who's that?" he whispered.

"I—I don't know," said Amos.

"Same tune that June was a-hummin'—I—I keep hearin' the cussed thing."

"Quiet!"

Tensely they waited, crouching behind the truck. The humming stopped. Sounds were deceptive in the summer air. There was nothing but the white road and the silent shadow of the kingfisher sweeping over the rosebeds.

"Mebbe they turned back—"

"Yeah, I guess so. Le's get the trunk in the wagon an' clean this mess up fast."

Feverishly they set to work. The Rag Man hurried to the rear of the truck and opened the squealing black doors. Staring blue eyes confronted him. He fell back terrified at the figure before him—the smiling red lips and familiar dark curls of Millie!

"Millie Cole!" he cried out hoarsely.

"Hello Uncle Amos—Mat!"

"I told you to stay away from here 'til five o'clock," Amos said, sharply.

THE GIRL stepped down from the wagon. "I got lonesome down there by the brook. Besides, you're up to something, you and Mat—" She caught sight of the trunk then, her words rising up in a gasp.

"You bet he's up ta somethin'," Mat moved in angrily, beginning to get an inkling of the truth.

"Run, Millie!" Amos yelled. The Rag Man lunged at him suddenly, knocking the gun to the grass. There was a wild scramble for it, with Mat's hand closing over the weapon. He sprang to his feet, facing the frightened pair. "Stay close together an' stand back a-ways," he ordered grimly. "We'll just see about all this."

"What's wrong, Uncle Amos?" Millie demanded. "What have you done?"

"Do as he says," Amos told her, "the Rag Man means business."

Facing the house with the couple,

in front of him, Mat took a stand on the walk. His red eyes burned with a new intensity. "Tryin' ta pull a slick one on ol' Mat, huh? All right, Amos, spill it—what's the angle?"

"Thought ya knew by now, Mat. I wanted your confession."

"Ta what?"

"The murder o' June Ryerson on the Mill Road."

"Pretty cute, ain't ya? All right, how'd ya catch on?"

"The finger was pointed right at ya."

"What finger?"

"Remember that pile o' ol' rags you had in the wagon last Thursday? You didn't notice, but there was a bare arm stickin' out o' them—mighty white an' stiff—pointin' right at you, Mat. I woulda acted quicker, but I was stunned there fer awhile—not thinkin' you'd be bold enough ta have a body trapsin' 'round with ya in the truck. When I heard about June Ryerson next day, I knew, but it was too late then. I knew you'd have hid the body good an' no one coulda sweat it outa ya. But this little trick paid off."

"Is that all ya had ta go on—seein' that arm?"

"That mostly, but knowin' your ways o' workin' helped."

"Well I am a plain fool! That was a wax dummy from Cy Kendall's store—I'd already got rid of the girl's body the night before."

Genuine surprise lit Amos's face.

"You're as sneaky as dry rot, Amos, an' twice as dangerous, but all this ain't gonna help ya any. You both know too much now."

"O' course ya know that gun ain't loaded, Mat."

"I can see that. But I got one here that is!"

There was the merest rustle of warning.

"Just stand as you are Mat, and don't make a move," a stern voice ordered from behind the Rag Man.

Mat knew the owner of that voice

well enough to obey. He stood for a moment, like a wounded condor, sinking into its feathers. With a mute gesture of despair, he turned around to face the speaker. The trunk had opened noiselessly behind him, revealing the trim blue uniform of Lieutenant Haynes of the State Police. The trooper had a satisfied smile on his face and a half-spilled bottle of brilliant red dye in his hand.

"Get in the wagon, Mat. I'm taking you in."

As the cloud of dust settled over the horizon, Amos put his arm around Millie. What he had done was right, but he felt a little sad, just the same.

"Thursday ain't gonna seem Thursday without the Rag Man—is it, Millie?" he said.

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"I never even liked him. But he offered me so much. . . ."

"And I can offer you so little!" He looked about his studio. It seemed pitifully bare, but there were some really fine paintings on the walls—all his. "If only I had my brother Bob's gift! He's making good."

"You have twice as much talent as Bob."

"But not half his talent for making money. If I were a lightning sketch artist. . . ."

"Dear Leonard!" She laughed throatily and kissed him again. "And now I must see David and tell him I am going to marry you."

She saw David Keating within the next ten minutes; he was twice divorced, and lived with his two maiden sisters in the old family home only a block away.

David greeted her in the wide front hall, holding a purple orchid. His sisters were having tea in the old-fashioned drawing room. He beamed upon her with his round, pink face and held the orchid against her dress.

"Mr. Keating—David—there is something I must tell you." And then she told him that it was all off between them.

He pinned the orchid to her dress. His chubby fingers never trembled. Smiling pleasantly, he said: "When did you decide to marry this—this—"

"Only a few minutes ago. He's a

(Continued On Page 88)

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GEM DETECTIVE

(Continued From Page 87)

young artist named O'Farrell. He has a studio just around the corner."

"Oh, yes; I know that building. As a matter of fact," said David, critically eying the orchid, "I happen to own it. . . Well, Bernetta, this is quite a surprising bit of news. But perhaps, after all, it's for the best." He leaned forward to rearrange the orchid.

Bernetta saw his fat fingers fussing with it. Then she heard him say: "Oops! So sorry. Broke the stem. But never mind. I'll get you another. And now, my dear," he went cheerfully on, taking her bag and wrap, "you must meet my sisters."

He hung her coat on the hatrack beside her handbag, then ushered her into the drawing room. His sisters greeted her cordially and invited her to a chair beside the teacart. Bernetta walked across the room and sat down between them. David stood in the doorway and beamed upon them rosily, gently tapping his palm with the broken orchid.

PRESENTLY, while none was watching him, he sidled silently away. Moving with surprising swiftness for a man of his build, he ascended the broad staircase to a bedroom on the second floor. He entered this room and closed the door behind him. And into his inside pocket he carefully tucked the broken orchid.

Then he crossed the room to a chest of drawers. From one of the drawers he took a loaded revolver.

He put the revolver in his coat pocket. Then he put on his hat and left the room. He went down a rear stairway and slithered from the house by a back door. Nobody saw him.

Still unobserved, he walked through the alley to an old studio building. He entered and strode down a musty hall to a door on which was lettered: "O'Farrell."

THE BROKEN ORCHID

With his left hand—his right was thrust into his coat—he pushed the door open and stepped inside. He closed the door behind him and stood with his back to it, staring steadily at a stalwart young man seated at an easel.

The young man had looked up inquiringly, as the door burst open, but now into his brown eyes there came a look of pleased surprise.

"Hold that!" he cried enthusiastically. "Don't move! That expression is magnificent."

David Keating's round, pink face was a curious study of jealousy and poisonous hate. He asked in a hard flat voice: "Is your name O'Farrell?"

"It is," said the young man, busily sketching. "Don't change that look on your face!"

"Then you're the man I want," said David Keating, and drew his right hand from his pocket. In his hand was the loaded revolver. He aimed it at O'Farrell's head.

Young O'Farrell, intent on his sketching, glanced around for another look at his caller—and two bullets caught him in the head and sent him sprawling backward.

David Keating made sure he was dead. Then he took the broken orchid from his pocket and dropped it on the floor.

He called the police, from a public telephone booth, and went back to his home.

In the wide front hall, he put his revolver into Bernetta's handbag. Then he stepped to the drawing room and stood stroking his smooth pink cheek and looking fondly at his sisters and Bernetta. His cherubic face reflected a sort of rosy content.

"Why, Davy!" said one of his sisters. "Have you been there all this time? Do come in and join us."

Bernetta half rose from her chair. "I really must be going—"

"No, no," protested David, and

(Continued On Page 90)



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GEM DETECTIVE

(Continued From Page 89)

walked into the room. "Please don't go. Louise, pour some more tea."

IN HALF an hour Bernetta again rose to leave; but now a servant entered and whispered something in Keating's ear.

"Show them in," said David.

The servant came back with two beefy men. One held the broken orchid. He looked at the three women and said: "Which of you is Bernetta Hubbard?"

Before Bernetta could speak, David said: "This is Miss Hubbard. What do you want?"

The man twitched his coat lapel, displaying a nicked shield. "We're from the police. We want to see Miss Hubbard about an artist named O'Farrell."

Bernetta's face went white. "Wh— what has happened to him?"

The police officer looked closely at her dress. Then he fitted the broken orchid to the broken stem pinned there.

"I guess that cinches it," he said.

David demanded angrily: "What's the meaning of this? What do you men want with Miss Hubbard? How did you know she was here?"

"Some person phoned the station. It was the same person who sent us to O'Farrell's studio—"

"What did you find at his studio?" Bernetta interrupted.

The officer turned and stared at her. "If you can't even guess, we'll take you back and show you."

"I'll go with you," David said, and followed them into the hall.

Bernetta picked up her handbag.

The officer bent a sharp scrutiny on it. "Lemme see that," he said, and took the bag from her hand.

And then, before her startled and unbelieving eyes, he opened the bag and took out a revolver.

Confused and bewildered, she

THE BROKEN ORCHID

walked back to the studio between the two policemen.

Staring at the white-draped figure before the easel, she asked in a half-whisper: "Is he—dead?"

"You oughta know," one of the officers said genially, "seein' it was you that killed him."

She cried out inarticulately—and, as if in a dream, she heard the voice of the man she loved; the strong, deep-toned voice of Leonard O'Farrell:

She saw Leonard standing beside the easel, tall and handsome and very stern, and she heard him saying to the nonplussed policemen:

"My brother Bob was a gifted lightning sketch artist, and if you want a good portrait of the man who killed him you need only look at the face on this easel."

The officers walked to the easel and looked at the crayon sketch. Then they swung around and stared at David Keating.

And the look on David Keating's face told them all they wanted to know.

(THE END)

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Stepson, Watch Your Step!

By Roy B. Frentz

Death lurked on a winding stairway, and a crafty woman waited.

ABBIE PURKIN, her body swelling under a silken mandarin robe, came slowly down the old staircase, admiring the slender newel posts and railings, the grandly flowing curve of the steps. She started to wrap herself in a reverie of admiration, a morning custom, when the hallway door opened from the outside, and Raymond Purkin, her stepson, came in.

Abbie descended the remaining steps rapidly, her robe floating out behind her.

She said harshly, "I'm getting a lawyer to investigate your conduct of the estate. I demand—"

Raymond stopped, turned sullen eyes on his stepmother. His lined, sallow face made him look older than her hard-held forty-five years, but he was two years younger. He said, "I'm damned if I'll allow you another nickel."

"I'll get it—" murmured Abbie Purkin, viciously.

Raymond's dark face wreathed in lines of hate. He said, "Don't pry into my affairs, see?"

Abbie went toward the kitchen without reply, smiling bitterly to herself. The late Mr. Purkin, who had found long before his death that his wife had married him solely for his money and position, had written a will providing that his estate would be administered by his son, who was to provide amply for Abbie. Raymond's interpretation of "amply" was

STEPSON, WATCH YOUR STEP!

typical. He denied her everything but the barest essentials, was making it impossible for her to start looking for a new husband.

She entered the kitchen, a great, low-ceilinged room with two cooking stoves, a huge refrigerator, a shining array of pots and pans. Abbie Purkin kept up her house, even if all the servants had left. She could faintly hear Raymond thumping around upstairs. He would go to bed now, sleep throughout the day.

Abbie puttered in the kitchen getting her small breakfast. She was calm, and there was a quiet determination about her actions, a certainty of purpose that made her clean every dish and utensil she had used, before she went to a high cupboard. She placed a footstool, climbed up. Her broad, fleshy face was without expression as she pulled out a roll of steel wire, and two heavy eyescrews.

She came down again, glanced at the articles in her hand. For an instant hard, predatory lines stood out on her face, then the expression was gone and she wore again a soft, too-highly-powdered mask.

Abbie Purkin was ready for murder.

Taking the wire and screws, she went back upstairs, quietly opened the door of Raymond's room. He was sprawled on the bed, half-undressed, his lips parted in uneven breathing. He snored a little, as she watched. She closed the door softly and locked it from the outside.

Back on the stairway, Abbie selected the proper step, just where the grand curve down to the hall began. Her hands were steady, like the careful fingers of a surgeon, as she knelt on the staircase to drive one of the eyescrews securely into the wood beside the step. She repeated on the other side with the second eyescrew.

When both screws were firmly in place, Abbie went down a couple of



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GEM DETECTIVE

(Continued From Page 93)

steps to measure their height with her eyes. A tremble ran over her heavy body, and for a moment mist seemed to cover her eyes and she felt faint. She caught herself, rested her hand on the slender stair railing and looked at the stone floor twenty feet below with a shudder.

It was several minutes before she could take the coil of wire in her hand again. The wire was cold, like the kiss of death. Finally she fastened one end in an eyescrew. She stretched out the coil to the other screw, pulled the wire taut so that it was two inches above the stair tread. She secured this end, stepped over the wire and went rapidly upstairs. She paused to unlock Raymond's room, then ran to her own bedroom.

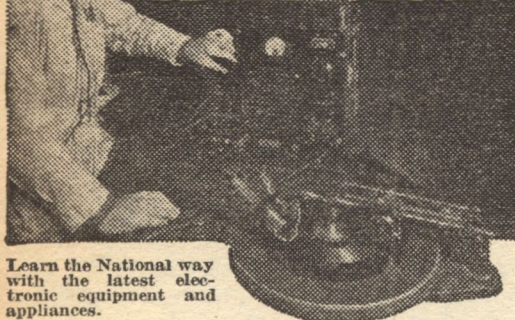
Abbie threw herself on the bed, lay there shaking. It was done, at last. When Raymond awoke, and came down stairs, he would trip on the wire, fall against the weak railing, and crash through to the stone floor twenty feet below. Then she could remove the screws, repair the holes with compound, and call the police. Abbie smiled.

SHE had stayed in her room for hours, unable to leave it, when a bell struck repeatedly somewhere in the house. Abbie started down hesitantly, winced when she had to step over the tripwire, but went on down, out through the kitchen. It was the meter reader, wanting to put the Purkin mansion figures down in his black notebook. Abbie let him in, waited by the back entrance as he disappeared into the basement.

Outside the sun was shining brightly, a warm summer breeze lapped at her cheeks as she stood by the open door. The wind brought a faint scent of flowers. Abbie felt as if some soft influence were eating away at her conscience, as if the summer had con-

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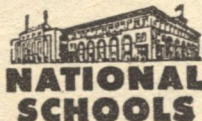


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GEM DETECTIVE

(Continued From Page 94)

spired to weaken her determination. She barely noticed the meter man as he went out.

Finally, hesitantly, she closed the door, shut out the seductive breeze, pleasant scents, and all the warm humanness outside. When she turned back to the kitchen she had put all thoughts of retreat out of her mind. Her face was again cold, emotionless, like the visage of a plaster statue.

Abbie filled a carafe with milk from the refrigerator, put a few crackers on a silver salver, and took the assortment with her, up the curved staircase, over the wire, and into her bedroom. Placing the food on a bedside table, she lay down and relaxed, waiting. From time to time she would sip the milk, nibble at a cracker, but mostly she waited, listening for the first sounds of someone stirring in the nearby room.

Abbie felt a queer shiver run up her back when the moment finally came. Sounds carried clearly through the big house. She heard a bed creak, steps on the floor. A drawer squeaked open, then slammed shut with a crack like a pistol shot.

Raymond, partly clad in loose shirt and trousers, came into her room a few moments later, and blurted, "What the hell did you do with my brown suit?"

Abbie was hardly conscious of what he said. All she could think of, looking at the dark face before her, was that soon it would be still in death. She tried to restrain her terror, tried to act calm, as if this afternoon was just another of the many times when her stepson had come stalking angrily into her room. She reached to the table, took a sip from the milk, hoping that this common action would cover up what she felt. She had always eaten crackers and milk just before her afternoon nap. Then she said, coolly, "Brown suit? I must have taken it for the buttons. I assumed you no longer used it."

STEPSON, WATCH YOUR STEP!

Raymond came close to the bed. His slender, powerful fingers were tense at his sides, his face flushed. And then he laughed, contemptuously. He asked, "Have you ever done anything good in your whole life?" He glanced at the milk and crackers, went on, "Steal my suit, will you? Have my estate books audited?" He reached out a long arm, slapped her smartly on the cheek.

Abbie rolled frantically out of bed, on the side away from her stepson. She looked at the cold hate in his eyes and for the first time was afraid of him. She stood there a second, then went swiftly to her closet.

Abbie found the suit, brought it out. She tossed it at her stepson, "Take it. Get out of here." She stood commandingly, pointing her finger at the door.

Raymond hesitated, then left. Abbie dropped on the bed, laid her head against a pillow. She listened. heard Raymond slam a door in his room, then start down the hallway to the staircase. He was moving fast.

Abbie couldn't breathe as she counted the steps he took downward. Then, like the breaking of a thousand matchsticks, there was a tremendous splintering of wood. The piercing, frantic shriek that came from the staircase lasted only a second. It was cut off by a heavy thud, like a sledge hammer striking a pumpkin, as Raymond's head hit the stone floor.

Abbie shivered, and whispered to herself, "Murder, my son." She reached out, took a long, deep draught of the milk from her table. She was too upset to notice its bitter taste. It wasn't until the pain hit her, minutes later, that she realized the horrible truth—while she had been in the closet looking for that suit, Raymond had poisoned her glass of milk.

(THE END)

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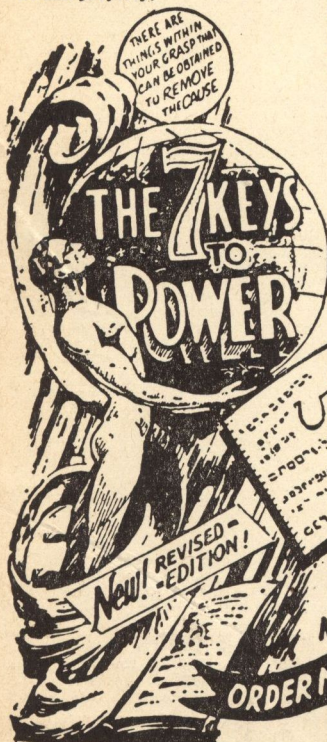
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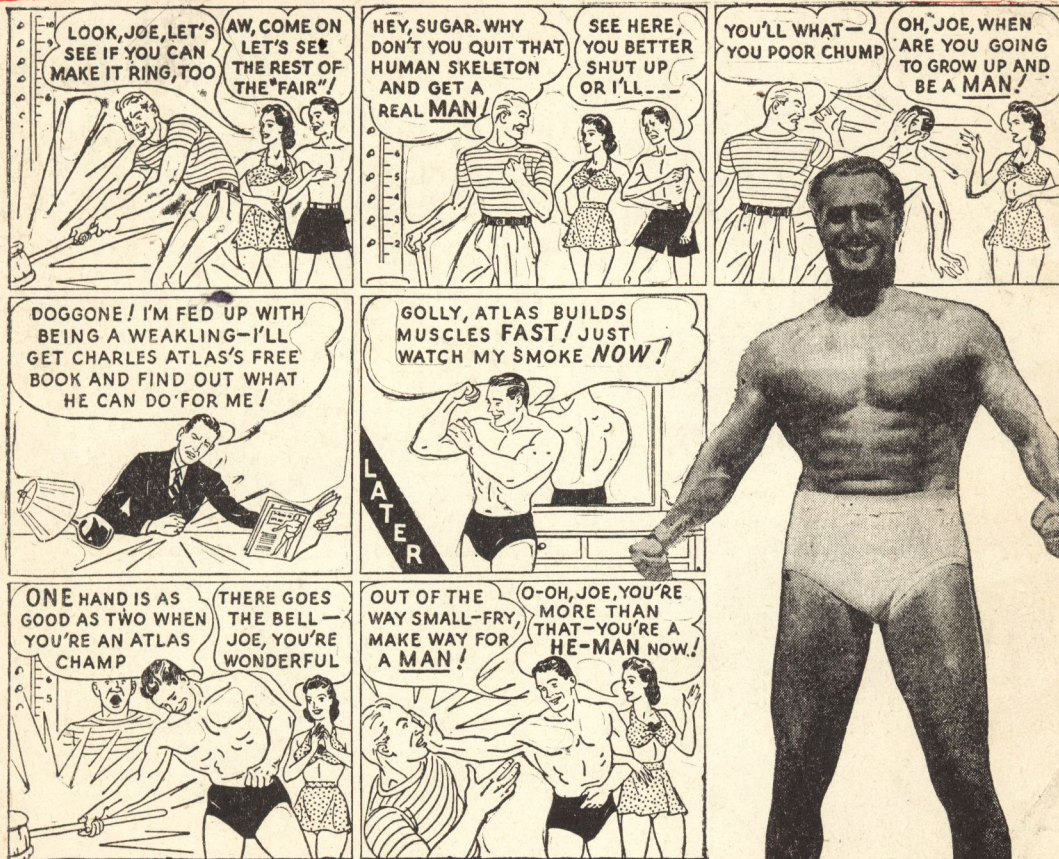
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