

OCTOBER 25<sup>th</sup>  
IN CANADA 30¢

# Mammoth DETECTIVE



**WHERE THERE'S SMOKE...**

By STEWART STERLING



# ★ HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO TO MARS?

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# Mammoth DETECTIVE

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## *All* STORIES *Complete*

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(Complete novel—60,000) . . . . . by Stewart Sterling . . . . . 8

Illustrated by Arnold Kohn

Fire Marshal Ben Pedley fights his way through flames, firearms and funerals to find a fanatic killer.

### AT LAST I'VE FOUND YOU (Short—2,100) . . . . . by Robert Moore Williams . . . . . 70

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Frank Gray discovered that the most heart-breaking search is for something that has never been lost.

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When using a weapon of the Gods for murder, remember that even Nature hates to be framed.

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It was a blackmail letter . . . and the contents made Spain sorry he had ever learned to read!

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This, Ivan knew, would be the perfect murder. But the victim decided to die a different way!

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Is it that the wicked can't rest because of a burning desire to undo all the harm they've done?

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OCTOBER 1946

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Front cover painting by Arnold Kohn, illustrating a scene from "Where There's Smoke . . ."

**MAMMOTH  
DETECTIVE**

Published monthly by ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY at 185 North Wabash Avenue, Chicago 1, Illinois. New York office, Empire State Building, New York 3, N. Y. Washington office, International Building, 1319 F Street, N.W., Washington 4, D. C. Subscription \$2.50 for 12 issues; Canada \$3.00, Foreign \$4.50. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address. All communications about subscriptions should be addressed to the Director of Circulation, 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.

Volume 5  
Number 7



# OFF THE BLOTTER



**Y**OU readers are still applauding "This Deadly Weapon"—the book-length novel in last month's MAMMOTH DETECTIVE—as we ready this issue for the presses. And certainly all your praise was deserved and to be expected, for the Wade Miller story had everything a detective novel should contain.

**B**UT now it's time to talk about this month's bellringer. It is titled "Where There's Smoke . . .", and was written by Stewart Sterling, who has put together more fine detective fiction than most of the authors in that field. Sterling, we understand, is an authority on fire fighting in New York City, so you can accept the background of this novel as the real McCoy. Even with all that taken out, however, there would still be a whale of a yarn left—a story of real people with staggering problems. There's a timeliness about the novel, too, when you consider such terrible holocausts as the recent hotel disasters in Illinois, Iowa and Texas. All we can say is that after reading "Where There's Smoke . . ." we went around the house and checked all the electric wiring and gave the wife a long lecture on turning off the electric iron while answering the telephone!

**T**URNING to the other stories in this issue, we want to recommend highly "At Last I've Found You," by Robert Moore Williams. If memory serves us right, this is Bob's first yarn in this magazine. Most of his work has appeared in science fiction magazines, but after reading this short we hope he'll do more tales for this book. Let us know if you agree.

**A** NEWCOMER, William R. Morse, presents "Lightning Strikes Twice," the story of a particularly unpleasant individual who tried to have Nature blamed for some of his foul deeds. He might have gotten away with it, too, had not his own nature tripped him up at just the right moment.

**A**NOTHER new name to these pages is that of John Raymond English. In "Nobody Wants to Die," he presents a hardboiled mystery with plenty of action, sluggings, shooting and corpses. It all begins with a little man who wants to hire a private eye to help one of the little man's relatives out of the clutches of a blackmailer. The surprising part of that is he hates his relative just

as much as the blackmailer does! The punch ending on this one, we believe, will leave you gasping!

**I**N "Am I A Murderer?", Ken Kessler presents you with one of those legal problems that is reminiscent of a story we ran a couple of years ago called "Double Jeopardy," by Helmar Lewis, that had to do with trying a man twice for the "same" murder. As we recall it, a controversy went on for months as to whether the author's solution was correct from a legal standpoint. Well, anyway, this story of Kessler's may very easily have the same reaction, for there are two ways to look at *his* solution. Briefly, the problem is this: can a physician be held on a murder charge for making a "mistake" in diagnosing a patient's illness, thus permitting the patient to die? Of course, there are some peculiar circumstances to this case; you'll have to read the story in its entirety before you can make any kind of decision.

**A**NOTHER writer who may be as new to you as he was to us, is Ric Hasse. The sixth, and final, story in this issue was written by him, and is called "No Rest for the Wicked." It's about a man who came out of prison determined to right a terrible wrong he had committed, and there wasn't going to be any rest for him until he had accomplished his purpose. Several people get hurt and a very lovely young woman gets the pan—(beg pardon!)—gets the breath scared out of her before her boy friend and the cops straighten things out. This is another one with an unexpected ending.

**L**OOKING ahead: In the November issue (on sale the 27th of August) comes another book-length novel that is scheduled for book publication *after* you read it in this magazine. It, too, is by another author with a long list of books to his credit (THE HORNET'S NEST, QUOTH THE RAVEN, THE SPIDER LILY, etc.). His name is Bruno Fischer, and his new novel is called "The Pigskin Bag." Like most of Fischer's novels, it concerns everyday people who find themselves caught up in a net of intrigue, violence and murder through no fault of their own. In this case an automobile accident tosses an ordinary pigskin traveling bag into the lives of a car salesman and his wife and they can't seem to get rid of the thing. You take it from there!—H. B.





## THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

### *You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!*

**TRY IT SOME TIME.** Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a positive demonstration that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

#### Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—get across to him or her your ideas? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be intentionally, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have

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# WHERE THERE'S SMOKE...

By Stewart Sterling

COMPLETE  
BOOK-LENGTH  
NOVEL

A number of people wanted Ned Lownes to settle their problems by dying. One of them did something about it, choosing as a weapon the deadly horror of fire.



With a scream of utter  
despair she toppled from the ledge





**T**HE RED SEDAN rocketed up Broadway at a screaming seventy with the siren wide open; for one not hardened to that Banshee howl it would have been difficult to catch, beneath it, the hoarse intonation of the panel speaker:

*"Second alarm — Second! Brockhurst Theatre — Forty-fifth — Eighth and Broadway! Engine Twelve. Engine Twenty-nine. Hose Thirty-one. Hose Thirty-four. Ladder Twenty. Rescue Five. At four fourteen P.M., authority Bureau Fire Alarm Telegraph. W.N.Y.F."*

Ben Pedley caught it and cursed with feeling. A blaze in the crowded theatre district was bad medicine any time. But with the mercury down in



the thermometer's socks and a half gale sweeping in from the Hudson, it was enough to give a man the smoke-eater's chills.

An expression of grim calculation hardened his harness-leather features; a line of concentration sharpened between the gray eyes as he shot the sedan between a stalled truck and a braking bus. The possibilities at the Brockhurst were numerous and unpleasant.

Hydrants might be so iced up the hose companies would waste precious minutes waiting for the "coffee wagon" to thaw the outlets. There had been an application from the gas company for repairs to the main, on Forty-fifth; if the street had been torn up, the rigs would be delayed getting into the block. Standpipes would probably be frozen solid. The emergency exits would most likely be blocked with drifts so it would take time to get them open.

There'd be forty or fifty men and half a dozen pieces of apparatus on the job by now—the pumper, hose trucks, hook-and-ladder and chemical of the four companies to answer the first alarm. The insurance patrol would be there—and the battalion chief's car and the district police cruiser. But some of the apparatus that was supposed to answer the second alarm would probably be delayed; no driver could get up to speed on these sleet-greased avenues. Pedley bore down on the gas. . . .

If this wind kept up . . . he shook his head silently.

Up at the Bureau of Fire Alarm Telegraph in Central Park anxious men would be waiting by the flasher for the call from the Deputy Chief to send out the third alarm. The spreading ripple of gong-taps would bring in more pumpers and additional hose companies

from an ever-widening area. This would be a hell of a night for the Borough Simultaneous!

The sedan slewed into Forty-fifth with tires shrieking, bounced over canvas tentacles radiating from an iron octopus, skidded on ice made by leaky couplings, slammed its bumper against the tail of Hose Eighteen. Pedley piled out into a bilious swirl surging from the theatre alley:

"What you got, Charley?"

A Battalion Chief, bulky in wet rubber, blinked smoke-inflamed eyes:

"Smoker, Marshal. Rear wall somewhere. Stinker to ventilate. Boys are having to take it in three minute relays."

"Everybody out?"

"Wasn't any audience." The Battalion Chief shoved his white helmet back off a smudged forehead. "Just rehearsing for some broadcast."

PEDLEY sized up the shivering musicians under the marquee. Some had retrieved their instruments; only a few had salvaged the cases. One guarded a bull-fiddle, wrapped in his overcoat against the spray. All were intent on a chubby individual struggling with a patrolman at the alley entrance.

"Guy trying to put on the hero act." The Chief made a hand-signal to the engineer of a pumper across the street. "Claims one of the singers is still inside."

The stubby man heard; whirled. "One of the singers! You dumb dilly!" He looked like an angry gargoyle carved out of pink glass. "*Leila's* in there! *Leila Lownes*." He wrenched an arm free from his belted camels hair, lurched back under the policeman's collar-grip. "She ran back to the dressing-room to get her brother! Cry-sake! She'll burn to death while you stand here and yawp. *Lemme in there!*"



Pedley eyed him bleakly. "Keep your pants on. You'd only make one more to drag out. We'll get your friends."

"Get Leila!" The gargoyle glowered. "Nobody gives a damn whether you get Ned or not. The creep probably tried to burn down the joint, anyway."

"Who're you to say so?" Pedley moved toward him.

"Ah . . .!" The battler smeared sweat off his face. "Don't mind me. I'm Terry Ross. Press relations for Leila. I'm off my nut, with her still in there. I know from nothing how the fire started."

"Just letting off steam?" Pedley shed his raglan, tossed it in the sedan.

"Yuh. That's all."

Pedley reached for his smoke-mask. "Then you better sit on his safety-valve, officer. I wouldn't want him to blow before I get back." He splashed into the alley past laddermen lugging a smoke-ejector.

"How is she, inside?"

"She's a ripe one, Marshal. Tough to get a draft through. Ice sheathing on the roof."

**P**EDLEY put on the mask, edged through the stage door. The switches had been pulled; the only light was a vague blur from electric lanterns moving about in the gloom of the wings.

He followed a length of canvas snaking in from the alley, up the narrow, iron staircase. His first job was to find out where the fire had started. Knowing that much, he might be able to take it from there. Lacking that, he'd be as much up against it as a homicide detective who couldn't find the body.

Sometimes the boys were able to settle that primary problem for him, by getting a stream on a blaze before Pedley reached the spot. But they evidently hadn't been able to do that

here, even though they'd rushed a two-inch line in fast, coupling up direct from the eight hundred gallon reserve tank on the pumper. There was no crackle of flames, no hiss of steam, up ahead. That meant the pipeman hadn't found a target to shoot at; there wasn't any sense throwing water at smoke.

Fumes thickened as he climbed. The beam of his flashlight barely penetrated an arm's length. In here, the pulse of the pumpers and the wail of arriving apparatus was faint and far-away.

A misshapen silhouette loomed up out of the murk at the top of the stairs—a giant with incredible shoulders. The figure lurched against him, bunted him across the slippery steps. Pedley grabbed at the pipe-bannister. The jolt knocked his smoke-mask off; it clattered below in the darkness.

He swung his flashlight up. The beam glinted on the front-plate of a hoseman's helmet; under it, to one side of the mask, a white face with the slack, open mouth of a smoke victim. The owner of the face sagged limply over rubber-coated shoulders—a middle-aged man with white hair and thin, sharp features. The brother. Then the girl must still be up here.

The rescuer mumbled beneath his mask, clumped on down the stairs.

Pedley would have to follow him; nobody could last five minutes breathing these fumes. It was either go down and hunt for his mask—or go back to the apparatus for a spare. He'd better get going while he could navigate, too; maybe the haze wasn't entirely due to smoke. He could leave the girl to the rescue squad. They'd get to her in time. . . .

He dropped to his knees, crawled ahead, along the corridor.

Smoke banking down from above wasn't as dense down here close to the floor. He could make out a sullen in-



candescence beneath a door-sill further down the corridor. He crawled along, one hand following the hose-line, until his fingers touched cold metal.

That rescuer had been the nozzle-man, of course. He'd be back up in a minute, but a minute might be too long . . .

Pedley's fingers closed around the lever, pulled the handle back slowly so the brass tip wouldn't buck with the back pressure and knock out a fistful of teeth. Water speared out ahead with a roar. The stream had no more than a hundred pounds pressure behind it. He could handle it. Easier than he could keep a grip on his senses, perhaps.

He put his mouth close to the *hrrussh* of the stream. A little fresh air was discharged along with the water. Very little. Maybe enough . . .

The door above that thin, luminous line was shut. He clouted it with his fist. Stuck. He flicked the stream at it. The rebound drenched him; the door slammed open as if he'd smashed it with a sledge hammer.

**A** CAULIFLOWER of smoke blossomed from the dressing-room, blotted out everything so he wasn't aware of the forked orange tongue until it licked at his wrist from beside the jamb. He hunched back on his heels, angled the stream up to spatter the ceiling, inched across the threshold under an icy cascade.

Across the dressing-room a garnet heart glowed dully through the haze, spat at the shower splattering down from the ceiling. Before he could get to it, the thing had cooled, lost its radiance. But he guessed what it was before his flashlight came close enough to make certain. The face of an electric flatiron, standing on end on the dressing-table.

He groped for it, felt broken glass

under his fingers. The sharp-edged shards of a bottle. He leaned over to feel the switch on the handle of the iron. His knee touched something soft.

She was between the dressing-table and the end of a smouldering *chaise*—a sodden heap of wet silk and warm flesh. When he got her over his shoulder, she was a dead weight.

He had to drop the nozzle before he lifted her; he had to clamp it shut before he dropped it or the twenty-pound tip would have threshed around and brained them both. But even with the rush of the water silenced, there was still a roaring inside his head . . .

He crawled out into the corridor with his burden. The heat became suddenly intensified, as if someone had opened a furnace door at his heels. Sparks stung his neck and face; breathing became an ordeal. His eyes streamed; he bumped into booted legs before he saw them.

A hand caught at his shoulder. The glass eye-piece of a mask came close to his face. The weight on his back lightened momentarily, but Pedley shook his head, clung to the girl's legs. He could make it under his own power; that nozzle-man was needed there in the dressing-room.

The hose companies would have their hands full getting this thing under control, now. That flatiron was like a neon sign flashing the warning word: *Arson*. And incendiary fires were always the worst; the arsonist would have done everything he could to help the blaze along. It was important that the torch who'd hooked up the flatiron and whatever had been in the bottle, didn't get the advantage of having his trail covered by the flames he'd started.

The Marshal crawled toward the head of the stairs. The murk became penetrable; a gush of cool air swept up at him. The boys on the roof must



have managed to hack open a draft-hole.

He caught hold of the pipe-rail, muscled to his feet, felt his way down.

Frosty air hit his lungs like a blow. He leaned against the whitewashed brick of the alley. Rescue-squad men grabbed the girl, hurried her toward the long, gray car waiting at the street end of the alley. Pedley stalked after them, unsteadily.

THERE was a little group around the rear step of the ambulance. One interne was unlimbering a stretcher; the other held an ampule under the nose of the smoke-victim, who sat propped against a hand-hold.

The rescued man was in bad shape. There was a glistening like warm butter along the angle of his lean jaw. His lips were gray; for all the color in his face he might have been ready for a hearse instead of the ambulance. But his eyes were open; he recognized the girl as the firemen laid her on the sidewalk beside him.

"Leila! he croaked. "She's not——!"

"Smoke-kayo. That's all." Even in her present bedraggledness, Pedley could see why fan magazines and Sunday supplements featured her as Luscious Leila. Her smudged face wasn't as glamorous as the makeup she wore on those full-color covers; the bronze hair tousled damply over closed eyelids made her look more like a tired child asleep after a romp in an ash-heap. But there was no mistaking this girl's appeal.

"I was afraid she'd——" The man on the ambulance step leaned over to touch her; toppled.

Pedley caught him. "Take it easy. They'll pull your sister around, soon's they get an inhalator on her." He pushed the man back to a sitting position.

"Sister?" Pale eyes bulged in the ashen face. "She's not my sister."

"Guy said she ran back to look for her brother."

"She did. When I heard"—he coughed up a thin trickle of smoke—"I went after her."

"Who're you?"

"Amery. Her lawyer."

"Then her brother's still up there?"

"Didn't see Ned." The attorney shrugged. "Wasn't looking for him."

"You're the second person I've run into who doesn't seem to give a damn whether Lownes' goose is cooked or not."

"Didn't say I felt that way." Amery glanced up. "All the same to me whether Ned goes to an institution, or the cemetery."

The Battalion Chief tapped Pedley's arm: "They're bringing another one."

Amery stared at the thing the firemen left down on the sidewalk. Blackened lips curled back against the teeth in a clown's grimace—a man whose face looked as if minstrel makeup had cracked and peeled from his skin, whose head was covered with charred fuzz where there had been hair.

"I take it back," Amery muttered thickly. "I wouldn't have wanted that to happen to my worst enemy."

"This Ned Lownes?" Pedley knelt in an icy puddle.

"Yes." The lawyer bent over, was sick to his stomach.

"Your worst enemy, hah?"

"Merely a manner of speech. Ned . . . always his own worst enemy. Is it too late . . . ?"

"For anything—except the Medical Examiner." Pedley put a palm to the dead man's chest, pressed gently. A tiny feather of smoke trailed from the blackened lips. "I'm curious to know how he got burnt like that—when he was alive at the time the fire started."



## CHAPTER II

THE interne pulled Leila's skirt down to her knees, bent over to grip the stretcher-handles. A lanky individual in a leather wind-breaker slithered past, grabbing at the rear step hand-hold to steady himself while he aimed his camera. The singer's wet dress outlined her figure as if she'd been naked.

The newspaperman crouched, peered through his finder. His left arm went up with the flash reflector.

A camels hair coat hurtled across the sidewalk. Terry Ross flung himself on the cameraman, brought him crashing to the gutter. The camera bounced on the curb, ricocheted off the hose wagon. The two men floundered in the hydrant leakage, were pried apart by a nightstick. The cop hauled Ross to his feet, ungently:

"Who give you any license to go bustin' cameras!"

"The jerk had no right to snap her like that," Ross panted. "Nobody has any right to take pix of her unless I say so."

The cameraman picked up the wreckage, swearing savagely. Pedley tossed the tarpaulin over Lownes, called to the officer:

"Bring Tough Stuff over here."

The nightstick prodded the publicity man across the sidewalk. "I oughta tap him, Marshal. He makes like a fugitive from a straitjacket ever since they bring the girl out."

"Why don't you tap the right guy!" Ross flexed his throat muscles; the patrolman's grip was tight at the back of his collar. "I try to get in the theatre to find Leila. So you crown me instead of going in after her yourself. I try to stop that bum from taking a lousy shot of her and——"

"It wouldn't hurt your glamour-gams

to show her stuff in a photograph that'd hit every front page in town," Pedley cut in, "—unless she had something to do with starting this blaze."

The press agent winced as if in pain. "Are *you* kidding! She risks her neck to save her rum-dum brother an' nearly gets killed. So the brave fire-laddies dope out she's responsible for the fire! Stop boy-scouting! I got to go to the hospital with Leila!"

"You might have to go to a hospital." Pedley was brusque. "But it'll be for resisting an officer."

"You're putting *me* under arrest?"

"We're not going to play parchesi with you."

Ross bristled. "You can't hold me. Not unless you charge me with——"

"I can hold you. With or without a charge." Pedley squatted beside the dead man.

"I won't stand for any superstupid fireman——"

"Shuddup." The cop shook Ross until the gargoyle face was purple. "He ain't a fireman. He's the Fire Marshal."

"I don't give a good goddam if he's Big Chief Pazookus in person. He can't run me in like any stray vagrant . . ." The publicity man wrestled to get free as the gong clanged tentatively and the ambulance wedged slowly through the crowd milling against the fire line. "I got friends down at City Hall, myself. I'll show him some trouble . . ."

The cop was bored. "Big an' little shots tryin' to do that for years, to my knowledge. The Marshal's still sherlocking for the department. Behave or I'll bat your bridgework in."

With his free hand, Ross fished in his overcoat pocket, came up with a cigarette. He stuck it between his lips, reached mechanically for his lighter. Then he glanced up at the giant toadstool of smoke sprouting over the



theatre, put the lighter away without using it.

PEDLEY turned to the rescue man who had brought out Lownes' body: "Where'd you find him?"

"Last dressing-room on the right."

The same one where Leila had her close call. "What happened to his face?"

"He was under one them lounging sofas, Marshal. Stuffing caught fire and dropped through on him."

"He crawled under the chaise?"

"Way it looked. He must of blown his top. When he couldn't open the door."

"It was stuck. Yeah."

"He could of bust it down if he hadn't gone panicky, Marshal. One good belt with a chair would have let him out."

"You'd think so." He stood up, looked at the sky. The ugly glow was gone from the underside of the low-hanging clouds; the smoke drifting upward had little heat beneath it to give it wings. The boys had the blaze in hand.

The pumpers were uncoupling. Soot-smudged men were taking up—handling the ice-sheathed canvas as cautiously as if they were juggling butcher knives. Gongs clanged the recall for hook-and-ladders. Motors roared. Police whistles shrilled. Sirens began their warning wail.

The musicians had drifted away. The crowds at the fireline were already thinning. Hose-trucks and combinations were rolling out from the curb, sliding away into the early dusk with bloodshot eyes.

The Battalion Chief sloshed to Pedley's side:

"Press wants a statement on how she started."

Pedley scowled at the thing under

the tarpaulin. "Something to do with the wiring, I'd say."

"Guy from one of the tabs seems to have an idea there was a pyro in the picture."

"He can print it. But not from me. He can say the Marshal thinks it was something to do with the wiring."

"Check. It could have been worse, with this wind. We were lucky."

"This guy wasn't." Pedley bent over the body. His finger touched something that resembled a melted rubber band running from the dead man's left eye to the point of his jaw. It was still sticky. Blood. From a cut on the eyebrow, there. Maybe Lownes hurt himself in a frenzied attempt to get out of the dressing-room. Then again, maybe not. . . .

A VOICE over the Marshal's shoulder observed:

"Not much doubt what happened to him, Ben."

"Hi, doc. Might be some."

"Oh! One of those things?"

"You tell me." Pedley regarded the Assistant Medical Examiner out of the corner of his eyes. "Fella was up in a dressing-room when a bottleful of something ignites. Door isn't locked. Later on, when heat buckled the frame, it stuck. But at the time the blaze started, this bird could have opened it with his pinky."

"The stuff in the bottle might have exploded and knocked him out."

"He came to in a hell of a hurry, then. Because he tried to get away from the flames by crawling under a chaise." He pointed to the charred trickle of blood. "Curious to know how he got that."

"We'll give him the complete treatment."

"Might help to know if he was schwocked. Whether that smack on



the eye could have put out his lights. Anything else you happen to run across."

The policeman propelled Terry Ross across the sidewalk. "I s'pose it's the same old horse this lad gives out, Marshal. But I though I oughta letcha know."

"What's his complaint?"

"Says every minute you keep him out of circulation costs him heavy dough. Same old mahaha about suing the city for fifty thousand damages and so on and forth."

Veins stood out on the publicity man's forehead: "If you think I'm going to let you shove me around while I'm losing——"

"You're not letting me. I have to find out how this blaze started. If it's costive to you, that's tough. It cost Lownes, too."

"All the more reason I've got to get to Leila. Get it through your skull: she's big business. Ned was her manager. With him gone, there are lots of decisions to be made. Somebody's going to pay, if you keep me from making 'em."

"They'll have to wait until after the autopsy."

"On Ned?"

"Have to make sure how he died. The fire that killed him *was* set. And you were the first one to say so."

"I told you I was just shooting off my face."

"You did. One of the things I want to know is why you were."

"I was . . . upset."

"Not enough to go in there after the girl."

"I'd have been in there before Paul, only I was turning in the alarm."

"Were you, now? You spotted the fire first?"

"Don't be putting words in my mouth. I'd been over to the Astor for

the house doc. Comin' back, when I get to the alley, I see smoke and hear someone holler 'Fire!' So I beat it to the corner for a cop." Ross kept his eyes away from the ambulance in which they were loading Lownes. "Course you never find a cop when you need one. So I pulled the box myself."

"Then ran back here?"

"Yeah. By then the boys in the band were stampeding out like crazy and this fat-pratt," Ross angled his head toward the patrolman, "*was* there. So when I start in after Leila, he stops me."

THE cop twirled his stick. "Now I come to think of it, I don't guess you were so anxious to go in, at that."

Pedley held up a palm. "How'd you know the Lownes girl and her brother were still inside, Ross?"

"How would I know? I look for Leila. I don't see her. One of the network boys yells she's run up to her dressing-room to help li'l brother."

"Why'd he need help?"

"He was out on his feet. Hadn't drawn a sober breath for weeks."

"That why you went for the doc?"

Ross hesitated. "Yeah. I'd hate to see a dog burn to death. But you don't hear me saying I'm sorry for Ned Lownes."

"I don't. No. I heard you say he was a crummy bum and might have set the fire himself."

Under the ruddy glare from the insurance partol's headlamps, Ross looked like a worried kewpie: "If this thing wasn't accidental——"

"It wasn't."

"Then Ned must have started it."

"There were lots of other people around and about," Pedley said. "Miss Lownes, for instance."

"Back to the asylum, Napoleon!"

"Or this Amery guy . . ."



"Dream on."

"Or you."

"Me? ME!" The press agent's face puckered up as if he was about to sneeze. "That's one for the book!"

"Yeah." Pedley moved toward the sedan. "In a few minutes we'll go downtown and write it up."

### CHAPTER III

HE GOT into the sedan, closed the door, cranked up the windows. Then he fiddled with the two-way until the "go-ahead" came over. He held his mouth close to the microphone: •

*"Marshal to W.N.Y.F. urgent. Locate Deputy Shaner. Tell him to fan his tail around to the Brockhurst. That's all."* He switched off the set, climbed out of the car, went into the alley and through the stage door.

Across the clutter of music racks, microphones and record-playing machines on the stage, he could see light reflected off helmets moving about in the gloom. They weren't the black helmets of firemen; the men under those red helmets were from the insurance patrol. They'd be tossing tarpaulins over the plush-backed seats that paraded back in empty rows to the darkened front lobby.

They knew their business, that National Board of Fire Underwriters crew. More than once they'd helped Pedley to determine the three W's of the arson-detection business. But this time the Marshal was pretty sure he knew Where the blaze started and What started it. Exactly when it was started—well, that was a matter for the lab technicians to figure out. As for the fourth and ultimate W—the Who—the Marshal refused to clutter up his methodical mind with guesses until he had something more to go on.

He knew only one way to go at a

thing like this: Keep asking questions. With his eyes, when he could. With his mouth, when he had to. If you kept on asking questions and getting answers, the right one would be among them, sooner or later. . . .

He paused by the fuse-box in the wings before he went upstairs. The melted insulation stank like burning tires. He went on up.

The smell of smouldering cloth was sharper on the dressing-room level, too. A little lazy smoke feathered up between the charred joists. The tiny cubby hole where he'd found Leila was a shambles of charred woodwork and smashed glass. Under the blackened skeleton of the chaise lay a litter of mushy gray—upholstery padding, the source of those knockout fumes.

The floor sagged like wet cardboard under his weight. He kept close to the wall as he edged over to the dressing-table.

Its plastic top had melted in places under the terrific heat, but it held together enough to preserve the original positions of the flatiron, the remains of the bottle. That might be one of the things somebody hadn't counted on . . .

The switch of the iron was ON, all right. Nothing defective about that. And on one of the splintered shards there was enough of the carbonized label left for him to make out:

#### SPOTZOUT

*p Away From Fire*

*Or Flame*

*hly Inflammable*

His nostrils distended like those of a startled horse. Naptha! And the odor was still here! Under an imitation-ivory hand mirror he found a damp ring; a little of the cleaning fluid had trickled under the mirror when the bottle broke—by some thermal freak it



hadn't ignited.

Well, bottles of naptha were frequently found in the vicinity of flat-irons. And it was possible to imagine an absent-minded imbecile so far forgetting himself as to put a bottle marked "Highly Inflammable" next to a pressing iron. Just possible. . . .

Too, people occasionally did plug in electrical appliances and forget about them until the heating elements became red hot. Pedley had even heard of fools who didn't bother to look at switches to see if they were "On" or "Off" before plugging in. That such a congenital cretin could have been in this dressing-room wasn't what he'd call a probability. Still, call it that.

But for two such implausibilities to coincide! That, he couldn't buy. . . .

SOMETHING gritty crunched under-foot. He bent down, felt bits of plaster. They were wet, but not soggy like the chunks that had dropped from the walls and ceiling because of the bondings having been weakened by the water. These bits had been protected from the direct force of the stream by something. They must have been beneath the girl's body when she collapsed, here beside the dressing-table.

He examined the wall. There was a break in the plaster, three or four inches long, a couple of inches deep. It couldn't have been made by a fireman's axe; there were sharp cuts at the upper edge, showing where the stuff had been chipped away with a narrow blade.

The break was close beside the dressing-table, and at its level. It was an amateur's job. An experienced arsonist would have started the blaze on the floor, instead of halfway up the wall. The naptha would have gone to work on the exposed lathing just the same, and the updraft would have been

much greater. Still, it had worked; the reason the boys had so much trouble was that the flames had been eating away inside this rear wall. . . .

Floorboards creaked behind him. Without turning, Pedley said: "Watch it. You're walking on nothing but wet paper."

A vaguely familiar voice answered: "I guess I'll stay out here."

Pedley swung his flash around. The beam came to rest on a pair of gray suede shoe-tops. The light traveled up; knife-edged mauve gabardines, checkered sports jacket, scotch tartan muffler—a round, boyish, red-apple face.

"Who the hell are you?"

The pleasant features assumed a pained expression. "Wes Toleman." He said it as if he expected it to be self-explanatory.

"Anybody give you permission to come up here?"

"I just told one of the firemen I'd lost something valuable; he didn't try to stop me."

"Lost it up here? When?"

"I didn't exactly lose it. I loaned my gold pencil to Leila to make corrections on her script . . . and they told me she'd been taken to the hospital—so I supposed she left it up here somewhere."

"You one of the orchestra boys?"

The shoulders of the tweed jacket straightened. "I'm the network announcer."

"Oh." That was why Pedley recognized the voice. "You weren't around when the fire started?"

"I went out to the drugstore. The engines came while I was having a cup of coffee. But I didn't know it was the theatre burning."

PEDLEY held the cone of light steadily on Toleman's face; this an-



nouncer was worried about a pencil but didn't appear to be concerned about the sooty water dripping down on his clothes!

"I haven't seen any gold gadgets around here. Maybe the Lownes girl had it on her when they took her away in the ambulance."

Toleman didn't register surprise . . . or concern. "I expect it's silly to bother about a pencil at a time like this. But it was a present. I'd like to get it back." He poked ineffectually in the wreckage by the door.

"You don't seem to mind that a guy just broiled alive in here."

"It's a lousy way to go. But Ned's better off where he is now. Wherever he is."

"Guy was popular, wasn't he! I haven't found anybody who has a good word to say about him."

"You'll look a while before you do. Anybody in show business can name a dozen people who'd have liked to fix the guy. On account of the way he treated Leila."

"How'd he treat her?"

"I've . . . uh . . . heard he hurt her."

"Physically?"

"That. And other ways. Humiliated her." The candid blue eyes became wary.

"You just heard this? You wouldn't be one of the dozen you mentioned?"

"Certainly not. Why? You talk as if somebody did kill him. The boys in the band said he was burned to death."

"He was." Pedley wondered why the announcer's winesap cheeks were suddenly polished with sweat. "Before we get through, we're liable to find somebody else got singed, too."

Toleman wasn't quite sure he understood; apparently he didn't care to hang around and discuss it. "If you do find the pencil, I'd appreciate it if you called me. At International Broad-

casting." He backed away, bumped into a beefy-shouldered individual who had come along the corridor without making any noise.

THE newcomer didn't apologize or step aside; he merely scratched the back of his head in such a way that the brim of his hat tilted down further over his eyes.

Toleman murmured: "Excuse me, I have to get back to the studio."

The blocky man looked at Pedley. The Marshal nodded:

"All right, Shaner."

The deputy moved aside languidly, let the announcer pass. Shaner stared at the departing sports jacket.

"Something, skipper?"

"Little Lord Fauntleroy claims he lost an Eversharp, thought this would be a good place to find it."

"Did he wander up here without a flashlight?"

"He seemed to know his way around in the dark."

"Don't sound kosher to me."

"No. I don't know what he was after. But it wasn't a pencil."

Shaner surveyed the dressing-room with mild curiosity. The casual manner and lethargic features of the Marshal's ace deputy had trapped many an arsonist into the assumption that Ed Shaner was just a big, dumb ox. Frequently they had opportunity to reconsider that judgment over a long period of years, at the state's expense. The respect Pedley had for Shaner's photographic memory, sleepy shrewdness and imperturbable courage was evidenced by the Pier Six manner of speech they customarily employed toward each other.

The deputy cocked an inquisitive eye at the wreckage of the couch. "What's the score here, coach?"

"One down. Two to go . . . to the



emergency ward."

"Bug-bite?"

"Cagey kind of a bug." Pedley pointed to the array on the dressing-table. "Iron plugged in to overheat. Bottle laid against the iron. When the bottle cracked, naphtha exploded and spattered on the lathing."

"Lot of trouble to go to, when a live butt dropped on the couch would have done the trick just as well."

"It wouldn't. The bugger who rigged this up wanted to be elsewhere when the fire started."

"Another Alibi Ike, huh? Any leads?"

"This stuff. Shoot it down to the lab. The iron. What's left of the bottle. Table. Some of the lathing. These chunks of plaster."

Shaner sighed. "Don't tell me this shebang was bonfired for the insurance!"

"All I can tell you is a bird by the name of Lownes got cooked to a cinder, half an hour ago."

"Lownes? Would he be any relation to Luscious Leila?"

"Brother. She was up here, too. Got herself a dose of nitrous fumes."

"Why didn't Lownes get out when the blaze started? Was he a cripple? Or shouldn't he have been mingling amongst sane folk?"

"He ought to have been in a sober-up sanny, at that. He was *non compos alcoholoris*."

"Hm." Shaner peered gloomily at the arrangement on the dressing-table. "I have never seen a strawberry who could set up a gimmick like that."

"No. He wasn't the bug. Couple other candidates."

"The Rover boy who just left?"

"Mayhap. Or a publicity flack, name of Terry Ross. A sawed-off specimen who looks like a forty-year-old kewp. Cop's holding him for me out front.

He's your meat."

"How would you wish to have him served?"

"All the trimmings. I'm taking him downtown and putting him through the wringer, first. Then I'll turn him loose."

"How long do I haunt him?"

"Until I give you the cease and desist. I want to know who he sees, who he calls up, who he drinks with—everything."

The deputy jingled silver in his pocket, suggestively. "I will likely need extra expense money, maestro. These publicity experts circulate amongst the most exclusive premises."

"Don't fret about it." Pedley sidestepped cautiously across the sagging floor. "Ross won't feel like visiting any more hot spots tonight."

#### CHAPTER IV

PEDLEY herded his prisoner past doors marked *Division of Fire Department Apparatus, Bureau of Combustibles, Bureau of Fire Extinguishment, Division of Places of Public Assembly*, past rows of shiny, oak desks and banks of green, metal files—until he reached ground glass paneling on which the faded black letters were scarcely legible:

#### BUREAU OF FIRE INVESTIGATION

*Chief Fire Marshal*

At a desk beside the door, a paunchy, bald-headed individual in a black shirt was absorbed in a *Racing Form*; he took his feet off the blotter and the pipe out of his mouth.

"Overtime again, boss?"

"Yeah. Any calls, Barney?"

"Only from my bookie."

"Those hijackers still cashing your



checks?"

"Yuh. That crystal ball I been using to dope 'em out; it comes up an eight-ball."

Pedley shoed Ross into the private office. "This gent and I are having a bit of a huddle. See nobody gets offside until I blow the whistle."

"Okay, boss." Barney contemplated Ross with the curious detachment of a nurse watching a patient being wheeled into the operating room.

While Pedley was stripping off his raglan, tossing it over a chair, he eyed a typed form on the green blotter-pad on his desk. Under the printed heading *Daily Record of Alarms*, he read the notations which had been listed following the Brockhurst Theatre entry:

Box No.:	Location:	Property:	Origin:	Est. Damage:
741	327 E. Manh.	4 s.o.l.ten.	ovrh. chm.	\$ 700
278	19 Duane Ave., L. I. City, Queens	Lt. bldg.	def. wir.	3500
61	f.s.			
935	1270 Simpson Ave., Bronx	Taxpyr.	kitchfat.	neg.

Not too much to worry about, there. Neither an overheated chimney in an old-law tenement or blazing fat in a one-story taxpayer occupied by a lunchroom, were serious problems for the Bureau of Fire Investigation. The false alarm was something for the police, though nothing would be heard of it. Chances were the defective wiring in the Long Island City loft building was the result of carelessness and not premeditation. Not like this Brockhurst business.

Still, they all had to be checked. How could they expect him to do a decent job of investigating that loft building fire, for instance—with less than fifty deputy marshals? He didn't have enough help to do the job right. Even running himself ragged, day and night, wouldn't do it.

Every ten minutes, around the clock, Barney would add a new notation to

this list. Forty-odd thousand of 'em a year. Even if a third did turn out to be false alarms, nobody could look into thirty thousand fires a year with the small force at Pedley's command. It was tough. Only half a hundred men, to back up the ten thousand blue-shirts, to keep the biggest city in the world arson-free, to watch over the six thousand miles of streets, the eight hundred miles of waterfront, the three thousand square miles where seven million people lived and worked and played and slept. Twenty-five billion dollars worth of property to guard, and still the Department couldn't get enough out of the politicians over there at City Hall to more than half do the job. Pedley was pretty bitter about it.

HE LOOKED up at the colored fire-map covering the wall opposite his desk. The worst trouble-spots were supposed to be indicated there. The red spots marked bakeries where defective ovens might constitute a menace, candy factories with kettles that overheated, warehouses storing excelsior and paper which any stray spark might touch off, printing plants cluttered with benzine-soaked waste, cleaning establishments, hardware stores whose shelves would be loaded with paint and varnishes, fur shops where they kept containers of wood alcohol too near the open flames.

Those purple blotches warned of special hazards: stores of powdered charcoal and sulphur in wholesale drug companies, carboys of searing acid in metal-working plants, ammonia-cooled freezer systems in cold-storage warehouses, fireworks factories, toy plants full of explosive celluloid trimmings, dynamite stored in construction company tool-houses.

That map was all right for the battalion chiefs and the company captains



... but it didn't mark the worst dangers. There weren't any colored spots to show the location of fire-bugs, of pyromaniacs!

"Listen, mister," Ross's voice was sharp with annoyance. "I can't fool around here all night. I got some rights, as a citizen."

"Phone there." Pedley peeled off his wet coat and vest. "Ring your legal eagle. Ask if a *habeas* will do you any good, long's I want to hold you."

"You know damn well I can't phone him. I don't even know where they took him."

"Paul Amery your lawyer, too?"

"Certainly. If I knew what hospital . . ."

"Don't bother with it. He'll only tell you I've the same right to commit you a judge has." Pedley took off his pants, stood in front of the radiator in his shorts. "What was Amery doing at the theatre, anyway?"

"We were going to check over the new contract, after rehearsal."

"What contract?" The Marshal hung up the wet trousers, took a blue serge pair from a hanger.

"Leila's. Five thousand clams a week for fifty-two weeks, non-cancellable. For Winn's Famous, the Coffee of Connoisseurs. I suppose you think that's a lot of hubba-hubba."

"Quarter of a million bucks? Sounds like a mortgage on the mint."

"That's not counting the extras." Ross rubbed the back of his neck, resentfully. "Recordings, personal appearances, endorsements, television, plus the shifting pictures."

"You get a cut on those fancy figures?"

"I get a straight salary. Less taxes, alimony and what I lay out for beer and skittles to the so-called fourth estate."

"Brother Ned was the ten-percent-er?"

"Supposed to be. Only he was cutting the take about fifty-fifty, if you ask me."

"I do. How'd he get away with that?" Pedley sat down at the battered desk, swung around in the swivel chair so he could look down at the white lacework of snow on City Hall Plaza, at the salt-and-pepper streaks of the churned-up streets.

"THE creep must've known where the body was hidden," Ross answered. "Only way to explain her standing for the stuff he pulled this afternoon."

"Do I have to jerk it out of you with forceps?"

The publicity man squinted as if the light was too bright. "He bust in, whiskeyed to the gills, just when the boys are going good behind her. Ned looks like something the Salvation Army refuses to collect: dirty, no shave, no press. He walks right up, grabs the mike away from her and makes with the four-letter stuff. Leila tries to shush him, but Ned starts riding her. 'Same ol' brushoff. Can't be bothered with Neddie, now. Forgotten how Neddie bothered about you when we were beggin' for split weeksh on Orpheum time.'"

"Doesn't sound brotherly, exactly. But it doesn't sound like a reason to barbecue the man."

"Wait'll you hear. From the control room, Chuck—he's the agency producer—does his best to break it up by hollering on the talk-back for everybody to take ten. So while the boys in the band are easing out for cokes and smokes, Paul Amery and I tear up on the stage where Kelsey's giving Ned the bum's rush."

"Kelsey's your orchestra leader?"



Ross shook his head, pityingly. "You don't follow the beat much, do you? Hal Kelsey's the King of Sweet. Anyway, he's feeding Ned some highly original line about not killing the golden goose to spite his face—and Ned's bawling about how he built Leila up and he can tear her down any time he wants. Hal makes a grab for him. Leila jumps between them. Ned swings. Not at Hal. At her."

"He socked her?"

"Smack in the kisser!" There was a harsh edge to Ross's voice now. "Knocked her down. Cut her lip."

PEDLEY swung around to look at him. "Who socked *him*?"

"I did. Wish I'd broken his ugly jaw. No such luck. I start the punch away down in the Third Precinct but he was going away from it. He bounced off the piano and wound up in the drums."

"Then you couldn't bring him to—so you went out to get a doc for him?"

"I'd have let the crut lay there until his eyes dropped out. Paul thought we ought to load him in a cab, take him to his hotel. But Leila made Chuck help her lug him up to her dressing-room . . . and sent me for the doc."

"Where was Amery, while this was going on?"

"Phoning. Leila asked him to call Ned's hotel to see if we could get hold of Staro."

The Marshal's eyebrows asked the question.

"Staro's the strong-arm Ned kept as combination bodyguard and wet nurse. He was supposed to bum around with Lownes, wherever he went. Once in a while, when Ned went off the deep end, he'd give his pal the slip. I guess that's the way it was this afternoon."

"So Miss Lownes and this Chuck whatever-his-name-is—"

"Gaydel. Best producer who ever turned clam-bake into fan-fare."

"Uh-huh. So they were the only ones who went up to the dressing-room with her brother?"

"'Sright."

"See Gaydel after you left for the medico?"

"Only on the street, afterwards. He told me he'd come down from the dressing-room with Leila, but she'd run back up for Ned when the fireworks began."

"Kind of puts it up to your talent, doesn't it?"

"Why?"

"She who gets slapped. Looks like she'd have more reason to want him out of the way than anyone else."

"Nuts! Call the roll of those who wished him harm, and lo!—T. Ross's name would lead the rest."

"Her dressing-room. And she was the one to suggest taking her brother up there."

"Tell me one good reason why Ned couldn't have touched the fire off himself."

"Person who sets a fire has to time it right. Man who was ga-ga couldn't have cut it that fine."

Ross bent over the desk, planted his fists on it. "If Leila'd wanted to snap the switch on Ned, she's had a million chances when nobody would know anything about it. And if she'd had any idea of hurting him, would she have knocked herself out trying to rescue him?"

"Your interest in the Luscious Leila"—Pedley was bland—"I expect that's purely professional, hah?"

"What else would it be?"

"From what I saw of the babe . . . and I saw quite a bit of her . . . I couldn't blame you if it was personal."

ROSS put on a prop smile; it curled up the corners of his lips but left



the scowl around his eyes. "A massive intellect, that's what it is! A great big high-Q!"

"The way you carried on when the amby took her away—that seemed a trifle ripe for a mere press agent."

The smile froze on the other's face—then he relaxed:

"The old needle. Got under my skin there for a minute. That's what you counted on, wasn't it? Okay. Say my interest in Leila *isn't* all business. You know what business comes before."

Pedley nodded, waited.

"Okay. The kid's had a long climb to get to the top of the billing. It's my job to keep her there. The job comes first."

"You're going to have to hump yourself, when it breaks in the morning editions that I've had to pin a rap on her."

"You don't think I'm going to sit back and watch, while you bull your way around my china-shop! I'll take this to people who can tell you where to head in!"

"You do that. File a complaint. File a dozen. See what they get you besides a subpoena for the Grand Jury."

"I've got strings over there!" The publicity man pointed out the window toward the City Hall. "And Liela's got drag with top-shots who can break you and your Commissioner, too. I'm telling you, put the smear on her and we'll make it hotter than the hinges of hell—"

"Hop to it." Pedley got up, flung open the door. "Tell your pals this was planned arson and planned murder and that I'm going to get the planner just as sure's Christ made little apples!"

## CHAPTER V

THE door of the down-car slammed behind Ross. Barney scratched his chin:

"Another influential gent who's going to give out with pla-a-nty troub'?"

"Queer thing is, he's one boy who might put it over." Pedley frowned.

"Who is he?" Barney unpeeled a stick of charcoal gum, slid it into his mouth. "Illegitimate son of a ward heeler?"

"Never speak disrespectfully of a public relations counsel. Brother Ross might get you an nokay notice in the gossip columns."

Barney grinned; evidently there was between him and the Marshal none of the stiffness which might have been found in a similar situation between a police inspector and his office clerk. The risks men took together in the fire department broke down such rigid relationships as existed in the army; the top brass among the fire-fighters shared the daily dangers equally with the youngest black-shirted probationer laying spaghetti or ventilating a roof.

A blaze-beater had to have the same confidence in his commander as an infantry soldier in the artillery officers who sent the creeping barrage rolling ahead of his path through barbed wire and mine-fields. When one wrongly directed stroke of an axe could send a wall crashing in the wrong direction—when one misdirected stream might cut off a man's retreat by driving flames across a door, or weaken a sagging floor—under such pressure of circumstance, a trust based on mutual respect for nerve and coolness of judgment was essential.

But there was one difference between the doughboy and his counterpart in black helmet and rubber coat: the fireman knew his superior officer would be exposing himself to the same danger at the same time. Nobody wearing the Maltese Cross, not even the Chief of Department issued orders from the rear. The days of the political ap-



pointments to the high place in the Department had given way to the era of civil service tests and promotion-on-the-record. Practically every blue-shirt on the city payroll had come up the hard way, gone through the same hard-boiled course of sprouts. Both Barney and his Boss had spent long weeks learning how to use the tools of their trade in the Recruit School at Sixty-seventh and Lexington, later at the Company School and still later, at the Fire College in Long Island City. As graduates of the same institutions where they'd both learned when to use an L-nozzle or a spinner, how to handle a scaling-ladder so the safety belt wouldn't slow you down, how to hook your heel into the rung of a ladder and get a knee-lock so you'd have both hands free to handle a hose without the danger of being dragged down the ladder if it should topple, how to jump into a net without breaking a leg and how to carry an hysterical woman on your back down an extension ladder when the wind was trying to blow you both to the street, forty feet below; as competent alumnae of the best schools of their kind in the world, Barney and his boss automatically assumed the kind of intimacy which exists between those who have spent under-graduate years on greener and less dangerous campuses.

**B**ARNEY knew that this peculiarly close relationship entitled him to no special consideration for his disability; he got none from his superior. Since that morning nine years ago, when a waterlogged warehouse, burst open by a swelling force of a thousand tons of water on baled cotton, had collapsed and left Barney under the wreckage of steel beams and concrete slabs, the former pipe-man had asked no favors on account of his infirmity.

Perhaps the fact that the warehouse

had been torched by a professional firebug who had subsequently been sent to Sing-Sing by Pedley for the rest of his natural life added something to Barney's silent admiration for this weather-reddened Marshal. Barney was well aware that Ben concealed, behind his facade of caustic wise-cracks, a grimness which was the direct result of knowing a lot of his best and closest friends had gone to their deaths in fires that had been set.

Possibly the circumstance of their having worked together on hundreds of cases, sometimes for days on end without rest or sleep, had made Barney more than normally alert to the Marshal's uncommunicated worries. He recognized such an uneasiness now:

"You figure this Ross character has any real weight to throw around, boss?"

"Depends." Pedley shrugged into his raglan again. "On what kind of weight you mean. He works for Leila Lownes."

"Oh, oh! The Thing with that Swing." The fireman limped across the floor in what was intended to be a rhumba step.

"Ross passes out the flimsies for her."

"Whatta job . . . considering some of the flimsies they photograph that fluffy in! Does the crumb take money for *that*?"

"He represents money. Coin big enough to buy most anything it wants. Except," he moved toward the elevator, "protection from the F.B.I."

"When they come around with the writs and the summonses," Barney called after him, "where'll I tell 'em to seek you out?"

"I'm going to the hospital. Then to the morgue."

Barney stared.

"To see the Lownes' girl's lawyer. Paul Amery. Senior member of Am-



ery and Cadawalder. Said gent got a bellyful of smoke trying to lug the Luscious Leila out of her dressing-room."

"Is he going to check out?"

"No. Then I'm going to Twenty-sixth Street to have a look at what's left of Ned Lownes." Pedley thumbed the elevator button. "Say. Get hold of Ollie for me, hah?"

The rhythmic clamping of the clerk's jaw stopped abruptly. "Oh-h-h! Gonna be one of *those* cases." He nodded sagely. "Okay. I'll get Ollie . . ."

THE private room in the very private Madison Avenue hospital smelled strongly of ammonium carbonate and chloroform when the Marshal came in and looked down at the waxy features of the man on the cot.

There was a bandage across the lawyer's jaw; another around his neck. But there was color in the lips that had been gray; the face was now coldly distinguished rather than merely thin. The eyes that had been dull were clear and sharply blue, but there was still something of shock and fear in them.

It had taken more than a few inhalations of smoke to throw a scare into this man, the Marshal realized. That Amery could afford a private room like this—that, in fact, he could get into this exclusive ultra-hospital at all—was evidence of the attorney's high position in the legal world. Even flat on his back on the narrow white, cot, he managed to give an impression of dignity. Yet he was afraid of something. . . .

He recognized Pedley with a lifting of iron-gray brows.

"Hello . . ."

"How you feel?"

"Lousy." Amery didn't trouble to smile. "But they say I'll be all right in two or three days if I lie still and

don't try to talk too much."

"You can talk to me."

"Afraid I can't tell you much." The lawyer's eyes studied him.

"You're Miss Lownes' counsel. You'll know about her business affairs."

The attorney struggled to sit up. "She's not—"

"Relax. She's home. Be all right in a couple days, same like you. I just want to ask some questions about the business setup with her brother."

"You think they might have a bearing on the fire?"

"Most arson does have a money angle. Nine out of ten incendiary cases are for insurance." Pedley sat on the arm of a tapestried chair, swung one leg idly. "Ned Lownes carry any insurance?"

Amery shook his head slowly. "Not that I know of. Not enough to make a fuss about certainly. He'd have been a bad risk."

"Miss Lownes didn't have her brother insured . . . with herself as beneficiary?"

"Certainly not." The lawyer's expression said the very idea was distasteful. "You seem pretty sure the fire *was* set."

"Positive. First thing we have to do, to find who set it, is determine whether he was a pyromaniac or a firebug."

"Don't they operate much the same?"

The corners of the Marshal's lips came down; he moved his head from right to left, back again.

"Pyro's a pathological misfit who sets a blaze because of an irresistible impulse. Firebug does it for a reason. Unusually a dollar and cents reason. Sometimes to cover up another crime."

"I wasn't thinking of motive." The tell-tale wheeze came into Amery's speech. "I meant their methods."

"Methods differ, too. Your pyro al-



ways works alone. He's afraid to tell anyone what he's done; generally he doesn't know what he's going to do long enough in advance to get an accomplice. But the firebug has to work with somebody, or for somebody, if he's going to make any money at it."

AMERY smiled thinly: "Unless he sets fire to his own property."

"Of course. There's another difference, more important. From my angle. Most pyros don't have any system about the way they start their fires. They just cook up a scheme on the spur of the moment, when the fever hits them. But your professional usually has some pet gimmick he's doped out to delay the starting of the blaze until he can get far enough away to establish an alibi. Maybe the setup varies a little from job to job, but the system is the same." Pedley licked the burn on the back of his hand. "There was a gimmick in the dressing-room at the Brockhurst."

"Ah . . .!" Amery sighed; some of the apprehension seemed to go out of the frosty eyes. "Something you can trace to a known criminal . . . because of the similarity in the *modus operandi*?"

"No. New one on me." The Marshal didn't elaborate. "But I expect I'll run into it again, or something like it. Might be in a few days, maybe a few months. If the person who torched the theatre did it for dough, he won't be likely to turn another trick until the money he got for that job is spent. On the other hand, if it was done to cover up a crime—say murder—" he paused; the lawyer was staring up at the ceiling, "—then he might strike again in a hurry."

"Obviously," Amery said gloomily, "you have somebody in mind."

"We have some leads. Whenever a

bug uses apparatus to get a delayed-fuse effect, the apparatus is evidence. Given enough evidence, we can put the party in a cell. Doesn't mean we can't use help. In the way of tips."

"Sorry I can't oblige you, Marshal. I haven't a notion."

"You were there when it happened!"

"I wouldn't be here, otherwise." Amery closed his eyes.

"You saw this Ned Lownes come in the theatre, schwocked to the gills, and start ribbing his sister—"

"Oh, that." The lawyer lifted a hand in deprecation. "That had been going on for weeks. Ned was sore at Leila . . . because of Gaydel."

"The producer?"

"Chuck Gaydel. Yes."

"Was this agency lad playing knees with her, or something?"

"Cozying with her?" Amery grimaced; the movement of his facial muscles hurt the burn along his jaw. "I wouldn't be surprised. Leila's rather . . . oh . . . indiscriminate that way. But that wasn't what caused the trouble."

"What was?"

"Ned resented Gaydel's running the show; telling Leila what to sing, how to sing it and so on. Left nothing for Ned except a back seat, you see."

"They'd had disagreements about it? The producer and her brother?"

"Oh, yes. But Ned didn't dare to blow off at Gaydel. He did that once; Chuck sent him to the dentist for repairs."

Pedley moved to the cot. "They didn't patch it up?"

"Well . . . I guess they did. But after that, Ned took his spleen out on Leila. That's what was behind that nasty business on the stage this afternoon."

"A smart prosecutor," the Marshal said, "could make out a *prima facie*



case against this Gaydel, all right. He'd had a run-in with deceased, previously. He knew his way around the theatre and the dressing-rooms. He could have rigged up this apparatus I told you about. And he was one of the last persons to see Lownes alive. But—" he leaned over the end of the cot "—all that leaves your client in a very bad light. If Gaydel fixed it so her brother'd get burned to death, she'd have to know about it! Because she was there; she came downstairs with Gaydel after—"

"Stop!" Amery sat bolt upright, coughing. "By God, I won't have you using my words to . . . to crucify Leila!" Little blue veins stood out on his forehead like fine lines in marble. "You keep your hands away from her, or—" A spasm doubled him up. Perspiration on the thin face made it leaden. The lawyer choked, fell over on his side in a paroxysm.

A nurse rushed in, glared at Pedley, snatched at an ampule.

"Get out of here! You must be crazy, stirring up my patient at a time like this!"

"Your patient," Pedley went toward the door, "isn't the only one who's stirred up. Or the only one who's been hurt. He'll be up and around in a day or so. I'm going to see a guy who won't be." He turned. "Tell Mister Amery I'll be seeing him."

## CHAPTER VI

ON THE way across-town to the somber stone building on East Twenty-sixth, one question repeated itself in the Marshal's mind like a groove-worn record: *Why had Leila been the only one to try to save Ned Lownes?* Admit the man was a no-good heel. Still, in emergencies, people thought of saving life without regard to the merits of the person in danger.

Of course, if Terry Ross and Paul Amery and Hal Kelsey and Chuck Gaydel had all assumed that Lownes was already dead when he'd been lugged upstairs, that would explain their lack of ordinary human decency. But it would also infer a conspiracy to cover up his death by the fire. Which in turn must have involved Leila—yet the girl obviously knew her brother was alive or she wouldn't have attempted his rescue. It didn't add up.

He was still turning it over in his mind when he walked into the morgue.

"If you come calling on that Lownes feller, he's still upstairs, Marshal." The dour-faced attendant acknowledged Pedley's arrival with a limp salute.

"Didn't expect they'd be through with him, Mike. Where's the inventory?"

"Right in here. I got a nice warm lower reserved for him." Mike chuckled at the ancient jest, as he opened the door to the cold room.

The things that had been in Lownes' clothing were spread out on a soapstone slab alongside his suit, shoes, shirt, tie, underclothing. Pedley scanned the miscellany swiftly; long acquaintance with the clammy chill and its depressing accompaniment of iodoform and formaldehyde hadn't overcome his natural repugnance.

A platinum cigarette case with four Pall Malls; pearl-handled combination corkscrew and bottle-cap opener; leather keytainer with six keys, four tumbler type; one suitcase size and one flat which might be for a safe-deposit locker; two handkerchiefs, both silk with hand-embroidered initial; a gold wrist-watch with the crystal cracked and the hands stopped at 3.26, a fact of no particular importance in Pedley's experience; a windproof lighter, English, sterling silver, no flint in it; eighty-seven cents in change; and a fat shark-



skin wallet.

Mike poked a wrinkled finger at the last item.

"If I didn't know positive they'd checked it, upstairs, I might have helped myself to a leaf of that lettuce. A stew-bum like him couldn't have come by that much, honest."

The bill compartment was full; there wasn't anything as small as a twenty in the lot. Pedley riffled through the thick sheaf; his eyes widened. Century notes . . . and thousands. More of the latter.

"Lot of cash for a rummy to be totting, for a fact."

"He could've filled a swimming pool with twenny-year-old brandy an' gone under feelin' no pain whatsoever, Marshal."

"Maybe he didn't have any sorrows to drown, Mike." He thumbed through the contents of the card pockets.

**M**EMBERSHIP card in the *White Rats*, oldtimers vaudeville club; paid-up dues in the Theatrical Agents Association; bills from a tailor, unpaid; bills from a liquor store, three cases of bonded stuff, ditto; receipt from the Hotel Elegante for rent on Suite 48-49; a note signed *Dolly* asking for a loan until her company started rehearsals; corner of a menu-card with a Harlem phone number scribbled in pencil; request from a theatre-manager in Lexington, Kentucky, inquiring if an old chum couldn't be put up at the top of the list for one of Leila's personal appearances; a dozen cards from bond salesmen, shirtmakers, magazine feature writers, yacht brokers.

One of the cards was stuck to the lining. He had to turn the wallet inside out to get it loose. It wasn't a card—but a photograph. One of those inch-square snaps on glossy paper.

It showed Ned and a girl who was

clearly Leila and Luscious six or eight years ago. They were both in costume; Ned as a gallant of the Nineties, with beaver and Prince Albert—Leila in one of those flouncy Floradora getups. They stood smiling at each other on the shallow front stoop of a brick house with a short flight of narrow, white-marble steps. There was nothing on the back of the print to identify the scene, except a date: *June, 1939.*

The photo went into a cellophane envelope which Pedley put back in his pocket. The wallet and the rest of the contents went back on the stone slab.

"Tag this collection for the Prosecutor's office, Michael me boy." Pedley took the keytainer. "And if that buddy of yours from the *Journal* blows in, tip him off there's no sensational story here. Nothing but a plot to blow up the Times Square subway with an atom bomb." He went upstairs.

He traversed nearly the length of the autopsy room before any of the white-gowned group around the table, under the operating lamp, paid any attention to him. Then a grizzled surgeon backed away from the table, stripping off rubber gloves.

"What happened to this poor devil, Ben?"

"He got himself incinerated, Harry. You didn't have to carve him up to find that out. What about that cut over his eye?"

"It didn't come from our old friend, the blunt instrument." The surgeon scrubbed busily at a washbowl. "You can discount it, anyway. He was in bad shape before that."

"Been hitting the hooch?"

"Plenty of alcohol in his tissues. But it wasn't precisely what you'd call potable."

"No?"

"Isopropyl. Denatured. Rubbing fluid."



"Not for internal use?"

"Definitely not. He must have taken half a pint of it."

"What's a lethal dose?"

"Depends. On age, condition, resistance. This man," the surgeon's head inclined toward the group clustered under the powerful lamp, "took enough to kill two normal adults."

"He was still alive when somebody tried to burn up the *corpse*."

"He wouldn't have lived long, fire or no fire. He must have been practically paralyzed."

"Not so much he couldn't crawl under a couch to get away from the flames."

"How could he see where he was crawling?"

"Come again . . . ?"

"First effect of isopropyl is to knock out the optic nerve. An hour after he'd taken the dose, he couldn't have seen his hand—or anyone else's hand, for that matter—in front of his face."

"Now that," Pedley rubbed his chin slowly, "might explain one hell of a lot. Could he have taken this massaging fluid without knowing it, Harry?"

The surgeon shrugged. "You couldn't. I couldn't. But a heavy drinker of this type, if he'd been imbibing a good deal beforehand, and if the denatured stuff was mixed with bonded whiskey, for instance, he might not have noticed much beyond the sensation of being kicked in the pit of the stomach."

"Um. If someone had him hog-drunken, he could have been fed the stuff in a ryeball?"

"Does such a supposition clear things up?"

"Like a cyclone. Let me have the report soon's you can, hah?"

AS A matter of fact, it could simplify matters considerably, Pedley decided, as the sedan bucked a stiff wind

up the East Side highway. The firebug must have known Lownes well enough to drink with him, or at any rate to be with him when the dead man had been in his cups. That ought to narrow down the field a bit . . .

At the Hotel Elegante, he crossed the lobby without the customary preliminary of making inquiries of the suave dapperdan behind the desk. Neither did he use the house phone; he simply strolled to the elevator and said "Three" in a bored tone. The clerk didn't seem interested in Pedley's destination.

There were no other passengers. The aged gnome who operated the car didn't even wait to see which way the Marshal turned in the corridor. He went to the left, waited until the elevator had dropped, came back, went up the stairs to the fourth.

How long it had been since the Elegante had lived up to its name might be a matter for argument; it had been a fly-by-night hostelry as long as Pedley could recall.

Carnival men in town to buy "slum" for their concessions, out-of-job stock players waiting for the big part that was sure to turn up some day, freaks from the dime museums and ex-chorus girls who cashed an occasional burlesque pay-check—these were the normal patrons of the place. Why would a man with twenty thousand dollars in his pockets prefer to live in a flea-circus like this?

Suite 48-49 was at the west end of the musty corridor. Pedley had the key-tainer out, was about to try the most worn of the tumbler keys, when he stopped, put his ear to the door. There was someone in Lownes' suite.

The knob turned. The door opened. Pedley didn't wait for it to swing wide, stepped in fast. The man who was coming out bumped into him, head-on. A husky blonde youth with a thin mous-



tache. His gray eyes stared into the Marshal's for an instant of shocked incredulity.

Then he backed into the room and raised his hands up beside his shoulders. He had to clear his throat before he could speak:

"Wait a minute, now! You've got me wrong! Give me a chance to explain!"

## CHAPTER VII

PEDLEY grabbed him by the shoulder, spun him around, patted his hip pockets, felt under his armpits. The youth kept his hands up; the engraving on the gold band of his wristwatch was good as an identification badge: *To Chuck—L.L.*

"Put your flippers down." Pedley closed the door. "Park." He pointed to an overstuffed chair beside a pedestal on which leered an obscene Japanese wood-statue.

The producer sat down carefully; he seemed to be more surprised than afraid.

"Who'd you expect to be waiting for you out in the hall, Gaydel?"

"Aren't you a house detective?"

"Don't give me that." Pedley's eyes roved around the living-room of the suite; the dead man's taste had run to florid oil paintings of the buckeye or calendar school, mostly of the female form. "This flop-joint couldn't afford a house man."

"I didn't know . . ." Gaydel did his best to be convincing.

"All right. Why were you scared he'd come in blasting?"

"I don't suppose I have any real right to be in here. It would be natural for him to assume I'd been ransacking the place." Gaydel pointed to the open drawers of an ornate desk which stood between the twin windows. Papers,

letters, account books lay in a jumble in the drawers; someone had evidently given the desk a going-over.

"That's not your handiwork?"

"No. The suite was a mess when I came in. You can ask the maid. She let me in with her pass key."

Pedley moved to the bedroom door. A typhoon couldn't have left the sleeping quarters in worse confusion. Bureau drawers pulled out and piled beside the bed, their contents scattered over bed and floor; closet open and empty, with suits, shoes and hats flung helter-skelter over chairs and a studio couch; the bedclothes piled in a heap in front of the bathroom; mattress slashed open and its stuffing littered over the carpet.

"Going to tell me Ned Lownes was always an untidy tramp?"

"Of course not. Somebody beat me to it, that's all."

"Spit it out. What were you after?"

"I don't know."

Pedley went over to him, bent down, put a fist under the producer's chin, tilted his face up. "You're not horsing around with a keyhole peeper, mister. You're talking to the Bureau of Fire Investigation. Better not double-talk."

"I *don't* know. That's the truth."

"How'd you expect to find it, then?"

"Oh." Gaydel tried to evade the fist, without success. "I know what it looks like."

"Maybe we can work up to it, gradually. What'd it look like?"

"I'm not sure I have any right to tell you that much."

PEDLEY'S fist opened. His hand dropped a couple of inches. His fingers gripped the knot of Gaydel's necktie. He jerked hard. The producer came up to his feet, gasping.

"I'm not going to play twenty questions with you. I'm after a torch who set fire to a theatre and burned a guy to



death. I can't wait for any feeble-minded flathead who thinks it's smart to play foxy while—"

"Set fire?" Gaydel whispered. "Are you sure?"

"My business to be sure." Pedley let him go.

"The papers said . . . defective wiring."

"Defective human."

"Ned?"

"Would I be after a dead man?"

"Then . . . who?"

"You could be elected."

There was nothing phoney about the shocked incredulity on Gaydel's face now. He shook his head from side to side, unable to answer.

"You were hot after this Leila babe!" Pedley made the accusation as if he'd welcome contradiction. If he could jolt this man off his mental balance, irritate him into retorting before he had time to reflect, maybe the producer would say something he didn't mean to. "Ned Lownes was sore at you. For playing around with his sister."

"Ned didn't know anything about . . . Leila and me. He—he wouldn't have cared anyway." Gaydel tugged nervously at the knot of his necktie.

"You weren't on the best of terms, put it that way. And you were in that dressing-room where the fire was started."

"Yes, but—"

"You helped carry Lownes up there. But it never occurred to you to go up and bring him down."

"No, because—"

"I find you rummaging around in Lownes' things with some screwy explanation about hunting for something you don't know anything about."

"I told you I knew what it looked like. It's a brown leather case. Italian tooled leather, I believe. About five by seven inches, couple of inches thick."

"What's so important about it?"

"That's what I don't know."

"Then why were you going to all this trouble?"

"Leila asked me to. It's here."

"You mean she says it is."

"Yes." Gaydel stiffened, as if he resented the implication. "She said Ned . . . took it from her."

"No idea what's in it?"

"None."

"When'd she ask you to perform this burglary?"

"About an hour ago. I called up the hospital to see how she was. They told me she'd been discharged and taken home. When I phoned her at the apartment, she said she was pretty fair but she'd feel better if I could find this leather case."

"Must be worth heavy dough."

"You're on the wrong track there. Ned handled all her funds, anyway. She wouldn't care if he'd had a little more or less. Besides, I never knew her to be concerned about money, one way or the other."

"Most people are. When they claim they aren't."

"Not Leila. She can make all she wants to, any time she wants to. Make it a lot easier, without Ned around, too."

"You another one who thought Lownes was a total loss?"

"Horsing around with a different fur coat every night? Hitting the cork like a dipso? Slobbering away her money in creep joints? Why, he was a drag and a drawback as far as Leila and the show were concerned. But I don't think he could help himself. Compulsion neurosis."

"What?"

"I told him a hundred times he ought to be psyched." Gaydel had the earnestness of an evangelist.

"What was his quirk?"

"Inferiority. With overtones of sad-



ism and masochism."

PEDLEY eyed him narrowly; the producer wasn't kidding. "High-brow excuse for being nasty, that's all."

"Oh, no. Not at all. Ned used to be the headliner in their brother-and-sister act on the five-a-day. Eccentric dancer. Tops at it, too, if you believe his clippings. Then Leila gets a break on radio. The act busts up. Vaudeville is dead. Hoofers don't get across on the kilocycles. But Leila goes big. Ned stays with her—only not as partner. Just manager. All the time Leila is getting up in the bucks. Pretty soon she's as well known as Kate Smith or Bob Hope. Everybody forgets about Ned. He's nobody except Leila Lownes' brother. Naturally it gripes him. After a while the gripe gets ingrown. It becomes a complex. He reacts by being ugly to her."

"You figure that all out by yourself?"

Gaydel scowled. "It makes sense."

"Apply your gray matter to what happened at the Brockhurst this afternoon and see where you wind up."

"I haven't the faintest . . . about how the fire started."

"You were up in the dressing-room all the time Miss Lownes was there with her brother?"

"No. After he snapped out of it and began calling Leila six kinds of names, she decided we wouldn't wait to locate Ned's private watchdog, a guy named Staro. She asked me to go bring her car, drive it to the end of the alley and come back to help her get him away from the theatre."

"So she was up there alone with him for a while."

"I couldn't say." Gaydel didn't like the direction the questions were taking.

"You don't know anything. What you came over here to find. Or who

was here ahead of you. Or why you practically jumped out of your socket when I walked in on you."

Gaydel said: "There's nothing mysterious about it."

"Not much. No. If one of Lownes' friends found you in here with the place turned upside down, it wouldn't be too hard for him to draw the conclusion you'd pushed the button on brother Edward. Then you might get yours, without benefit of jury."

"That's silly. When I came in here, I wasn't even aware Ned had been murdered. If I had known, of course I'd never have come near the suite." He edged toward the door. "Apparently I can't be of any help to you in your investigation. So if it's all the same—"

"As you were." Pedley sauntered up to him, patted his pockets, shoved a hand inside the producer's coat, drew a thin sheaf of blue papers from the inside pocket. "What have we here?"

"Contracts." Gaydel chewed his lower lip.

"Your property?" The Marshal scanned them briefly.

"As agency executive, I have a right—"

"Bushwah! These were Ned Lownes' property. Signed by the Winn Coffee people. So you didn't find what you were looking for. You ran across these and decided they might come in handy. They might. But they won't come in with you. You're out."

"You don't understand—"

"Roll your hoop." Pedley stuck the contracts in his own pocket. "Before I roll you downtown."

Gaydel went quickly, shut the door behind him.

Pedley didn't go through the waste motions of searching the room; the others had done that too thoroughly to overlook any Florentine leather case. Maybe the thing hadn't been there at



all. Maybe the first search party had located it. All he could be sure of was that Gaydel hadn't.

The maid might have some ideas about the identity of the first ransack-artist. She might still be on the floor. It was worth a try. If Gaydel had been able to bribe her, she could be made to talk.

He went to the door, stuck his head out. He didn't see who was behind the door—but he felt the blow coming. That was all he felt. . . .

## CHAPTER VIII

**I**T WAS dark and wet and cold. He ached so it was torture to attempt movement. When he did attempt it, he found he couldn't.

It took him a while to realize that his right arm was strapped to his side with surgeon's tape, his feet bound together and his mouth plastered shut with the same adhesive.

He was propped up awkwardly in a bathtub, his left wrist locked to the end faucet with his own handcuffs. Someone had intended him to stay put.

If he could just get a leverage with his feet, twist around so the fingers of his left hand could reach the tape binding his right arm . . .

After a while he gave it up.

This must be Lownes' bathroom. His assailant wouldn't have run the risk of lugging him out of the suite. And the man hadn't meant to kill him; there'd have been plenty of opportunity for that while Pedley lay unconscious. A possible exception occurred to him—maybe the slugger was coming back to attend to unfinished business.

Maybe he *was* back already . . . somebody was moving around in the next room. Still, it might be that floor-maid the Marshal had been looking for.

It was a sweating effort to lift his

feet off the tub, bang his heels on the porcelain. Probably the person in the next room wouldn't pay any attention to what sounded like a steam-pounding in the pipes, anyway . . .

The knob rattled, the door was kicked open, light flooded in. For an instant, Pedley could only make out an ominous silhouette in the doorway. The ominous part was the man's right hand; an automatic, outlined against the bright light.

The man in the doorway murmured surprised profanity. He came into the bathroom a step. Then he threw back his head and laughed long, and raucously.

Pedley knew that harsh guffaw—and the man who belched it out so heartily. Practically the last person in the world the Marshal expected—or wanted—to see was Sime Dublin. Captain Simon Dublin—of the Eighteen Karat Squad.

Sime was as smooth as greased glass—and as difficult to see through.

The resentment which Pedley held against him had nothing to do with the apocryphal feud between the police and fire departments. Empowered with special and secret authority direct from the Police Commissioner's office, Sime's ways were dark, if not actually devious. He never said just what he meant or did just what he said he was going to. Pedley's manner was brusque and direct. Naturally, they grated on each other's nerves. For Dublin to find the Marshal in this predicament was gall and wormwood of the bitterest.

The switch on the wall clicked. Dublin came to the tub, squatted on his heels with his dark-blue jowls close to Pedley's face.

"Ought to take your clothes off before you get in the tub, Benny." The bright black eyes traveled from the tape over the Marshal's mouth down to the handcuffs.



PEDLEY mumbled under the adhesive. The line of scar-tissue on his right cheekbone whitened.

"Oh . . . so you're ready to talk." Dublin used the police phrase with amusement, ripped the tape from the Marshal's mouth with a careless hand. "Key to cuffs . . . fob pocket." It hurt Pedley's lips to say even that much.

Dublin went to work on the tape around the right arm; took his time about it.

"Unlock those cuffs!" Pedley spat out a little blood; the tape had taken some of the skin with it.

"Telling me how to run my business?" Dublin complained. "This stuff is stuck to your belt. How can I get to your panty pocket?"

Pedley wrenched his arm free, flexed his fingers, fumbled at the pocket under his belt. "Save the cracks. I just had one." He got the key around to the handcuffs with difficulty.

The Captain of the Special Headquarters Squad let Pedley wrestle the tape loose from his ankles. But when the Marshal got his knees under him, Dublin gave him a hand, yanked him upright with a jerk that nearly dislocated the Marshal's shoulder.

"Who played you for a mummy, Ben?"

"At a guess, the same person who left Ned Lownes to fry in his own flat. Maybe you have the party in custody, already?"

"All in good time, my impetuous fire-eater. You can dismiss him from your thoughts. This one isn't down your alley."

Pedley sat on the edge of the tub, massaged his wrists. "Who says it isn't?"

"Medexam's office. They report enough poison in Lownes' system to kill two marines."

"He didn't check out from denatured alky," Pedley said. "He was an arson victim."

"The fire wouldn't have finished him if it hadn't been for the blind staggers."

"You ever go in to the D.A. with one of those 'if' cases, Sime?"

"I'll go in with this one." Dublin smiled charmingly. "I've just been talking to him about it."

"Keep on fiddling around if you want to. I'm going to get an arson indictment."

"You can get nice odds it'll turn out to be a presentment for homicide. If you want to make a little side bet, I wouldn't be surprised if I could find a few bucks that claims the fire was started by Lownes himself. Accidentally, of course."

Pedley went to the washbasin; sopped cold water on his head. "Who's putting the pressure on, Sime?"

"Pressure?" Dublin cocked an impish eye. "Perish forbid. 'I seen my duty and I done it.'"

Pedley sopped a wet cloth against the lump over his right temple. "You'll be a big help, I can see that. Impounding evidence for Homicide. Tying up witnesses when we want them for examination."

"Why don't you step out of it, Ben? What you looking for? A citation?"

THE Marshal leaned forward, tapped the Captain's top vest buttons with the back of his fingers. "I'm looking for a firebug, Sime. Anybody gets in my way is liable to wind up saying 'hello' to a surgeon. Eighteen Karat shoo-flys not excluded. Pass the word along to the prosecutor's office if it'll make you feel better."

"Benjamin! Such a way to talk! To one who just delivered you from durance vile!"

"Do as much for you someday, I



hope." Pedley went into the living room, recovered his hat and overcoat from the corner where his attacker had tossed them, strode out.

He stopped at the desk to ask about the maid. The suave desk-man was still on duty. He was duly impressed by authority; very sorry he couldn't be of assistance; The floor-maid was off duty. Wouldn't come on until seven tomorrow. He didn't have her address, no. Or any phone number where she could be reached. Doubtless the agency which supplied the Elegante with help would be able to give that information.

Pedley didn't press the matter. No point inquiring about some unknown and indescribable individual who might have been loitering outside Suite 48-49 an hour or so ago.

It was snowing softly when he reached the street. In another hour the rusty brown of the traffic lanes would be covered by a clean, white blanket. There was a parallel there somewhere, he mused; it wouldn't take long to cover up certain other dirty traces, the way things were going. . . .

The electric clock on the mantel over the old black-marble fireplace said five minutes past ten when he unlocked the door of his suite at the Metropole. And one of the three phones was ringing. He picked up the receiver:

"Mister Pedley!" The hotel operator sighed with relief. "There's been a party trying to get you for the last half-hour!"

Pedley tucked the receiver between his shoulder and ear so his hands would be free to open the flat brown-paper package that lay on the side table.

"Should I be concerned?" He knew that if the call had been urgent, it would have come in on one of the other phones, those with pink number cards tucked under the plastic disc and no exchange

typed thereon except OFFICIAL 270.

"Well . . . it was that Regent number."

"Oh! Makes different. Get it for me, will you?" He ripped the wrapping off the package—an album of phonograph records on the cover of which was a picture of a cannon spouting fire and lettering: *Dmitri Shostakovich—The Seventh Symphony*.

"Hello?" The voice in his ear was music of a more intimate kind.

"Ollie . . . !"

"Ah, you rounder. From what disreputable dive are you calling?"

"Just got back to the Metropole. Can you come over?"

"Mmmm?" The girl at the other end tasted the invitation, tentatively. "Do I hear lust raising its lovely head?"

"Could be. Also, less agreeable matters."

"Barney said you were in a swivet."

"A medium swivet. Can you ditch your date and give me a hand?"

She laughed. "I have no other dates but you, darling. I'll be over before you can recite the Bureau of Combustibles code."

AFTER she hung up, he called room service, ordered ice and setups. Then he took the first record out of the album, went to the only modern piece of furniture in the suite—a big radio-phonograph that had cost him as much as a car. He put the platter on the felt turntable with the air of a woman trying on a new hat.

When the opening chords of the Philharmonic began to fill the musty corners of the big living-room, he went into the bedroom and changed his clothes.

He'd taken these second-floor rooms for living quarters nearly ten years ago with the one proviso that he might play his recordings any hour of the day or night. That wouldn't have been possi-



ble in one of the newer, up-to-date hotels with their thinner walls and low ceilings.

But the Metropole had been built nearly fifty years ago, when its Twenty-third Street location, between Seventh and Eighth, put it right in the middle of the then fashionable midtown district. The solid masonry and high-vaulted construction smothered sounds that otherwise might have disturbed neighboring tenants. Also, the second floor situation was convenient for a man who sometimes had to dash out in the middle of the night without waiting for a sleepy elevator boy.

Little of the furniture in the suite had been changed during the Marshal's tenure; he had become so accustomed to the McKinley period pieces he'd have felt uncomfortable in more up-to-date surroundings. But the rooms had nevertheless acquired considerable evidence of the individual who occupied them.

Over the mantel was a standard department signal-box with the gong removed and a wooden block placed where the tapping arm would hit it. On the walls were framed photographs which were, of themselves, a kind of progressive record of Benjamin R. Pedley in the Fire Department.

A snapshot enlargement of him as a probationer in his first helmet, a posed group in front of Old Hook-and-Ladder Twenty with Pedley sitting at the rear steering wheel of the big truck, and the rest of the company on the running-board; a yellowed cut and accompanying clipping from the *Tribune*, showing the Chief pinning a medal on the chest of a very self-conscious Hook-and-Ladder Lieutenant; a flashlight picture of a beefsteak party given by his division officers on the occasion of his promotion to Battalion Chief; an inscribed photograph of the then-Mayor congratulating Pedley on his appointment as Chief

Fire Marshal. And a score of others, taken at banquets, clam-bakes, at the scenes of conflagration—usually ten or a dozen in the group . . . friends who had drunk with him, argued with him, battled with him, risked their lives with him.

And against the east wall, a row of green-metal file cabinets which had grown heavier and increased in number from year to year. The names typed on the white cards labeling the drawers might not have been familiar to Barney or Shaner or most of the others who had visited these rooms. There were none of the names of the criminals Pedley had sought, arrested, sent to prison. The top drawer was marked *Back, Beethoven, Brahms*, and the second *Debussy, Dvorak, Foster*.

Into those files had gone no small part of the Pedley expenditures—out of them had come a good share of the limited number of pleasant hours he had been able to grab from the endless pile of unfinished cases that came to his desk downtown.

His feeling for what Shaner called "dress-suit music" was one of the reasons for Pedley's feelings about the girl who had just phoned him. Not especially the fact that she recognized a good string section when she heard one—and preferred Prokoffieff to the Hit Parade; it was more than that, deeper than that. When he was with Ollie, he had the same sense of inner peace as when listening to Stokowski conducting a Mendelssohn concerto—a complete absence of the tension which had come to be the normal atmosphere in which he moved.

There was a knock; he went to the door.

The girl who came in was tall and willowy, perhaps twenty-two or -three years old. She wore a mink coat that would have aroused comment at a fur-



riers' convention, but she didn't need the coat to attract attention. Her face said she was sensitively intelligent. Her sloe eyes were subtle invitation, her movements a suggestive challenge. The combined impression was that of a girl who has just worked her way through college by doing a strip tease in a chorus line.

"I'll have to do something about those elevator boys," she said briskly. "I can tell by the way they look at me when I say 'Two' that they're beginning to Think Things!"

## CHAPTER IX

PEDLEY helped her off with her coat.

"Don't worry—they just think you're coming to my hotel for immoral purposes. Never occur to them we might be discussing business."

"Oh!" She made a face at him. "That's all right then!"

"Fix a drink, while I get a shirt on, Ollie." He disappeared into the bedroom.

"What happened to your hand, Ben?" Olive examined the new album of records approvingly.

"Got careless up at the Brockhurst Theatre. Doesn't hurt, to speak of..."

"I know you, Ben. You wouldn't pay any attention to a broken leg if you were hot on a case."

He emerged, buttoning his shirt. "You act as if I liked this kind of life!"

"You'd be miserable," she rattled ice into tall tumblers, "in any other sort of existence."

"Hell I would. Why do you think I bought that acreage up on Lake Candlewood?"

"You can dream, can't you?" She knew all about the plans for the little stone cottage up in the Connecticut hills, the big stone fireplace and the picture window overlooking the lake, the

wharf for the knockabout sailboat and the special freezer for the fish he expected to catch. Olive had listened to those dreams more than once and filed them away for reference in some future that seemed to be forever receding into the distance.

"I'd quit this job tomorrow morning—" he began.

"Only the Bureau's under-manned as it is," she recited with the manner of one who knew the answers by heart. "If you could only get caught up once, so you wouldn't leave such a mess of unfinished business for someone else to take over..." Olive went to one of the record-cabinets, pulled open a drawer labeled *Schubert*, *Sibelius*, extracted one of the fifths hidden behind the brown disc-envelopes.

"Well, it's a fact. I certainly couldn't quit now, with this Brockhurst thing."

"That wasn't a self-starter, I take it." She poured Bourbon over the ice, fizzed club soda.

"No. Cover-up for a killing, seems as if." He told her about it. "Worst of it is," he concluded, "an amateur torch like this is scared to begin with—and he's likely to get more rattled as he goes along."

"He set fire to the theatre because he was afraid of being found out as a murderer. Minute he begins to be scared of being discovered as a fire-bug—with his right pant-leg slit up to the knee as an end-result—he's going to light up the town again. To eliminate any witnesses who might know the wrong things about him. So... problem is to catch up with him fast, before he can bonfire some other building."

OLIVE offered him his drink. "Which suspect do you want me to ensnare with my female charms?"

"You see right through me, don't



you?" He didn't seem surprised.

"Um . . ." noncommittally.

"I've got Shaner tailing Ross and Maginn covering the Lownes apartment. Levinson's looking up Gaydel's background. I thought you might see if Wes Toleman could be induced to unbosom himself to you . . ."

"As long as you don't insist on its being the other way round, darling."

"My guess is, this announcer knows something. You can't put him in the chair for that, unless it's guilty knowledge. But there's no law says you can't try to rope him, find out what he does know."

"Is he attractive, Ben?"

"No great big hunk of male, exactly. One of these pretty-boys. Maybe you'll make a man out of him."

"I'll do my damndest." Olive regarded him slyly. "My personal preference isn't for the shy, retiring type." She picked up the Third Movement of the Shostakovitch, turned to the big phonograph.

Pedley set his glass down carefully, came up behind her, slipped an arm around her waist.

She set the needle in place, waited until the low voices of the violas and voilins filled the room before she moved.

The high-pitched discord of a buzzer cut into the symphony. They both turned to the smaller of the "official" phones, Pedley swearing softly.

He lifted the receiver off the rack.

Barney spoke into his ear. "I'm down in the lobby, boss. Something with a rush priority has come up, sudden-like."

"Does it have to come up to my rooms?"

"I'd better discuss this matter with you in *persona grata*."

"Trouble?"

"I'd as leave not go into it via the Bell System, boss."

"Okay. Come on up."

By the time Barney rapped, Olive had gone; there was only one tumbler with ice in it on the center table.

"We had a call from the Commish, boss."

The Marshal indicated the Bourbon bottle. "Help yourself. The call wouldn't be about the Brockhurst blaze?" The Commissioner had been a pretty smart politician in his day; he'd not go at it as crudely as that!

"In a sort of backhanded way, it would." Barney poured himself four fingers, raised it to the light: "The Big Boy wants you should drop everything else and give him a personal report on the work of the Bureau for the past year."

PEDLEY poured a dollop of straight whiskey in his own glass. Drop everything else." He sniffed at the liquor. "Personal report on the Bureau." He lifted his glass in toast. "They got to him, Barnabus. They had him in a corner and he couldn't get out. But he's a right guy at heart. Here's to the Commissioner."

Barney stared at him, stopped midway of a refill. "It's the first time I ever hear of the Hall mucking up the Fire Department." He set the whiskey bottle down, swirled the liquor in his glass dejectedly.

"It's happened before." The Marshal drained his glass. "It'll probably happen again. But it won't happen this time."

Barney peered at him. "You're not taking it lyin' down?"

"I'm not leaving it."

"Supposin' His Nibs suspends you!"

"He can. He might. But that'll take time. Filing of charges. A hearing. The Commissioner knows that. He knows I know it."

"I catch. He's telling you to lay off



... but he won't be sore if you don't."

"Providing we can get fast enough action to keep the higher-ups from bearing down too hard."

"I know what *that* means!" Barney applied himself to the bottle again. "Where'll you be when the Commish desires me to forward the bad news?"

"You're slipping, Barney." Pedley went to the table, took a shoulder holster out of the drawer, began to strap it on. "You haven't been seeing your quota of double features lately."

"Huh?"

"When these slap-happy screen dicks come up against a dead end, what do they always do . . . along about reel six?"

Barney's mouth formed a silent O. He nodded slowly. "Sashay la femme."

"You've won four silver dollars. Would you care to try for eight?"

"The Lownes femme?"

"Can you think of a better one to sashay?"

## CHAPTER X

THE maid who opened the apartment door for Pedley at Riveredge House wore a crisp white cap and a starched white apron. But there was no starch in her manner. She drooped; even her voice was depressed.

"Miz Lownes ain't in, sir."

"She's in. I checked downstairs."

"She ain't seein' nobody." The woman started to close the door.

"She'll see me." He pushed past.

"You cain't come in, mister!"

A brisk feminine voice called: "Who is it, Netta?"

"'Nother one of them reporters, way he shoves himself in where he ain't wanted. I told him Miz Lownes wasn't to home."

A stout, chesty brunette appeared at the other end of the little lobby. She

had a bland moon-face with a pert, up-tilted nose; she wore a tight-fitting vermillion suit that could have been seen a mile on a dark night.

"Maybe I can help you." She smiled pleasantly.

"I doubt it." Pedley kept on toward the sunken living-room. "I want a minute with Miss Lownes."

She stepped in front of him quickly. "I'm Kim Wasson. Her arranger. Secretary, sort of. If there's any way I can help . . .?"

"Sorry, Miss Wasson. Accept no substitutes. This is official." He held out his badge in his cupped palm. "Where is she?"

"In bed. But—"

"She won't be the first girl I've talked to that way. That her room?" He walked past a lot of low-slung, white-corduroy furniture and a concert-grand, glanced at oil paintings of bleached bones and tree stumps on grotesque deserts, crossed in front of a huge stone fireplace where big hickory logs crackled, to a door opposite the little lobby.

Kim Wasson hurried along beside him, caught at his arm.

"If you'll just wait—"

Pedley opened the door quietly. The girl in the bed didn't bear any great resemblance to the limp figure he'd carried down the dressing-room stairs. The bronze hair was glossy as new metal shavings, now; there was color in her cheeks and on her lips. The fuzzy bed-jacket didn't quite hide the sheer black nightgown—the nightgown wasn't meant to conceal what was under it.

He took off his hat. "I think we've met before."

"I don't remember it." She pulled the jacket a little closer together; it was one of those gestures designed to draw attention rather than distract it. "You don't wait to be invited into a girl's bedroom, do you?"



"Not when I'm on business."

"You have no business," the singer shook her head as if resentful—bronzed hair fanned out over the pillows, "bothering me at a time like this." Her tone didn't carry out the suggestion of resentment; Pedley thought she was waiting to determine what sort of an impression she'd made.

The Wasson girl cried: "Don't talk to him, Leila. He has no right to crash in like this!"

PEDLEY gave the room the once-over. "No idea how much latitude the Fire Investigation Bureau has when it's looking into an arson case." The bedroom was a decorator's delight. Nice furniture. Period pieces. There was a glimpse of polar bear rug showing through the open door of the bathroom. Somebody had taste.

Leila murmured: "Arson?"

"The blaze that killed your brother wasn't any accident, Miss Lownes."

"I don't believe it." She sat bolt upright. Her eyes were those of a child who had heard something too horrible to understand. If she was acting, he decided, she was one hell of a good actress. The eyes that stared at him in disbelief were really green, he noticed—not the hazel-green many red-haired girls have, but the delicate shade of fresh mint.

"The theatre was torched especially to get your brother."

Kim Wasson muttered: "Oh, God!"

Leila put one hand to her eyes, sank back helplessly on the pillows. It was very effective.. Very little-girl helpless.

"You want to help identify the person who caused your brother's death."

She nodded numbly. "What can I do?"

"Answer a few questions. In private, preferably."

She took the hand away from her

eyes. "I won't have anything to say that Kim shouldn't hear."

"I might have." He didn't make it sound disagreeable.

"The gentleman wants you to leave, darling." Leila forced a wan smile for the arranger. "Don't go far away."

"I'll be within screaming distance." Kim Wasson marched out, left the door open.

Leila shifted her pillow. The Marshal made her uneasy; she resented the unfamiliar sensation. She was accustomed to men being disturbed by her, to having them more or less automatically at an emotional, or perhaps a glandular, disadvantage as soon as they got close to her. The reversal of positions was disturbing.

Everything about Pedley was slightly alarming. His muscular compactness, that burn-scar on his face, the high-cheekboned features, the tightly sensitive mouth. In the way he had come into the room, the way he moved about it, restlessly, there was an impression of intense and concentrated alertness.

His eyes searched hers with obvious suspicion. When she spoke, his head inclined almost imperceptibly as if to make certain he caught the slightest overtone in her voice. His whole attitude was a challenge.

"I don't like to come at you like this, when you're sunk, Miss Lownes. But no use beating about. You're right up at the top of the suspect list."

Leila pulled bits of white fur from the cuffs of her bedjacket. "Do you have to be nasty?"

"I'm trying to show you what you're up against. The firebug had to have a motive for putting your brother out of the picture. You had one. Maybe even a good one."

"You're a liar." There was no rancor in her tone.

"The bug was at the Brockhurst and



in the dressing-room where the fuse was set. "You were at both places."

SHE put her knees up under the bed-clothes; the movement disarranged the bed-jacket again. "What's that supposed to prove?"

"The fire was touched off right after you helped carry your brother upstairs. About the time you sent Gaydel downstairs so you'd be alone with Ned. I've known grand juries to vote true bills on less than that."

She pushed the bronze helmet of hair back off her forehead: "I'd like to know what makes you think I'd want to murder my brother."

"If this was just another murder, I wouldn't run a temperature about it. First place, it'd be a matter for the police, not the Fire Department. Second place, I've known occasions when a good, clean murder might not have been such a bad thing." He wandered past the doorway where he could see the Wasson girl; she was at the telephone, talking so softly he hadn't even heard her put in the call.

"But this was arson, Miss Lownes. For my dough, an arsonist is ten degrees lower than a child murderer. And ten times as dangerous. Your murderer kills in hot blood. Unless he's a paid chopper he generally stops at a single manslaughter. Almost always he knows his victim, confines his attack to that one individual. But incendiaries are madmen running wild in crowds with machine-guns. Don't know who they may kill. Don't care. I hate 'em all, seed and breed."

"You don't have to hate me, then." She was solemn about it.

"It wouldn't be easy." He looked at her with frank admiration. "But being a glamour babe doesn't make you innocent. There are certain points you'll have to clear up before we cross you

off the list."

"Such as—?"

"Why'd you change your mind so fast about taking your brother away from the theatre after Ross knocked him for a loop? First, you wanted him taken up to the dressing-room. You got Amery out of the way by asking him to phone Ned's bodyguard. Then a few minutes later you sent Gaydel down to get your car, to take your brother to his hotel."

"I was afraid Ned had been hurt seriously; at first I wasn't sure it would be safe to have him moved. Then when I found out he was all right—"

"He wasn't all right. He was full of poison booze that would have killed him in an hour or so, anyway. That was what kept him from getting out of the dressing-room when the fire began." She hadn't asked him how it started; that was queer, on the face of it.

"Where'd he get bad liquor?"

"You're the one who's supposed to be answering questions." Why was she glancing at the bathroom door as if she expected to get a cue there?

"Ned drank anywhere they wouldn't throw him out. Afraid I can't help you on that."

"Try this one, then. What's in the leather case you asked Gaydel to get from your brother's room?" She was ready for that one. Gaydel must have phoned her what to expect.

"Something of interest only to me."

"It was of interest to your brother or he wouldn't have had it in his rooms. It was of interest to the laddie who got there before Gaydel and tore the place inside out looking for it." *Was Pedley's imagination doing nipups or had there been a change of light in that bathroom, just now?*

"I don't know anyone else who'd want it."

"What's in it more precious than



rubies?"

She turned her head away. "Photographs."

"Why'd your brother have 'em, if they were yours?"

"He had a peculiar streak in him. He seemed to enjoy embarrassing me."

"Oh. That kind of photos."

She looked at him quickly. "There's nothing really wrong about them. Mostly snaps taken while we were on the road in the act. But there were a few Ned took while I was . . . sun-bathing."

"Oh."

"It wouldn't be so good to have the wrong people get hold of them."

"You haven't any ideas on who does have the case, now?" It hadn't been a shadow that Pedley'd glimpsed out of the corner of his eye. But something had been moving between the light and the bathroom mirror; it was still there.

"No. If I'd known there was going to be all this commotion about it, I wouldn't have asked Chuck to hunt for the case at all."

"Gaydel must be a pretty good pal of yours. For you to trust him with intimate pictures like that." He took a few casual paces toward the bathroom.

"Chuck's one of the best—*Oh!*"

Her warning came too late. Pedley pulled out his service special, stepped to the bathroom door, leveled the gun close to his hip.

"Come on out. Let's have a look at you."

## CHAPTER XI

IT WAS a look worth having. The man who sauntered out was striking in several respects.

He was about twenty-four or -five—darkly handsome after a gaunt and somewhat haggard fashion. His brown eyes were deep-set, brooding. His nose

had the hawk-like sharpness of the out-doorsman. His skin was tanned until it was almost a match for his close-cropped hair. There was something the matter with his left hand; he kept opening and closing his fist with a nervous, jerky motion. He wore shaggy gray tweeds, a heavy, blue-flannel shirt; his shoes were thick-soled brogans.

He paid no attention to Pedley's gun, brushed past the Marshal so close his coat caught on the revolver's front sight. He went straight to Leila:

"Sorry, shugie. I must have made a noise or something for Old Sleuth to get wise."

"Be careful, Bill." She flopped out of the bed and her bare feet fumbled for the fuzzy mules. "Anything you say may be held against you."

"Leila," he said. A slow grin spread over his lean face as he watched her hurry to the closet for something to cover the sheer black net.

She shook her head in mock reproof. "Pardon my costume. Lieutenant Conover . . . meet Mister—?"

"Pedley," said Pedley. "I don't like to intrude on this tender scene. But where do you fit in here, Lieutenant?"

Conover said: "Uh—"

"Bill and I are engaged," Leila filled in, quickly. "It hasn't been announced yet, but I suppose you'll fix *that*, Mister Pedley."

"I'm no keyhole snooper." The Marshall slapped Conover's hips by way of precaution, put his own gun back in the holster. "I'm not interested in anybody's private life except as it may concern the fire that was touched off at the Brockhurst. I'll admit to a little curiosity as to why the Lieutenant thought it advisable to skulk in the john."

"Simple." Conover slouched, loose-limbed, toward the living room. "Terry Ross phoned Leila you were hell-bent on arresting her. I stuck around to make



sure you don't do it. I figured I'd stand a better chance if it came to telling you where to get off, if you didn't know I was here. How's about letting the lady have a little privacy until she's decent?"

Pedley followed, turned back at the door. "I don't know what your doctor's orders were, Miss Lownes. But if they were to stay in bed, you'd better follow directions on the bottle. You don't feel the worst of those fumes for a while after you inhale 'em. They anaesthetize the throat so you can't tell how hard you've been hit."

CONOVER was standing, straddle-legged, in front of the fireplace, holding out his hands to the heat.

Pedley asked: "Mind filling in a few blanks, Lieutenant? Name, status, so forth?"

"William T. Conover," the youth at the mantel answered, without turning. "First Lieutenant, Paratroops, U. S. Marine Corps. Honorably discharged nine weeks ago."

One of these super-tough youngsters, Pedley thought. Kind of kid they trained to do work no man could stand up to. Postgraduate course in the fine art of annihilation. Specialist in sudden death. Now he'd come back to the States and the Lownes girl. Maybe Ned Lownes hadn't liked the idea of Conover's marrying his sister? It was something to keep in mind.

The Lieutenant chafed his hands together affably. "Prometheus' gift," he said. "The oldest friend of man."

Kim Wasson, at the concert-grand, let her fingers fall on the keys in a howling discord.

Pedley leaned against the stone mantel so he wouldn't have to talk to the Lieutenant's back. "That the way you feel about fire, Conover?"

"Naturally I wouldn't expect a fire-

man to feel the same way."

Here's another one of these lugs who figure all you need to be a fireman is a strong back and a little luck at pinochle, Pedley thought. Never stopped to think—these birds whose lives we protect at the risk of our own—that a fireman has to know something about the physics of hydraulic pressure, the chemistry of fire. The scar-tissue on Pedley's face whitened a little, but the anger didn't show in his voice.

"Feel pretty good about the fire, don't you, Lieutenant? How you think Ned Lownes felt about it?"

"I never gave it a thought." Conover swiveled around to stare blandly at the Marshal. "Selfish about it, I suppose. That bonfire saved me a lot of trouble."

"Why?"

Conover balanced on his toes, hunched his head forward, truculently. "You never saw Ned chivvy Leila, or you wouldn't ask. If you're looking into this thing and are half-smart, you'll find it out, anyway. So I might as well tell you. I'd threatened to fix Ned's wagon for keeps."

"Did you?"

"I wouldn't admit it, if I'd done it—so you won't believe me if I say 'no.'"

"Lownes jealous of your attentions to his sister?"

If Pedley had pulled the pin on a hand grenade and tossed it at Conover's face, it couldn't have resulted in any more unexpected reaction.

The Lieutenant recoiled, swung on his heel, strode away from the Marshal so rapidly he was almost running. He went swiftly to the concert-grand, stood beside it, his face drained of color, his voice shaky:

"Play something, Kim! Anything! Loud! Quick!"

The arranger nodded, poker-faced. Her fingers moved over the keys; the



instrument reverberated with a boogie version of *Stomping At The Savoy*.

With both fists, Conover began to pound on the piano top in rhythm. His face strained up toward the ceiling so the cords in his neck stood out sharply.

THE beat of the music brought Leila.

She was wearing lime-colored lounging pajamas of some filmy material, the top was fastened high around the neck but the back was cut so low she was practically naked to the waist. Whatever she wore beneath the pajamas wasn't enough to hide what showed suggestively through the thin fabric.

"Bill!" She flew to him. "What's the matter!"

He acted as if he hadn't heard her, kept on with his ferocious fist-banging.

Pedley rubbed his chin. "I said something that touched the wrong chord. What is he, mental instability discharge?"

"Don't use that term!" She spoke bitterly over her shoulder, while she clung to the Lieutenant's arm. "Bill had a nervous breakdown, that's all. After twenty-eight months in the Burma theatre, what can you expect!"

The music became *St. James Infirmary*; the pounding kept on.

"I might have doped that out." Pedley wasn't apologetic. "How long will it take him to tone down?"

Leila left the Lieutenant, came close to Pedley:

"What did you say to him?"

"Asked him if your brother was jealous of him."

"Oh, Lord! Why didn't you ask me? Ned never liked any of the men I was friendly with. Terry . . . or Chuck . . . or Wes . . ."

The fist-hammering stopped abruptly. Kim eased off on the bass; the music trailed softly into a Strauss waltz,

stopped. Conover stood relaxed by the piano, mopping a rain of sweat off his forehead.

Leila hurried back to him. "Want a drink, darling?"

"Uh, uh, I'm jake." He stuck the handkerchief in his pocket as if nothing had happened. "I'm afraid I interrupted you, Dick Tracy."

Liela put a finger to her lips, pleaded with her eyes.

Pedley ignored the appeal. "I was about to ask where you were between, say, three and four-fifteen this afternoon, Lieutenant."

"Let's see." Conover appeared to consider. "Most of that time I was nickeling the jukebox in a hole-in-the-wall called Alf's Green Room."

"The Fortieth Street hangout? See anyone you know?"

"Bartenders."

"Didn't go there with anyone?"

"No."

"Didn't run into Lownes there?"

Conover shook his head. "I was just lapping up a few beers and waiting until it was time to go pick up Leila. Any other little items you'd like to be wised up on?"

"Yeah. Where you live?"

THE Lieutenant put his arm around Leila, looked down at her, affectionately. "Tell him where I live, shugie."

She was genuinely startled this time. "Why . . . on your boat, Bill."

Pedley elevated one eyebrow. "In midwinter? What is it? A steam yacht?"

"Motor boat," Conover said. "Thirty-eight footer."

"In the water, this time of the year?"

"Up on the ways. At Sheepshead."

"Must have to sleep in your woolies. Well . . . don't take any cruises until I give you port clearance, Lieutenant."



Leila made a derisive gesture. "Now you're being silly. Bill's the last person in the world to suspect."

"You might have a slight emotional bias, Miss Lownes. Your fiancé claims he had his reasons for—"

"Oh!" Leila cried. "Plenty of others had good reason." She put the back of her hand up to her mouth, opened her eyes very wide as if something had slipped out unintentionally.

"As for instance?"

"Oh . . . lots of people. Ned could have written a book on How to Make Enemies and Irritate People."

"You say lots of people had good reason to hate your brother, Miss Lownes. But you can't think of their names at the moment. How about this Hal Kelsey who leads your orchestra?" Pedley cocked his head to listen to the piano; Kim Wasson had started playing again. The music was soft but the tempo was being accelerated.

"Hal Kelsey?" Leila dismissed him with a shrug of her free shoulder. "I guess Hal was practically the only soul in the show Ned *didn't* pick a fight with, one time or another."

"Just one big happy family!" The Marshal recognized the tune that emerged from the elaborate overchords the arranger was devising. . . .

*Shine, little glow-worm*, tinkled the treble. *Glimmer . . . Glimmer*, echoed the bass. *Um-dee-dee-dum-dum, da-dum, dee-dum . . .*

"Kim! Please!" It was Leila. "I'm tired."

"Sorry, Li. I wasn't thinking." The piano was silent.

Conover held out his hand. "Great fun to have met up with you, Mister Pedley. Too bad to cut your visit short. But you heard what the little lady said. She's a-wearyin' of you."

"Don't be rude, Bill." Leila tried a smile. "The gentleman won't want to

pay me another visit."

"Oh, I'll be back," Pedley said. "Before I come, you might think up some better answers than the ones you've been handing me." He put on his hat, touched the brim in salute. "Or first thing you know, you'll have me wondering why you two don't want this firebug caught."

## CHAPTER XII

PEDLEY stood beside the PBX in the Riveredge lobby talking to Maginn. He hadn't finished looking over the list of outgoing calls made from Leila's apartment when he heard the hum of the descending elevator again.

The grille clashed, the bronze door slid back. High heels clicked on lobby tile. Around the corner of the screen shielding the switchboard from public gaze, Pedley caught a flash of vermillion beneath a short beaver jacket.

"Stick with it, Mag. I want to know if she talks to her lawyer." He flipped a hand at his deputy, got to the sidewalk as Kim was beating a red light at the corner. It was too stormy for many people to be on the street; he had no trouble keeping her in sight until he could climb behind the wheel of the sedan.

He nursed the car along behind her until she reached Lexington and swung north; he was parked fifty feet away when the drugstore door closed behind her.

He pretended to inspect the display of cough remedies and hot-water bottles until he saw her mounting a red leather stool at the fountain. Then he went in.

He hooked a leg over the stool next hers.

If she was astonished or annoyed, he couldn't have told it.



The only other person at the counter was a watchman having his midnight pickup. The soda-jerker hardly looked at Kim as he sauntered over, polishing a glass.

"Ham and swiss on rye," she ordered. "Plenty of mustard. And a raspberry malted. Sweet."

"Old Black Joe," said Pedley.

The counterman started to push things around on his cutting-board.

The Marshal leaned on the marble. "You didn't waste any time following me out."

"Don't flatter yourself." She was amiable about it. "I didn't know you were going to hang around and pull a Dan'l Boone on me. I came out because I thought those two had a right to be alone for a while. What's the idea of shadowing me? You don't imagine I tried to burn down the Brockhurst?"

"You might know who did."

"I might have some ideas. But that's all they'd be."

"That wasn't a bad idea—that Glow-worm thing you were playing." The counterman brought the malted and black coffee.

She showed nice teeth. "I was butchering it. That's my weakness. When I'm excited about anything, it comes right out on the keyboard. That's why I'll never amount to anything as a pianist. Can't control my emotions."

"You're in the majority. What're your emotions about Hal Kelsey?"

"Censored!" She started to devour the sandwich.

"What's he done to you?"

"Nothing beyond the usual chiseling on the special arrangements I make for the show. And the customary battling when I have to take over the eighty-eight to make sure Li gets the right tempo in the production numbers. It's what he's been trying to do to her, that riles me. And she doesn't even sense

what he's up to. Maybe I'm talking out of turn."

"Long's you keep on talking . . ."

"I don't know whether you'll understand."

He pointed to his shoes. "No flat feet. No derby. Ditch the idea I'm a detective. Pretend I'm Joe Blow."

She laughed. I'll try,—but I don't know whether this has anything to do with the fire or not . . . I really don't."

"Let's hear it,—then maybe we'll see. Keep on pouring."

"WELL . . . the thing goes back a bit. To the time when Ned and Leila were headliners on Pantages and Polis and Keith-Orpheum. The five-a-day is the hard way to come up, don't let anybody tell you different. One-night jumps from the tanks to the sticks. Playing every whistle-stop in the timetables and some that weren't even on the map. There were plenty of times when they had to hock their overcoats so they could have coffee and cakes. And they did their share of tenting on the old camp ground before they got the breaks. But they finally got 'em. They were never next-to-closing but they were good enough to get by—partly because Ned was terrific as an eccentric hooper, partly because Leila's looks put over the act when her pipes couldn't. She hasn't much of a voice, you know." She studied Pedley to see if he thought she was being disloyal.

"I wouldn't be any judge of that," he said. "But she has something."

"'Deed she has, suh. 'Deed she has. That's the point. Lownes & Lownes hit the jackpot by getting a fill-in job on one of those Broadway legstravaganzas. It wasn't such a much of a spot but they made the most of it. The crix went wild about Leila. Not her singing; she had only one number. Just her fresh-



ness, her figure—you know what I mean."

"Sexcess story . . ."

"Sure. That's the way she affects you, across the foots. Not all of it comes across on the radio, of course. But enough."

"Where's Kelsey come into this?"

"Her radio show's big-time stuff. Top rating. Premium price. They print her pictures in the country weeklies, name bras and race horses after her. So the band that backs her up gets in on this great white glare of publicity. 'Luscious Leila Lownes with Hal Kelsey and the Gang'. It's gone to Hal's head. He's had a taste of the big dough for the first time in his lousy life—and now he wants the whole piece of cake. He'd like it to be 'Hal Kelsey with Luscious Leila'—instead of the other way 'round.'"

"Then bye-and-bye it would be 'Hal Kelsey with Trixie-So-and-so'?"

"Sure. I *know* that's what he's after. *Because* he told me so one night when he was high and tried to sell me his idea of romance. I was to come along and help him ease her out of top billing. Step one—to kill Leila's throaty mike-style, kid her that she can sing anything the gals in the Met can. She's half ready to fall for it, believe me. And it would ruin her. She's no Lily Pons. Then Hal might be able to step in and replace her with someone he could control."

"Step Two?"

"Ned. He was in Hal's way, if Hal was to put it over. You can say what you like about brother Edward and I'll agree with all of it doubled and redistilled. But Neddie knew show biz. He knew how to handle Leila. *On* the stage, I mean. Off it—well—what's the use of calling a dead dog names!"

"Why didn't she ditch her brother, if he treated her so scummy?"

She looked at him sideways. "That's for her to say, isn't it?"

"It's for you to say, if you know. He was holding something over her head, wasn't he?"

"He might have rattled the family skeleton around in the closet a little." She opened her handbag, dabbled around in it, laid coins on the counter. There was a pucker of perplexity between her eyes. "Maybe Hal Kelsey knew about *that*, but I don't think so." She finished the sentence slowly, as if doubting it herself.

"I guess I'm the only person besides Leila who knows, now Ned's about to push up the daisies. She'd cut my throat for telling you." Kim did things with lipstick, compact and puff; Pedley forced himself to be patient. Eventually she completed the prettying process. "Promise me you won't use it any way that'll hurt her?"

"If she isn't the guilty party." He nodded.

"I don't know why I should take your word for it. But you couldn't be so hardboiled and a two-timer to boot. Well . . . four or five years ago—five, I think—Leila was . . ." She had been preening herself with the aid of the mirror back of the fountain; now she stared fixedly at it.

**A**BRUPTLY she spun around on the stool, bumping into the Marshal, spilling him off his perch and back against a pyramid of display cartons which toppled down around his head.

As he was freeing himself from the cardboard clutter, he wondered if that sudden movement of hers had been intentionally awkward. That expression of mingled alarm and apology as she peered out the store window might be the McCoy . . . or not.

"I'm terribly sorry." She whispered so the soda-jerker couldn't hear what



she was saying. "But there was a man out there on the street! With a gun!"

"Where?" Through the window, Pedley couldn't see anyone. He slid out the door. The street was empty except for a taxi driver reading a tabloid behind his wheel.

Pedley sprinted to the corner. Nobody there but an old woman wrapped in a shawl, huddling over a pile of newspapers on the curb.

He went back to the cab driver. "See a guy standing at the drugstore window there, a minute ago?"

"There's always somebody hangin' around this corner, Mac." The taximan rattled his newspaper. "I don't pay no attention."

Perhaps there hadn't been any man. The arranger might have been putting on an act. But why? He went back inside.

Kim Wasson wasn't there.

"Where'd the babe disappear to?" he asked the counterwoman.

"Side door." The man slapped the cartons back in place aggrievedly. "Like to know why she tore out in such a swivet, without helpin' pick up these things."

"Don't ask me. I haven't an idea. Not a glimmer."

Pedley went out the side door, but he didn't expect to see Kim.

He was right about that.

### CHAPTER XIII

THE Marshal used the phone in the drugstore booth to call Barney, gave instructions to dig up the Wasson girl's address. Then he went out on the street, waited a minute or so on the corner. There was an outside chance Kim might come back when she got over being scared. If she *had* really been scared. If it hadn't been a put-up job to get away from Pedley so she

wouldn't have to make good on the inside story of Leila's past . . .

He pulled up his coat collar and watched the snow eddying around the towers of the Waldorf, across the avenue. Maybe he was wasting time, trying to pin down the motive behind the firebug. There were too many motives, too many people who had personal and private reasons for wanting Ned Lownes below ground.

Terry Ross, who'd knocked Lownes out, there at the theatre. Ross would be taking over the managership of a piece of talent that could earn up to half a million a year. He'd do better, now Ned was out of the way.

Bill Conover . . . Bill had threatened to push the button on Lownes; if Leila's brother could have blocked her marriage to Bill, or made it difficult, that might be enough reason for a youngster whose nerves had been shot to pieces by what he'd been through in the war.

Chuck Gaydel's position wasn't quite the same, but the producer had been close to Leila. He still thought enough of her to make a try at getting back that Florentine box and he would have been able to get around the theatre better than almost anyone else. And that was probably one of the keys to the answer: familiarity with the Brockhurst.

Wes Toleman? Pedley wouldn't have any data to go on, there, until Ollie checked in with some thing. And this Hal Kelsey. Kim Wasson had done her best to point the finger at the band leader, but that might mean nothing more than that the arranger was mixed up in it, herself. Or that she held a grudge against Kelsey and had picked this time to put him in wrong.

Maybe a few words with the band leader would clear that up. . . .

The Starlight Roof. That's where Hal Kelsey and his Gang were featured attractions at the moment. Pedley gave



a final glance up and down the avenue for Kim Wasson, decided it was no use waiting, climbed in the sedan and drove over to Fifth.

When the elevator let him off on the top floor of the big hotel, he pushed through the knot of people herded against the red plush cord, beckoned to the *maitre*.

The head-waiter observed him without enthusiasm. "Your party at a table, sir?"

Pedley said: "The skinny lad leading the orchestra. That Kelsey?"

"No, sir. Mr. Kelsey doesn't come on again until the floor show is over."

THE Marshal surveyed the big room. The tables were nearly all taken. Mostly couples or parties of four; evening gowns and dinner jackets with here and there a man in business clothes.

On the dance floor a line of a straw-skirted bare-midriffed cuties were doing a sultry hula. Behind them, musicians in tropical linen were playing softly enough to let the steel guitars take a solo.

"Where'll I find this Kelsey?"

"I couldn't say, sir. He might be in his dressing-room."

Pedley unhooked the plush cord, let himself in, before the *maitre* could prevent him.

"I'm sorry, sir. Unless you have a reservation—"

The Marshal held out his hand with the gold badge cupped in his palm.

"Oh!" Supercilious eyebrows lifted in concern. "I hope there'll be no trouble—"

"None at all." Pedley strode over to the wall aisle, headed for the red light bulb over the EXIT sign beside the orchestra platform.

A hand touched him lightly on the shoulder. He turned. It was Shaner.

He had been sitting at one of the wall tables, in the shadow; had stepped out into the aisle after the Marshal had passed him.

"Looking for somebody, skipper?" the deputy inquired, lazily.

"What the hell are *you* doing here!"

"That publicity flack is here."

"Ross? Where?"

"Out back. With Kelsey."

"Get to it."

"I tail Ross over here. He gets a table and right away the band leader comes over and sits down with him. They don't order any eats but they do a little serious drinking. Also, they get into an argument."

"What about?"

"I don't know. The nearest table I could rent wasn't in good listening range. Anyhow, this argument gets steamed up considerable and they must notice they are attracting attention. Because they take their fight to more private quarters."

"You didn't hear anything they were saying?"

"I only catch a titbit, here and there, as I am passing to and fro to the little boys' room."

"Pitch."

"Ross states he's going to be kingpin of the radio show now Lowmes has taken his final bow. Kelsey insists *he's* in the driver's seat and means to hold a very tight rein on Ross."

"Why'd they break up the discussion?"

"This I can't tell you. I catch a snatch about some lawyer—"

"Amery?"

"Could be. Kelsey bounces up all of a sudden and allows as how he'll see this lawyer himself and would Ross kindly go to hell in a handbasket. Then he stamps off in low or medium dudgeon . . . and the publicity professor sprints right after him."



"And you don't go after them! I've got a good mind to send you back to straightening hose kinks. Didn't it occur to you it might be important to know what goes on, out there?"

Shaner shrugged. "I called Barney, asked him to locate you, tell you the status. I was sort of waiting for a call-back with instructions."

"You've got 'em now. Come on."

PEDLEY led the way out back of the orchestra platform, into the dressing-room hall. They located Ross and the bandleader by the simple expedient of listening. The quarrelers were in a locker-room marked: *Instrument Storage Only. No Smoking*. The door was shut, but it was thin. . . .

Ross was bellowing:

"Why don't you use some sense for once in your life, Hal? Don't rock the boat. I'll see you get what's coming to you."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Kelsey's voice was softly venomous. "I've got your cute little canary over a barrel. I'm going to keep her there until I get what I want."

"What's your price?"

"I stay with the show. I run the show. I'll use Leila long's she makes the grade. I'll decide when she doesn't."

"She won't agree to it. Amery wouldn't let her."

"She will. And he will. When he knows I've got that Florentine case. Mister District Attorney wouldn't ask for a better motive for murder than what's in that leather beauty."

"Before I'd let you put the bee on her like that, I'll—"

"What'll you do!" Pedley could scarcely hear the bandleader, he spoke so gently.

"I'll sic Staro on you!"

For the space of a breath there was

silence from the other side of the door. Shaner hunched his shoulders, held out his hands, palms upward. Pedley got a hand on the knob.

A chair scraped on the floor inside the storage room.

Ross cried: "Put it down, Hal! Put it down or—"

Pedley swung the door wide. Several things happened so fast they seemed to be simultaneous.

The tall, taper-shouldered bandleader swung a chair from above his head. Ross pulled the trigger of the nickel-barreled hammerless he held pointed at Kelsey's lower vest button. Pedley kicked at Ross's wrist.

Ross dodged; the gun spat at the floor. Pedley's boot caught the publicity man in the groin. He caromed back against the wall. The chair crashed down, knocked him sprawling. Shaner stepped in swiftly, hooked a left to Kelsey's face, rocked the bandleader back into a corner.

PEDLEY toed the broken chair out of the way, bent down, took the gun away from Ross.

"Didn't know it was loaded, I bet!"

"You, again!" Ross got to his knees, put his hand below his belt buckle, grimaced. "What's it to you if Hal and I have a little disagreement?"

"I've known these private Donnybrooks to get hot enough to burn people." The Marshal broke the pistol. "Where's your permit for this?"

"At the Olympiad." Ross staggered to his feet. "You won't take it away, either. I was using it in self-defense."

"You were going to gut-shoot your chum here in a spirit of good clean fun. If I hadn't given you the boot, you'd be facing a felonious rap right now." Pedley closed the hammerless, stuck it in his pocket. "I'll have Ballistics check this and send it back to you."



You better trot along, now."

"There's some unfinished business to be attended to," Ross said stiffly.

"Isn't that a fact! But your part of it'll hold. On your way, now."

Ross went out, walking with his feet placed well apart. Shaner cleared his throat.

"All right if I leave this chair-heaver to you, coach?"

"Wait a sec, Shaner." Pedley stepped to the door with his deputy. "Never mind the butter-ball. I'll have to give him a going-over, myself. I've a better chore for you."

"Be *reasonable*, skipper! I'd figured on having a brief interim on my own after I tucked the Ross boy in the hay."

"Tend to your home work some other night. It's a cinch job you're getting, anyway."

"Such as . . .?"

"Relievin' Maginn. Riding herd on Leila Lownes."

"Now that," Shaner smiled clear back to his ears, "is another color of a horse. Give me my boots and saddle!"

"Watch her close. I want her where I can put my hands on her if I need to."

"Who wouldn't?" The deputy went away. Pedley shut the door.

There was sheer malignancy in the way Hal Kelsey squinted up when the Marshal propped a chair under the doorknob in lieu of a key.

"You're a pretty shrewd operator, Kelsey."

"Trying to con me?"

"Just laying some cards on the table. You want to get hold of the Winn radio show, now Lownes has departed these precincts. I don't know whether you can do that or not. It's no skin off my seat, either way. Unless you're the firebug I'm after."

"You're about to proposition me. I

can tell."

"That was the general idea. You might save me some trouble . . . I might make things easier for you."

"How?"

"There's a little matter of a leather case."

"What about it?"

"I want it."

"You won't get it from me. I haven't got it."

"You told Ross different."

"To keep him from mucking up my plans, that's all." Kelsey smiled cunningly. "Ross doesn't know where the gadget is; he says somebody stole it from Ned's hotel room. I don't know what's in it, but I know it's dynamite of some kind. So I put two and two together and get a notion. If neither Terry nor Leila knows where the thing is, maybe Ned hid it where nobody can find it. All I have to do is admit I have it—and the old black magic works just the same as if I had the gimmick right in my locker. But if you're going to tell everybody I haven't got it, you'll wash me up good."

"I've a single track mind. I'm after a firebrand. Where'd *you* breeze to this afternoon after the flame broke out?"

"International Broadcasting. To make arrangements for another rehearsal studio."

"The show must go on? Your star won't be able to . . ."

"You'll be surprised," Kelsey's eyes were very bright; the color high in his cheeks, "how little the Lownes vocals will be missed. There'll even be those who'll contend it's a better show without her."

"You've kind of a single track mind, yourself." Pedley took the chair away from the door. "I just hope for your sake you haven't been trying to outfox the Fire Department." He went



out into the hall. "Don't arrange for any Havana vacation until your hear from me."

From a phone booth beside the coat-checkroom, he phoned his office:

"Anything on the Wasson chick, Barney?"

"Sure have, boss! Listen—"

"What's her address?"

"Twelve-ten Horatio! The damndest thing—"

"Apartment house?"

"If you'd lemme tell you!" Barney was excited.

"What's eating you?"

"A still alarm come in from there just a few minutes ago!"

Pedley snarled at the transmitter. "From where?"

"Twelve-ten Horatio, boss. There was an explosion of some kind . . ."

Barney was talking to a dead line.

## CHAPTER XIV

THE Greenwich Village street was a welter of noise. Women shrieked. Men yelled incoherently. Teen-age girls, wrapped in blankets, giggled hysterically. Half-clad children scampered screaming from frantic parents.

Policemen bellowed at young boys pressing against the fire lines, at the crowds milling out of nearby houses into driving snow tinted claret from the headlamps. The thunder of the pumpers reverberated across the icy rubble. Water lanced up hoarsely toward the roof of Twelve-ten.

The top of the building was glowing like a brazier seen from beneath. Against the dark line of the cornice, orange flashes illuminated black, oily coils spewing up from below.

The gusts whirled smoke down into the street, blotting out the bedlam, momentarily. A sprinkling of sparks was whipped by the wind from the win-

dows on the top floor; intermittent showers of brick chips and broken glass rattled down on the red hoods of the apparatus.

Below that radiance on the fifth floor, the apartment house was dark, save for firefly flashes of lanterns moving behind the windows of the lower floors. But every window in the adjoining buildings was lighted. Heads were silhouetted against squares of soft yellow, all up and down the block.

Short ladders were in place across the sidewalk. In the middle of the street, Hook Eighty's giant extension ladder was being cranked up toward the top floor.

To the morbidly excited or frightened people on the streets, this was the scene of inexplicable and ominous confusion. But like one of those old slapstick films in which the automobile ran backward and the hat that had been knocked off the fat man's head magically rose from the ground to perch again upon his bald pate, the picture unwound itself backward to Pedley.

Without being conscious of it, his mind retraced in an instant what must have happened before he reached the spot.

The engine company had raced in, gated their hoses to the hydrants. The hosemen had unreeled their lines, started one in the front door at the street level, another up an extension ladder which the first truck company would have slapped up against the building within a few seconds after its arrival. A third line would have been laid in through the alley and up back of the building on the fire escape.

The hook-and-ladder men would have raised their short ladders, helped the tenants to get out. Some of them would have gone up to the roof to ventilate the building. Normally, with a fire starting in the basement or one of



the lower floors, the hot gases and smoke mushroomed right up there under the roof. That's why most people who lost their lives in tenement fires died on the top floors. The fire would spread out horizontally unless a skylight or a bulkhead was opened up to give a draft and clear out the smoke so the pipemen could work their way up from floor to floor, putting the fire out ahead of them as they climbed.

That was the way it was supposed to be done—but sometimes conditions were such that you couldn't go by the book. Pedley could see that this was one of the times. None of the windows on the lower floors had been smashed in; those in the upper apartments were all opened. This blaze must have started on the top floor . . . and it seemed to be spreading *down!*

**R**UBBER-COATED men sloshed in and out of the darkened doorway, carrying axes, Quinlan force bars, wrenches, flashlights. Pedley started in past them. A hose-company lieutenant put a hand on the Marshal's sleeve.

"Can't get up, Ben."

"Stairs going?"

"Whatever it was, blew all to hell and gone. Spilled out into the well, ran down a flight or so. Flames chimneyed right up. Treads are gone."

From the street came a megaphoned roar pitched so as to be heard over the maelstrom:

"DON'T . . . JUMP!"

Pedley jammed his flash up against the row of letter-boxes. There it was . . . *K. Wasson—502.*

He dodged out to the street. The portable searchlight from the Emergency truck was shooting a solid beam of brilliance up through the swirling flakes, spotlighting the end window on the top floor.

Only her head was visible above the sill. But in spite of the smoke and the snow, Pedley could make out the arranger's face clearly.

Beneath her, short ladders were in place up against the building; on them hose-men were passing up loops of canvas into the lower floors. The sidewalk was ridged with ice-jagged drift. Not even the small net would fit into the cramped space on the pavement below her window. If she jumped—that was it!

Kim's shoulders appeared above the sill. One of her hands came out, clutched at the ledge.

From surrounding windows, from the fire lines below, surged a shout:

*"Wait! . . . Wait! . . . Don't jump! . . . don't jump!"*

The eighty-five foot spring ladder inched upward toward her. Kim climbed onto the sill, crouched there. She still wore the vermillion suit; one side of it was black, now.

A whoof of flame puffed out of the smashed window at her back; for a second it seemed as if the girl herself was aflame. But the orange flare was replaced by a gush of smoke.

The crowd quieted. A ladder-man was already halfway up the towering extension, climbing fast.

The tip of the ladder moved toward the sill. A burst of blazing embers cascaded from the room behind her, scattered around her, on her. She screamed, recoiled. The involuntary movement put her off balance. She toppled, her arms flailing wildly.

The ladder touched the sill. The ladder-man locked his knee over a rung, leaned out, pinned her against the wall.

For a long agonizing moment she seemed to be sliding out of the fireman's grasp. But he braced himself, shifted his grip slowly. Then for a split second she dangled over the side—



walk, fifty feet below . . . was swung over to the ladder.

The crashing roar of the crowd was like the breaking of a dam . . .

Smoke enveloped the ladder, obscured the rescuer from the Marshal's view.

The fireman reappeared a dozen rungs lower. The girl was limp over his shoulder, her arms dangled loosely, like a rag doll's.

THE internes were waiting when helping hands lifted her from the ladder-man's shoulders. Pedley was there, too. He needed no more than a single glance at the singed hair, the ugly sheen on the back of her neck and the side of her face. Third-degree burns. Shock. Possibly lung-burn. Not much chance . . .

"What you think, doc? Will a hypo bring her around? Long enough for me to ask her a question?"

The student physician shook his head. She wouldn't be able to talk even if she came out of it."

"She won't pull through?"

"No telling." The interne lifted her into the ambulance. Plasma. Sulfa. Put her in the freezer. I've seen these new methods bring 'em right up out of the coffin."

"Put a listener with her, will you? I'll be over, soon's I'm through here."

"Right."

Pedley consulted with the Deputy Chief who was listening to a walkie-talkie cuddled against his shoulder.

"How's it look, Fred?"

"Quick burner, Ben. Top floors are gone. We can save the lower ones."

"I'm going up."

"You can't, man! That side wall's weakening!"

"All the more reason. I have to get my peek before she goes."

"No reason to expect any funny busi-

ness, is there?"

"Yeah. Ties in with the Brockhurst thing, this afternoon." Pedley swapped his overcoat for a stiff rubber one. "Girl your boys brought down will be one of the witnesses, if she lives."

"All those beams are gone up there on the top floor, Ben. Wall's buckling some, already."

"If she lets go, there goes my evidence, too." Pedley hooked one leg onto the spring ladder. "Any more up there?"

"Only other fifth floor tenant's a printer. Works nights." Deputy Chief had to shout; Pedley was ten rungs above the truck platform.

SPRAY froze on him as it fell from the streams arching overhead. The rungs were sheathed in ice. Smoke blew into his eyes; he might as well have been climbing with his eyes bandaged.

The wind buffeted him, swayed the ladder ominously. He had to pause every few rungs.

There couldn't be much doubt this place had been fire-bugged by the same person who'd touched off the theatre. That would seem to eliminate several prospects. Terry Ross, for one.

The publicity man had been under Shaner's more or less watchful eye all evening. Unless the device for starting this fire had been arranged prior to the Brockhurst blaze, Ross was out.

Amery, too. The lawyer was in no condition to get out of bed. In any event he couldn't have gotten out of that private hospital without being seen.

The setup put Hal Kelsey pretty well in the clear, too—or didn't it? Still, there were a few others who hadn't been under surveillance . . .

He made the shift from ladder to sill in the teeth of a shower of spray, clambered over the sill onto a mound



of reeking laths, glowing pressed-board, mortar, smouldering furniture. Water gurgled and sloshed along the floor. Glass and plaster crunched beneath his boots.

He moved cautiously. In here the beat of the pumps and the hum of the motors were scarcely audible; in their place was the roar of rushing water as bar-rigid streams forced their way through the windows beside him, the hiss of cold water hitting blazing wood and hot metal.

This had been the bedroom. The explosion hadn't occurred in here or the inflammable wouldn't have trickled down the stair well.

He picked his way past a heap of rubbish that had been a boudoir chair, keeping close to the wall where the risers would be less likely to have burned through. The partition into the next room had completely burned away, leaving only a few charred joists.

Pedley could look through into a gutted room filled with enamel that had once been white. The kitchen. By the twisted wreckage of the gas stove, the blast had been there. Maybe there'd been a leak in the feeder pipe; the pilot light would have done the rest.

He crawled over the litter, sniffing. Gas, all right. But not cooking gas. What had gasoline been doing in Kim Wasson's kitchenette?

The blackened remnant of a cardboard box had been wedged down onto the top of the gas stove. It had been a round box, the size that would hold about five pounds of chocolate.

He pried it loose from the hot metal. The imprint of the metal guard which had covered one of the burners was deep in the crisped bottom of the box. Meant the cardboard had been wet. And filled with something heavy enough to press the soaked fibers down onto the burner guard sufficiently to leave

an imprint.

He looked around for the lid, saw something that sent him leaping back toward the partition.

The brickwork of the rear wall bulged out, slowly, away from him—the way a sleeping animal breathes. After a moment of deliberation, the swelling increased.

The bricks opened up as if a child had poked his foot through a pile of blocks.

The floor beneath his feet slanted and fell away.

## CHAPTER XV

HE FLUNG himself as flat on the floor as he could, with the linoleum beneath him sliding away at a fifty degree angle. He felt as if he was dropping through to the basement—but he didn't hit hard, merely slid up against a pile of something soggy that had been an ottoman.

Then a ten-ton truck smacked him in the small of the back, knocked the wind out of him, pinned him face-down against the smoking upholstery.

He fought for breath in air clogged with brick dust, fiercely hot from steam. The pipes had been torn loose somewhere close to him. He'd better get elsewhere in a rush unless he wanted to be parboiled.

He stuffed the crown of his hat beneath his teeth so the wet felt would filter out some of the heat.

He couldn't move forward. It seemed to him that it took hours to twist and wriggle backward so his shoulders were beneath the beam that held him fast. After that it was a matter of straining every last ounce he could summon into heaving the heavy timber up a fraction of an inch at a time, until he could squirm out from under.



Snow beat in at him as he rolled free. A yard away was the edge of nothing. Beyond and beneath were lights from the next block.

He backed away, crawled through a jumble of smashed furniture, splintered wood, piping, wires. Luminous lines of blue raced in waves across the floor ahead of him, crisscrossing in his path.

There was no way to tell which had been doorways and where the walls; he reached a stair-landing before he knew what it was. He went down slowly, a step at a time, listening for the splatter of water in order to duck the force of a stream, if the boys were shooting in here.

At the second floor landing a white-helmeted figure glittering with ice shoved a flashlight in the Marshal's face, barked hoarsely, seized him in a bear hug.

"Godsake, Fred! You don't have to bust—"

"Thought we were going to have to send lilies, sure, that time. You all right?"

"Sure, except you're busting this box I've been hanging onto."

The Deputy Chief turned his flash on the bit of charred cardboard. "What is it?"

"Ancient Navajo fire-making apparatus. Candy box filled with ethyl. Set on top of the gas stove."

"Delayed-action bomb?"

"Yeah. Take a while for the gas to soak through that glazed cardboard enough to make it soft so it would sag open at the seams, let the gas spill out."

"I'll be damned!"

"Give somebody time to get quite a ways away from here before enough vapor collected for the pilot light to ignite it. Only thing—the guy who thought this up evidently expected there'd be enough of a fire to burn up the box here."

THE Deputy Chief swore with accomplished fluency. When he had relieved his feeling he added: "Wouldn't think the girl would have gone to all that trouble to blow up her own place."

"No. You wouldn't. I don't. I think the party who arranged this delayed-action doo-dad wanted the girl to burn up too."

"You know who it is?"

"I know quite a bit about him, Fred. He's an amateur—improvises as he goes along. He's well-fixed with dough, because when he had the chance, he wouldn't touch a roll that would choke a hippo. He's in—or close to—show business." Pedley started down to the street. "Also, he cuts a lot of ice around City Hall."

He left the Deputy Chief puzzled, shaking his head.

Down on the street, he spoke to a police surgeon working over a fireman on the sidewalk.

"Broke his hip," explained the doctor. "Slipped on the stairs."

"Any other casualties?"

"Couple smoke-chokers. You look as if you could stand a little jelly on that ear, yourself, Marshal."

"I'll let 'em treat it at Saint Vincent's." He put the remnant of the candy box in a white-enamelled photographer's tray, tied the lid on, stuck it on the ledge back of the seat in his sedan.

At the hospital he parked by the *Emergency* platform, went along a corridor smelling of ether and antiseptic. The night matron led him to a corner of the woman's ward.

"She hasn't been conscious a second. They keep her going with adrenalin."

"I know. She hasn't a prayer." He stood at the cotside, watching the doctors work over her.

Where the bandages didn't hide it,



Kim's face was putty-gray. Her lips were gray; there was a metallic sheen around her mouth and nose.

One of the medical men spoke without looking up:

"Only a question of time."

"Uh huh. Has she talked?"

"Mumbled a little. Delirium, of course. Nothing the nurse would take down." The doctor nodded toward a probationary standing by the condition-chart, with a notebook.

"I'm going to phone. Be in the booth, down the hall. Call me if you see any chance of an *in extremis*."

**H** E RANG his office.

"You don't have to dig up any more dope on the Wasson kid, Barney. She's through."

"Holy cats! The Horatio Street blaze?"

"That's right. Same bug who sparked the theatre. Same technique."

"What a tough break!"

"He got her because she'd been talking to me."

"Speaking of which, boss, Shaner's been calling in every ten minutes to get hold of you."

"What's his complaint?"

"The Lownes babe. She got away from Maginn."

Pedley swore with conciseness, added: "Where is she now?"

"Well, she's back at the Riveredge, boss. But Mag lost track of her for a while and it took Shaner a little time to retrail her."

"Where'd she go?"

"Took a hack to Twenty-third and Madison, then switched to another that let her out at Christopher and Seventh."

The matron tapped on the glass of the booth door.

"She's going. . . ."

"Said anything?"

"Tryin' to . . ."

Kim's eyes were still closed, but her swollen lips moved tortuously.

The probationer whispered: "While you were out, she said 'Three minutes . . .' and something about a 'curtain.' I couldn't catch it."

"Three minutes to curtain time," Pedley said. "She's not calling it far wrong." He bent over.

Kim's slack lips twitched. ". . . ill."

He could just make it out the second time:

". . . Bill."

Then the thin lips were still.

The doctor sighed: "Did all we could for her, Marshal."

"Not quite. Not yet."

The physician frowned, uncertainly.

Pedley motioned. "See you a minute?"

He and the medical man went out in the hall for a brief consultation. The doctor began by shaking his head, ended by nodding dubiously. . . .

"I can't guarantee anything, Marshal. But I'll do what I can."

"That'll be enough."

"How about yourself? You look as if you ought to pile up in one of our private wards."

"If you feel like putting some tannic salve on this ear, I won't say no."

While the jelly was being applied, the doctor made one more attempt. "What you really need is about fourteen hours of good, sound sleep."

"The raveled sleeve could stand a little knitting. Tell you . . . a couple of benzedrine might pick me up. How about such?"

**H** E TOOK his own medicine in a quart of the blackest coffee the Sheridan Square Wagon could serve up, scanned the morning papers while he ate.

There was plenty about the theatre



fire. None of it was new except some slants on Ned Lownes:

*"One of Broadway's most popular citizens."*

*"Greatest eccentric dancer of his time."*

*"Leading theatrical manager."*

Pedley detected the fine hand of Terence Ross in the phrasings.

And there was one line that made the Marshal smile wryly over his coffee-cup:

*"Miss Lownes, the incomparable Leila of stage, screen and radio, is prostrated at her East River residence over the untimely death of her brother."*

He wondered how she'd feel about Kim Wasson.

There hadn't been any brotherly love lost between Leila and her brother. But Kim had been close to the singer, had been a friend of Bill's.

Conover had been pretty cheerful about Ned's passing. What happened to the Wasson girl might affect him differently. Still, the Lieutenant had seen a lot of killing, close up and not so long ago; maybe death didn't disturb him very much.

In that case, it might be a good idea to take precautions. But quick. . . .

## CHAPTER XVI

THE snow was falling faster at Sheepshead Bay—and it was deeper. The wind sliced in off the Channel like a rip saw. False dawn was just beginning to gray the east. It was bitter cold.

The rows of canvas-shrouded hulls on the ways were piled yard-high with sugar-frosting. A few wore no winter covers, but it was hard to distinguish them from the others. Only a few had

a sheathing of thin boards; of these but two were reasonably free of the caked covering.

One bore the name *Judy C.* in heavy letters across her transom. The Marshal passed her up; Conover might not be the kind of waterman who insisted on naming his craft after his girl, but he'd hardly own a boat bearing the name of another.

Smoke plumed up from the Charley Noble of the second choice, anyway. Now that he plowed nearer along the hard-packed path through the shipyard, Pedley saw that the portholes of the *Voyageur* emitted a faint light. There was someone aboard.

The someone was singing. Pedley didn't recognize the tune or the language, probably something the Lieutenant had picked up over in the Islands. There was no mistaking the voice.

Against the starboard side of the thirty-eight footer stood a short, home-made ladder. Pedley went up it quietly, pushed aside the canvas wind-break which served as vestibule door, stepped softly onto the deck.

The deck-house was empty and dark. What illumination there was came from the forward companionway. Pedley made no noise opening the deck-house door . . . or closing it. The draft an open door could make in weather like this would be fairly noticeable.

The smell of bacon came up the companionway, along with the liquid melody of the South Seas.

Pedley went below.

Conover didn't hear him. He stood with his back to the companionway, forking strips of golden brown onto a plate.

"Morning, Lieutenant."

The younger man dropped fork and frying-pan, whirled on the balls of his toes, ducked into a semi-crouch, reached for the back of his neck, recog-



nized the Marshal, froze.

"Used to a collar sheath?" Pedley came down to the galley, leaned against the door to the motor compartment. "Got a knife cached back there? Or was that just habit? Takes a while to forget a routine that's been hammered into you. Took me five years to forget I didn't have to jump down a brass pole every time I heard a gong ring somewhere."

Conover straightened up, brought his hand away from the neckband of his sweater.

"And I was expecting you to drop in on me, too." He grinned, dourly. "I didn't hear a thing. You must have had one of those commando courses."

"You were making too much noise yourself." Pedley looked around. A good serviceable cruiser; nothing fancy but nothing lacking. White paint instead of varnish work; an iron shipmate in place of the usual compressed gas cookstove.

But the dish rack was grimy; there was no signs of food anywhere except what the Lieutenant had on the stove. No coffee. No butter. A new loaf of bread with only two slices gone.

It didn't look as though the *Voyageur* had been lived on much, now he came to analyze it. No ash-trays around. No clothes hanging up.

"Do your own cooking here, most of the time, Conover?"

THE Lieutenant drained a piece of bacon, dropped it onto the plate. "What's it to you?"

"I'm interested in cooking. It's my line, you might say. For instance, you've got too much draft through your stove. Guess you haven't had time to adjust it. Takes a few days."

"What if I haven't been holing up here right along?"

"You said you were living out here.

I didn't think you were."

"What did you think?"

"That you were staying in town."

Conover shoved the frying-pan to the side lids. "I suppose you know where, too!"

"The Riveredge, for first choice."

The Lieutenant's left shoulder dropped, his left arm went back pugnaciously. Then he laughed. "I ought to toss you out on your can, for that."

"I don't toss easy, Lieutenant. I don't say you couldn't do it. But you'd be apt to get banged up. And for what? To protect the fair lady's name? You aren't so wet behind the ears you think you're the first male who's had breakfast with the dame!"

"All right now! That's it!" Conover stepped forward with his left foot, bent his head a little; the movement had the effect of sinking his chin behind his left shoulder.

Pedley didn't alter his own position, though he recognized the professional slugger's stance.

"You shouldn't expect to stake out a keep-off-the-grass notice on a seductive sal like Leila."

"I'm going to beat the living bejeesis out of you. No one can talk that way about my wife!"

Pedley lifted his hand in the traffic cop's gesture. "What's this about the bonds of holy matrimony?"

"Goddamn your soul!" The Lieutenant trembled. "I gave her my word of honor I wouldn't tell anyone . . . and here you chivvy it out of me. Well, it's a fact. We're married. *Been* married, over a month."

"I'd never doubt the word of an officer and a gentleman. But why's Leila want to keep it under cover?"

"She doesn't, any longer."

"Um. Brother Ned was the flea in the ointment?"

"Who else?"



"Put it in words of one syllable."

"Ned claimed it would hurt her at this stage of her development. He wanted to get her next option taken up or a new contract signed or whatever."

"No savvy. Wedding chimes don't hurt the flicker stars. Some of 'em have been married and de-married three or four times. Sometimes I think they do it just to hit the front pages."

Conover scowled darkly. "Suggesting I wed up with Leila because she's a celebrity?"

"Cool down. All I meant was, it doesn't seem a very solid reason for holding your honeymoon in a dimout. Must have been something else."

THE Lieutenant returned to his bacon. "There was. Ned had the Indian sign on Li."

"He was holding something over her head."

"That," Conover said drily, "is the logical supposition."

"Something more than photos of the female form divine."

"I don't know what it was."

Pedley watched him pour a batter of eggs into the frying-pan. "Must have been important enough to ready Lownes for a shroud. To charcoal grill Kim Wasson within an inch of her life."

The fork clattered on the stove lids. The frying-pan slid against the guard rail. Conover didn't turn around, just stood stock-still, his back to the Marshal.

"Kim? When?"

"Few hours ago. In addition to sending La Wasson to the Emergency Ward, the blaze put a good ladder-man in the hospital and cost the City of New York fifty thousand bucks or so to put the fire out. To say nothing of another fifty the insurance companies will have to pay on the building. Adds up, you see."

"How do you know it was set by the same person who started the other fire?"

Pedley held up a finger. "Your arranger pal was scared out of her scanties that someone *would* get to her." He put up a second finger. "The fire was set in her three-room-and-bath down in the Village." A third digit straightened. "Method was about the same in both cases. Made to look like an accident. Rigged up to give the firebug a chance to be long gone from those parts before the alarm went in."

The Lieutenant turned around. His face was drawn and tense; there was the same wild light in his eyes Pedley had seen during the piano-pounding scene at Leila's.

"If you knew this, why'd you mush out here to check up on me?"

"I know more than that. Among other things, that Miss Lownes—pardon—Mrs. Conover left the Riveredge about three-quarters of an hour before the fire started in Kim Wasson's kitchenette; didn't return until twenty minutes after the alarm went in."

THE eggs began to smoke; Conover ignored them, clenched his left fist and began to pound the motor-room bulkhead gently.

"She went down to Sheridan Square. Case you're not familiar with the Village, that's not too far from where Kim Wasson lived." Pedley reached over, took the pan off the stove. "That isn't all we've got. But it'll do for a starter."

"What would you say," Conover kept on with the tattoo against the bulkhead but his tone was almost placid, "if I told you Leila came downtown to meet me; to get me to go back to her apartment for the night?"

"I'd say you were lying like a trooper to give your wife an out. Very natural thing to do. Very dumb."



"Suppose I admitted I'd been up in Li's dressing-room when she and Chuck brought Ned up there this afternoon."

"Simple way to dispose of that. We'll drop in and ask her to sign an affidavit to that effect."

Conover shook his head. "I wouldn't want to do that."

"Hell of a lot of difference it'll make. Douse the stove. No telling when you'll be back."

Indecision was stamped on Conover's face. Clearly he was debating whether he should risk a rough-and-tumble? In close quarters here, he might be able to put the Marshal away.

Pedley cast the deciding six votes:

"I know. You've been trained to take a guy with a gun, Lieutenant. But don't try judo on me. I'll wing you so you won't be much of a husband for a while."

They went up the companionway and down the ladder, slogged through the shipyard. Conover appeared to have given up the idea of a break.

At the sedan, The Marshal opened the door on the driver's side.

"Get in the saddle."

"You want me at the wheel?"

"Otherwise I'd have to cuff you. Better this way." He went around the sedan, got in the other side. "And don't get the notion your hand is quicker than my eye."

Conover was a good driver. He made speed back toward the Bridge. A little too much on the icy curves.

Pedley cautioned him:

"You don't have to bear down on that gas every second!"

With an angry jut of his jaw, Conover jammed on the brakes.

The car slurred, skidded in a slow semicircle at fifty.

It hit the ditch sideways, did a lopsided somersault and crashed into a telegraph pole with a bang that could

have been heard all the way to Harlem.

## CHAPTER XVII

PEDLEY got his elbows up in time to cover his face. The door at his side flew open. The violence of the shock threw him free of the car, into a stone wall.

The cushion of snow helped some, but it was half a minute before he made it to his feet, hobbled to the smashed sedan. Conover was nowhere in sight.

There were plenty of spots to cover which the Lieutenant could have reached in that thirty seconds. Rows of drift-banked billboards, a hedge on the other side of the road, a couple of metal garages less than a hundred yards away. In this gray light it would be useless to search; the man could move faster than the Marshal could, in *his* present condition.

He felt of his thigh. It wasn't broken; might be black and blue for a year or two, but he could use it.

That was more than he'd be able to do with the sedan. The front axle formed a V with the rear one; the steering post canted to one side; the windshield looked as if had been run through a rock-crusher.

But the dashboard was intact; by some miracle the two-way set still seemed to work. He waited anxiously until the tubes warmed up, was relieved to hear the WNYF dispatcher's "Go Ahead."

Pedley put in an all-State alarm for Lieutenant William Conover, with complete description. He asked the dispatcher to call his office and relay back reports from Shaner and Barney. Then he asked the Battalion chief in the nearest Borough division for the loan of a car, shut off the set and got out and walked while he waited. No sense in getting any stiffer than he was.



Conover's escape complicated matters a good deal, but the Lieutenant hadn't promised to clear up the principal problem anyhow. That, Pedley informed himself bleakly, was a Florentine box about which nobody seemed to know anything, though a number of people were greatly concerned about it.

Ned Lownes had had it; it was a fair assumption that his having it—or maybe his losing it—was responsible for his murder.

Chuck Gaydel had been looking for it, but hadn't found it—because some mysterious visitor had evidently abstracted it prior to the producer's visit to Ned's hotel room.

Wes Toleman hadn't been queried on the question, but it was possible the announcer had been looking for the leather case, instead of a gold pencil, when he'd come up to the dressing-room after the fire.

Kim Wasson had known something about Leila's past which might be the same secret presumably hidden in the missing box. She'd intimated that the knowledge might have had something to do with Ned's death; the Marshal thought it likely it had been the cause of her own.

Hal Kelsey had claimed he had the case—and then denied it. At least he guessed the thing's importance—and might have tried to get it, after Pedley left the Roof.

And Terry Ross . . . Ross had known about the thing, but had kept the knowledge from Pedley, even under considerable pressure. He'd tried to get it from the orchestra leader—to the extent of offering a price for it. Whether Ross had been making that offer on his own—or for Leila—it was necessary to know that. And since the publicity man knew the value of the leather box, it was reasonable to suppose he had a pretty good idea what was in it. Mr.

Ross was a man to put on the carpet and without delay.

THE car that arrived to pick him up presently dropped him at the Olympiad Athletic Club; the probationer who drove handed over the keys.

"She's yours, Marshal. The Chief has a spare he can use until you return this jeep."

Pedley said, "Thanks much," went into the huge lobby.

At the desk he held a *sotto voce* discussion with an assistant manager who was sufficiently awed to produce a pass key.

Upstairs the Marshal unlocked the door of 67, picked up the morning newspaper tucked inside the sill, switched on the lights.

Terry Ross pulled the sheet up over his eyes, mumbled:

"Go 'way."

Then he did a double take, jerking the sheet down off his face, sitting up gawk-eyed. He moaned:

"Are *you* in again?"

"Tut, tut." Pedley dropped into a modern chair that brought his knees up on a level with his eyes. "Didn't actually think I'd been pulled off the case, did you?"

Ross loosened the neckband of his red-and-white striped pajamas, propped himself up on one elbow, ran fast fingers through his mat of curly hair:

"What you want, waking me up in the middle of the night?"

"The seven o'clock just blew. Let us then be up and doing." He tossed the newspaper onto the bed. "All the news that's print to fit. Story on page one. Third column."

Ross grabbed the paper; the garboyle features became a caricature of consternation.

"It says," he had difficulty speaking, "Kim's on the critical list. Is she going



to—?”

“Live? Long enough to tell us what she knows, I imagine. Get up. Put your clothes on. Unless you want to go downtown looking like a barber pole.”

“Downtown?”

“Pokey. The sneezer. The clink. May not have all the comforts of this place, but the board is free.”

ROSS rolled out of bed. “I’ll give you any odds you care to name that you can’t arrest me and keep me in jail twelve hours.”

“When you’re working for the city, you learn not to take bets, fella. Sometimes they turn out to be bribes. Anyhow, I’m not going to arrest you. I’m going to detain you. As a material witness. You shouldn’t beef. It’s for your own protection.”

“I had some of your protection last night. My stomach’s still sore.”

“You think you can take care of yourself. That’s what Kim Wasson thought. I’m here to tell you: all of you people who’re in the know on this Lownes business are in danger of making the obit column. Unless you spill what you know.”

Ross went into the shower. “I told you what I know.”

“In a pig’s eye! You were hep to her boy-friend, Lieutenant Conover. I don’t recall you mentioned him.” Pedley reached for the phone: “Room service, please . . . Two pots of coffee, to sixty-seven. Better make it three. Mr. Ross, yes.” He hung up, grinned at the dripping face the publicity man poked around the bathroom door. “Thing that really rubs me wrong, you failed to report on the bone of contention you and Kelsey are battling over. The radio show.”

“What have those things to do with the fire . . . fires?”

Pedley gazed down at the cater-

pillars of traffic crawling southward out of Central Park. “I’m not one of these geniuses who can lean back with a pipeful of hashhish and dream up the answers. But Lownes was incinerated because he had some peculiar hold on his sister. You said yourself he knew where the body was hidden. His sword of Damocles seems to have been that leather case, or what’s in it.”

Ross interrupted his shaving to say: “Photos. Indiscreet, from what Leila says. Possibly worse than that.”

“That’s the bunkola. Only thing that would hurt her to any extent is something that could be published. If there were pictures and they were indelicate, they couldn’t be published. Conclusion: something besides glossy prints in the Florentine case.”

“How do you dope out these things?”

“With mirrors. Take another trip through the looking-glass with me. I see an arsonist who faces a fifteen-thousand volt hotfoot up at Sing-Sing. He’s so afraid of it, he touches off a second blaze to keep Kim Wasson from telling what she knows. And sure as hellfire, he’s not going to stop there. He might as well be electrocuted for a sheep as a lamb. Which is the same as a death warrant for anyone else who may be able to point the finger his way. Including especially you.”

THE waiter came. Pedley signed the check with Ross’s name, laid a half dollar on the tray, helped himself to a cup.

Ross came out in batik shorts and a burgundy shirt with collar points that reached halfway to his belt. “Why me? I’m simply a guy trying to make a clean dollar. I keep my nose strictly out of affairs which don’t concern me.”

“You’re working for La Lownes. Even if you’re not wise to whatever it is in her past that needs hiding, you’re



more'n likely to know the party who's willing to burn down the town to prevent her secret from being made public."

"I never heard a breath of scandal about her."

"Wouldn't be scandal. You'd know how to cover that. Or tone it down. Or even build it up, make capital of it. My weegee board says it has to be something more serious than a breach-of-promise. Say, something illegal."

"Not for all the dough in Morgan's. I'd have had wind of anything like that, positively."

"You see? Just claiming you'd know puts you in a position where you'd do well to consider the merits of a steel casket as compared to soft pine, Climb into your pants."

"Give me time to make a call."

"To your lawyer? Sure. Amery was signed out of the hospital at six-fifteen. About three-quarters of an hour ago."

"You keep close tabs on folks you're interested in, don't you?"

"Only way. By now, your barrister is probably out at his Long Island place, sleeping off a dose of bromides. The number's Great Neck 72414."

Ross used the phone for a while, said: "Yes?" and "No!" a few times, hung up.

"Shows what a miraculous system you have for checking up on people. Paul isn't there."

"We can't be right all the time. Where is he?"

"Left for his office. Only stayed home long enough to change his clothes. He had a hurry-up call."

"From?"

"Staro. Ned's bodyguard."

"I've been wondering where that lad was."

"He's at Amery's office. In the Tower building." Ross tied his necktie

hastily. "Mrs. Amery said there was trouble of some sort."

"Forgive her for understating. Grab your hat."

## CHAPTER XVIII

A TRIM secretary with a sleek, sat-in blonde bun on the nape of her neck smiled mechanically over the law journal she was marking.

Mr. Amery's not in yet. Oh! Good morning, Mr. Ross."

"It's lousy, Miss Bernard." Ross nodded. "Mind if we wait in the sanctum sanctorum?"

"Not at all." She opened a heavy paneled door to the inner office. It didn't look like a lawyer's place of business to Pedley.

There were no bookshelves in brown-backed tomes. Instead, the walls were covered with framed photographs of theatrical celebrities. Authographed "*To my bosom, pal,*" "*Smuch love, Paul,*" "*A friend in need indeed,*"—and all the other cliches.

The near-great and once-great of Broadway were here. Pedley knew most of the famous faces that looked down on what might have been a pleasant study in a private home. He turned to the secretary.

"We expected to run into another gentleman who has an appointment, miss."

"There hasn't been anyone." She looked blank, examined the memo pad on the enormous mahogany flat-top. "Mr. Amery has no appointment until eleven. He shouldn't come in at all, after that terrible experience yesterday."

Ross took the chair beside the desk. "They let him out of the hospital this morning."

"Yes. But the doctor said he really should have a nurse around for a while;



he's in no shape to go out."

"I can testify," Amery came through the door abruptly, "that the doctor was right. I feel like ice breaking up in the Hudson."

He certainly didn't look good, Pedley thought. Strips of plaster held a wad of cotton in place along the lawyer's jaw; a wide band of gauze served him in place of a collar. His eyes were rabbit-pink from the smoke; his skin was the shade of mildewed canvas. The wheeze was still in his voice:

"Get the Lownes files for me, Miss Bernard. Everything but the transfers. Morning, Terry." Amery noticed the Marshal, scowled. He took off his balmacaan. "I promised my physician I'd avoid excitement." He sat down heavily at the big desk. "That was before I knew you were going to be here, sir."

Pedley said bleakly: "I can't take time out to be sorry every time somebody has a coughing spell. But I'll try not to be too great a strain on your constitution."

The lawyer gestured in deprecation. "Let's not start with a misunderstanding. I don't want any consideration on my account. I shouldn't have come at all, today, if I'd consulted my own preferences."

"So what? You came here to meet this ex-bodyguard of Ned Lownes. Staro's a client of yours, isn't he?"

"Indeed not!" The lawyer's chin lifted resentfully. "I wouldn't represent that hoodlum for any fee you care to name."

"Put it the other way then," the Marshal retorted. "He wanted to consult you. Why?"

"You still haven't got it quite right." Amery extracted a pink capsule from a small round box, popped it into his mouth, poured a glass of water from the thermos set at his elbow, washed the

pill down. "Staro telephoned me at my home. Claims to have information about a leather case that had been Ned's property. Apparently there's been some trouble about it."

"What's this private convoy know about it?"

THE attorney didn't answer immediately. He swiveled around in his chair, stared out the window with pursed lips. Finally he swung back to face Pedley. "I don't see any good reason why I shouldn't tell you. We're both working toward the same end, I assume."

The Marshal was non-committal. "I'm after the person who set a couple of fires, myself."

"I'm interested in clearing Miss Lownes from any suspicion of connection with those fires. Amounts to the same thing." The lawyer made his recital brief. Some time previously, according to Staro, Lownes had ordered his hired hand to take possession of the Florentine case in the event of a sudden fatality to his employer. The case was to be turned over to Amery. When the bodyguard heard about the theatre fire, he hurried to Lownes' hotel room, searched for the case but couldn't find it.

However, Staro knew what was in the leather box and was prepared to tell the lawyer . . . for a consideration. What this consideration was, or how much, hadn't been discussed in their phone conversation.

Pedley digested the information. "You expect the dope he has for sale is damaging to Miss Lownes?"

"I'll admit nothing of the sort." Amery was cautious, rather than indignant. "I'm merely acting as my client's agent in a matter which is extremely distasteful to her. She has authorized me to use my best judgment to



get back this case, which she contends is lawfully her property."

"Can she prove it's hers?"

"She . . . um . . . she tells me the contents of the case are ample evidence it belongs to her."

Ross cut in: "Why play guessing games? When Staro gets here, we'll know what's in it. Then maybe this dumb gum-shoe will let me go about my business."

The lawyer was startled. "You've put Terry under arrest, sir?"

"He says he's protecting me," Ross said.

"I'm detaining you," Pedley answered, "as material witness."

"You can do that, of course." The attorney sighed wearily. "But we can probably work out a better way to give you what you want."

"I'll tell you what I want." Pedley roamed around the office, restlessly, looking at the photographs. "I want Ross to sign a waiver of immunity for his Grand Jury appearance and—"

"I don't mind signing a waiver!" the publicity man shouted. "Why should I mind? I'm not guilty of anything!"

Amery gestured irritably. "If you don't mind, Terry, let me do the talking. I can't allow a client of mine to be bulldozed into testifying."

Pedley sat on the lawyer's desk. "I might make a deal."

"Willingness to deal," the attorney was wary, "implies my client has something to lose by not making it."

"Sure he has something to lose. Time. His freedom. I can take him downtown and lock him up. But I'll settle for the Grand Jury appearance on your recognizance . . . if he'll tell me what strings he pulled to get the Headquarters Squad interested in Lownes' demise."

to the Olympiad, Barney had relayed him the Fire Commissioner's urgent insistence on a conference immediately after lunch on the subject of the B.F.I. report. The party who'd brought influence to bear on the police would be the same one who'd convinced the Commissioner it would be politic to pull the Marshal off the Lownes case.

Amery began to make arrangements of paper clips on his blotter. "That's an offer I'd accept, Terry. The Marshal can get that information sooner or later from other sources, anyway. Your going to higher authority isn't incriminating; on the contrary. You'll have to go before the blue ribbon panel in any event, but it'll be simpler if you don't have to do it under duress."

Ross sneered. "I told you you'd bring influence to bear, Marshal. All I had to do was tip off Gaydel that you were set on ruining his star's rep. He turned the International Broadcasting bigwigs loose on the mayor."

Pedley considered. "So that was the ticket! The power of the loudspeaker. The mayor needs plenty of free time on the air in the next campaign. Well, it hasn't worked. Yet. But it certainly might."

Amery flipped a hand in annoyance. "Let's not get off at cross-purposes. It appears Terry overstepped himself out of zealotness to protect Miss Lownes' interest. We'll grant that was a mistake. But you'd be making an equal error, Marshal, if you fail to appreciate that Ross and Miss Lownes and I are quite as anxious as you are to put this firebug behind bars." The lawyer pushed the paper clips together in a heap. "We'll do whatever we can to help you convict this incendiary. I don't know what headway you've made, but—"

He stopped. The secretary in the outer office was screaming!

Pedley took three strides, yanked at

HE THOUGHT it unnecessary to mention that just before he'd gone



the doorknob.

MISS BERNARD was on her knees by the files. She bent over one of the lower drawers as if to hide. Her eyes were riveted on the door into the corridor. Pedley followed her glance.

The door was open a little. Through the foot-wide aperture there was a glint of blue metal. Pedley's reflexes worked at top speed. He ducked, dragged his own gun from the holster, switched off the lights in the inner office in three smoothly coordinated movements.

With the click of the switch came the shot. The orange panel of flame pointed at the door of the private office. Before the glass had stopped tinkling, Pedley stuck his own arm out, blasted at the segment of dark corridor twenty feet away.

The secretary squealed "E-e-e-e-ee!" Ross cursed hoarsely, flattened himself against the wall.

The Marshal crossed the outer office, kicked open the door. The corridor was empty, except for Amery, peering nervously around the jamb of the door leading from his private office into the hall. Then a couple of doors opened down toward the elevators; girls peered out cautiously.

"Ran down . . ." the lawyer pointed to the stair-well.

"Who was it?" Pedley had no intention of conducting a man-hunt through the twenty-eight floors of the Tower Building.

"I couldn't see him clearly." The lawyer was shaking; he clung to the door for support.

"Staro?"

"No." Amery looked hard at Terry Ross, who came timidly out into the corridor. "Staro's not that tall. He's not tanned like this . . . gunman."

Ross babbled: "He tried to kill you,

Paul!"

"He wasn't shooting blanks, that's sure." Pedley went back into the office, snatched the phone:

"Police . . . Emergency." While he waited for the connection, he asked: "What'll I give 'em for a description?"

Amery spoke reluctantly. "I was going to say he was about the size and build of Bill Conover—but that would be ridiculous. I *know* it wasn't Conover."

## CHAPTER XIX

THE bullet had gone through a picture of the Buckaroos, bisecting a ten-gallon hat and drilling a half-inch hole in the paneled oak.

"Forty-five," Pedley said. It was the kind of gun an ex-officer would be expected to posses, all right. "Didn't you get a peek at him, Miss Bernard?"

"No." She was breathless. "I heard the door open and looked up and there was this arm sticking in from the hall with the biggest pistol I ever saw. The man didn't come in and he didn't say anything and of course I couldn't so much as speak. Then I guess I did scream and you came in . . ." She sat down, her knees weak.

Amery dabbed with his handkerchief at beads of perspiration on his forehead. "I'll have to ask for police protection until he's caught."

"There's been an alarm out for Conover since early this morning." Pedley stood in the corridor door to reassure the secretary. "If it was the Lieutenant, he hasn't had time to get out of the building. They'll get him." He had a few reservations about it but he kept them to himself.

When the radio patrol came up on the elevator, he told them he'd seen a hand and a gun, nothing more. He couldn't identify the hand but if they



located the gun they could check it against the bullet in the panel over Paul Amery's desk.

The lawyer wanted to call Leila. But the sergeant from the patrol car vetoed that in favor of a personal call by the uniformed force to see if Conover had headed toward the apartment.

Pedley didn't offer an opinion on that, either. The one point on which he expressed himself forcibly was Staro.

"If it wasn't Staro who did this gun-work—and the light's so bad in the hall that I wouldn't rule him out—in any case you're not going to see him here in your office, Amery."

"Of course not," the lawyer agreed. "If he came into the building now and saw a cordon of officers down in the lobby, he certainly wouldn't try to come up to the office. I don't know a great deal about his background but I'm sure he's had some uncomfortable moments in the company of policemen."

"Doesn't anybody know where this Staro hangs out?"

Ross said: "He did live with Ned. Slept on the divan in the living-room."

"What's he look like?"

"He's Italian. But doesn't look like one, exactly." The press agent held out his hands to indicate. "Heavy-built. About my height. Black hair, can't remember what color his eyes are, guess you'd call his complexion florid. Wears flashy suits and neon neckties."

"And the Little Boy Blues haven't been able to pick up a traveling trademark like that!" Pedley went to Amery's desk, wrote Worth 4200 on the pad. "Phone me or leave a message at this number when you get in touch with the guy, hah?"

Amery said the next time he got in touch with anybody, it would be with a plainclothesman at his elbow.

"That's smart." The Marshal was

emphatic. "If the bally-hoo boy here has any sense," he turned to Ross, "he'll ask headquarters for a plain-clothes pal, for the next couple of days, too. This firebug plays for keeps . . . and I don't think he's played out his string yet."

**PEDLEY** departed before the dragnet really got underway; it would take a couple of hours to comb the building and he wanted a little time to think things out before he had that conference with the Commissioner.

He went to his favorite spot for secluded cerebration—the Bosphorus Baths, half a block from the Penn Station. The owner was a pensioned pilot who had been on Engine Nine when Pedley polished his first Maltese Cross.

The Marshal had the run of the establishment; at this time of day there wouldn't be many patrons to disturb his contemplations.

There were only two; both departed before the Marshal had been in the steam room fifteen minutes. Only one arrived while Pedley was there, a bald-headed, barrel-chested individual with grotesquely bowed legs and, apparently, a hangover.

Pedley wrapped himself in a towel like a Roman of old, let the steam soak into his dog-tired muscles and put his mind to work on the problem: who was next in line for the firebug's lethal attentions?

It seemed to be beyond question that the glow worm would strike again. The score to date was a pretty good indication of that. In the Brockhurst blaze, Lownes killed, his sister and his lawyer escaped with injuries. At Greenwich Village, Kim Wasson eliminated, one fireman seriously hurt. At Amery's office, an outright attempt at assassination. It would be feeble-minded to as-

*(Continued on page 116)*





"See that scar? Well, he's got one on his forehead—about the same size"



# AT LAST I'VE FOUND YOU

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

**There could be no happiness for Gray until he found the man who had taken from him the one thing that had never been lost**

WHEN the minute hand of the big clock registered one minute past five o'clock, Frank Gray removed his paper cuffs, got his hat and coat, and walked out of the tiny cage where he worked as a bookkeeper.

He always waited until one minute past quitting time before he left the office.

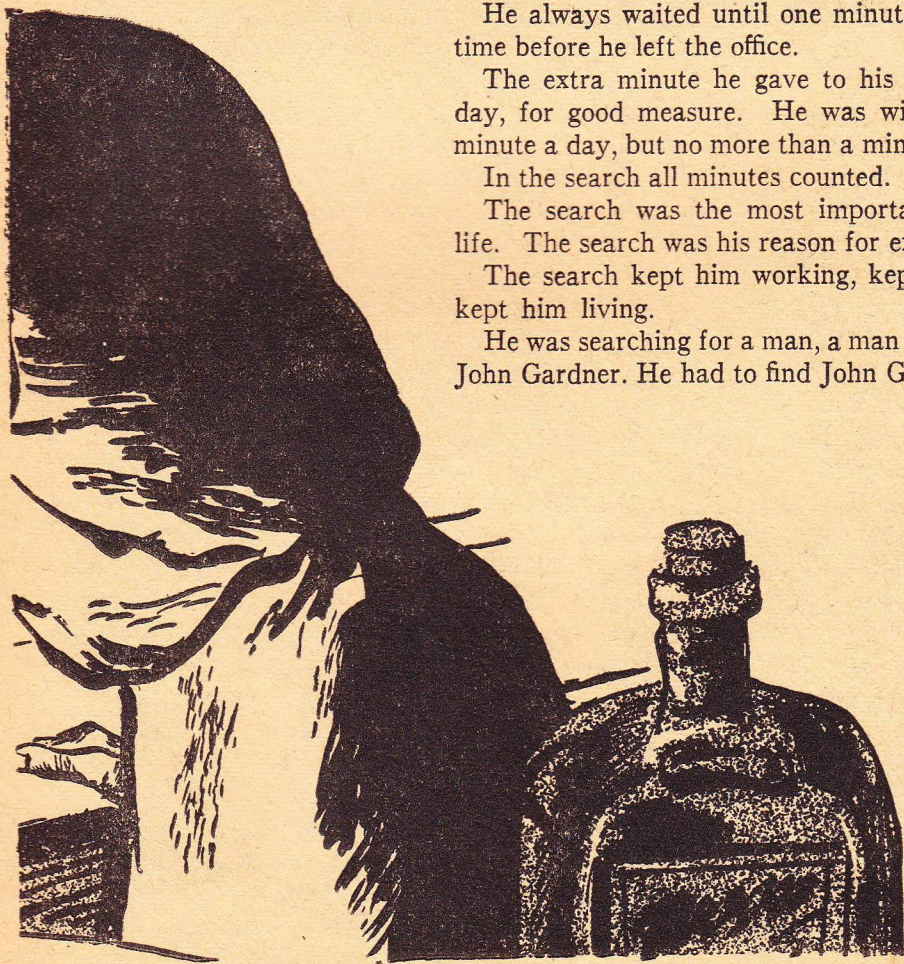
The extra minute he gave to his employer each day, for good measure. He was willing to lose a minute a day, but no more than a minute.

In the search all minutes counted.

The search was the most important fact in his life. The search was his reason for existence.

The search kept him working, kept him moving, kept him living.

He was searching for a man, a man by the name of John Gardner. He had to find John Gardner, had to.





*had to!*

Tonight as he walked from the office, he was more bent over than usual. And his back hurt. "I'm getting old," he thought.

The thought spurred him to move faster. He musn't get old. He musn't let himself get old.

If he got old, he might not be able to find John Gardner.

He *had* to find Gardner.

The pressure of the urge to find Gardner made him hurry faster than usual, made him rush through dinner, with the result that he was on Times Square a full fifteen minutes earlier than usual. It wasn't yet seven o'clock on Times Square. But the lights were on. All of them were on.

They blazed in the sky, a riot of changing color and shifting scenes, along Broadway, along the Great White Way, along this street of broken dreams and broken hearts.

Somewhere, within sight of these lights, John Gardner was hiding.

At the thought of Gardner, Gray's face, white from lack of the midday sun, darkened with anger.

Gardner had ruined him. Gardner had wrecked his life. His family was destitute, his family lived in shame, because of what Gardner had done.

He had to find Gardner.

He plunged into the crowds on Times Square, searching for Gardner.

The crowds made the search so difficult. There were *so* many people here. Gardner could hide among all these people until doomsday. That was why Gardner was hiding here.

"I'll find him, though," Frank Gray said to himself. "Maybe tonight I'll find him."

The thought was comforting.

He watched the face of every man he met. There were *so* many people. They stepped on his toes, jabbed their

elbows into him, pushed him around. He watched them, his eyes going eagerly from face to face. He didn't see the man he wanted.

HE WENT up the side streets, walking from Broadway to Sixth Avenue and back, covering each side of every street. Gardner might be anywhere around here. He might be living in any of these hotels, in any of these cheap rooming houses.

He went into the saloons, into the little bars.

The bartenders all knew him.

"Hi ya, Pop," the bartenders would say. "No, I haven't seen him since the last time you were in here. Yes, I'll keep looking. No, Pop, I haven't seen him," the bartenders would say, shaking their heads.

"He might be using another name," Gray would timidly say. "Perhaps I had better describe him to you, so you will know him if you see him."

"Okay, Pop. Describe him. What does he look like?"

He would describe John Gardner.

"He's forty-seven. He weighs about a hundred and fifty pounds and he has a little white scar on his forehead about the same size as the scar I have."

He would point to the tiny scar on his own forehead.

"You will know him by the scar. You will watch out for him, won't you?"

And the bartenders, those hard-hearted Broadway bartenders, would faithfully promise to watch out for John Gardner.

That was the way it had been during the three years Frank Gray had searched for Gardner.

Tonight it was different.

The first saloon he entered, the bartender beckoned to him.

He hurried eagerly forward. Perhaps the bartender had found Gardner!



"Have you seen him?" he eagerly questioned.

The bartender shook his head. "No, I haven't seen him, but somebody else was just in here looking for him."

Somebody else was looking for Gardner too! The thought jarred him.

"She described him just like you always describe him," the bartender continued. "Middle-aged, a little scar on his forehead—"

"*She?*" Frank Gray repeated the single word. "Was it a woman?"

"Yep," the bartender answered. "A good-lookin' bit of fluff."

"Ah," Gray thought about this. "Gardner had a daughter," he said slowly. "I wonder if his daughter is meeting him here?"

"I don't think she's meeting him," the bartender said. "I think she's looking for him, the same as you are."

"Looking for him?"

The bartender nodded vigorously. "That's the idea I got. So I thought, since you were both looking for the same man, you might get together and help each other out. She's right over there at that table. No, she's not either. She's coming up to the bar."

Frank Gray turned. A girl was coming toward him. She was looking straight at him.

For an instant, he thought he knew her. Then he didn't know her. His lack of recognition showed in his eyes. The girl looked at him. Her face was white with suppressed emotion.

For a minute, he thought she was going to speak to him. But she spoke to the bartender instead.

"Is this the man who was looking for John Gardner?" she asked.

"That's him, miss," the bartender said.

The girl turned to Gray. Her eyes were blue, he saw, like sunny skies. She held out her hand.

"Hello," she said.

HE TOOK her hand. He could feel it tremble in his grasp. Why, this girl was frightened!

He straightened his shoulders. He wanted to help this girl. "My dear," he said.

"Shall we sit down?" she said.

"Certainly. Certainly. I want to talk to you." He escorted her back to the table, held the chair for her as she sat down.

"And now, my dear," he said, when they were seated. "Why are you looking for John Gardner?"

Her face was white with strain.

"I might ask you the same question?" she answered.

"Why—" He thought about this, and his voice grew strong.

"Gardner is a thief," he said. "He stole money, took funds that did not belong to him. He betrayed a position of trust, and ruined himself. He made his family suffer. That's why I have to find him. I have to make him return the money he stole."

For a minute, the girl didn't speak. She took a cigarette from her purse, lighted it with suddenly trembling fingers.

"No," she said. "You're mistaken. Perhaps I know John Gardner better than you do. He isn't a thief. He is a very fine person, respected in his community, loved by his family. He is not a thief."

Gray could hardly believe his ears. This girl, whoever she was, did not know the facts.

"You must be wrong, miss," he said. "There was a large sum of money missing—"

"The money was missing all right," the girl interrupted. "And Gardner was accused of stealing it. But Gardner didn't steal the money."



"He didn't?"

"No."

Gray was a little dazed. "How do you know Gardner didn't steal the money?" he questioned.

"Because the real thief has been found and has confessed," she answered.

This was startling news. Startling indeed! It caused something to turn over in Gray's mind.

He looked at the girl closely. Her eyes were blue, like sunny skies. There were tears in them. Once he had known someone with blue eyes like these. He couldn't remember who it was he had known, but it was a much older woman than this girl. Perhaps it was this girl's mother.

The tears in her eyes made him uncomfortable. He wanted to believe this girl, because of the tears, but this was an important matter, and he had to be sure.

"How do you know these things about Gardner?" he questioned.

"I live in Gardner's home town," she answered. "Albany. I know the story."

"Oh," he nodded. "Yes, Gardner did come from Albany. I remember now. But you came to New York looking for him. What made you think he was here?"

"A friend was in New York seeing a show," she answered. "He caught a glimpse of Gardner in the crowds. Just a glimpse. Gardner got away before the friend could speak to him. But the friend told me and I came here to look for him."

"Well, now," Gray said. "That was nice of you." He tried to think why this girl would go to so much trouble to find Gardner. His mind was confused. He couldn't think clearly.

"John Gardner lost his memory," the girl continued. "When he was accused of theft, the shock was so great that he

lost his mind. He didn't know who he was. When he was suffering from amnesia, he disappeared. That was three years ago. We've been looking for him ever since."

SHE spoke calmly, in a matter of fact tone of voice. Only the tense white face, the traces of tears in the corners of her eyes, revealed the intense emotional pressure under the calmness.

He couldn't think clearly. He was confused. What this girl had said confused him. Her very presence, like a ghost from some other time, added to his confusion. There was a roaring in his mind.

Suddenly the roaring stopped. Suddenly the confusion cleared.

It was replaced by another kind of confusion.

He looked at the girl, then around the bar. Something had happened. He was not exactly certain what it was. Something. . . .

His head turned slowly, going from the people lining the bar to the busy bartender. Where had he seen that bartender before? He looked again at the girl.

"How did we get here?" he spoke. "What happened?"

The girl rose swiftly from her chair. The tears running down her cheeks were plainly visible now.

"Nothing has happened," she said, striving desperately for calmness. "Nothing has happened. We're going home. That's all. Mother is waiting for us and we're going home."

He looked at her. There was still a little uncertainty in his eyes.

She saw the uncertainty. "Don't you know that you're John Gardner?" she said. "Don't you know that I'm your daughter? Don't you know that the man you've been looking for—is yourself?"



The last lingering traces of uncertainty went slowly out of his eyes as she spoke. Happiness replaced it, such happiness as is seen in the eyes of a man who is going home after long, long wanderings in strange and unfriendly places.

"I've been looking—for myself!" he whispered.

She did not trust herself to speak but

her nod carried more meaning than words.

He rose from his chair. Years seemed to drop off him as he straightened up. Somehow in this moment he looked like a young man with life opening before him.

"Yes, my dear," he said. "Of course. And now we're going home."

THE END

## THE KNAVE WITHOUT A HEART

BY LESLIE ANDERSON

**T**RY as one might, it is impossible to ferret out the least spark of kindness or goodness from the life of Gilderoy, highwayman and king of rogues of the seventeenth century. Standing six feet ten in his stockinged feet, with a wild mass of curly hair dipping over a low forehead, a livid scar furrowing his cheek from one end to the other, and a sinister glitter in his eyes, he looked every inch the villain that he was. For fifteen years, he terrorized Scotland, making his law the law of the land. The most courageous of men wilted at his approach, yet the women invented ballads in his praise.

Even as a boy, Gilderoy's feats of strength were legendary. It is said that while still in school, he could crumple up a horseshoe like a wisp of hay. When his father, a Scottish landowner, died, Gilderoy demanded impossible sums of money from his mother, until, in despair, she finally revolted and turned him out of the house. Infuriated by this attempt to curb his will, Gilderoy conceived a monstrous plot. Pretending to be penitent, he returned to his home and was accepted back without question. That night, he stole into his mother's bed-chamber, seized the family's money and jewels, slit his mother's throat with infamous calm, and laughing hugely at the spectacle, burnt the house to the ground, destroying the evidence of his crime.

Burning and looting as he went, he marched across Scotland, leaving slaughtered families and charred houses in his wake. It took a whole company of soldiers to track him down and carry him off to gaol, where after a swift trial he was condemned to death. With his prodigious strength, it was easy to burst his bonds and flee the prison. A reward of one hundred pounds for his recapture was offered in vain. Even if he had shown himself on the road in broad daylight, no one would have dared to lay a hand on him.

With all Scotland on his trail, Gilderoy moved to new areas for exploitation. He deserted Scotland for France. So impressive a figure did he make, that he was taken for an eminent scholar and gentleman. In the church of St. Denis, he accomplished the most audacious exploit of his career, to the lasting humiliation of all France.

The great church was packed with the most renowned people of the kingdom. Cardinal Richelieu attended in state; the king himself made his appearance. The strange Scotsman was the center of attraction as he moved with ease about the noble assemblage, his bold plan taking shape in his head.

At the very moment when Mass was being sung, Gilderoy managed to lift Richelieu's purse from his pocket. The king was a delighted witness to the theft, thinking it all a huge joke played upon Richelieu by a friend, and he obeyed Gilderoy's motion to keep silent about the theft. The king was hilarious over the Cardinal's consternation over the missing purse, but his laughter soon turned to shame when he discovered that in the midst his own fit of merriment, Gilderoy had absconded with his own purse, leaving the two great men of France the poorer in money and respect.

After touring the continent in a similar manner, Gilderoy returned to his own country. The highwayman's trade soon bored him, and he decided to enlarge his activities. He assembled a band of fearless ruffians about him. With this army behind him he ruled Scotland more truly than its rightful ruler. No man dared to lift a finger against the will of this one man.

The price on Gilderoy's head was now increased to a small fortune. In the end, Gilderoy was betrayed by his current lady-friend, who did it less out of greed for the reward money, than for revenge upon his arch-villain for all his misdeeds. She tricked him into spending the night at her house, then admitted fifty armed men. At the last minute, Gilderoy discovered her plot, stormed her room, and killed her so that she might not survive him. Then, he turned upon the armed band, laying low eight of them before he was finally taken. Loaded with chains, he was carried off to Edinburgh where he was starved for three days and then hanged without the formality of a trial. Even then Scotland's vengeance was not complete. The body was hung in chains forty feet high, where it creaked for half a century as a warning to evil-doers who might set out in the same path of versatile crime as the amazing Gilderoy.





Carefully he poured the explosive liquid into the golf ball



# Lightning Strikes Twice

by William R. Morse

**Sometimes the seeds of retribution can be  
found in a twist of the murderer's own character**

**D**R. JOHN HARLEY, playing golf with a foursome at the Blue Hill Golf Club, made a birdie on the third hole. This fact annoyed Roger Pincus.

"Hit the ball and stop gloating," Pincus said as Dr. Harley, still chuckling from the good shot he had made, prepared to drive off from the next tee. "Everybody knows you're a wonder at this game, so go on and drive."

There had been no malice in the physician's chuckle. He had made a good shot and he was laughing and kidding about it, remarking what a wonderful golfer he was.

"Don't be bitter, Pincus," he said, as he squared off for his next drive. "All of us can't be great golfers."

As the physician started his downswing to hit the ball, Pincus spoke again.

"You certainly are a wonder at this

game," Pincus said, breaking one of the cardinal rules of good sportsmanship in golf.

Dr. Harley, distracted by Pincus, momentarily took his eye off the ball. He sliced his shot and the ball went wide of the fairway. Glancing up at Pincus, for an instant his face was dark.

There was malice in Pincus' chuckle.

"You're in the rough," he said laughing.

"I see I am, thanks to you," Dr. Harley quietly answered.

"I didn't do anything," Pincus said. The fact that he was responsible for the shot into the rough did not distress him in the least.

It did distress the other two members of the foursome.

"Shoot another ball," the third man promptly suggested.

"Yeah, Doc, shoot another ball," the fourth man agreed.

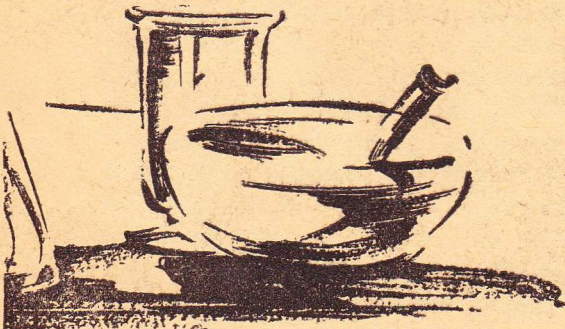
They were good sportsmen, these two men.

"He'll take a penalty if he does," Pincus stated.

Technically, Pincus was right. As a matter of good sportsmanship, he was very much in the wrong. But the rules of good sportsmanship did not concern Pincus, not where Dr. Harley was concerned.

"He'll take a stroke penalty if he shoots another ball," Pincus repeated.

For a second, Dr. Harley's face dark-





ened with anger. Then his normal good nature reasserted itself, and he grinned.

"I'll play the ball from the rough," he said.

"Play it if you want to," Pincus grudgingly assented.

"Mind if I go ahead and look for it while you're shooting?" the physician courteously asked.

Pincus said nothing, but the other two members of the foursome nodded quick assent. Waving to his caddy to move over into the rough, Dr. Harley followed the line of flight of his lost ball.

Chuckling, Pincus drove from the tee. The other two men drove in strained silence.

**THIS** was Dr. Harley's lucky day.

He not only found his ball in the high weeds, but he made a recovery shot that would have done credit to a professional, was on the green in three, and was down in par four, winning the hole. But even more important than winning the hole was the fact that while looking for his ball, he found a ball that some other golfer had driven into the rough and had lost.

They said of him around the Blue Hills club that he would rather find a lost golf ball than eat. The money the ball was worth didn't interest him—his large practice brought him more money than he could spend—it was just that he liked to find lost balls. He was superstitious about them, believed they brought him luck.

He was laughing like a kid on Christmas morning as he exhibited the ball he had found.

"I'll shoot it on the next hole," he said, chuckling. "Found balls are lucky balls."

On the next hole, a long par five, he sank a fifty yard approach shot for an

eagle three.

It was luck, pure luck, but Dr. Harley had always been lucky.

Pincus said nothing. He seemed to be thinking. He answered with grunts the occasional questions his companions asked him. They didn't mind his silence. If he kept his mouth shut all the time, it was all right with them.

Pincus was barely tolerated in the Blue Hills club. Twice his name had been brought up for expulsion, on grounds of poor sportsmanship, but because he was so infernally rich—he had made a mint of money during the war out of a new explosive he had invented—the club members tried to put up with him. They needed his membership fees.

The foursome didn't get to finish their round that day. Another one of the sharp thunderstorms that had played havoc with golfing this summer swept in from the hills. Lightning, thunder, and driving rain, drove them to shelter.

**ALTHOUGH** the thunderstorm cut short their golfing, Pincus had already accumulated new reasons for disliking Dr. Harley. The lucky shots the physician had made and his cheerful good humor in the face of poor sportsmanship, these were minor things, but they loomed large to Pincus, who could not remember a time when he had not hated John Harley.

Pincus had started hating Harley when both were boys in high school. Even then everybody had naturally liked Johnny Harley and had naturally disliked Roger Pincus. Pincus had resented Harley's popularity, resented it in sneaking, underhanded ways. Later they had both fallen in love with the same girl.

She married Dr. Harley.

Pincus had not done what millions



of other men have done in similar circumstances, gotten drunk, found another girl, and forgotten the whole thing. He had brooded.

He was still brooding when he left the golf club that afternoon. Down the years, brooding had become a habit with him, a canker eating at his heart, a cancerous growth urging him to revenge himself on Dr. Harley.

Now, out of the combination of a thunderstorm and a man who liked to find lost golf balls, he had found the means of securing his revenge.

PINCUS went directly to his private laboratory. He was a chemist; the fortune he had made out of the new explosive he had invented proved he was a good one. In his laboratory, he took a new golf ball, set it in a vise, and with a tiny drill, bored a hole in it. Then he took a reamer with an expanding point, and hollowed out the entire center of the ball, leaving only the tough covering. Next he mixed a greasy liquid in a test tube. Working with infinite care, he filled the golf ball with the gray, greasy liquid. Carefully plugging the tiny hole with gum rubber, he applied a coat of white paint all over the ball.

When he had finished, he tested his work for flaws. He took a magnifying glass and examined the ball, turning it over and over in his hands. He secured another ball and compared the weights of the two.

The doctored ball he handled with extreme care. Not much greasy liquid had gone into it. Not much was needed. Pincus was an expert on explosives. The greasy liquid was more powerful than nitro-glycerine. The ball contained enough of it to blow a man to bits if it exploded within two or three feet of him.

The greasy liquid was a sensitive

explosive. A jar would set it off. The smash of a golf club against the ball would explode the liquid instantly.

When he had finished with the ball, Pincus went over his idea in his mind, considering all possibilities. Supposing Harley wasn't killed? In that case, he would certainly be badly injured. The explosion would knock him unconscious and he would not know what had happened to him.

How would he get the ball into Harley's possession?

That was easy. Harley was always looking for lost balls. Pincus could easily lose the ball where Harley would be certain to find it.

What about the flash and sound of the explosion? There was where the thunderstorm came in. Pincus would only have to make certain that Harley used the ball when a thunderstorm was coming up. There had been a lot of thunderstorms this summer. Several trees had been struck on the golf course and two caddies had been knocked senseless by lightning.

Witnesses? Sure. A couple of caddies. They would see the flash and hear the roar. It would be easy to convince them that Dr. Harley had been struck by lightning.

Pincus tested his plan until he knew it was foolproof. There was just enough of the fantastic about it to make it completely convincing. Lightning rarely hit a human being but it hit them often enough to make his plan perfect.

PINCUS was patient. He waited two weeks before his chance came. It was a Saturday afternoon. Normally the course would have been crowded, but a heavy rain the night before had left the fairways soggy. Over the hills another rain was gathering. Thunder was muttering far off.



It was a perfect day, for Pincus. He waited patiently. Dr. Harley drove up. He looked at the sky and walked toward the club house.

"Come on, Doc," Pincus hailed him. "I'll play you for a dollar a hole."

"It looks like rain," Harley answered.

"What of it? You won't melt if you get wet."

Harley looked again at the thunderstorm on the hills.

"Scared of me?" Pincus jeered. He could say things in a nasty way that got under a man's skin.

Harley flushed. "Get your clubs," he said. He went into the club house to change clothes. Pincus went to the caddy house to find a boy to carry his bag.

The caddie saw him coming and when he got there, not a boy was in sight. The caddy master had to hunt one up and assign him to the task. The caddy reluctantly took Pincus' bag. No boy liked to caddy for Pincus.

When he got to the first tee, Harley was already there with a caddy who had seen him arrive and had gone into the clubhouse and asked to carry his bag.

They teed off, Pincus winning the honor and shooting first. As they went down the fairway, he watched the clouds. Thunder was growling in the hills.

The fourth hole is the place, he thought.

The fourth hole was a dog-leg, the fairway doubling back sharply to the left around a clump of trees. It was one of Dr. Harley's favorite spots to hunt for lost golf balls. On every round he played, he cut across the rough looking for lost balls along the path.

They had halved the first two holes and Pincus had won the third, making it his honor on the fourth. His caddy

gave him his ball and went ahead to wait for his drive.

Pincus' drive went into the rough.

"I'll go help that dumb caddy look for it," he said, leaving the tee.

"Here's where I get my dollar back," Dr. Harley called after him. "It'll cost you at least one shot to get out of that rough."

Here's where you get more than your dollar back, Pincus thought.

Pincus followed the path into the rough. The explosive ball he left lying at the edge of the path. Then he hurried on through the rough and called impatiently to his caddy.

"Come on. Let the ball go."

The caddy came slowly out of the clump of trees at his call. Pincus took another ball from his bag and used it to shoot for the green.

When Dr. Harley came up to the green, he was chuckling happily.

"Found a new ball on the path," he said. "Found balls are lucky balls."

They both took fives on the hole. The caddies retrieved the balls from the cup and went on to the next tee.

PINCUS was calm, calmer than he had been in years. The thought of approaching vengeance made him feel good. Inwardly he was gloating. He had waited years for what was going to happen in a few minutes but he took care that his face showed nothing.

"It's still your honor," Dr. Harley said. "I'll get you this hole, if we don't get rained out."

A cloud was sweeping down from the hills. It wasn't much of a cloud, not much bigger than the palm of the hand, but rain was streaking from it. Lightning flicked down from it and a sharp crack of thunder rolled across the fairways.

"Maybe we ought to get under cover," the physician suggested.



"Hell, a little water won't hurt us," Pincus answered. "It's only a light shower, not enough rain in it to wet the grass. What are you waiting on, Caddy? Give me my ball and get the hell on up the fairway."

Even to the caddies he showed a sneering disposition. The boy sullenly handed him a ball and a tee and went scooting up the fairway.

The ground was soft. Pincus set his ball on the tee, looked up the fairway.

*Everything is working perfectly, he thought. There's a storm coming up and there's already been one sharp crack of thunder. Doc has the explosive ball. The caddies are too far away to make certain what happened. All I have to do is to stay thirty or forty feet away from him when he hits it.*

He was calmer than he had been in years. There was something calming about vengeance, something satisfying.

His club head went back over his shoulder as he started his swing. It came down in a flashing arc, connected squarely with the ball.

Boom!

The explosion drove the shaft of the driver completely through his body. It lifted him ten feet into the air. It blew off both his feet.

Dr. Harley, standing fifteen feet away, was knocked unconscious by the concussion.

THE papers carried it this way:

#### GOLFER KILLED BY LIGHTNING

Roger Pincus, who invented the powerful explosive known as Pincite, was

instantly killed by a stroke of lightning while playing golf at the Blue Hills Country Club yesterday afternoon.

Dr. John Harley, well-known local physician, who was playing with Pincus, was knocked unconscious by the same electrical discharge. He is resting easily at Mercy Hospital and is expected to make a complete recovery from the shock.

According to the boys who were caddying for the two men, the bolt of lightning struck Pincus' steel-shafted golf club as it was drawn back over his shoulder.

This is the third instance of this nature this summer.

Pincus, if he had lived, might have had the satisfaction of knowing he had planned a perfect murder. There was no question whatsoever that he had been killed by another other than a stroke of lightning.

Neither Dr. Harley nor the caddies ever guessed what had actually happened. All three of them thought Pincus had been struck by lightning.

Even his own caddy, who had seen him leave the explosive ball beside the path, and thinking Pincus was going to accuse him of losing it, had retrieved it and given it to him at the next tee, did not know what had actually happened. All Dr. Harley knew was that he had found a ball in the rough. He didn't know the ball he had found wasn't the ball Pincus had planted for him to find.

Murder builds up out of the accumulation of little events. And by other little events its foul purpose is often defeated.

IN THE NOVEMBER ISSUE . . .

BRUNO FISCHER'S New Novel

THE PIGSKIN BAG

ON SALE AUGUST 27 — WATCH FOR IT!



# Nobody Wants To Die

by JOHN RAYMOND ENGLISH

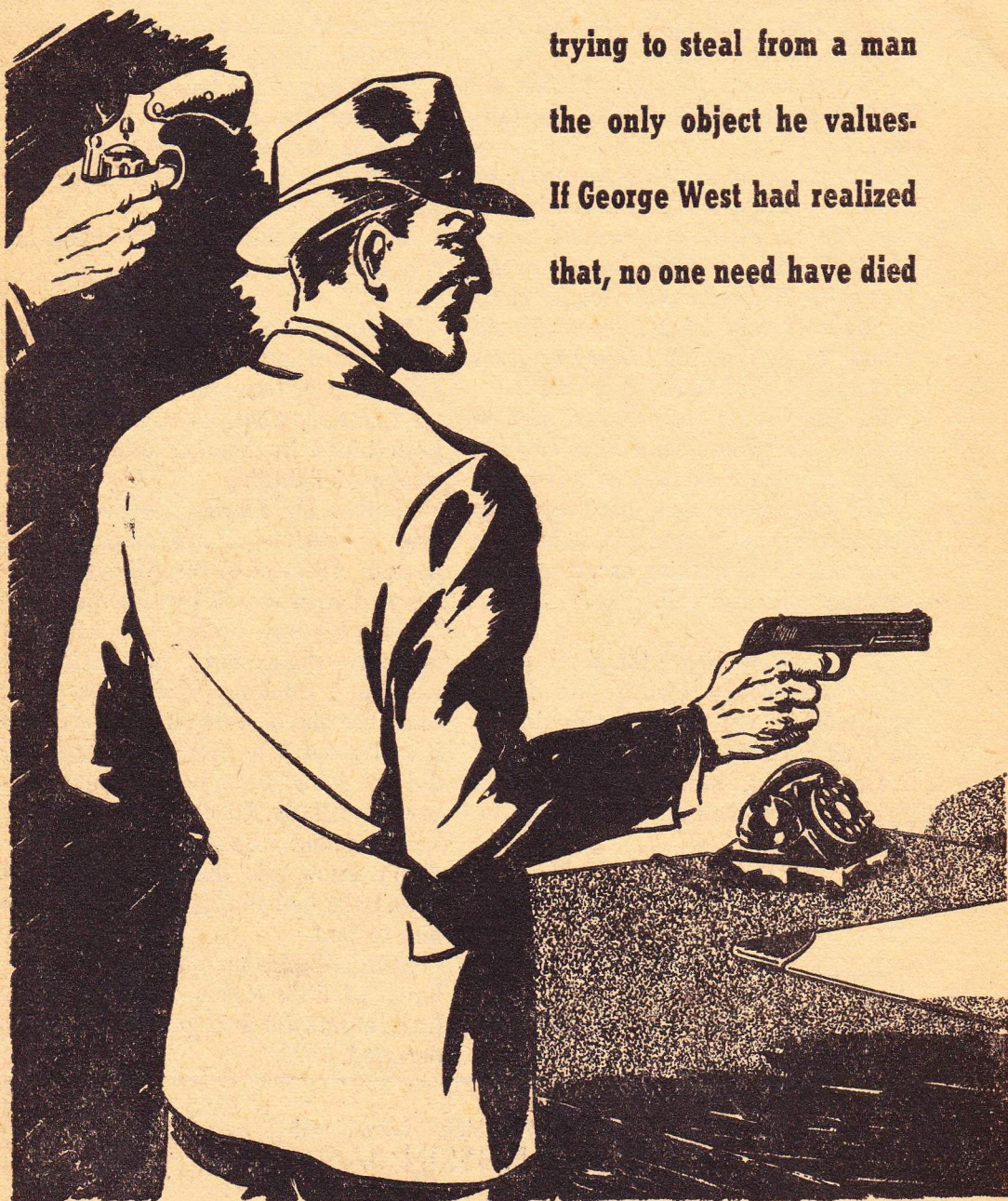
There is nothing more dangerous than

trying to steal from a man

the only object he values.

If George West had realized

that, no one need have died





**I**T WAS a Tuesday afternoon late in July and the air came burning up off the pavements almost too hot to breathe. My office was in the old Greisler Building then, and I had spent the day cleaning my guns, both of them, eating cigarettes and looking out of the window. I was in my shirt sleeves getting another drink at the watercooler when this man came in.

He was short, about my height, and he gave an impression of roundness, but he wasn't excessively fat. He stood there, panting like an old dog from the heat, looking at me out of sad watery eyes.

"Mr. Spain?" he asked.

The gun in my hand showed who was boss. But it seemed that someone else also had a gun . . .

I said I was.

"My name is Pressler," he said and handed me a card.

I made a gesture towards the customer's chair and said, "Won't you sit down, Mr. Pressler." He sat down, and I got a clean glass from the desk





and brought him a drink from the cooler. He needed it. Then I sat down across the desk from him and looked at the card. It was sticky with perspiration. It read *Otto M. Pressler* and under that in smaller print it said *President* and under all of that, in the lower right hand corner, it said *North American Domestic Trade and Technical Journals Inc.* I put the card down and looked at him.

He seemed fifty. His face was very pale and smooth, almost shiny like wax, and he had thin receding yellowish-gray hair. He was wearing a light gray summer suit with an orange tie that was an eyesore, and he was soaked in sweat. He had begun to mop his face with a large white handkerchief.

I said, "What can I do for you, Mr. Pressler?"

With what appeared to be a lot of effort, he took a large wilted manilla envelope from his inside pocket and laid it down on the desk before me.

"My brother-in-law received this," he said and went on wiping his face. "This morning," he added in a flat, tired voice.

I picket it up. It was damp; perspiration had sealed it. I slit open one end with my letter knife and another, smaller envelope slipped out. The smaller envelope was addressed to *George West, Manchester Apartments, 1320 North Grand Boulevard, City.* The address was printed in uneven capital letters in black ink. The postmark looked genuine enough, but the date was blurred and very faint and the only thing I could really make out was the *July*, besides, of course, the *U. S.* and the circle and those parallel wavy lines.

I had heard a lot of things about George West, all of them bad, but I didn't say anything and I kept my face empty of expression.

From this second envelope I took a

sheet of paper that said:

*IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIFE YOU WILL HAVE ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS READY AT ONCE YOU WILL AWAIT ORDERS BY PHONE DO NOT CALL COPS THIS IS IN MEMORY OF OUR SCHOOL DAYS DAYS TOGETHER.*

The words were formed by newspaper letters cut out and pasted together; the paper was dime store stuff like the envelope. When I put it down, I saw that Pressler was watching me intently.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

I HELD my cigarettes toward him, but he shook his head. I took one for myself, lighted it, dropped the match in the blue glass ashtray. I didn't reply at once and the room was silent for a moment. You could hear sounds of traffic on the street below, the hum of the office fan, the noise of a typewriter somewhere in another office. Two women going down the hall outside were laughing about something.

I said: "It stinks. But then most of them do. What does the school days stuff mean?"

His pale, empty face stared at me. "I thought you could probably guess," he said quietly. My only guess was that he had seen too many movies. He evidently thought I could read minds like those Hollywood detectives. Or deduce from the spot on his shirt, that might have been soup or beer, that he had twenty-six illegitimate children. There was a more logical conclusion.

I said, "You've just come from lunch."

He looked startled. "Yes," he said, "How did you know?"

This set me up. I felt fine. Spain, you old dogcatcher, you can still pull a few tricks out of the bag. I said out loud, "And your shirts unbuttoned."



Which was true. I tried to appear as inscrutable as possible.

He looked even more surprised. His cheeks showed two high spots of color. His sad, misty eyes were bewildered and annoyed. He policed himself hastily. He was embarrassed and angry now. It was sort of pathetic. I opened my mouth again before he could speak. I had a real flash of wit this time.

I grinned at him. "No, I can't guess."

"This is not a joking matter, Mr. Spain," he said hoarsely.

"I don't imagine it is," I said, "but I asked a question and I can't guess the answer. I don't want to. This isn't supposed to be a guessing game either. Or is it?"

He didn't know quite how to take all of this, but he made a brave effort. "I'm sorry," he said. "I thought everyone remembered the Dubois School scandal even though it happened thirteen years ago." His voice was still thick.

I explained that that was before my time. Thirteen years ago I had been working for a big agency in Kansas City. I mashed out my cigarette in the tray. Pressler nodded and went on.

"Do you know anything about my brother-in-law?"

I said, "I've heard a little."

Pressler sighed and shook his head. "If it was bad, it was undoubtedly true," he said. "He's as rotten as they come."

That was one thing I could guess. I hadn't heard much, but I had heard enough. This is a big town, but he was one guy that a lot of people would tell you about over their second drink; a lot of people hated him. I had even seen him a couple of times. He was a smooth forty, handsome, with well-cut sensitive features, except for a loose soft mouth. His hair at the temples

was touched with gray and he looked like the tired, bored, cynical man-of-the-world, but with, perhaps, a little tenderness still remaining. He was the sort of man young girls and old ladies go crazy over. He could be, and was called, a blackmailer; he was a kind of half-crook, making his money on anything that smelled a little, that was just on or over the edge of the line of the law; he must keep, I thought, a fair number of people sleepless at night. And above all, he was a gentleman.

I DIDN'T say anything like this to Otto Pressler. I only nodded politely and sympathetically and waited.

"Perhaps you know," Pressler said, "that as a young man he worked for the Masters' machine, as foul a crowd of politicians as this town ever had. He got off to a nice start. He was always clever. He was cutting quite a swath for himself. I've never known all of the details, but I do know that he engineered all of the backroom deals in the school tragedy.

"They watered the cement and the building hadn't been opened a month when part of a wall collapsed and buried a janitor. Fortunately, the accident, if you can call it that, occurred after the children had been dismissed." Pressler paused for a moment and smiled grimly. "That sort of thing will arouse public indignation when nothing else will. The Masters administration was ruined politically, of course, but none of them ever got to the courtroom. They laid the responsibility on the construction company, and the public, as long as it had somebody to chew on, didn't look any further. All of them, including George West, went scot free. The contractor shot himself, and the foreman, a man named Harry Ritt, received, as I recall, a ten year sentence. At any rate, he's out of



prison now."

Pressler stopped talking now and began wiping his face. I lighted another cigarette and decided I wasn't going to like this job because I knew what was coming next, and I wondered how much choice I had in the matter. My dimes were wearing thin that summer. I watched the little particles of ash dance across the glass top of the desk in the breeze from the fan. The glass was dusty too. I was doing my own dusting then. I'd be taking in washing before long. I said:

"And your brother-in-law got this letter this morning?"

"Yes."

"And it's his assumption, or yours, or both, that the foreman Harry Ritt sent it?"

Otto Pressler shook his head. "Not mine," he said, "but that's what George would like to have me believe. I think he's merely blackmailing me after his own fashion."

I thought, this is jolly.

I said, "I don't understand."

Pressler stared at me. There was a deep bitterness in his round face and behind his sad eyes. His lips were a thin colorless line.

"My wife, his sister," he said, "is an invalid. Besides having a very weak heart, she has an abnormal affection for her brother. If anything happened to him it would kill her and if she thought anything was going to happen to him, it would probably kill her faster. He knows this and capitalizes on it. When he's needed money in the past, he's gone to her with some story about his debts and I've been forced to pay him to give her some piece of mind. However, he's never done anything as rotten as this." Pressler waved a hand at the note on the desk before us and then looked at the floor. His hands were now clenched and his knuckles were white.

"How much has he nicked you for in the past?" I asked.

"Usually three or four hundred at a time."

"Has he," I pointed to the letter, "taken this to your wife yet?"

"No," said Pressler, "but he threatened to. He was, or pretended to be in abject fear this morning. He said that he knew it was Ritt. You see, Ritt made a loud courtroom speech after he was sentenced. He was as guilty as the rest of them, but he said he was framed and he named George, among others, that he was going to get even with. He was a stupid roughneck, but George persuaded him to confess to his part in the mess, assuring him that with old Masters' lawyer defending him, he didn't have a thing to worry about."

I said, "A ten year stretch would have Ritt out of stir a couple of years now. Why would he wait so long to pull a shake down?"

PRESSLER shrugged. "I don't think he has anything to do with it," he said. "I think the note is a fake. I want to prove that it's a fake. Conclusively. I've got to show Louise what a low sort he is. I don't care how you do it."

I nodded. "Have you promised to give him the money yet?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "tonight."

"Stall him," I said, "until tomorrow morning at least."

"But," Pressler began, "supposing he goes to Louise. . . ."

"It would be a hell of a lot better," I said, "if I had some time."

"I'll think of some excuse," he said thickly. He looked drained, washed-out.

I said, "Good." Then I gave him the phone number of both my office and my apartment in case something came up and told him not to call unless it



was really important, that I would get in touch with him.

"If you can't reach me," I said, "you can leave a message with the switchboard girl at the apartment."

I asked him if he had any idea of the whereabouts of Harry Ritt. No, he didn't. Did Ritt have a family? Yes, he had a wife and some children. Did he know where they were? No.

Then I took some of his money and we shook hands, and I said:

"Supposing Ritt did send the letter, do you think he'd mean it as a scare or do you think he'd really mean it?"

Pressler's face was expressionless. "Yes," he said.

I grinned. "What kind of an answer is that?"

"I think he would be easily capable of murdering George West," he said. His voice was dull, flat, lifeless.

I watched him walk toward the door then. When he put his hand on the knob, he turned. His watery eyes seemed very sad. He said:

"If it were not for Louise, I would kill him myself."

He gave me a dim half-smile and went out.

For a long minute, I stared at the door. I felt very tired. Then I looked at the letter and the two envelopes without picking them up. They rustled lightly in the breeze from the office fan. I lighted a cigarette, got up and went to the window and watched the late afternoon cumulus piling up in the west. I became aware that sweat was sticking my shirt to my back. Maybe we would get some rain tonight. The papers had been saying we would for a week. Maybe tonight. It was a strange world. Now I had to find out if a rat wrote letters to himself. Somewhere a clock struck four.

I came back down to earth and hauled out the street and telephone di-

rectories and found what I wanted in the street directory and wrote the address on the back of an old envelope. My mouth felt cracked and dry and I decided I needed a couple of cold beers.

I put on my coat and hat and went out.

IT WAS a neighborhood of dingy little square frame houses way out on Hellman Street. I pressed the doorbell and almost immediately she was there, frowning at me through the screen.

"Is Mrs. Harry Ritt at home?" I asked.

I supposed she was sixteen, not much older. She was wearing a gray skirt and a light cottony blouse and flat shoes, and all of them looked shabby. But there was nothing the matter with her body. It was lithe and hard, and it pushed right out in the right places. She had some nice, loose tawny hair, and her face was pretty in a cheap way. Already she looked like a babe.

She said: "Why?"

"I'd like to talk with her."

"Who are you?" Her voice was high with a shrill brittle quality.

"Me? I'm the last of the Mohicans."

She stared at me, sneering. "Oh, you're smart, shorty. You're very wise." She called into the house and a small, frail woman in a faded print dress came to the door.

"I'm Mrs. Ritt," she said. Her voice was gentle, and her hair was a fine gray and her eyes were deep and dark and tired. Worry was a habit on her face.

I asked if I could come in and talk with her. She held the door for me, and I followed her into a shabby but immaculate room. Then we were seated and facing each other across a dark worn rug. The girl leaned against the door frame, the way Dorothy Lamour leans against a palm tree, with the top



of her blouse open, watching me. It was only a fair pose. I handed Mrs. Ritt my card.

She read it and said, "Go into the other room, Adele, and close the door."

The girl stared for a moment, her face hard, and then went out, slamming the screen door viciously.

The room was quiet for a while. Mrs. Ritt closed her eyes, opened them again, sighed and said, "Is it about my husband?" Her voice was very soft; it was delicate and fragile like fine lace.

"Yes," I said, "I'd like to know where he is."

"Is he in trouble?"

"He might be."

She didn't speak for a long time. The silence felt strange to me. A clock ticked quietly on a table in a corner. The shrill voices of playing children came through the open window like a song on the summer evening. Then she said:

"I haven't seen him for nearly thirteen years. He never even wrote me from the prison. He never came back. He was always very stubborn and he had a temper . . . I don't know why . . ." Her gentle voice died against the leaves rustling in the wind outside.

I suddenly felt cold in my stomach. The room was much darker now, and I became aware that purple-black clouds had buried the evening sun. There was a long, low peal of thunder in the west. Staring hard into the dim light, I could see that her eyes were moist. The wind was getting stronger. It was heavy with the smell of rain.

I said, "You don't know where he is?"

"No."

There didn't seem to be anything else to say. I thanked her and stood up to leave.

"If you find him," she said. "tell him he can come home." The words had a

lingering spent quality.

I nodded and went out. Leaves were flying in the wind, and the thunder came again, loud. It shook the sky. I walked around the car, opened the door and slid in under the driver's seat.

The girl Adele was sitting there, smiling a crooked smile at me.

I LIGHTED a cigarette, blew the match out slowly and said, "How," like an Indian. There was more thunder.

"I listened at the window," she said. She had a nice, sharp, white, even little set of teeth.

"That's swell," I said.

She leaned forward quickly then and pressed her body to me. Her face was very close to mine and she closed her eyes. I could feel her breath.

She said, "Kiss me!"—She began to shake.

I dropped the cigarette out the window and with both hands I pushed her back to the other side of the car and opened the door behind her. She nearly fell out.

"Beat it, kid," I said. "I'm damn near old enough to be your father."

The wind was in her hair and her small pinched face was white as calimine. The first drops of rain began to fall, leaving spots as big as half dollars on the windshield. She looked wild in the strange half-light of the storm. She began to laugh crazily.

"Isn't it swell when your old man's a jailbird!" she almost screamed.

"Go on, beat it!" I said savagely. "Don't you know enough to get in out of the rain?"

She turned then and ran into the house.

I started the car and drove back towards town. I looked at my watch. It was time to eat, but I wasn't hungry. The rain was coming down hard now



and blowing and I had to drive slowly because you could barely see.

I PARKED in front of the Manchester Apartments across the street. I reached behind the seat and pulled up my raincoat and slipped into it and decided that I would sit and have a cigarette and see if the rain let up any. It was that bad. You could have gotten wet up to the waist even running across the street with a slicker on. I lighted my cigarette and listened to the rain pounding fiercely on the roof of the car. After a while I reached in the glove compartment and dragged out a pint of not so good whiskey and had a couple of jolts to pass the time.

The longer I waited, the harder it seemed to rain. I finally made a run for it.

The Manchester was actually an apartment hotel; quiet, peaceful and expensive. I padded like a wet dog over their soft blue carpet and up to the clerk at the desk. He was a thin yellowish man with a small moustache and a polite smile.

"What is the number of Mr. West's apartment?" I asked him.

"301, sir. I'll check and see if Mr. West is in. What was the name, sir?"

"That's all right," I said, "I'll just go on up."

He gave me his polite smile. "What did you say your name was, sir?"

I grinned back. "Webster," I said, "Daniel Webster."

There wasn't the shadow of a flicker in his face. He picked up the phone and asked for 301. He waited; there was no answer. He cradled the phone, smiled very, very politely this time and said:

"I'm sorry, but Mr. West doesn't answer. He evidently isn't in. Would you care to leave a message, Mr. Webster?"

I smiled and said I wouldn't and thanked him, and he smiled again, and I left.

I walked through the rain to the corner and around to the service entrance. I walked up stairs to the third floor. Nobody stopped me; I didn't see a soul. I pressed the button in front of 301 and heard the soft tinkle of chimes inside. Nobody came to the door.

I tried the door. It was locked. I took out my passkeys. I was surprised when one of them worked.

The room I let myself into was wide with windows that went from the ceiling to the floor. There were drapes at the windows and too much angular modernistic furniture was spread out over the room. Framed on the walls were a couple of large prints of modern French paintings and on a low cocktail table in front of a divan was a bottle of good scotch and two glasses and some charged water that had gone flat. The air in the place was stale. The rain beat hard against the windows.

I went into the bedroom. It was empty and orderly except that a red silk dressing gown had been thrown across the bed. There was a picture on the dresser of an attractive dark haired woman who I guessed to be thirty. Writing on it said, *to George with love Linda*. There was nothing in the bathroom. I decided to go to the kitchen, get a clean glass and some ice and fix myself a drink with the good scotch in the living room and wait for George West to return.

When I opened the kitchen door, I changed my mind about the ice and the glass.

I stopped breathing. There was no sound except the rain slapping the kitchen windows. He was lying on his back on the linoleum, his head in a brownish sticky pool. There was a bloody icepick on the floor beside his



arm. He must have been stabbed with it a dozen times. One of his eyes was just a sticky hole. There was a long raw sliver of flesh hanging loose from one cheek. He had been stabbed in the neck and the arms and the chest. Somebody had kept on stabbing him long after it no longer mattered. I reached down and felt him. He was very cold, but he wasn't stiff yet, and he was very dead. It kept right on raining.

I went back to the living room and drank some of his scotch straight from the bottle. It was very good scotch; it was very expensive scotch; and since the war, it was very rare scotch. It tasted fine, but George West would never taste it again.

I went over the place very carefully then. I looked for cut up newspapers and cheap notepaper. I didn't find any. The only scissors I found were nail scissors. I didn't find anything that would help me. I went cautiously back over the entire apartment wiping off everything I could remember touching. Then the phone started to ring.

I let it keep on ringing and went out, locking the door behind me and carefully wiping off the knob.

I didn't think anybody saw me leave the building.

AS I drove back to the office, the rain ended and the night air felt cool and fresh and wet in my lungs. In my office, I picked up the phone, and my finger swiftly dialed a number. There was the dull little click at the other end and Otto Pressler's voice said:

"Hello."

"This is Spain," I said. "Are you alone? What I'm going to say isn't for the neighbors?"

"Just a moment," he said. "There was a quiet minute. Then, 'All right.'"

I said, "Somebody used an icepick on our friend George. He's as dead as

he'll ever be. I found him in his apartment."

"Do the police—" His voice sounded choked and far away.

"Not yet," I said. "I wanted to talk to you first. Do you know a brunette named Linda? About thirty-five years old."

I waited. I thought I could hear the sound of heavy, irregular breathing at the other end of the line. I waited a long time.

Then he spoke. "The police . . . What about Louise—" His voice was low and jagged.

"Don't worry," I said. "Did you ever hear of a dark-haired woman called Linda?"

"What?"

I swore and stuck a cigarette in my mouth. "Look," I said, "pull up your socks. Get hold of yourself! Did you ever hear of a dame called Linda?"

"No," he said simply. "Should I have?"

I let that one go past. "All right. Now listen—" I stopped talking and listened myself. I thought I heard steps in the outer hall, just the bare suggestion of a whisper of steps.

"Look," I said in a low voice, "I'll notify the law. You'll hear from me later. And don't worry," I hung up.

I lighted my cigarette and watched the door slowly open. He was a gaunt man of medium height, and his thin haggard face had a strange sick color. He smiled, showing me a set of stained teeth.

I said, "Yeah?"

"Alone? I thought you might have company."

"No company."

He coughed, and his hand came out of his raincoat pocket with a dirty looking handkerchief. He held it to his mouth and coughed again. The cough was a flat hopeless sound. He moved



forward then and seated himself in the chair that Otto Pressler had sat in that afternoon. He was dying; it was apparent in his bloodless lips and colorless bitten nails.

HE MADE a vague gesture at the door with my name on it. "I didn't think you was a shamus." He had a voice like dead leaves blowing along a vacant street.

I said, "You've got that real indoor pallor."

He stared at me out of black, empty eyes.

"Yeah, I've seen the inside of a lot of jailhouses," he said bitterly.

"Okay," I said, "what's the gift?"

He coughed again and spat out a little pellet of phlegm into his handkerchief. "I seen you at the Manchester," he said. "I seen you go in the regular way and then come out and go in that door by the alley. While you was inside I look at the license holder on the steering shaft in your car and see your name. Then I see you leave, and I look you up in the book and see you're a shamus, and I come here. I figure we could talk."

"About what?"

"About a guy named West."

"What about him?"

He gave me that faint meaningless smile again. "I figure you go up to see him only you don't want to be announced."

"What are you selling?" I asked.

"This West is a grifter just like you and me, only high class and smarter. He's rolled an awful lot of people. I figure somebody hires you to put the bead on him, to get the goods on him. I got the goods."

I pressed out my cigarette in the ash-tray. I said, "What's your name?"

"Joe Cisco," he said and he began coughing. He kept on coughing for a

couple of minutes. Then he said, "I need new lungs. I'm all burned out."

I made my eyes dreamy. "Okay, you saw me at the Manchester. But I never heard of this guy West, Joe. He doesn't mean a thing to me."

He pulled his lips back over his teeth and his nostrils quivered. He watched me carefully for a moment and shook his head. "No, shamus, no. It's no good."

"I don't know him, Joe."

Then he was trembling. "Look, guy," he said hoarsely, "I'm a sick kid or I'd brace him myself. I'm too old and sick. Don't fool with me. You can have what I know for a hundred bucks. All I want is a stake to get out of this town. Just a little stake." He was trembling all over, and his face pleaded with me.

"Fifty bucks," I said.

He let his breath out. "Okay. Fifty."

"What makes you think I went to see this West, Joe?"

He licked his lips. "Look, we ain't going to start that again?"

"Who is this guy West?"

He was really shaking now. He rubbed his face with his hands, but it didn't help. "Look," he said desperately, "the Manchester is a class joint. I'm out of the chips, see. I case the place, see. I'm watchin' this guy West, hopin' I can pick up something so's I can brace him, so's I can get a grub stake. Look, it was just a hunch. I just played a hunch. Class people live there; West was the only guy who smelled. I figured you being a shamus that you naturally had business with him."

He didn't see me anymore. He stared fixedly at the floor, his hands clenched tightly. "It's a tough dollar for an old timer these days," he said sadly.

I lighted another cigarette and watched him for a while. The night



breeze picked up the pale smoke and carried it quickly out the window. He sat very still.

I said, "Maybe your hunch was right. Let's say it was. If what you've got is worth anything, I'd pay you a century. Why don't you spill it, Joe?"

Anger and bitterness pulled at his face muscles. "Why, you dirty—" The words were rough, choked gasps.

"On the other hand," I interrupted, "what you've got may not be worth anything. Somebody bumped off West this afternoon."

IT JARRED him so he had to grab the arms of the chair. "Huh?"

"Somebody worked him over with an icepick."

"The cops know?" His lean, sick face looked dead.

"Not yet. Spill your guts, Joe."

He shook his head meaninglessly for a moment. "Case Andrews," he said.

Case Andrews was a gambler, a tough boy. He was powerful and he had protection. And he had a lot of dirt under his fingernails, like numbers and hiding out hot boys. He was shrewd and he was careful and I didn't think he would kill anybody with an icepick. Bodies were found a long, long way from Case, and anyway he had spent the evening with friends. He always had a lot of friends handy that he'd just spend the evening with. But then I didn't know.

"Go on, Joe."

He coughed and licked his lips again and said slowly: "This West was playing around with Case Andrews' wife. She'd come to his apartment once in a while, but mostly they'd meet at a little flat over on Butler Street. I been watchin' them for a couple of weeks. I figured it would be worth somethin' to West to keep Andrews from finding out."

"Is Andrews' wife a brunette about thirty-five named Linda?"

He shook his head. "No, she's a redhead with a gang of curves. She used to chirp with a band. Her name was Gerry Keene, then."

"She and West meet today?"

"This West ain't been out all day. She comes to his place around noon, stays an hour maybe, then leaves. I don't know the time exactly."

"See anybody else?"

"People goin' in and out all day, and I'm watchin' from across the street. I don't know none of them."

"Okay, Joe," I said. "But you'll have to come back in the morning. I have to get the dough from the bank." I dropped my cigarette in the tray and took ten out of my wallet and shoved it toward him. "Take this on account."

"On the level?" He looked grateful, but I didn't know for what. He was dying; his gray face was a death mask. He coughed his dull little hopeless cough.

"Yeah," I said, "the client will pay."

I stood up and walked toward my raincoat on the coat rack. "Want a drink?" I asked him, reaching in the pocket for the pint I had brought up from the car.

THERE was the delicate sound of glass breaking and I turned to see Joe Cisco jerk in the chair and then fold his arms across his chest the way they sometimes fold a man's when he's lying in a coffin. Then he doubled over and slipped slowly to the floor in a silent, crumpled heap. I flattened myself on the floor against the wall.

There was a small jagged hole in the glass of the half opened window behind the chair I had been sitting in. I crawled slowly forward on my belly until I could reach the cord of my desk lamp. I carefully pulled it to the edge of the desk and over and caught it in



my hands. I switched it off and stood up quickly in the dark room and moved to the wall next to the window.

I listened to my breathing and the night sounds of the city floating up from the street below. My palms were sticky as I peered cautiously around the frame of the window. The roof of the Majestic Hotel across the way was just a little higher than my eye level. I couldn't see a thing that told me anything. The air still smelled sweet and cool and wet.

Nice shooting, buddy. Are you still over there with that gun with the silencer? Did you wait until I got out of your way to shoot Joe? Or did you just arrive and start banging away at the first guy you saw? I wonder if you've got binoculars. But then you really wouldn't need them, would you? The desk lamp must have given you all the light you wanted. Are you still over there waiting for me to show? That was pretty sweet shooting, buddy.

I waited a long time. Nothing happened. Joe Cisco was a shadowy form in the middle of the room. I'm sorry you didn't get that stake, Joe. But you didn't really mind, did you? Hell, you were going to die anyway. Six months. A year maybe. Like hell you didn't mind. I'm sorry, Joe.

I crept to the desk and took a shoulder holster and a Police Special .38 out of the bottom drawer, moved quickly back into the corner, took off my coat and strapped it under my arm. Then I put my coat back on. It's a tough dollar, isn't it, Joe? It's tough to die, too.

I went out and down the stairs, twelve stories of them. Old Mike was dozing on his stool; he didn't see me go past him to the street. Outside I wondered if I should have brought my raincoat and I looked up at the sky. The stars were out; clear and bright and lonely.

Real pretty stars, Joe.

I STOOD there on the walk, people going past me in either direction, and stared across at the Majestic Hotel. I didn't see anyone and nobody shot at me. I moved quickly down the street to where I had parked my car, got in, drove off. I drove carefully for a while, going no place in particular, until I made certain that I wasn't being followed. A nice peaceful summer night after a rain.

I turned the car and headed west. As I drove along I tried to think, to get it straight in my mind and make it add up to something. It didn't add. A sad-eyed man, an extortion note, a woman whose heart had been breaking for thirteen years and her screwball daughter and her ex-con husband who never came back. And a couple of bodies and a gambler and his redheaded wife and a woman named Linda that nobody knew and a hood with a gun with a silencer on it. I should worry; I was on top of the world. Those two stiffs especially would put me in good with the law. Why don't you use your head, Spain, and call copper now? No, not you; your too smart.

I kept on driving. . . .

I had parked up the street and the doorman smiled as I started to go in. He was a big man, and it was a big broad friendly smile. But he wasn't going to let it interfere with his job.

He said, "Let's see your card." His voice was firm and quiet.

"I just joined the club," I said and I held my hand toward him slightly, the palm up and partly open so he could see the color of the ten-dollar bill I had folded in my fingers.

His smile didn't change. "You a copper?" he asked softly.

"You ever see a cop with dough?"

He nodded almost imperceptibly.



"I guess I know a gentleman." He took the money, cupping it delicately in his hand as if it was a rose. "I never even seen you. But if you get your nose skinned, treat me right. It's the job."

I went past him and on in, gave my hat to the check girl, and down three steps into a large low-ceilinged room trimmed in chromium and with tricky indirect lighting that gave the illusion of another world. There was a bar at one end and a small circle for a dance floor at the other end and only one couple was dancing to the tired band. But the place was crowded nevertheless; Case Andrews was doing a nice business. Far at the back were some stairs. I went over to the bar.

I had a whiskey and watched the room in the blue mirror behind the bar and nobody came over to throw me out even though my clothes were pretty slow for the company I was keeping. All I got was a jaded look of disdain from the barman.

Then I went to the back and up the stairs.

This room had more light. It was still another world: bright, glittering and unreal. Case Andrews was doing a nice business here, too. There was blackjack and roulette and two or three other things I didn't bother to notice. I bought a few chips, a very few, and shouldered my way to the edge of the roulette table. The croupier was a lean bald man with chilly black eyes and an expressionless face. I placed most of my chips on red and to the woman next to me I said:

"I always put my chips on red because black is my favorite color. Do you like boys? Hmmm?" I gave her an idiotic drunken leer.

She didn't even turn to stare at me. She just bit her lip in annoyance. The wheel stopped spinning and the croupier pulled my chips and a lot of others in

with his rake.

"Hey," I said in a loud voice, "look at these robbers haul the stuff in. Doesn't anybody ever win around here?" I swayed a little and tried to bring an alcoholic brightness into my eyes.

THE croupier eyed me sadly, and his hand went below the rim of the table for a moment. The other players had become suddenly still. Then fingers like ice tongs dug into my left arm, and I glanced over my shoulder at a large florid man. The croupier looked past my head and said:

"The gentleman doesn't care to play anymore." His voice sounded bored.

The florid man said, "Come along, little man." He said it very softly and he led me away from the table gently but very firmly. My arm ached from his fingers. People turned to stare at me briefly as we moved between the tables toward the door. When we were standing in the corridor just beyond the head of the stairs, he said:

"All right, small fry, let's see your membership card."

I grinned at him foolishly and lurched back against the wall. "I was slow getting my dues in this month," I said.

He let go of me and stood there, his hands on his hips and his wooden face tight and cold. "Not funny at all," he said, "and I'm damned if I think you're drunk. I'm damned—"

I never let him finish it. I came up fast and laid as hard a punch as I could manage on his Adam's apple.

A couple of dim choked sounds came out of his throat, and he fell back against the other wall and down on his knees gasping. He was holding his neck with one hand and holding himself up off the floor with the other. By this time I had my gun out.

"Get up, fat boy," I said. "We're



going to see the boss."

He dragged himself slowly to his feet and when he was able to speak he said, "What is this, a heist?" His voice was torn and ragged.

"No heist," I said. "Come on, let's go."

He shook his head, said, "You're strong for a little guy." I followed him down the corridor to a large oak door. He knocked.

"Yeah?" said a voice inside.

"It's Nolan," the florid man said.

He opened the door and we went in. The room had paneled walls and a soft dark blue carpet covered the floor. A thin man with silver hair sat behind a broad desk, and behind him stood a blond youth in a flashy green suit. The desk was empty except for a phone and a decanter of whiskey and two glasses, clean and unused. There was a side-boy in one corner and built in bookshelves on the other side of the room that stretched from the floor to the ceiling. The books all looked new and unread. The silver-haired man looked at my gun and smiled faintly and not unpleasantly. The blond started to bring his hand up to his coat.

"Relax, kid," I said.

He let out a snarl, and I could hear his breath coming through his teeth from where I was standing. I closed the door behind me and leaned against it. The blond youth's eyes were as dull as slate and his nostrils twitched as he brought his gun arm back down to his side. For a second or two, I idly wondered how old he was. Twenty? Twenty-one? He was doped up to his ears. He glared at me, his lips a thin, tight line.

I looked at the silver-haired man now and said, "You Andrews?"

"Yes."

"I'm Spain," I said.

"That's swell," Andrews said through his faint shadow of a smile. "That

means a lot to me."

I motioned Nolan, the florid man, more to the center of the room and said, "I'm the private eye."

"Uh huh," said Andrews without meaning.

I MOVED forward, the .38 tight in my hand. "Let's quit horsing around," I said roughly. "A guy named West who was playing with your wife was bumped off this afternoon with an icepick in his apartment. Stop me if you've heard this before. Your wife was there about the time he died. Maybe she did it. It looked like a woman's job. Maybe West told her he was tired of her and she threw a wing-ding and started sticking him with the icepick. And kept on sticking long after he was dead. It was just a messy enough job to be done by a woman. He probably fought with her, but after he got that icepick in his eye the fight sort of went out of him. Did she do it, Case?"

I was breathing hard then, and I could feel my hand cold and clammy around the butt of the gun. Case Andrews' face had gone a little slack.

"Look, Spain," he said in a low nervous voice, "this isn't a shooting play. Why don't you put up the gun and we'll talk things over."

"You're right," I said, "it isn't a shooting play. But just the same, a grifter named Joe Cisco was shot in my office, Case. He'd been watching your wife and West for a couple of weeks. He tried to sell me this because he'd seen me go in and out of the Manchester by the service entrance, and he found I was a shamus and played a hunch and figured I went to see West. But while he was telling me all this, somebody sitting on the roof of the building across the street with a gun with a silencer on it shot him. It couldn't have been your blond torpedo there, could it, Case. He's



all hopped up and he looks like he liked to kill people. Could it be, Case?" My voice was harsh and nasty in my ears.

Case Andrews was smiling dimly again. He didn't answer me. I pulled a cigarette out of my pocket and stuck it in my mouth. I moved forward a little more and said:

"How does it all add up to you, Case? Oh, yes. I almost forgot. An ex-con figures in it, too. The ex-con sent West an extortion letter. Or did you send it, Case? Or maybe West sent it to himself. It gets complicated, doesn't it? The ex-con's name is Harry Ritt."

Andrews jerked in his chair at this last, or perhaps it was just my imagination. The next moment his face was wearing that thin smile again. I took a match from my pocket, nicked the head with my thumb nail and lit my cigarette. The blond youth wasn't such a good actor. His mouth hung open, and he made a hissing sound through his teeth. I waved the match out and winked at him.

Case Andrews said, "You're a fool, Spain. What are you going to do now? How do you figure in this?"

I said, "I think I'll call in the law and see what they think about that gun that's bulging the side of Blondie's coat. And while they're at it, they can ask your wife a few questions."

Andrews looked at the palms of his hands. "I wouldn't like that, Spain. I wouldn't like the publicity. It would be hard on me, hard on my business."

"Yeah," I said, "and the boys down at city hall might find it a little difficult to give you protection after the homicide boys moved in."

"That's what I mean, Spain. It would be hard on my business."

"You didn't kill West, did you Case?"

Andrews laid his hands flat on the desk, and the smile left his face. "You

won't listen to reason, will you?" he said softly. Then he gave a short, soundless laugh. He said:

"Just a little man with a big mouth. Okay, take him, Flo."

I started to twist around, but I wasn't nearly fast enough. I barely caught the shadow of the sap out of the corner of my eye. In the long second before it hit, I wondered how long the man called Flo had been standing there, how long Andrews had let me shoot off my mouth. I hadn't heard the door open; I hadn't heard his steps on that soft carpet. You played it smart, boy, you played it smart. I cursed myself fiercely and then a sharp wedge of pain split open my head.

I didn't have time after I had started to turn to swing back and put a slug in Andrews or his young, blond hood. It happened that quickly.

I was flaying my arms in a dark, icy pool, and a voice a long way off say, "Boy, am I ever going to work this baby over."

Then I stopped thinking, stopped feeling, stopped remembering.

**I** WAS first aware of the glare. It burned through my lids, and I turned my head so that my cheek rested on the damp cement. It hurt to turn my head. The pain came in waves like nausea, throbbed behind my eyes and through my head and died away, a slow, lingering ache in my neck and back. Then I opened my eyes and the basement room lay like a fuzzy vision before me.

It took me a long time to focus clearly. The glare was from the bare bulb dangling almost directly above me. It wasn't a large room and the white washed brick walls made the light brighter than it should have been. But it was a plain room. I thought that it was nice for a change to look at some-



thing that didn't flash with chromium and garish colors. It was so simply furnished. Just a couple of wooden crates and an empty chair and another chair that wasn't empty.

The other chair was tilted back against the wall, and the biggest man that I had ever seen was sitting in it. A Luger hung loosely from one of his hands as if it had been long forgotten, and a dead cigar stuck out of his face. He had large unintelligent eyes that only half looked at me, dreamy and bored.

I laid my cheek comfortably on the cold floor again and closed my eyes. It was so peaceful and cool on that soft wet cement. I could have stayed there forever.

After a while, I looked at the room again. On one of the crates a pint of liquor stood proud and serene beside a tumbler. My throat contracted in a barely audible idiot laugh. I wondered how I could have missed it the first time. I crawled painfully on my hands and knees toward the box, and when I could reach it, I pulled myself up and stood leaning over it, supporting myself with my hands. It took me a minute to make sure I wasn't going to faint. Then I drank straight from the bottle for the second time that day.

Or was it that day? Or was it tomorrow? It seemed a long, long time ago that I had stood staring down at the lifeless form of George West. And Joe Cisco was a fleeting gray shadow in the dark corners of my brain. I felt as if I had been transplanted to another unit of time and space. A sound that might have been the hum of eternity droned in my ears. What day was it anyway?

I gave up trying to think and drank from the bottle again. It was cheap whiskey, and it burned my throat, but it was doing some good. It made my

stomach warm and slowly took some of the stiffness out of my body, and I could feel the blood running back into my fingers. A sharp, loud, rough sound broke the silence of the room.

It was the big man laughing. He sounded like some barnyard animal howling at me because I had fallen down trying to close the barn door. The laughter ended as abruptly as it had begun. He just smiled now, and it was not a bad smile, not an unfriendly smile. He said:

"You're a sight. How you feelin'?"

His voice was a drawl that was soft and gentle for such a big man.

"I'll feel fine," I said, "if I can just get my head screwed back on right."

The big man roared again. "Mac, you're a card."

"Not anymore," I said. "I think I'm going to go away for a long rest."

He laughed, not quite so loudly this time, and shook his head.

"And that's a fact," he said softly.

I WAS able to see him more clearly now. His face was etched with a thousand lines and scars and his nose was a crooked, battered lump. Part of one of his ears was gone and his smile showed me two rows of broken brownish teeth. I tried to give him a wise-boy leer, but the muscles of my face wouldn't respond. I carefully felt the blood caked on my cheek and the bumps on my head and temple and my swollen mouth. So Blondie had kept his promise and pounded me after I was out. I had only a dim idea of what I might look like, but I could understand why the big man might have laughed when I was tipping that bottle. That is, if this was one of his sadistic days.

Then the door opened and Case Andrews stepped into the room, pushing a redheaded woman in front of him. The slim blond youth came in last. The



woman had a full, nicely rounded body, and her tight, low-cut evening gown didn't conceal much of it. The gown was torn, and her lipstick spread from her mouth up over one cheek in a wide smear. Her red hair hung loose and messy around her face. Her eyes were glazed and the lids were red. Andrews shoved her toward me.

"Okay, baby," he said hoarsely, "know him?"

"Never saw him before, Case," the woman said. Her voice was thick with alcohol.

"Don't lie to me, angel."

"I don't know him, Case."

Andrews slapped her savagely. She stumbled against the wall and sobbed. The big man wasn't having any of it. He was staring dumbly at his feet. The blond youth leaned against the door frame, smiling faintly.

I said, "She doesn't know me, Case. She's telling the truth."

The woman said, "Lemme out of here, Case. I'm gonna be sick. I can tell I'm gonna be sick."

Case Andrews looked at her a long time, finally said, "All right, alley cat, beat it upstairs to Flo."

The red-haired woman went out, swaying unsteadily. The blond youth snickered at her. Andrews turned toward me and lighted a cigarette. He blew the match out carefully and stared at me.

"I take it that was Mrs. Andrews," I said.

"Yeah," he answered tonelessly.

I didn't say anything.

After a long moment Andrews said, "Who you working for, shamus?"

I still didn't say anything.

"How did you get on to the Ritt grift?"

It was my turn now. I played it for all it was worth, but inside I was feeling weak. I had to rest my body

against the crate in order to keep from slipping to the floor.

The blond youth forgot his grin. "Let me have him, boss," he said in a voice like thin ice breaking.

I laughed foolishly. "Small time punk," I said. That was a crazy thing to do. He still looked like he was high on the stuff. He might have pulled his gun and let me have it right then.

He made a couple of animal noises in his throat and Andrews raised his hand and said, "Hold it, Rudy."

Andrews stared at me coldly, said, "You better smarten up, Spain. I'm not going to kid . . . Spain! Spain! . .

My eyes had closed, and I had slipped to the floor. It was just too much work to stay on my feet. My head was pounding with pain and my stomach was twisting and turning. Then cold water was splashing in my face. I was still feeling dizzy when I looked up at Andrews.

"All right, Spain. Sit up now and spill it. Who are you working for?" His silvery hair undulated before my gaze.

I was sick of him and the whole business, and I wanted to go to sleep again. I said, "Go to hell, Andrews." I shut my eyes and began falling through space. It was twilight where I was and very cool, and my head stopped throbbing.

A dull, muted voice said: "Take him, Rudy. He needs more persuasion."

Something hard jarred me. It mashed my nose and shook my jaw and my tongue was a large fish swimming around in my mouth. And it was raining in my face.

HOURS later, days later, years later I was tasting whiskey. It was cheap whiskey, but I should care. I didn't care. It was like a plasma transfusion, and its new warmth made my body stir and I fell suddenly out of



space and was on the dank cement floor again.

"Take it easy, Mac," the big man said.

He was kneeling beside me and holding me up with one arm. His free hand held the pint of liquor, what was left of it. He looked into my face out of the same large unintelligent eyes, and he was wearing that same smile.

"Well, well, if it isn't Mother Macchree," I said weakly.

He laughed roughly. "Still the card." His breath almost put me out again.

He helped me up to one of the chairs, and I sat bent over, tenderly holding my head in my hands. My face was sticky with blood. I felt like an old forgotten piece of hamburger.

I said, "How long was I cold this time?"

"Half hour, maybe."

"Seems like years. Did the blond work me over?"

"Yeah. Beat on your face with a gun barrel. I don't hold with that. Beatin' on a guy when he's out." His voice had suddenly become solemn.

I managed a guttural sound. It was the nearest I could come to a laugh. "What's your name?" I asked him for no reason at all.

"Horselaugh Tooney," he said. "Why?"

"Nothing, only you're one of the nicer characters in this plot."

"Huh? Say, Rudy beat on you too long, I think. He and the boss was sure mad at you. But I don't hold with it."

"Nuts," I said, "you ought to see me when I'm in shape. I can go on like this for days."

Horselaugh Tooney bawled with laughter again. I was gripped with a nauseous, sinking feeling, and I had to hold on tight to the seat of my chair

to keep from fainting. When the spell was over, I had to stop and think hard in order to remember where I was.

I said, "Pass the whiskey, Horselaugh."

He got up from his chair and handed me the bottle. I poured a couple of stiff ones into my stomach. I let it soak into my body and in a little while, when I was feeling a little better, thoughts began to move around in my head. I actually began to have ideas again.

"Where's Harry Ritt?" I casually asked Horselaugh.

Horselaugh's face became cold and wooden. "Let's not spoil our beautiful friendship," he said in an empty, far-away voice.

"What does Ritt mean to Andrews?"

"Forget it, shamus."

"What the hell," I said irritably. "What's it to you?"

Horselaugh was silent a long time. Then he said, "It's a lot to me. He took a rap for me in stir, and they put him twenty days in solitary. Nobody's going to frame a murder on him now." The words had a quietly determined quality, and Horselaugh looked at the floor when he had finished.

HE WAS a big, simple brute of a man. His face had felt the knuckles of too many fists for him to have much of a mind left. But then he probably didn't begin with much. Maybe he had a heart. I didn't know. Thoughts came and went like ghosts in my brain.

I said, "That's a laugh. There have been two men killed. Who do you think's going to be the fall guy?"

"You're not funny anymore, chum," Horselaugh said.

"Yeah," I said nastily, "you think I'm kidding. Well, there's a letter that the guy who framed Ritt got before he



was killed. A corny thing. Probably just meant to scare West, but the cops will get it. The letter was made to sound like Ritt had written it. A corny thing made with letters cut from a newspaper and pasted on paper."

Horselaugh nodded. "I take that back, chum. You're still funny. You and vaudeville could make a comeback together."

Dull thoughts kept on pushing themselves around in my head.

"All right," I said, "maybe you'll buy this. Andrews knew his wife and West were playing house a long time ago, but Andrews is a business man. He'd forget his wife before he'd forget his business, and he surely wouldn't kill for her. On the other hand, he doesn't like it either. So he gets an idea. His vanity has taken a wallop, and he gets one hell of an idea. A real mean idea. He digs up Ritt who was the fall guy for West and a lot of the old Masters boys thirteen years ago and calls in his lawyer and probably hires a private dick like me and gets Ritt to sign an affidavit, and his dick gathers more dirt. Maybe he hires two eyes, I don't know. But it's a swell idea. Everybody's happy about it. Andrews and Ritt get their revenge. Why even the boys at city hall are happy. Case probably got their hearty cooperation. West doesn't stand a chance with a fair trial in a clean court and neither would a lot of the other old Masters' boys. The gang at city hall could smear all the old Masters dirt around, and the voters would say my what a clean administration we have now. Yeah, everybody likes it. You like it?"

"No," said Horselaugh in a low voice. He got up from his chair and came over and stood looking down at me, his big fists on his hips. "And shut up," he said tonelessly.

I went on thinking out loud. "Then

everything went haywire. Case's wife has a fit and pokes an icepick in West, and I wander on the scene and ball things up some more. Case half believes I was working for his wife and West, but he isn't sure. All he knows is that now he doesn't want any part of it because murder is in it. If it was just his wife he could leave her to the wolves and walk away from it clean, but now . . ."

"Shut up," said Horselaugh through his teeth.

"But now there's been—"

Horselaugh gave me an open-handed slap that sent me sprawling across the room. I dragged myself to my hands and knees and kept on talking.

"But now another guy's been knocked off. A harmless grifter who could have been bought for nickels and dimes. Andrews must have had his blond wonder watching West, and Blondie spotted the grifter. But it didn't worry him until he went in and found West was croaked after I had been there. Then he followed the grifter to my office and plugged him from the roof of the building across the street. He was probably loaded with the stuff and feeling trigger happy, and he couldn't resist the opportunity to try out his new silencer. A sweet, playful boy at heart. Likes to shoot people. And now Andrews can't walk away so clean. He has to cover up himself and his blond boy. His wife can't take the fall for both murders." I was out of breath, exhausted when I finished.

I GOT wearily to my feet and slumped in the chair. Horselaugh was watching me closely. His large eyes were opaque and lifeless. He didn't say anything.

I said, "And I wouldn't give two cents for Harry Ritt's chances from



here on out."

"You're crazy," said Horselaugh in a dry whisper.

"Yeah, I'm crazy," I said. "I'm punch silly, but add it up yourself. It won't add any other way."

Horselaugh stood in front of me and licked his lips. He looked at me a long time. Finally he said.

"You make a good speech. What if I buy?"

I breathed in hard. "It'd be a good buy," I said.

Horselaugh said, "Harry's in pretty bad shape. He's a boozier now. And in stir he wrapped himself around a can of varnish once, and it just about wrecked him for good. I been takin' care of him. Andrews made us a hot proposition." His eyes suddenly became dark with suspicion. "That was a lie about that letter, wasn't it?"

I felt as if I was balancing delicately on a tight wire. I was afraid of breaking the spell.

"Yeah, it was a lie."

"I thought so," said Horselaugh in his soft drawl. "You'll see."

"Meaning what?"

"You'll see. We're getting out of here."

It was all a dream. A big simple man, and I had sold him a dream. Maybe it wasn't just a dream after all.

"We gotta get past Flo upstairs," said Horselaugh under his breath as I moved unsteadily to my feet.

We went out of the room and softly up some steps. There was a sallow man sitting in a chair reading a paper in the bare room at the top of the stairs. His back was turned, and there was a gun in a holster under his right arm. A left-handed punk. Flo, the guy who had sapped me the first time. Horselaugh crept up behind him, reached an enormous hand around his face and swung his Luger. The Luger

made an ugly sound when it hit Flo's head. I knew how he felt.

Then we were outside and the cool night air was as sweet as wine. I gave Horselaugh the keys to my car and waited for him at the entrance to the alley. He left the Luger with me. It was as cold as ice in my hand. I hoped nobody would come after me because I knew I would shoot to kill, and I didn't want to kill anybody.

"Hey," Horselaugh called in a loud whisper from the car.

And then the car was moving under me. I made Horselaugh stop at an all-night filling station so I could wash some of the blood off of me.

When I was going out, the attendant said, "Say, you better see a doctor, buddy."

I didn't answer him. He stared after me open-mouthed.

A COUPLE of moths were circling the only light in the dismal hallway. In a little while, I thought, their wings will burn and they will fall and die.

Horselaugh said, "I don't know why I'm trustin' you. Maybe it's because you're a little guy. But that won't keep me from mashin' you if you cross me. I'll break you in pieces and eat you up."

"Don't worry," I said.

"I'm not worried," said Horselaugh, "but he took a rap for me once and nobody's going to hurt him now."

"I have to talk with him," I said.

Horselaugh looked at me and patted me gently on the head. "Yeah," he said woodenly. Then he handed me a large flat key. "The door may be locked," he said. "He may be sleepin' one off. I'll keep an eye peeled down here for a while in case the boys come hunting. If he's out, wait till I come up and we'll move him out together. I'll keep the gun."



I nodded and went slowly up the stairs. Somewhere a radio was playing softly. The steps creaked under my feet, and paint was peeling off the dark, grimy walls. Faint music. The all-night record man. I had reached the first landing. A night light burned dim and lonely at the end of the long corridor. The third door. I walked to the third door. The knob was sticky to my hand when I turned it. The door was unlocked.

The night air gently fluttered the curtains at the open window and across the street pale neon spelled "Hotel." I stared hard into the shadowy room and for a long time I couldn't see a thing.

Then I saw the long dark form of the man kneeling over the bed, his face pressed into the crumpled sheets, his arms folded under him. He looked as if he might have been praying. My fingers fumbled crazily in my pocket for a match. The flame flared briefly while I looked desperately for the light switch. It was a thin piece of string hanging from the ceiling. The single bulb glowed a faded, dusty yellow.

He was a lean man. A bare skeleton ankle showed between a sock and a partly pulled up pantleg. There was a neat hole in the back of his head from which a little blood trickled. More blood spread out from under his face on the sheet. I didn't think I cared to look at the exit wound. I felt him; he wasn't long dead.

The room was small and square with one window. Against one of the walls was a chest of drawers and an old-fashioned wooden wardrobe stood in a corner. On the marble top of the chest of drawers was a dirty basin pan and a pitcher, a half-empty bottle of gin, some change, a cheap pair of dark glasses, and a grimy towel. A chair with a cane resting against it was next

to the window. And there was the old iron frame bed with its forgotten burden.

I went to the window and looked out. It was a long way to the sidewalk. I turned and walked to the door. I could distinguish the outline of a fire escape through the window at the end of the hall. The window was closed. The only sound was the faraway radio. I looked at the room again.

It was just a small noise, and I hadn't thought that the wardrobe was large enough to hold a man. A thin, crawling coldness moved up my back and tingled my neck hairs. The door slipped slowly open, and he was crouched inside like some trapped animal. The gun with the silencer seemed enormous in his pale hand. It was the blond youth.

"You're all washed up," I said. "Come on out and shed the heater."

His eyes had the same dull, doped look. He pulled his lips up over his teeth, and I could see his hand tighten around the gun. I could see his knuckles get white.

"Not me, shamus. You." The words came out of his throat like broken pieces of glass.

Then there was a sudden, balanced instant when time ended, when he made a noise that might have been a snarl, and I threw myself at the floor. His gun went off with a sound like a wet rag slapping against something.

And behind me there was another gun. It made a deafening roar in the small room. I lost count of the number of shots. The wood of the floor was rough to my face. It had a taste like bitter tea. And my ears were ringing and there was a strange sound now.

It was silence; the silence had a sound like no sound at all.

I raised my head slowly and looked into the wardrobe. He squatted, his



arms holding his belly, his eyes wide open, his gun on the floor in front of my face. He had drooled a lot of blood on his shirt front. A slim blond youth and quite dead. The smell of powder smarted my raw nose.

I tiredly half lifted myself and, turning, saw Horselaugh sliding down the door frame to the floor. He coughed once, and his eyes had the vacant, astonished look of a small boy's. His legs doubled under him like thick rope, and he slipped into a grotesque sitting position. His head fell forward on his chest, and he kept his Luger clenched tightly in his hand. I thought he might be going to laugh, one of his rough, loud laughs, but he didn't. The queer twist to his mouth was probably an expression of intense pain.

He was dead. Nobody could live with four holes in his chest; not even a big man like Horselaugh.

On my feet, I felt like an old, old man; lonely and bitter and without memories. I stared at the room. Something was still missing. The letter was a lie. Horselaugh had said, "You'll see." Then it came to me from a long way off like a forgotten song, an echo. I might have been standing in a dark, cool forest looking down into the clearest, stillest pool in the world. The cane, the dark glasses, the vision of a man with a can of varnish desperately seeking drunken escape.

Harry Ritt had been almost blind.

Outside in the hall there were sounds of movement and voices. They were cautious sounds. People staring sleepy and scared at the raw edge of the night.

"Well, you've played long enough," I said aloud. "Now you better call in the law, smart guy."

But I stood there a long time, helplessly, while my teeth started to chatter. I couldn't stop my teeth from chattering.

HE SAID, "Just who do you think you are? God? You must love that license of yours. You must think it gives you the right to operate high, wide and law-be-damned." He was plenty sore.

The other one laughed harshly. "Nothing like a half-smart shamus," he said.

It was a small, plain office, and the air smelled stale with old butts. The single bare bulb burned pale in the watery half-light of the early morning. I was on my third cup of coffee and I was beginning to feel alive.

I said, "A guy was knocked off in my lap practically, and I had a client to look out for."

The first one said, "Everybody seems to get knocked off in your lap practically." His lips moved, and he swore silently. He was a tall, stringy man with graying hair and weary, depthless eyes. He was a homicide lieutenant named Harley.

The other one had a sour, ugly face, and he just leaned against the wall with his hands deep in his pockets trying hard to be nasty. I didn't know his name.

I had told Lieutenant Harley about everything including the business of Otto Pressler's sick wife.

"What I don't figure," Harley said, "is a hard pug-ugly like Horselaugh Tooney watchin' over Ritt like a mother." He sighed, and spread his fingers and looked at his palms.

"Stranger things have happened," I said.

"Yeah. Well, you may break clean. You may be lucky and break clean if you've told the truth. None of these politicians will touch Andrews with murder on the books. They'll let him rot before they'll touch him. And I imagine the hush will be laid on with a trowel. So you may be lucky."



The other one withdrew his hands from his pockets and looked at me. "Break clean? Lucky? We ought to pop this guy. He walked away from two stiffs. He's been flyin' high and wide. He must think he's in the air corps."

"Can it, Sam," said Harley.

Sam walked over and stood glaring down into my face. "Was you ever in the air corps, shamus?" He pronounced corps like corpse.

I said, "Why don't you go beat your wife for a while?"

Sam's face went deathly white, and he swallowed twice. Harley jumped up and grabbed his arms.

"Get out of here, Sam!" he said roughly.

Sam said, "Why this lousy little—"

"Get the hell out of here, Sam!" roared Harley.

Harley gave Sam a gentle shove. Sam twisted in Harley's grasp, gave me a long hard look, jerked himself loose and went out, slamming the door. Harley sat down again behind his desk and stared at me and shook his head.

"You shouldn't have said that. He found out yesterday another guy was makin' time with his wife."

I said, "That's tough. I'm sorry about that."

Harley frowned. "You got to understand a guy," he said sourly.

I let out a long sigh. "Yeah," I said, "don't mind me. People have been beating on my head all night."

**WE WERE** both quiet for a time and then the door opened and Sergeant Peters came in.

"Here's the letter, he said to Harley. "It was in his desk where he said it was. The dead guy was there, too. French is still lookin' things over, and the boys are takin' pictures. Everything seems to be pretty much as this guy told it."

He nodded toward me.

Harley said, "Thanks, Roy." Peters went out, and Harley solemnly looked over the extortion letter to George West. Sunlight was coming through the windows now.

Harley folded the letter carefully, returned it to the envelope and stood up. "We'll take this down to the lab and then go get a bite. If you care for breakfast?"

I said I did.

In the hall a cop told Harley that Captain Saunders wanted to see him. Harley went into Saunders' office, came out a few minutes later. He didn't say a word to me until we had left the building.

Then he said, "Ballistics has got the blond kid's gun, but there doesn't seem to be any doubt that he shot Cisco and Horselaugh and that Horselaugh shot him."

"Wonderful," I said.

Harley ignored me. "Case Andrews and his wife have been picked up and Saunders says an assistant D.A. named Chapin is coming right down and rarin' to go. The D.A.'s on his vacation, and this young fellow wants to make a name for himself. We have about twenty-five minutes to eat something and get back before they all swarm in on us."

We were walking across the street toward a sign that said **IDEAL LUNCH**.

Harley said, "Looks pretty much like Mrs. Andrews did it. Swung that ice-pick, I mean. This'll take the wind out of Case for a long time. The desk clerk says she was the only visitor West had all day."

At the entrance to the place, Harley turned and faced me. "You think Andrews can buy his way out of this. You think he just greases our palms and we jump through hoops for him. You



think cops are political stooges." There was a great deal of dignity in his voice and manner.

"No, I said, "I don't. But I don't think this business is as simple as you figure it now."

Harley grunted. "Why don't you cut out this Philo Vance stuff, Spain? You're in enough trouble. You may be selling papers on the corner yet."

I said: "You mean you don't want the true solution?"

Harley didn't answer me. We went into the lunch room.

IT was ten o'clock in the morning.

Otto Pressler seemed to pale slightly at the sight of my swollen face. I put my hat on his wide mahogany desk and sat down and said:

"Your girl seemed a trifle slow on the up-beat. New?"

"My secretary had to leave me rather suddenly," he explained. "Her father died out west. That girl is something the agency sent over. I'm afraid she isn't going to be satisfactory. What in the world happened to you?"

"Just about everything," I said. "Including a few more killings."

"Good God!"

"The police know everything now," I said, lighting a cigarette. "It's about all settled. Want to hear it?"

He nodded.

"Last night after I talked to you, I had a visitor. That was why I had to hang up. He was a grifter named Joe Cisco, and he had been watching your brother-in-law for a couple of weeks. It seems George was having clandestine meetings with the wife of one of our local tough boys, Case Andrews. He wanted to sell me this information, he figured I was hired by somebody like you to dig a little dirt up on West, and this looked pretty good to him. Then somebody shot him from the roof of the

building across the street with a silenced gun.

"That left me more or less up a tree, and two men had been killed, and I had you, my client, to act for. I hadn't done anything up to that point but attract trouble the way honey attracts flies. So I stuck my neck out. I decided to stir up a little more trouble and maybe the lid would blow off of whatever it was holding down. I went to see Andrews and shot off my mouth and made quite a few wild guesses, and the lid came off the works. And I got this." I made a vague gesture with my hand at my face.

Otto Pressler gave me a worried frown and shook his head. "You shouldn't have done it. Have you been to a doctor?"

I said, "No, but I don't feel so bad now. Anyway, I'm paid to stick my neck out. That's part of what I sell. And this time it worked. It seems Andrews knew about West and his wife, and he had cooked up his own private punishment for West. He had dug up Ritt, our missing man, and talked to his lawyers and uncovered a lot of the old slime connected with the Dubois school thing. He had a pipe line into city hall with a couple of politicians at least, and it seemed a fine idea to the boys with the present administration. He was going to have West indicted for his part in the school scandal, since West was never brought to trial. That was what he had planned for West until West got killed.

"Then Andrews got worried. His wife had been to see West that morning, and the icepick looked like a jealous woman's work. Also, one of his gunmen, a blond coke hound, spotted the grifter who came to see me and got trigger happy and shot him."

"From the roof of that building?" said Pressler in a shocked voice.



"That's right. So now Andrews figured he better get Ritt out of the way, and the blond killer shot him. I don't know whether Andrews wanted Ritt actually killed, but his blond hood shot him anyway. The blond liked to kill people."

"Liked?" said Pressler.

"Yeah. A big, likeable lug named Horselaugh Tooney shot him. So it's all over. The law is handling it from here on out. They've got Andrews and his wife down at homicide now. They're grilling his wife."

Otto Pressler swallowed and said in a halting voice, "About Louise . . . Mrs. Pressler will . . ."

I said, "Your wife? I don't think the police will bother her at all."

Pressler nodded. "It would seem that I owe you a great deal, Mr. Spain."

I made my face polite, noncommittal.

**P**RESSLER reached in his desk and took out a large checkbook. He wrote hurriedly and handed the check across to me. It was for five hundred dollars. He said:

"I hope that will compensate you for your injuries, and I want to thank you for everything."

I said, "The money is fine, but don't thank me."

He looked a little startled. "You're an odd sort, Spain," he said, "I don't believe I've ever met a man quite like you. Tell me about the letter. Was that part of Andrews' scheme?"

I folded his check in my wallet and put out my cigarette. "No," I said, "it wasn't."

"Then my brother-in-law sent it to himself. It was a plan of his to extort money from me as I suspected."

"No," I said, "you sent it and it was a pretty bad touch. It made the whole thing look slightly sour from the beginning. I won't say that I knew you sent

it from the beginning. I didn't. But it should have occurred to me."

His entire face went loose, and a fishy kind of sickness spread over it. "That's absurd," he said in a gritty whisper.

"No, it isn't," I said. "They looked at that postmark down in the police lab. It was dated last week some time. You said George West received it yesterday."

"But that's only what he told me."

"All right, we'll let that go for a time. It can be proven that West didn't leave the building all day yesterday, and you said you saw him, and he gave you the letter. Yet the clerk at the desk says he only had one visitor. This came out when the police questioned him. That visitor was Case Andrews' wife."

"But—"

"Yeah, I know. You went in the service entrance the same way I did when I found the body. Only you went in first and you killed him. You were lucky Joe Cisco didn't spot you the way he did me. You must have gone in about the same time Andrews' wife was coming out. That's how he missed you."

"But—"

"Okay," I said, "stall if you like." I got up and went out of the room.

I returned in a bare minute with Lieutenant Harley and a cute little girl of around nineteen who pounded a typewriter in the large outer office.

I said, "This is Lieutenant Harley of Homicide, Mr. Pressler."

He just sat there staring wordlessly at all of us. He seemed numb with fright.

"And I believe you know Miss Rogers who has worked in your office for the past ten months."

He still didn't answer. Miss Rogers shifted nervously on her feet.



"All right," I said to Harley.

Harley took a framed photograph of an attractive dark-haired woman from under his arm. The woman might have been anywhere between thirty and thirty-five. The picture bore the inscription: *to George with love Linda*. He held it up so that both Miss Rogers and Otto Pressler could see it.

He said, "Do you recognize the person in this picture, Miss Rogers?"

Miss Rogers looked at Harley and at Otto Pressler and at me. Her eyes were frightened. I nodded to her.

"Yes, I told you," she said in a small voice, "That's Mr. Pressler's secretary, Miss Standish. Her father—"

I said, "What's her full name, Miss Rogers?"

"Linda Standish. I don't know her middle name."

"Thank you, Miss Rogers," said Lieutenant Harley. "You can go back to work now."

The girl went quickly out. I grinned at Otto Pressler.

"You said you didn't know any Linda," I said.

He still didn't speak. His face was oily with perspiration.

I said, "I don't know yet how you worked the letter business. I can make a guess though. You mailed the letter one day and went over to his apartment the next morning. You stopped at the desk, told the clerk that you would take your brother-in-law's mail up to him. Going up in the elevator, you took out your letter from the several letters the clerk had given you. You planned this sometime ago, didn't you?"

Otto Pressler's watery eyes were very sad. "Yes," he said simply.

I said, "You want to tell it?"

"There isn't much to it," he said in

a strained voice. "You probably won't believe this, but I cared for both my secretary and my wife. It was just that Louise was so ill for so long, and then Miss Standish came to work for me, and . . . well, we were always very careful as to where and how we met, but somehow George found out. He had been blackmailing me for some time. He made life pretty miserable for me, and when I told Linda about it, she thought it best that we go our respective ways. I couldn't have stood that, and so I planned to kill him. I thought up the letter scheme and felt that I was very fortunate that the date on the postmark was indistinguishable. Apparently indistinguishable, that is." He paused and ran his tongue over his lips.

"It didn't happen exactly as I had planned, however. I really intended to shoot him. I had the gun in my pocket. Then he showed me that picture." He nodded at the photograph of Linda Standish in Harley's hand. "I don't know where or how he had gotten it. Linda didn't give it to him. The inscription is in his handwriting. But he thought it was a fine joke. I lost my head and reached for the first weapon at hand. The icepick. I would rather not talk about it any more, at the moment. Do you mind?"

"No, we don't mind," said Lieutenant Harley. "You'll have plenty of time to talk later, Mr. Pressler."

I took his check out of my wallet, tore it in half, and laid it on his desk. I hadn't thought I would ever feel sorry for a murderer.

Outside, just before we climbed into the police car, I glanced at his face. It was gray as old dough in the glittering summer sunlight.

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# BUY VICTORY BONDS!





I watched him go down the stairs . . . a man whose life was near an end.



# Am I a Murderer?

by **KEN KESSLER**

**Is a doctor guilty of murder if he  
deliberately makes a mistake in diagnosis?**

**I**T'S only fair to say, in my own behalf, that my business is to save lives, not destroy them. What happened to Tom Heath was thrust upon me by circumstances and pursued, God knows, as a secret joke which both amused me and served my ends.

It all goes back to Ann Parnell. Had it not been for her I might have lived a

normal, happy life. Possibly I would have married some likely girl and traveled the course of a successful physician, serving my community and enjoying its homage and respect.

Seizing upon a day and saying, "This is the day I began loving Ann," is like defining your first moment of consciousness. It can't be done. It was





either in kindergarten or early grade school—and forever after.

The day I left for college, with nine years of med training stretching ahead, Ann cried, "I'll wait, darling." She was seventeen then. I believed her, without taking into account her youth.

Looking back, I can't blame Ann for what happened. Tom Heath was our age, a friend of both of us. Tom loved her too, and perhaps as far back as I did. Knowing Tom and his ideals, I'm sure he would have avoided her if he'd known how I felt. As it turned out, he didn't.

Put it down as the price I paid for nine years absence. Or as the toll exacted by my profession. Probably the latter, which explains, through some twist of the subconscious, why I used my profession to get back what it had cost me.

The shock came when Ann failed to meet the train. I'll never forget running up the steps to her house. It was May, and the garden was blooming. Tulips, and lilacs, their buds almost purple. It was Springtime, love-time. Why hadn't Ann met me?

She was waiting but not on the porch, nor with her arms yearning for mine. She came to the door, her hair the color of honey, her blue eyes radiant. "Hello, Ivan," she said. The way she said it, I knew. With two little words she destroyed everything I'd dreamed and planned.

"Ann," I said. I flung open the screen and embraced her. But she was not for me. She had told me in two little words.

"I don't know how—" She pulled away from me. "It just happened." She looked up. "Oh, Ivan, you've got to understand. Tom Heath—"

"Tom Heath!"

At the sound of his name her face lighted up. "I've never known any-

body so fine, so honest."

"Fine and honest, huh?" My fists clenched. "Moving in while I was away working to give you a decent, secure life."

"Oh, no, Ivan," she protested. "Tom didn't know. I never told him. After you left—well, it wasn't the same. I guess I grew up. I couldn't help it."

TOM happened by a few minutes later. He walked in, head up, eyes clear. "Well, Ivan," he yelled. Tom was tall, pale and sallow.

"I wish you both a lot of happiness," I said. It was a lie and not of the harmless, sportsmanlike variety. It was like catching a glimpse of yourself in the mirror the morning after. What you see isn't pretty. I didn't wish them happiness. I hated Tom suddenly. Yet I was able to lie and, strangely, make them believe it.

"Thanks, Ivan," Ann exclaimed, relieved. And Tom clasped my hand. "We want everybody's blessing," he said.

"I'm putting out my shingle soon," I said. "Anytime you need a butcherer, come around."

Ann laughed. Her laughter was like church bells on a still Sunday. Tom cleared his throat. Tom didn't laugh. "I may take you up, Dycus," he said. "Just for a check-up."

"Tom's been working too hard," Ann explained. "After his father died, Tom took over the business. Already he has almost doubled it."

"Sure, drop around," I told Tom.

. . . Two rooms, one for examining, the other a reception room, that was my office. No nurse. I couldn't afford unessentials yet. Eventually Tom came for his check-up.

"Head aches continually," he explained. "Pains in my stomach. Ann thinks it's overwork. I'm not so opti-



mistic. We're to be married next month, June. I want to be physically worthy of her."

His statement—I called it corny—caused me to smile. "Let's have a look. Drop your shirt."

His face was grayish, his eyes somewhat sunken, but he'd always tended toward the cadaverous. I slipped the stethoscope in my ears and listened to his heart thump-thumping along, beating its rhythm for Ann, for her love which, rightfully, was mine. Suddenly, as I listened, the idea began to formulate.

It came too quickly to be clear. Understand, I was a young practitioner, brimming with good intentions and the Hippocratic oath. But in the dark corners of my mind, something stirred. "I can't be sure, Tom," I said ominously. "Leave me a specimen. I'll analyze it. Come back in a few days."

Diagnosis—in part, at least—is the art of knowing when a patient is organically sick or functionally disordered. The latter often stems from the mind, and not infrequently is the result of fatigue. Tom was overwrought, working himself twenty hours a day, building security for Ann. Always it came back to Ann.

I thought it out carefully. Physically, he could be built up in short order with rest and diet. But why not let him worry? Let a year elapse, or until he went to another doctor. I could always plead misdiagnosis. Doctors have done it before. Meantime, I'd be seeing Ann.

I didn't examine the specimen. I didn't deem it necessary.

My little act was all rehearsed when he returned. "I'm sorry, Tom." I looked him straight in the eyes. "Anybody else, it wouldn't be so difficult, although it's never easy to give a patient bad news."

He smiled lamely. "I can take it." "Diabetes," I said.

He was silent a long moment. His head dropped and he swallowed hard.

"Gastro-intestinal pains, headache, generally run-down; it all adds up. But don't look so forlorn. It isn't fatal."

"In a way it is." He looked up but he wasn't seeing me. "Incurable isn't it?"

I NODDED slowly. "With regular injections of insulin, the diabetic lives a comparatively normal life. Certain symptoms will persist, perhaps. Polydipsia, excessive craving for water; polyphagia, inordinate desire for food." I was playing on his imagination. "The mind is an important corollary of medicine, whatever the disease.

"I'll never be well. That wouldn't be fair to Ann."

I didn't answer. His own mind could do that better than I, and more effectively.

He straightened his shoulders. "I couldn't. No—"

"I'm putting you on a special formula of insulin. Fact is, I must insist you use no other, because of the formula." I put my hand on his shoulder. "But don't expect a miracle. It will take time before you commence feeling better."

He followed me into the inner office. I pointed to a large bottle on one of the shelves. "It'll be right here. Stop in as you go to the office. I'd prefer making the injection myself rather than letting you do, as some diabetics, shoot it at home."

I filled a syringe with the clear liquid—a harmless isotonic saline solution almost identical to insulin in density and appearance. "Daily, at first. Later we'll lengthen the intervals. Perhaps, when we see what happens, Ann can—"

"I don't want her to know." He was



so intense he startled me. "I'd rather nothing was said."

"You know best," I agreed quickly. My whole plan had depended on what he'd just said. And it'd worked!

Revenge? Call it that. Hate? Not of the kind I'd felt for him when Ann jilted me. Nobody could hate Tom directly and besides, it was now nothing personal. He could have been Dick or Harry. Tom merely represented an obstacle who, by his own integrity, could be removed.

The next time I saw Ann—weeks later—was at a country club dance. She came unescorted. She looked lovely, and weary.

"Where's Tom?" I asked innocently.

"Tom—broke our engagement."

"I'm sorry," I said.

The presence of other people kept her from weeping. "I'm glad he found out before we were married."

I caught my breath. "Found out what?"

"That he didn't love me." She put her hands to her cheeks. "Oh, Ivan, please take me home. I shouldn't have come."

I did, with pleasure. And by careful strategy I managed other times. Slowly—agonizingly slow at first—she bowed to time and began sluffing off her love for Tom, like skin sluffs off of an old flesh burn.

Little things. That's how the change came. Friendship modified into affection. The touch of her hand, the light kisses at the end of an evening. Someday, I decided, I must tell her about Tom's "illness," just to keep everything, as far as she knew, aboveboard. The time wasn't quite ripe yet.

It was another six months when we were parked by the lake, watching the moon on the water. I kissed her, and for the first time her lips parted and she gave herself into the embrace. "Darling," I whispered, "marry me."

She took a long time in answering. Finally she said, "Yes, I think I will." It was a queer answer, but at last Ann was mine!

After that she started dropping into the office. Why not? It was to be as much hers as mine. But she never mentioned Tom, even after bumping into him once or twice. He came regularly, still looking pale and wan, with lines coming in his face. Worry, and perhaps doubt over giving up Ann, I thought. His eyes were always sad when he looked at her.

And underneath I was laughing at him. My periodical examinations were mockeries of medicine.

ONCE, when Tom left, Ann said, "There's something about Tom neither of you have told me. Oh, I know that he tired of me. That's understandable. But there's something else."

Jealousy stabbed through the confidence I'd gained. "Worried about him? You're engaged to me now. Tom's worries are his own. Unless—" I added sarcastically—"you're still in love with him."

"He's an old friend. I'm interested, of course."

Telling her was a gamble I had to take, but waiting till now reduced it to a minimum. I didn't want her to find out after we were married and throw it up to me.

So I told it straight. I could, because I'd come to believe it myself now. That fact is important. It helps to explain what happened later. Maybe, in some way, it helps to justify what I did.

"But diabetes is no longer serious if its victims stick to their insulin." I chose my words carefully. "Tom's as well today as ever. He knows it. It couldn't have had any bearing—"

"So that's insulin." She pointed to



the bottle on the shelf, which I'd showed her. "Watery looking stuff to be so important." She got up to leave. She kissed me. "It was big of you to tell me this, Ivan. I think you're—swell."

"Thanks, Ann." My heart leaped. It was what I wanted her to say! The last hurdle was crossed!

Her telephone call the next morning gave me a shock. "Ivan, quick, it's Tom!" Her voice was frantic. "I'm at his apartment."

"His apartment? What are you doing there?"

"Don't be unreasonable, darling. Tom's fainted. I found him lying on the floor, dressed. He looks as if he has been unconscious all night."

"Very well," I said evenly. "But I can't examine him there. I'll send an ambulance." I clicked the phone and called the hospital, giving the necessary instructions.

I damned myself for being jealous. Ann was square. Tom disgusted me, worrying and working himself into a coma over a lost cause! Why didn't he get tight and sleep it off?

Tom was pale, still, as the attendants carried him in. Ann walked behind the stretcher, a puzzled expression on her face.

One whiff of Tom's breath was all I needed. The acetone—rotten apple—odor. I was stunned. An incredible numbness stole over me. There was no longer any need for acting, or for the impotent bottle on the shelf. Tom needed real insulin, and quick!

I rushed to the store-room where I kept medicines infrequently used, and got insulin. But there was no use in hurrying. The diagnosis I'd made in mockery had returned to laugh at me. As Ann had said, he was probably stricken the night before, hours ago. His mouth gaped open as he fought for air.

I watched helplessly as his chest lashed out for a final breath, and failed. Ann gasped. Tom looked up at me, pleading, questioning. Then he died.

I WENT outside, got into my car and drove for an hour. Chills crawled through me like living things. Am I a murderer? I asked myself over and over.

If I was, then strangely, I felt no remorse. It was a blow to my professional ego. I'd made an irrevocable mistake. I believe I would have felt better about it had I made a correct diagnosis and deliberately altered the treatment. Which, maybe, I'd have done. As long as he was alive, Tom was a threat.

I thought of Ann, and felt better. It had been worth it. Yes, a thousand times. Ann would be waiting for me at the office. She could explain why she went to Tom's apartment.

Ann was there, and so was Dr. Rogers, from the hospital staff, and two plainclothes detectives. Tom's body had been removed. One of the officers touched my wrist. I thought he wanted to shake hands. "I'm Dr. Dycus," I said.

"We'll get to know each other better, doc," he snapped. Handcuffs feel cold, inexorable against your wrists.

Ann set in a chair, rigid and dry-eyed. I said, "Ann—"

She gazed up, hurt in her eyes. "I wanted to tell you, Ivan, I went to his apartment because I had to know. I found out that I didn't love him any longer, not the same way. No, I killed my love for him and gave it to you. Or rather, you took it for yourself. Now that's gone too. Somehow I'm glad. It wasn't quite right, ever."

Dr. Rogers, tall, austere, held the damning bottle of saline solution in his hand.

"Miss Parnell brought this to me," he



said. "As a result of your telling her he'd be all right so long as he was treated, she grew suspicious. She noticed that when they brought him in, in diabetic coma, you rushed for a different bottle—real insulin."

"Yep, she's told us the whole story, doc," the detective sneered. "We fig-

ure you let him die deliberately. The D.A. can build a tight case around that bottle, and her story."

The protest that surged to my lips died away. Dr. Rogers grunted disgustedly. I gazed at Ann, but she didn't look up. The detective gave my wrist a tug. . . .

## KEEP 'EM JIVING!

**A**N IDEA invented by youngsters—a juke joint run by kids—is proving in many towns a solution of the teen age social problem. Given a chance to help run the show, they can produce the kind of fun that attracts teen agers into a decent place of their own instead of drawing them to the beer joints.

Such youth centers are the ideas of the kids. The common meeting point of all youngsters consists of a juke box, plenty of cokes, and some furniture you can put your feet on. They busy themselves with all kinds of games, war work, athletic leagues, orchestras, and discussion groups with such youth centers.

Most of the "drop-in spots" are on the solid side. Open every afternoon and evening for the little jives enjoyment. The youngsters don't mind to clean up and scrub up knowing the place is really their own.

Dancing and cokes alone won't hold the high school crowd forever. You want other things too.

Some youth centers have pool tables, a workshop, lounges, pianos, a hot-dog stand, a monthly newspaper, all sorts of games from pingpong to darts, and even weekly radio programs as well as juke boxes.

The problem that faces every youth center is the curious caste system of age. Sixteen-year-olds do not swarm about 13-year-olds. Different centers have found different solutions to this snobbery by holding certain days for one age group and other days for the other ages.

The rate of delinquency arrests can be greatly reduced by amassing the jitterbugs in such fun centers. No one pretends youth centers are a cure for delinquency, but they have proved to be a way of preventing situations that lead to delinquency. Youth centers have proved that the teens can solve their own problems and that their own idea of a good time is as mystifying, as wholesome and as generally all right as the high school boys and girls themselves.—*Lee Standish.*

## THE MURDERED CONSUL

**T**HERE was much excitement in diplomatic circles when the news of the German consul's death first came to light years ago in Santiago, Chile. The circumstances which surrounded the case indicated that foul work had been done—and the Chilean government did not know how to appease the irate representatives of Germany. That the man had been murdered could not be denied for the charred skull and bones in the furnace showed that before the body was burned the head had been cracked open with a blunt instrument. The German ambassador called in to examine the remains was in a rage and threatened that war might be brought down on the frightened Chileans. The safe had been robbed of a fortune in cash, negotiable securities and important papers.

The Chilean government promptly began an investigation, and hardly had the case opened before the absence of the janitor of the building was noted. Immediately he was assumed to be the guilty one, but it was not until a medical expert was called in on the case that the true story was brought to light.

Dr. Valenzuela noted that the murdered man was reported to have been in his late fifties, yet

this skull had an almost perfect set of teeth. The German consul's widow, when questioned on the subject, revealed that her husband's teeth had had much dental work done on them. The dentist's records substantiated her story. Then the patient Dr. Valenzuela asked the janitor's wife the same question and found that the man had lost only one tooth in his life, a fact which tallied with the charred skull.

When the chief of police was presented with this startling new evidence, the warrant against the janitor was torn up. They now knew him to be the victim, not the killer. It was the consul who had departed with a stolen fortune in his valise.

The fleeing criminal was captured at Chile's southern border, and he was hanged for his crime.

The diplomatic tables were turned. The German government was now forced to make apologies and offer restitution. The large sum of money which they turned over to the nation of Chile was used to build and equip a modern dental college. Citizens who receive this valuable health service are seldom aware that a murder was responsible for it all.—*Pete Boggs.*



## WHAT ABOUT CRIME?

**I**F YOU are 17 years of age, the F.B.I. is interested in you today. Among all arrested persons that is the age that predominates, with age 18 a close second.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation crime during the last year had the greatest upsurge since 1930. The increase over 1944 alone was 12.4 per cent. And teen-agers, the Bureau reports, are responsible for a large proportion of it.

A glance at the percentages of crimes committed by young people gives an accurate picture of this appalling situation: Those under the age of 21

committed 30.1 per cent of the rapes; 33.5 per cent of the larcenies; 35.2 per cent of the robberies; 49.9 per cent of the burglaries and 61.1 per cent of the auto thefts.

Every 20 seconds a major offense was committed in this country in 1945. Every 6 minutes a rape, felonious act or a killing occurred. But if you happen to be a citizen of either North Dakota or South Carolina the F.B.I. has encouraging news for you. These were the only states in the U.S. in which there was no increase in crime.

—June Lurie.

## "FOOLPROOF" SURGERY

**J**OHAN DILLINGER often boasted of the foolproof surgery a crooked doctor had performed in obliterating all trace of his original fingerprints and giving him a "new" set. After his death Department of Justice operatives examined

these new prints. They found over 300 points of identity, twenty-five times the number necessary in a court. In addition, the scars were still fresh. Scars only affect the ridges temporarily, and in time they resume their natural formations.

## THE "FUGITIVE" FREED

**A**HAPPY ending has at last been written to one of the most tragic stories in penal history. Robert Elliott Burns, author of the autobiographical book, "I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang," returned to that state recently and received a full pardon from Governor Ellis Arnall.

Burns, the father of three children, had been sentenced to serve from six to ten years in prison for a \$5.80 holdup. In 1922 he made his escape from a chain gang, left the state, and wrote a book about his experiences which made him famous and eventually led to his pardon.

## HOW NOT TO BE A SPY

**A**HIGHLY scientific system of espionage and counter-espionage was developed during the Franco-Prussian War, and as a result of the clever intricacy of some techniques, a number of agents were caught in their own snares and literally found themselves trailing themselves!

Gustave Lügner, a German police official, was the inventor of just such a complicated counter-espionage system. When he discovered that he had fallen into a trap prepared by his own assistants to catch him acting as a traitor, he committed suicide.

## THE BARE MOTIVE

**"G**O AND see if you can find some diapers for baby!" an irate mother told her husband.

Among shortages in Britain these days baby's diapers are an almost impossible article to obtain. According to London police, that's probably what led to the attempted theft of a baby shop re-

cently. As two men were discovered burglarizing the store, they dived through a plate glass window and made their escape. Apparently the only article the thieves had intended stealing was diapers, for the store's entire stock of them had been ransacked and piled on the floor, ready for removal.

—A. Morris.

## THE DEAD PAST

**S**OME mysteries are easier to forget than to explain. One of these is the discovery of one of history's greatest hoaxes, a matter of a royal substitution.

In 1938, Holyrood Castle in Edinburgh was being reconditioned by a crew of workmen. Several of the men noted that directly over the entrance to the apartment once occupied by Mary Queen of Scots, a great stone sounded hollow. Thinking to repair it, they removed the stone. To their amazement, they found that what they had uncovered was actually a tombstone, for in the small niche lay a tiny but elegantly wrought oak casket. Inside the coffin they found the skeleton of a newborn male child, clothed in fine linen garments under a robe of purest gold cloth. On the robe was an exquisitely embroidered letter "J."

Historians who heard of this strange event

were drawn to speculation. King James I had been a coarse, heavy-boned man, with the bearing and mannerisms of a peasant. This was surprising in light of the features of his parents, for his mother, Mary of Scotland, and his father, Henry, Lord Darnley, were both delicate small-boned and refined people. It would seem then, that the pathetic spectacle in the little coffin was the rightful son of Mary, who had died as an infant, and the man who had reigned over England was really an imposter, a peasant's child whom she had substituted for her dead son.

The implications of the discovery were so startling, that the best solution seemed to be to do nothing at all. The coffin and its contents were duly photographed. Then they were returned to the crypt, and the stone was cemented back into place. Behind that hollow stone, the mystery rests.

—Rosetta Livingston.



# WHERE THERE'S SMOKE...

by Stewart Sterling

(Continued from page 69)

sume that the killer would stop now.

His idea was evidently to remove everyone who might be able to tie him in with the death of Lownes. That left quite a list of possible candidates for the next attempt which probably would be made quickly.

The most reasonable conclusion he could arrive at was that the next try would also be on the life of the man who came so close to getting shot up there in the Tower Building. But there were other possibilities. Ross, Kelsey, Gaydel, Toleman . . . *'round and 'round again, Willie!*

Wasn't this a pretty dish to set before the Commissioner! Well, the ill wind in Horatio Street had blown some small good; the head of the Fire Department couldn't very well block the Bureau from investigating *that* conflagration. Officially, he might frown on duplicating the work Sime Dublin would pretend to be doing; unofficially, Pedley knew he would have the Commissioner's hearty approval.

But the journalistic anvil chorus would begin its knocking before many more hours had passed—unless the firebug was caught. Editorial writers never asked for any better opportunity than a chance to pan city officials who failed to protect the citizenry.

HE TOOK his headache out to the plunge. The baldheaded man was there at the edge of the pool, testing the temperature of the water and shuddering with anticipation.

Pedley hooked his toes over the tiling, swung his arms, knifed in with scarcely

an after-splash. He let his body glide through the cool greenness with the force of his dive, was aware of commotion in the water alongside. He took a lazy under-water stroke to bring him to the surface, felt fingers clutch at his shoulder.

For that first brief instant, he supposed the other man had dived too close to him, was merely horsing around in the manner of kids grabbing each other under water. But the fingers didn't let go. Another hand clamped itself on his neck, kept his head beneath the surface of the pool.

Pedley tried to roll over to see if the man whose hands were now at the Marshal's windpipe understood what he was doing. Then the Marshal knew; heavy elbows pressed down on his shoulders, forced him toward the bottom of the pool!

The man on top had everything in his favor. The surface position, the weight, a fresh lungful of air inhaled about the same time Pedley had been ready to come up for a fresh breath. Also, the man who was trying to drown him had the advantage of the initial grip.

But the strangler might not have the special ability every smoke-eater is forced to acquire as a matter of course—the ability to get along on a thimbleful of air for half a minute beyond the ordinary limit of lung endurance. Pedley would have to make the most of that.

He kicked, threshed, rolled. The man at his back followed every maneuver.



Pedley used knees and feet. The hands clamped more firmly around his throat.

One foot touched cold tile. The side of the pool. He made a convulsive effort, twisted on his side. The man rolled with him.

Pedley didn't have much left. He put it all into one backward lunge. His head butted back against the man's chin, banged the other's skull against the side of the pool with bone-cracking force. The fingers at his throat loosened . . .

THE Marshal sucked in some water as he drifted up to the surface. He was too exhausted to do more than dog-paddle, gasping and gulping until the mist cleared from his eyes.

He swam slowly to the edge of the pool, caught at the ladder.

There was no one else in the plunge room.

He climbed out as fast as he could make it, ran along the side of the pool, saw the white form magnified by the water against the green tile of the bottom.

He ought to leave the murdering dog there with that thread of pink trailing up through the water from the bald head.

But he dived in, swam under, locked a forearm beneath the unconscious man's chin. It took several periods of hauling and dragging to get the heavy body out of the pool, onto the tiling.

He rolled the bald man over on his stomach, held him up, let the water drain out of his lungs. Then he straddled the barrel-like torso, began the forward-pressure on the shoulder-blades, the rhythmic back-sway and the Schaeffer count.

He never knew how long it took. But his arms were numb and his knees without feeling when the man began to

breathe steadily.

"It's not the recommended position for recuperation, you pot-bellied hog," he said close to the man's ear. "But you're going to have your wrists tied behind your back."

He used his own belt for the purpose. Then he slipped the rubber key-band from the bald man's neck, padded through the steamy hall in straw slippers and bathrobe until he found a lock the key fitted.

The first thing he saw on the bed was a wig. A toupe of shiny black hair, neatly parted.

"Staro!" His eyes lighted up. "It's about time somebody took your scalp!"

## CHAPTER XX

"BARNEY? I'm up at the Bosphorus. With a cute little customer, name of Staro. Yeah. Reason we had difficulty digging up the low-down on him is that his name is Lasti . . . *L* as in lethargy, *A* as in arms of Morpheus, *S* as in sleep . . . Yeah, As-taro Lasti . . . Staro for short. He and I are about to split a tea for two over at Combination Thirty-six . . . That's right . . . and we'd feel lonesome without company. Would you be so nicely as to bring MacCarthy over there? . . . but right away. And listen, if the Commissioner gets itches in his britches—you don't know where I am, what I'm doing or when I'm going to show."

He hung up the phone, went back to the pool-side, where a gnarled-oak individual was rubbing horse liniment on the prostrate man's bald pate.

"Thanks for holding the horse's head, Johnnie."

"It stopped the bleeding, Ben." The proprietor of the Bosphorus was apologetic. "But the guy doesn't seem grateful. Confidentially, he says it stings."



"Doc," grunted Staro. "Get me . . . to a doc."

"You're more likely to need the services of an undertaker before I'm through with you." Pedley rapped Staro's fingers with the barrel of his gun. "Rise and shine."

Staro stumbled unsteadily to his feet.

"Can'tch take a little roughhouse, without getting sore?"

Pedley shoved him toward the dressing-room. "Slap that wig on and get dressed. Don't waste time looking for your bill-clip or your keys or such. I've got 'em."

Staro made one more try, as he was putting on the gaudy shepherd plaid trousers with the exaggerated pleats and cuffs.

"Maybe you hadda little right to a peeve, pally. I useta play a lot of water polo an' sometimes I forget myself, splashing around inna pool."

"I know how it is." Pedley observed the orange and cerise tie with wonder. "I'm about to forget myself, too, in a few minutes."

Johnnie said: "If you want any help with him in the car—"

"No thanks, Johnnie. He'll go out like a lamb."

Before they went down to the car, Pedley locked one cuff of the bracelets around Staro's right wrist.

"Stick your mitt in your coat pocket and keep it there, fink."

At the borrowed sedan, he ordered the bodyguard to sit by the right hand door.

"Bend over. Put your right hand under your knees. Now the left one, same way." The other cuff clicked shut on the man's left wrist.

"Jeeze, I can't even sit up," Staro complained.

"You're lucky you're able to breathe."

COMBINATION Company Thirty-six was still playing house-maid to the apparatus when Pedley unlocked Staro and marched him in from the street.

Some of the men were doing "committee-work"—cleaning the brass, buffing enamel. A couple were re-loading dried hose in horseshoe loops.

This was one of the crack outfits, a combination engine and hook-and-ladder company with one of the best records of quick "stops" in the whole department. It was also the successor to Pedley's old hook-and-ladder outfit; he knew the building as most people know their homes and some of the old-timers as well as the average man knows his own family. They wouldn't interfere with what he had in mind; they wouldn't let any prowling patrolman cut in on the deal, either.

"Hi, Marshal." A pair at a checker-board saluted.

"Hi. How's the tournament?" He kept Staro moving toward the back room.

"Mitch loses two straight after he has a King advantage. The yap's trying to play according to that *How to be a Champion* book . . . but he can't remember the moves when he's at the board."

"Try playing with quarters instead of pieces. Makes you more careful. I want the back room for a while. Okay?"

"Help yourself."

"If we make a racket in there, it's just because I'm showing my side-kick some *jui jitsu* holds."

The back office was a small room with bare brick walls, one window, a radiator, a brass standpipe with a siamese coupling, a row of shelving on which were mounted helmets and trumpets of the three-horse-hitch era, a wall map of the fire district, the signal box, the assignment board, a green steel desk



and three straight-backed chairs.

Pedley jammed Staro down into one of the chairs. His aim wasn't too good; the heavy man let out a yip:

"Lay off! You ain't gonna third me!"

Pedley closed the door. "Look, Staro. Ordinarily I don't believe in banging a rat around. You get a squeak out of him but it doesn't stand up in court. This is different."

The bodyguard didn't try to conceal his fear, as the Marshal went on: "I'm not going to give you the works because you did your best to drown me, though I wouldn't want you to think I'm forgetting that. But I'm not going to stick to the letter of the ordinances with a murdering slob who's been running around town starting bonfires to burn up people."

"I didn't have anything to do—"

"Hold it. I know you're not the boy-behind-the-scenes. You aren't big enough. You couldn't make that kind of crime pay enough. But you probably rigged up those fires. And I suppose you were told to fix my wagon because Mister Behind-the-Scenes thought I was bloodhounding around too much and might be lucky enough to come up with the answers. Now, I'm going to find out who he is. It's strictly up to you how I do it."

Staro licked the knuckles Pedley had rapped with the gun.

"You can talk now and I'll take you down to the prosecutor's office to make an affidavit. You might even arrange it to cop a plea on account of turning state's evidence. It's been done."

"I don't know anything about the fires, so you can put me under the light all you wanna. I won't be able to tell you nothing."

"Suit yourself, Staro. By the time you get ready to squawk, the surgeons will have their hands full putting you

back together. And I mean it."

**B**ARNEY arrived with a canvas bag about as big as himself. He barely glanced at the man in the chair.

"Where you want MacCarthy, boss?"

"Set him in that chair, Barnabus."

The fireman untied a heavy cord at the top of the bag, pulled out a life-size dummy made of sailcloth, with leather joints at knees, hips, shoulders and elbows. The thing was weighted to approximate that of an average man; its flat canvas face was crudely painted with horror-stricken eyes and open mouth.

"Borrow a doughnut from the boys, Barney." Pedley propped MacCarthy up so the dummy faced Staro.

Barney came back with a tight, round roll of fire-hose.

"Hook up the standpipe, Barney." Pedley wrapped the dummy tightly, from neck to waist, in coil after coil of the hose, mummy fashion—carrying the hose around the back of the chair on each loop.

"Generally use Mac to train the boys in rescue work," he explained to Staro. "He's not made to stand this kind of treatment. But it'll give you a rough idea of what to expect." The Marshal opened the window, stuck the nozzle end of the hose out of it. "Let her go, Barney."

Barney turned the brass hand-wheel on the standpipe. Water rushed through the hose, swelling each coil instantly to a rough hardness that constricted the dummy's torso so the canvas neck swelled, the arms stuck out straight at the shoulders, a ridge of stuffing swelled out between two loops that weren't overlapping. The dummy stiffened as if in its death agony.

"Hold your water, Barney."

The clerk shut off the stream at the



nozzle. The dummy sagged limply.

Staro's eyes bugged. "You can't pull that on me. *You'd kill me!*"

"Not right off." Pedley unwrapped the dummy. "Kind of messes you up inside, of course. Ribs can't stand much of it. Ruptures you, usually. I know one case where a guy took fifteen seconds of it before he caved."

STARO swallowed morosely. "I don't even know what you want me to tell you."

"Who sent you after me?"

"Some guy rings me on the phone. Says you were the one murdered Ned Lownes. I didn't know you was with the Fire Department . . . or I'd never—"

"How'd you know I was at the Bosphorus?"

"This guy who calls me up and says you'll be at the Tower Building an' all I hafta do is wait an' pick you up."

"Oh! You were at the Tower Building!"

"Yeah."

"Wouldn't have had a .45 with you, at the time?"

"No."

"Hm. Well. You didn't recognize this voice that told you to push the button on me?"

"Nah! I guess he was trying to disguise it—"

"Couldn't you have thought up something original?" Pedley looped a coil of hose around the bodyguard's neck. "That old mahuska about the unknown gent on the phone who put you up to it. Lift your arms so I can wrap this around your chest."

Staro struggled. Pedley put his hand in the man's face, pushed his head back.

"No!" Staro choked. "Don't! For crysake! I'll tell you!"

"Do it sudden." The hose went around the bulging midriff.

"It was . . . Hal."

"Is that right?"

"Hal Kelsey. He gimme five hundred, in advance. I was to get another five if you go to a cemetery."

## CHAPTER XXI

"HAL KELSEY, hah?" Pedley sat with the back of a chair between his knees, rested his elbows on the top of the back. "Did he pay you to torch the Brockhurst, too?"

Staro fingered his throat tenderly. "I had nothing to do with the fires whatsoever."

"You'll be all set with an alibi."

"One you won't be able to finagle, either. I was on East Fifty-first from two o'clock yesterday afternoon until around ten o'clock last night. Until I could get a bondsman to bail me out."

"The East Fifty-first Street police station?"

"Look it up on the blotter, you doubt my word."

"What'd they pick you up for?"

"D and D. It was Ned's fault, tossing a bottle through the bar mirror like that, because they wouldn't serve him no more in his condition. But it was my job to be fall guy so when the cops come, I says I'm responsible an' they run me in."

There was nothing he could do about that, Pedley knew. Whoever had set the fire at the theatre had been *at* the theatre. If Staro had been in the lockup all that afternoon, that put him in the clear, so far as the Brockhurst was concerned.

"Don't congratulate yourself, my slug-ugly friend. I can still keep you making little ones out of big ones for ten to twenty. Keep a loose upper lip and tell me why Kelsey wanted me rubbed off the blackboard."

"Honest to God, I don't—"



"Now, now. Barney's only out putting Mac in the car. He'll be back in a minute. And the hose is still handy."

"It was something about that leather case . . ."

"Here we go again!"

"You could gimme the squeeze with that hose all day an' that's all I know about it."

Pedley reached out, cuffed the bodyguard on the side of his head so the toupe fell over one of Staro's eyes. "You worked for Lownes. You were with him when he was under the influence, which was most of the time. You know where the case is—"

The man cringed, readjusting his wig. "I know where he kept it."

"Sing."

"In his safe."

"I didn't see any in his suite."

"At the office."

"Where's that?"

"Ambrose Building."

"You have a key to the office?"

"*You* got it. It was in my pocket."

"Yeah. Know the combination to the safe?"

"Nobody knew it but Ned." The answer came just a bit too readily.

"He wouldn't trust you with it, I can believe that. But you'd be around when he was schwocked and had trouble opening it. You know the numbers, all right."

Staro shook his head.

Pedley picked up a loop of hose. "This is where you came in."

Before the canvas touched him, Staro yelled: "Right nineteen, left two, right eight."

"Must be one of those old tin cans the Wells Fargo people threw out in ninety-six. Okay. Put your foot in the road. After we get there, if you claim somebody's switched the combination, I'm likely to shove the hose right down your throat and give you

the full blast."

THE signal box rapped out a brassy *bing-bing-bing-bing*, as Staro shuffled out of the office ahead of Pedley. Neither the boys at the checker table nor the ancient Dalmatian snoozing under the hook-and-ladder paid any attention to it, Thirty-six only rolled on boxes in the 800 to 900 group.

One of the firemen called:

"Want to sit in for a while, Marshal?"

"Not this afternoon. I have a couple of jumps to make, in line of duty."

The offices of Lownes Enterprises, Incorporated, were something unusual for Tin Pan Alley. The furnishings were Victorian; there were old hunting prints on the walls; not a piano in sight. Not even a casting couch.

The safe stood in a corner of Ned's private office. It was a Mosely, *circa* 1910, painted black and gold; nineteen, two and eight opened it on the first twirl. There were ledgers and papers and blue bundles of legal documents; in the cash compartment, a small stack of ones and fives with a little silver. But no leather case.

"I thought it was too good to be true," said Pedley. "He wouldn't have kept it here."

"I saw it in there," Staro insisted.

"How long ago?"

"Maybe a month or a little more. It was the day she was in here fighting with him."

"Leila? What about?"

"This Conover she's been honeying up to. She's goofy about the guy. Ned gives her the razz, gets the case out of the safe an' waves it in her face. 'The Lieutenant wouldn't be so cuckoo about you, if he knew what was in this,' he says. 'An' I'll show it to him, if I have to, to keep you in line.'"

Pedley swung the safe door shut,



twirled the knob. Somebody else was trying to get into the office. A blurred figure showed through the ground glass of the outer office door.

A key made noises in the lock.

"Face the wall," Pedley whispered to Staro. "Don't turn around. Unless you want to know how it feels to get hit with a .38!"

The hall door opened. Sime Dublin's voice said:

"You keep the key. I'll keep the warrant, superintendent."

Pedley strolled out. "And when he got there, the cupboard was bare . . ."

**T**HE Captain of the Special Headquarters Squad raised both hands in mock disgust.

"Don't tell me you've been balling things up again, Benny boy!"

"If you're after that leather case, it's numbered among the missing, Cap. But I have something to repay you for your trouble. A slight token of my regard for you."

"I can bear up without any expressions of your fond affection." Dublin squinted, suspiciously.

"Notwithstanding . . . come on out, polo player."

Staro backed away from the wall, grudgingly, into the Captain's line of vision.

Pedley inclined his head toward the bodyguard. "Meet the gentleman your teletype's been chattering about—Staro Lasti."

Dublin scrutinized the toupe carefully.

"The Police Department's been co-operating to locate this man, Bennie. Now you have your dukes on him, he's your pigeon."

"I'm through with him, time being. You can take him in for felonious assault, attempted homicide."

"Who'll sign the complaint?"

"I will. He came close to cutting me down in my prime, couple hours ago."

Dublin held out a hand toward Staro. "If you'd learn not to bungle these things."

Staro said: "Go on. Kid me."

The Captain raised bland eyebrows. "Would you deny the Marshal's word?"

"Of course," Pedley drawled, "I can take you in and book you, myself, Staro. I'd have to park you in my office for a while, though . . . and I expect Barney will have told home of the lads—"

"I'll take my chances with the cops," Staro gritted. "I ain't admittin' a thing, understand, but if I'm gonna be arrested, I'll prefer it to be by the police."

"The Marshal," Dublin selected his words with care, "is only running a bluff on you, Staro. He can't take you into custody. Not any longer."

Staro spat, resentfully. "The way he was socking me around!"

Pedley walked close to the Captain. "Who says I can't pin a charge on this dirty heel and make it stick?"

"The Commissioner!" Dublin was astonished. "Hadn't you heard? You've been suspended, Benjamin."

**P**EDLEY went to the phone on Ned's desk. Dublin wouldn't have risked making a crack like that unless it was true . . .

Barney filled in the blanks.

"There is something underhanded on foot, boss. Are you alone?"

"No."

"Then I'll mention no names."

"Go ahead."

"Word gets around on the grapevine that a certain party with whom you were to have a conference after lunch isn't so anxious about that report on the Bureau as he is about something else."

"Want me to guess?"

"Your health, boss."



"My *what?*"

"It comes up that he'll ask you to take an immediate physical—some sucker having suggested you aren't precisely in the pink at the moment."

"See what you mean." After thirty hours without sleep, a couple of burns and an underwater catch-as-catch-can, hyped up on coffee and benzadrine—he'd be in great shape to take a physical!

"There'll be a doc at the meeting, so the little bird says, and after the business with the stethoscope and so forth, the aforementioned party will suggest a temporary retirement . . . on full pay. Don't sound like such a bad idea, to me."

"It sounds putrid, Barnabus. But there's more than one way to skin a kitty."

"Which way do we take?"

"The now-you-see-it, now-you-don't routine."

"Elucidize."

"I'll be unable to keep the engagement. Press of business. For the good of the Department."

"Roger."

"If anyone wants to know where I'll be, ask him to contact Captain Dublin at headquarters."

He hung up, touched the brim of his hat to Dublin, said: "Be seeing you on the roller-coaster, sometime," and walked out.

## CHAPTER XXII

FOR some hours he hadn't given a thought to food; now, suddenly, he was ravenously hungry. He drove to Dinty's, found the corner table vacant, ordered an outsize sirloin.

While he waited for the chef to broil it, Pedley made inquiries about Hal Kelsey. The orchestra leader's hotel said Mr. Kelsey wasn't in, they ex-

pected he'd be at the studio. At the International Broadcasting Company, somebody in the production department said the Marshal could talk to the control room in Studio 8H.

That didn't help; the anonymous voice from the control room was obviously disturbed, but Kelsey wasn't there, they didn't know when he'd get there or if he *would* . . .

It struck Pedley as peculiar; after he'd mused over the steak and french fries it began to appear significant. He went up to the skyscraper city where the IBC broadcast originated.

He came into Studio 8H through a door marked *Do Not Enter When Red Light Is On*. The red light wasn't on, but beside it a frosted panel proclaimed *Rehearsal*.

The auditorium was empty, except for two actors playing gin rummy in the front row, and a scattering of privileged visitors in the rear. The stage was a clutter of activity.

Against the huge gold back curtain with its black sequin message—*Winn's, the Coffee of Connoisseurs*, a score of shirt-sleeved musicians picked at violin strings, blew experimental scales on woodwinds, tuned up guitars and bass viols, rustled score-sheets on their racks. The sweated individual on the podium, consulting with a trombonist, wasn't Hal Kelsey.

At one side of the stage, an angular brunette addressed a microphone with a full-throated *ah-ah-ah-ah* to the tune of *do, mi, sol, do*, casting an anxious eye toward the control room.

Four young men in tuxedos put their heads together, nodding and emitting sounds like *hodel-e-yo, hodel-oh*. At the center microphone Wes Toleman enunciated inaudibly with one eye on the sweep second hand of the control room clock.

The talk-back emitted a sepulchral,



"Quiet, people." It was Chuck Gaydel's voice. "We'll take it straight through for time. Thirty seconds."

Through the rectangle of plate glass at the side of the stage, Gaydel's expression was tautly apprehensive, Pedley thought. Maybe that was just rehearsal tension . . .

The studio bedlam died away. The sweated man turned half around so he could see the producer. Gaydel's hand went up. The baton rapped twice, was raised aloft. The second hand of the big clock circled around to vertical.

Gaydel flipped a finger at the leader. The baton swung down. The orchestra hit the opening bars of the signature. Wes Toleman lifted his script, poised for his cue.

OLLIE came through a door beside the stage, searched the studio as if looking for someone. She saw Pedley; her gaze met the Marshal's blankly; she tiptoed a few steps, craned her neck at the stage, fluttered a hand at Toleman and smiled entrancingly.

After a moment, she tiptoed back to the door, went out. Pedley waited until Toleman had announced . . . "Patsy Ludlow, the singing star of *Rainbow Every Morning*" . . . and Patsy began her throaty blues. Then he made his way inconspicuously to the door through which the tall girl had disappeared.

She was waiting for him; held out her hands. "I thought it was about time you were showing up, darling."

"How's my favorite undieworld character?"

"Doing as well as might be expected of an alleged grass widow with a susceptible nature. I just phoned your office. Barney said you were officially off the reservation."

"The Commissioner wishes to relieve me from active duty."

"He *does*?" Olive's eyes opened very wide.

"Doesn't think I'm fitten to be up and about my chores."

"I hadn't heard a word about it, Ben. Honest. City Hall must be acting up."

"The broadcasting boys are afraid I'll make a wreck out of a million dollar baby. So, I'm a zombie, time being. Dead on my feet but still capable of giving folks the jeebies."

She patted his arm reassuringly. "Let's go up to my royal box . . . I've found something. But I'll be an old woman in a shoe if I know what it is."

On the way, he told her about Kim.

"I read about it, Ben." Her warm, friendly eyes were disconsolate. "There was a paragraph about the rescue. I thought that might have been you."

"No." He followed her through a long hall, up a flight of stairs. "I should have saved her before the fire. I let her get away from me. Killer followed her down to the Village . . . or made her go down to her place with him."

They went into the client's booth. There were big easy-chairs, a cigar stand, a loudspeaker. They looked down on the stage through a duplicate of the control room window.

"Sponsor's pew, isn't it, Ollie? How'd you rate this?"

She threw back her coat, crossed nice legs. "Sit at the side there, darling. With the lights off in here, they won't see you." She let him light a cigarette for her. "I'm supposed to be the niece of the vice-president in charge of coffee bean bags or something. Wesley's so anxious to please anyone connected with the Winn account that I didn't have to go into details."

"You always were a fast worker."

"Toleman's so easy. We're going places this evening. To dance, he says."



I think his attentions are somewhat less honorable."

"That wasn't your great discovery, I hope?"

"Oh, no. Did you notice an air of consternation among the control room biggies down there?"

"Gaydel's tense as a fiddle-string. Anything more than show-strain?"

"Kelsey's done a vanishing act. No one's seen him nor seek of him since he left his hotel after breakfast this morning."

"Um." Pedley listened to the Wasson arrangement of *Make Believe*. "Any ideas as to where he might have gone?"

"Not exactly. But half an hour ago, just before the rehearsal started, my lustful cavalier confided that he doesn't think Kelsey's going to show up at all."

"What's his angle?"

"Wesley has his doubts whether our orchestra leader will ever be seen around these parts again."

"Reasons, if any?"

"That's as far as we got when he had to go preach the merits of the fresh-roasted morning cup of joy."

"He suggested that Kelsey was behind those fires?"

"No. Is he?"

"No savvy." He patted her knee casually. "No ketchup one piece evidence. You findum."

"That leather thingumabob Barney mentioned?"

"Pandora's box. Belongs to Leila."

Olive leaned toward him. "Is she really as stunning as they make out?"

He nodded solemnly. "Only female I ever met who can hold a candle to you." He bent over and kissed her ear. "Keep on with that illicit romance. I haven't checked little Wesley off the list yet. I'm going down and ask him a couple of leading questions now."

THE quartette was laying into some four-part harmony; nothing but the rhythm section was playing when he came into the studio again. Wes Toleman sat on a folding chair beside the stage, reading a *Radio News*.

Pedley walked up behind him, laid a hand on his shoulder. The announcer's eyes swiveled to the left, his head and neck remained rigid. When he caught sight of the Marshal's overcoat, he relaxed, turned around.

"Did you find my pencil?" he whispered.

Pedley shook his head, pointed toward the control room. "You don't have to spiel for a few minutes, do you?"

"No." Toleman followed him to the passageway leading to the control room.

After the sound-proof door had closed behind them, Pedley said: "What's with this Kelsey lad?"

"That's one for *Information Please*."

"Hasn't called up to say what's delayed him?"

"No!" The network man was vehement. "And if anyone should ask me, I don't believe he will."

"Think he flew the coop?"

The announcer flashed his eyes nervously at the control room door. "It's just one man's opinion. I really haven't a thing to go on except I know Hal's been eager to be top dog in the show and it was Ned who always threw him for a loss."

"Why wouldn't he put Leila out of the running instead of lighting a fire under her brother?"

"That wouldn't have done any good," Toleman explained earnestly. "Ned would still have the contracts with Winn. It isn't Leila who matters. I probably wouldn't have thought anything about Hal if it hadn't been that he and Kim Wasson got along so badly. But when she got so terribly burned,



too . . ."

"If Kelsey was in on that one, he must have one of those dual personalities. It would have been impossible for him to have been there because he was up at the Starlight Roof when the blaze was primed."

"He could have had someone helping him, couldn't he?"

"Wouldn't put it past him. What are you holding out?"

"Sir?"

"You must have some reason for tying up Kelsey into these crimes. What is it? Does he have the axe out for you, too?"

Toleman held himself primly erect. "It's a matter of complete indifference to me what Hal Kelsey thinks. Whether he likes my announcing or not won't affect my standing with the network. It isn't that at all!"

"You're warming up. Get hot."

"Well, there *is* something. It didn't seem of any particular importance at the time. But since he hasn't seen fit to come to the studio today . . ."

Pedley controlled an impulse to swing on the announcer's chin. "I'm tuned in. Proceed."

"Everybody on the show knew better than to offer Ned Lownes a drink of anything stronger than root beer. It's been kind of an unwritten code, that when the folks stop at a bar before rehearsal, they'd all avoid taking Ned with them. He always wound up with a jag and nearly always caused trouble. Yet yesterday afternoon Hal was at the Telebar with Ned, buying liquor for him as fast as Ned could put it away."

"You were there?"

"Yes. I saw them. And my personal opinion is that anyone who'd pull a filthy trick like that would do *anything*. And if he's gone further with his schemes than he originally meant to, he'll be afraid to show up again."

## CHAPTER XXIII

AS PEDLEY opened the control room door, the announcer's voice came through the speaker:

"Until next week at this same time, when Winn's, the Coffee of Connoisseurs, brings you another great show featuring Leila Lownes, the Barber Shop Boys, and Hal Kelsey and the Gang . . . this is Wes Toleman saying 'So-long' for Winn's—the coffee you find on the better breakfast tables from coast to coast."

The music swelled up to a final crescendo. On the stage, the sweated man's baton quivered with the final downbeat. Faces turned toward the control room.

Gaydel glanced at the figures his assistant was making on the script, pushed the talk-back button:

"Nice knittin', kittens! It comes up *good*. Everybody back at six sharp." He took his finger off the button so his voice couldn't carry outside the control room. "Holy jumping . . .!! You'd rock 'em . . . in a deaf and dumb asylum. You'd be a beg-off . . . in Timbuctoo. Kay . . . rist! We can't go on with a turkey like this!"

The engineer said: "Patsy's not bad."

"She's not good," Gaydel snorted. "She's not Leila. Cliff Etting isn't Hal. The whole show's a hash-house special." He wheeled about dejectedly, saw the Marshal, groaned. "All I need now is to have *you* mucking around for a while."

"Might not take up too much of your valuable time." Out in the studio, Pedley could see Toleman talking animatedly to Ollie. "Place around where we could get a quickie?"

Gaydel took him to the Telebar, on the ground floor, ordered a double gin buck.



"Set a bonded bottle right here," Pedley told the waiter. "And leave the rest to me." He poured a drink. "Your program's jinxed, seems like, Gaydel."

"I won't go on, tomorrow, without Kelsey."

"Then, according to Toleman, they'll play recordings during your time."

"Wes is a blubber-mouthed yawp. Hal will turn up."

"Toleman thinks your band-boy has taken it on the lam because he's responsible for Lownes' doing a shuffle-off."

"Horse radish! Hal wouldn't have touched a hair of that dipso's head, much as he may have wanted to."

"How about you?"

"I'm in no mood for jesting."

"Give me a quick panorama of your whereabouts last night, after I shooed you out of Ned's suite."

"Pleasure. I beat it home, had dinner with my wife and youngster. We went over the plans for our new house up in Westchester, quit along about one o'clock. I went to bed. Period."

"Ought to be able to verify all of that. Where you live?"

"Marble Hill."

"Ten, eleven miles down to Horatio Street. If all is according to Hoyle, you'd be excluded from the Wasson thing."

GAYDEL brooded into his drink. "Kim's getting hurt like that hit me a hell of a lot harder than Ned's getting killed."

"All part and parcel. Same bug, same motive. Don't suppose you could do what Miss Wasson was about to, before she landed in the hospital . . ."

"What?"

"Tell me something about Leila's past. That leather case you were looking for—that must contain something

out of the dear, dead days beyond recall. Obviously it's something she's anxious to hush up."

The producer held out his right arm, touched the bicep.

"I'd cut it off, right up to there, before I gave you anything to use against Leila."

"Take off your armor, Sir Galahad. Don't put a girl's reputation ahead of her life. Or other folks' lives. This fire-setter's going to keep on until he kills somebody else. Once he started covering up one crime with another, he won't be able to stop. Lownes, Wasson—maybe you."

Gaydel ordered another double buck, put half of it under his belt before he made up his mind.

"All I know is what I read in her press books. I've got those. I doubt if you'd find anything in them that Leila wouldn't want the world to know about."

"How far back do they go?"

"Since Lownes & Lownes were wowing 'em in the bush leagues."

"I'd like to take a crack at them. Where are they?"

"My house."

"How's about running up there with me?"

"My God!" Gaydel looked at the wristwatch Leila had presented him. "I've a million things to do between now and six. I'll call up my wife and ask her to show you the clippings. Won't that do?"

Pedley said it probably would. . . .

The Van Doorn Arms looked down upon the sparkling blue of the Hudson and the oily swirls of Spuyten Duyvil; on a clear day you could see most of Manhattan from the Gaydel apartment. The rooms were like the view—big and pleasant.

Mrs. Chuck was a good-looking woman with henna-dyed hair and a figure



that implied dieting. She wouldn't be any competition to Leila in a bathing-suit, but she was agreeably wholesome and probably a straight-shooter. Pedley liked her.

She was even more distressed than her husband had appeared to be.

"I'm half out of my wits, Mr. Marshal. . . ."

"Pedley."

"Of course. Mr. Pedley. You'll have to excuse me, I'm so fidgety about Chuck. If he keeps on having insomnia about the show the way he has—"

"Keeps him on edge, hah?"

"He's been lying awake half the night. Getting up, prowling in the ice-box, playing solitaire—to get so he can take as much as a catnap."

"This been going on for some time?"

"Well . . ." She hesitated. "It's been worse the last couple weeks. He's so sensitive to people's reactions. It upsets him when things don't go along smoothly." She brought out three large imitation-leather books. "These are the clippings. You aren't going through all of them . . ."

"I'll browse around in 'em for a while, if you don't mind."

"Make yourself at home."

HE HAD just located the press book for the year 1939 when a vision in pink and chocolate wafted into the room. She was about five, very bright and alert. The pink was a corduroy jumper-dress; the chocolate, around her mouth.

"I'm Gwenny," she announced.

"Hello, Gwenny."

"My whole name's Gwendolyn Elizabeth Gaydel but they call me Gwenny for short. I'm five. How old are you?"

"Ninety, going on ninety-one, way I feel, Gwenny." He skipped around in the yellowed, manila pages. . . .

"*Lownes Clicko at Bijou.*" "*Dance-*

*song Duo Held Over Another Week.*" "*Looker Can Warble Too.*" Norfolk, Canton, Steubenville papers. Mostly good notices. A few n.s.g. "*Fifty-fifty Act*" read one excerpt from a Trenton sheet . . . "*The Lownes team, brother and sister, got boos and applause in about equal proportions on their three-day stay here at the Academy. The down-thumbs were for Ned Lownes' time-tested eccentric steps; the clapping hands for Leila's blue-cooing. The routine of this pair could stand some brushing up.*"

"What you looking for?" Gwendolyn put a sticky paw on the corner of the press-book.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be looking," Pedley answered.

"My mother says you're looking for people who set fires."

"Did she say that?"

"I like to set fires, mister."

"Well, that's a habit lots of little boys and girls have, Gwenny. But it's an awful bad habit."

"Why?"

"It destroys things. Hurts people." Pedley found a cutting from the Baltimore *Evening Sun*:

"*The Lownes & Lownes twosome, new to these boards, received a rousing welcome here yesterday (9th). Ned L. clever with his feet and Leila doesn't have to be clever, with what she has to show the customers.*" The clipping had been marked with red crayon.

Baltimore, he said to himself. That rang a bell, didn't it? Baltimore . . .

"My daddy says sometimes fires help people instead of hurting them." Gwendolyn was practically in his lap, now.

"When did daddy say that?"

"Last night. And he said that he wouldn't blame Leila if she'd burned the old theatre down—" she was breathless—"and killed that nasty old man."

"I don't expect daddy meant it just



that way, young lady."

"Yes, he did, too. Because he said he knew all the time Leila was going to do it sometime and the sooner it was over the better. Do you know Leila?"

"Well," Pedley said. "I *thought* I did."

He took the Sunpaper clipping with him.

## CHAPTER XXIV

PEDLEY phoned from a cigar-store booth on Two Hundred and Thirty-second Street:

"Mr. Molloy? Good evening, Mr. Molloy. Have you had your nightly ptomaines yet?"

Barney said: "No, sir. I have not."

"High time you corrected this state of affairs."

"Yes, sir."

Pedley hung up.

He drove down the West Side Express Highway without using his blinkers and he didn't once run through a red. He crossed town at Canal, went south again, turned the ignition off around the corner from Park Row.

At the cashier's desk in Ptomaine Pete's he paused.

"Pete."

"Top of the evening, Marshal." The apple-cheeked proprietor ducked his head in greeting.

"I'm not here, if anyone calls."

"You're not here." Pete made it a statement.

"You haven't seen me. I'm dead and I'm going to be buried in one of your back booths."

Pete didn't bat an eyelid. "I'll liquidate anybody who says diff'rent."

Pedley had finished his second cup of black coffee laced with bourbon before Barney limped down the long row of tables.

"Whose dish of cream have you been

lapping up, Barnabus?"

"I'm derelict in my duty, boss." Barney stood as straight as he could, considering his game leg, tugged at his bow tie, hiked his belt up over the paunch that was just beginning to make itself show. "I forget to bring you a highly important document."

"Consider yourself bawled out."

"The Commish will be annoyed, I fear. 'Twas an order of temporary suspension, boss. Under Rule Twenty-two of Department Regulations, such an order becomes effective when and as received. And there it is—a-laying on your desk. You ain't received it."

"Pity. Doesn't appoint any acting Marshal, does it?"

"Uh, uh. Under Civil Service, Chief of Department's supposed to take over, isn't he?"

"Yeah. Hanneford would be nominally in charge tomorrow morning. Only he's at that convention in Chicago."

"You think maybe the Commissioner thought of that?"

"He might have. He's learned the First Lesson of City Hall: people don't care so much what their public officials do, as what they say." Pedley filled his cup with Pete's special extra-strong coffee. "Ollie hadn't heard a thing about the suspension."

"She hadn't?" Barney was plainly astonished. "But I thought—"

"So did I. Just goes to show. You and I aren't the only ones who don't trust females. Eat hearty. It's on the firm."

"I COULD eat the saddle off a cop's motorcycle." Barney ordered clam broth, chicken cacciatore, salad Ptomaine and mince pie. "There's no word of that ex-paratrooper or whatever he is."

"Marine. Lieutenant. He's a starker, Conover is. Had to be, to prow around



behind Jap lines, couple of weeks at a time. Shaner hasn't picked him up at the Lownes apartment?"

Barney shook his head. "Ed calls in, howsomever, with a request for you to ring him back."

"I'll get around to that in a minute. What about that list of cleaners?"

"I got everybody working on it, boss. No trouble to check Ross's wardrobe. Or the Gaydel fella's. Still working on Kelsey, Amery, Toleman and Miss Lownes."

"It might be the clincher. But if the boys haven't brought in Kelsey's suits we're likely to be s.o.l."

"Why?"

"The ork leader is numbered among the missing. Hasn't been heard from since he left his hotel this morning."

"Guilty conscience?"

"I wouldn't think so. But from what Staro said, it could be. That sweet thing, Toleman, put in his two cents worth . . . and *it* points to Kelsey, too. In any case, we'll need that report from the cleaners to go into court. Anything new on the candy box?"

"Came from Schraffts."

"That's a great help. Hardly anybody buys candy at Schraffts except five or ten thousand people a day!"

"This was one of those holly-day gift packages."

"Now you're closing in! Practically nobody bought those!"

"Give us time, boss."

"Hell, Barno! We can't afford any more time. I'm not thinking about the suspension, either. That lightning-bug is going to strike again, you can bet on that!"

"Yeah. They've got that box under the lenses, now. By morning they may be able to tell you the name of the dentist who filled the cavity that ached when the guilty party chewed on the bon-bons. Say, there was another call

for you. From a girl name of Bernard."

"Amery's secretary. What'd she say?"

Barney pulled a *Racing Form* out of his pocket, studied hieroglyphics pencilled in the top margin. "I thought maybe you'd wish me to be accurate in this matter, so I took it down in shorthand."

"I'll get around to calling you Friday, presently."

"She said: 'Mr. Amery wishes to inform Mr. Pedley that the insurance policies on Mr. Lownes will amount to two thousand five hundred dollars, that he died intestate as far as can be determined, that the estate will probate a little less than forty thousand after repayment of funds which are the property of Lownes Enterprises, Inc., that stock in that corporation is of no par value and was owned by Mr. Lownes, five hundred shares, Miss Lownes, four hundred ninety shares, Terrence Ross, ten shares. Mr. Amery will be at home this evening if Mr. Pedley wishes to call him.' Boy, whatta mouthful. What's intestate?"

"Means died without leaving any will. A stew-bum like Lownes would have done that."

"Who gets the dough, then?"

"His sister, I expect. She'll also get those shares in the corporation—which is herself. That might be an angle."

"You don't think she bumped off her own brother?"

PEDLEY took his time about answering. "I wouldn't exclude it as a possibility. She had a lot to gain . . . and she may have thought that even if she was found out, a jury would refuse to convict her on account of the way Lownes had treated her."

"But, boss! That would mean she's the one who blew up the Wasson kid's



apartment, too."

"We can't write that off, either. But one thing sure, Barney. We'll be two of the most unpopular people in town if we have to bring this home to an 'idol of the air-waves.'"

"You can't believe she did it!" Barney held knife and fork poised halfway to his mouth. "Two fires. Two murders. To say nothing of putting this Staro up to nearly giving you a case of permanent pneumatism. I couldn't believe it."

Pedley added more whiskey to the coffee. "She had motive and opportunity to do the Brockhurst job; she had opportunity and a possible motive for touching off the Horatio Street one. And she seems to have most of the crew who work with her, covering up for her."

"Ah! If all this assorted arson was to keep what's in the leather case out of the public purview, why'd she have set the fires *before* she had the gimmick? Why wouldn't she wait? This way, the police might turn it in or some smartjacks newsman might lay hands on it—spilling the beans to hell and gone."

Pedley regarded him quizzically. "Every once in a while I get the cock-eyed notion that the Bureau would do better if you were in my number elevens and I was in yours. This is one of those moments, Mr. Molloy. The query you've just propounded has been buzzing around in my head for several hours. I don't know the answer. The book says a detective should never admit he doesn't know which end is up. But I don't know."

Barney reddened. "I was just shooting off the cuff, boss. But there are still a few other prospects for the defendant's chair, not so?"

"Sure. Several. Toleman. Kelsey. Conover. Which reminds me . . ." He

put his napkin on the table, headed for the phone booth.

SHANER mumbled incoherently at his end of the line.

"Peanuts, skipper."

"What?"

"Mouthful . . . peanuts. I've had no sustenance all afternoon. Excuse. pliz."

"Seen the Lieutenant?"

"Nary glimpse."

"What about the babe upstairs? She still sulking in her tent?"

"She's there now. But—"

"*Has she been out?*"

"For about half an hour."

"*Where?*"

"Lemme tell you about that, coach . . ."

"You let her get away from you, you bird-brained—"

"I got her back again. She comes home to roost after I, momentarily and with good and sufficient reason, allowed her to escape my keen scrutiny."

"Get to it."

"About four forty-five Miss L. comes out of the apartment building and starts over toward Sutton Place. With me right behind her. She isn't wearing any hat or coat so I know she can't be intending to go far in this kind of weather. She has a long envelope; she heads for the mail-box at the corner of Fifty-seventh and the Place. You know."

"I know what a mail-box looks like."

"Well, she moseys up to the box, looks around quick-like as if she wishes no one to catch her in the act. I'm half a block behind her and across the street, so naturally I duck into a doorway. Then I bethink myself of your trick about letters mailed by suspects and I figure I'd be smart to copy your procedure."

"She was probably posting the check for the gas bill, that's all."



"It looked to me like an important missive. So, anyway, I wait till she comes back past the door where I am tying my shoelace. It seems plain she is intending to return straightway to the Riveredge. Which will give me a minute to scribble a few words to the postman on a blotter which I happen to have in my pocket, asking him to make note of the address of the letter which he will find underneath the blotter and have the postoffice notify the Bureau of Fire Investigation."

"While you're doing all this, the little lady gives you the slip!"

"She crosses me up. That going out with no coat or hat; that was evidently done with malice aforethought. Because when I get back to the Riveredge, the elevator man says she's not returned."

"Remind me to assign you to a wheel-chair suspect, next time."

"She's only gone half an hour before she comes breezing back, skipper."

"She could have bonfired the Grand Central in that time."

"It won't happen again, I guarantee positively."

"Forget it. You're not the only one in the Bureau who hasn't been able to keep track of a dame. Let me talk to your PBX chum. Hello, charming. Put me through to Miss Lownes' apartment, will you? . . . Miss Lownes . . . this is the Fire Marshal."

"Oh, hello, Mister Pedley." Her voice had no traces of alarm or concern in it.

"Going to be home around nine?"

"If you're coming to see me, I'll be home." She sounded like a bobby-soxer accepting an invitation from her favorite boyfriend.

"Around nine, then. 'Bye."

He walked back to the table in deep thought, came out of it only when Barney jabbed the newspaper under his nose.

"The newsboy came in whilst you were in the booth, so I grabbed a copy to see if they print anything about your suspension. But *look!*"

Pedley felt a cold prickle at the back of his neck as he read it:

### BAND LEADER SUICIDE

*Hal Kelsey Slashes  
Throat in Park*

### CHAPTER XXV

AT THE Seventy-second Street entrance to the Park, a policeman with a traffic wheel patch on the sleeve of his overcoat stood in the middle of the southbound lane, blocking the road and waving traffic east and west. Twenty yards behind him and not more than ten feet from the sidewalk of Central Park West, two black police sedans had parked. A little group of plain-clothesmen clustered around something covered with a snow-coated tarpaulin. A couple of feet away a dark felt hat showed under a thin covering of white.

Two men were down on their knees making moulage casts of shoe-prints in the snow. A photographer arranged his tripod so the heavy police camera could point down at the tarpaulin at a close, steep angle. One man wrote in a notebook, looking up every now and then at the barrel-chested, cigar-chewing district detective-captain who was supervising the on-the-spot investigation.

The men from Homicide glanced up as the head-lamps of Pedley's car swung around from the crosstown lane and spilled twin shafts of burgundy over the parkway's ermine.

The Marshal slid his borrowed car to a stop on the opposite side of the road from the group, got out and joined them.

"Somebody ring a box in, Marshal?" the captain wanted to know. "This isn't down your alley."



"Hell it isn't!" Pedley glanced at the trampling of foot-prints around the tarpaulin. "There's a lug down in the Tombs who's been trying to tell me this dead man—" he pointed a toe at the thing under the canvas—"was the one who set the Brockhurst Theatre on fire."

"You can wrap that one up and stick it in the 'closed' file, then. This guy didn't wait to be apprehended. He took the short cut."

"Sure it's Kelsey?" the Marshal inquired.

The captain stooped, lifted the tarpaulin.

It was the band-leader, all right. The dead man lay on his stomach with his head turned to one side. There was a small, irregular blotch of dark red on the snow beneath his chin. The fingers of his left hand were also splotched with blood. The right hand lay flung out on the snow at his side; the fingers were tightly clenched. A foot beyond them, the ebony handle of an old-fashioned straight-bladed razor projected from the snow. The blade itself was buried; whether there was blood on it, Pedley couldn't see. But he noticed something else that made him narrow his eyes and hold back the captain's arm when the plainclothesman would have recovered the body.

"Who says it's suicide?"

The captain put on the patient attitude of one explaining things to a persistent boy. "Look, Marshal. This isn't a three-alarm matter. It comes under the head of homicide. That's my business. If you'll just mind yours and leave the police angles alone . . ."

"Keep your pants on, Cap. I'd just like to get a picture of what happened."

"That's what my men are doing. Taking casts of his last steps, when he walked off the road and decided to end it all. There aren't any other foot-

prints around. He was all by himself."

"You'd say he walked into the park and pulled out the razor and slashed himself?"

"That's what the facts say, Marshal."

Yeah? Tell me why there isn't more snow on his shoulders."

THE other detectives stopped working to glance at the dark blue cloth of Kelsey's overcoat.

"It was snowing when he died. He's covered with it, head to foot. But there's no more snow on his shoulders, or on his hat, for that matter," Pedley pointed, "than there is on his pants or socks."

None of the detectives made any comment, but the two who had been working on the moulage exchanged glances, pursed their lips and nodded.

Pedley went on: "So he hadn't been walking. Or there'd have been an extra coating on his overcoat. He must have come here in a car. And since there isn't any car here . . . somebody must have driven it away."

The captain of detectives smiled disagreeably. "He probably caught a cab, drove in here, paid the hackie off, waited until the taxi drove away and then cut his throat. We thought of that."

"Sure you did." The Marshal's features were expressionless. "All you have to do now is find the cabman who drove him here. If he did come in a cab."

"Suppose he didn't!" The Captain became truculent. "Somebody else could have driven him here, let him out."

"Kind of funny. To drive away and leave a man who's just slit himself open from ear to ear."

"Maybe you'd prefer to take over this investigation all by yourself!"



"Christ, no. I'm up to my ears in it, now," Pedley said. "I'd like to see anything he might have had on him, if it doesn't raise your blood-pressure too much . . ."

The district commander tossed the tarpaulin back in place, strode to the nearest police car, opened the door, switched on the dome light.

Neatly arranged on a newspaper covering the floor in front of the rear seat was the kind of assortment Pedley had seen so many times at the morgue and in muster rooms after prisoners had been searched.

Billfold, coins, cigarette case, knife, matches, handkerchief, fountain pen. The only item which interested the Marshal was a yellow page torn from a classified telephone directory.

He studied it carefully . . . and a far-away, reflective look came into his eyes.

"Want to make a little bet, Cap?"

"What about?"

"One'll get you ten that you don't find any cab driver who let Kelsey out here. And that before you get through, you do find this was plain ordinary murder."

## CHAPTER XXVI

IT WAS seven-thirty when Pedley raced across the Queensboro, not yet eight when he pounded on the knocker of the great stone chateau overlooking the Sound.

A tiny rectangle opened in the upper part of the massive door; eyes he couldn't see looked him over.

"Who do you want?"

"Paul Amery."

"He's retired, sir."

"Wake him up."

"Quite impossible, sir. I must ask you to leave—"

"Wake him up. Tell him Ben Ped-

ley wants to see him. Or I'll have the Great Neck Fire Department run a couple of ladders up to his window and get in that way!"

The door opened. An emaciated individual in a black frock coat, a wing collar and a black cravat, frowned severely:

"We can't have all this rumpus, with Mr. Amery in such ill health, sir!"

"Skip the argument. Take my name to him—"

A small, dark man with mild brown eyes behind gleaming *pince-nez*, hurried down the big staircase at the opposite end of the hall.

"What's wrong, Nesbitt?"

"This gentleman insists—"

Pedley cut him short: "You a physician?"

"Doctor Rae. I must say you've chosen a poor time—"

"What kind of shape is Amery in, now?"

"Very bad indeed, sir. He should have stayed in bed today, instead of going in town."

"Do him any real harm to come downstairs for ten minutes?"

"No. Probably not. But—"

"Tell Nesbitt to go ask him."

"Well, really—"

"I'm investigating the fire that put your patient in his present condition. I'm here to tell you that unless I see him, there may be more serious results."

"Nesbitt . . . would you mind?"

The butler departed.

Pedley tossed his hat on a camphor-wood chest.

"How long have you been with Mr. Amery, doc?"

"Since he came home from the office this morning. Around eleven-thirty."

"You've been here all the time?"

"Indeed I have. Why, sir?"

"Process of elimination, doc. There's been another fatality tied up to this



Brockhurst Theatre fire. Just wanted to make sure our friend Amery couldn't have been connected with it."

"Most certainly he couldn't! I gave him some bromides and put him to sleep about one o'clock; he's been in bed ever since." Rae was indignant. "I resent your questioning me in such a manner, sir. Paul's a friend of long standing, as well as a patient. He risked his life and definitely endangered his health in the attempt to rescue Miss Lownes. He—"

"Just routine, doc. Later on, some limber-tongued lawyer for the real fire-bug will ask us these things on the witness stand in an attempt to befuddle the jury. If we've checked up beforehand, we're not so likely to be made to look like saps." Pedley thought the doctor was on the level. The mark of the respected physician was stamped into Rae.

AMERY came downstairs in a long gray-silk dressing-gown.

"Did you get my message about the estate, Mr. Pedley?"

"Thanks, yes. Did you hear the news about Kelsey?"

"No. What?"

"His body was found in the Seventy-second Street Drive—"

"Body!" the lawyer exclaimed. "Body!"

"—near Central Park West."

"Great God! Accident . . .?"

"Suicide, according to the police. His jugular'd been slashed with a barber-style razor."

Amery moved slowly to a low coffee-table, shaking his head. He picked up a crystal decanter. "I feel the need of a spot. Anbody join me?"

"I will," said Pedley.

"None for me, thanks, Paul" the doctor said.

"Thing that made me hightail out

here to see you," Pedley inhaled the fumes of the well-aged liquor with satisfaction, "was something they found in Kelsey's pocket."

Amery drank without ceremony, slouched down on an antique ottoman. "Not the gun that took a pot-shot at me this morning?"

"No. A list. Of the safe deposit companies in Manhattan. Banks, trust companies—whole slew of 'em."

"What's the significance?" Rae wanted to know.

"Lot of the phone numbers on the list had been checked off. Kelsey'd presumably called them before he died. I haven't anything to back it up, but it occurred to me the guy might have been trying to locate a vault where Ned Lownes stashed something valuable."

"Ned used the Corn Exchange," Amery said. "Madison and Forty-fifth. He had a drawer there."

"How about taking a peek at its contents?"

"Any time you want." The lawyer set his glass back on the table. "There wasn't much in there besides the stock certificates I phoned you about; some copies of contracts with the record companies and a savings book."

"Oh. You went over and opened it, today?"

"No. I sent Miss Bernard over with power of attorney to open it. Surely there can't be any connection between that and Kelsey's suicide."

"When you come right down to it," Pedley said, "I'm none too convinced he cut his own throat."

AMERY coughed raspingly. "If it was murder"—he felt of his bandaged neck—"in Central Park, in broad daylight, somebody must have seen the murderer."

"Not many people in the Park today. Too much snow. Roads were bad. Man



might have been let out of a car close to the Seventy-second Street entrance and his throat slashed as he was getting out. Don't say it happened that way. Could have . . . Well, thanks for the drink. Sorry to have routed you out for nothing."

Amery went to the door with him. "Headquarters is going to assign a plainclothesman to me in the morning."

"See what it means to be a member of the bar?" Pedley smiled.

"They'd have done it, anyway. At least until they capture the man who fired that shot at me."

"An old fire-horse's opinion, for what it's worth. The man who fired that shot is in the Tombs right now. His name is Astaro Lasti. He tried to murder me in a Turkish bath this noon, but it didn't jell. He's being held for tomorrow's Grand Jury."

Amery was agitated. "Why didn't you let me *know*! It would have saved Mrs. Amery and me a tremendous amount of worry. Not to mention Nesbitt and the doctor. We've all been hearing queer things in the darkness, all evening."

"Didn't know for sure. Don't now. Guy tried to implicate Kelsey. Outside of that, Staro didn't really confess anything. I'd still keep a Colt stabled under your pillow."

He drove back to town more slowly, weighing the possibilities. That key on Lownes' keytainer must be for some other vault than the one Miss Bernard had found access to so simply. Without the key, her power of attorney wouldn't have done any good; a court order would have been necessary to get the safe deposit to open it. The key in Pedley's possession must fit a drawer in some other bank.

His first call on the Manhattan side of the river was at the Tombs, where he had an acrimonious conversation with

the man who'd tried to drown him, less than twelve hours ago.

Pedley made an offer of a leniency recommendation to the trial judge. A sentence of from ninety-nine years to life held some slight hope; the chair was a bad alternate. The Marshal couldn't promise anything. But his word sometimes carried weight . . .

Staro went through successive stages of flat denial, blunt suspicion, wary hedging. In the end, he exercised his memory sufficiently to recall that his ex-employer had occasionally made trips to the Columbus Circle branch of the Merchants & Importers National.

Pedley's second visit was to the bank at the Circle. It took a little longer than the first, on account of the difficulty of reaching the bank's executives by telephone and verifying the fact that the Fire Marshal can issue what amounts to a summary court order, on the spot, when and where needed.

Even then, the results weren't what Pedley expected. After the night man in the vault had been properly convinced, he checked his visitors sheet.

"You're the second person who's had access to this drawer today, Mr. Pedley."

The Marshal cursed.

"Who was here before me?"

"Here's her signature, sir. She had the key and written authority—everything in order."

After Pedley read the signature, he didn't bother to look in the locked drawer.

Leila Lownes wouldn't have left anything worth finding.

## CHAPTER XXVII

SHANER emerged from behind the tapestry screen shielding the PBX operator in the Riveredge lobby. He made an umpire's sweeping gesture of



the flat palm. "She's safe at home, coach."

"She better be." Pedley thumbed the UP button. "If you haven't tended your sheep this time, you're a dead Bo Peep."

"This afternoon was one of those mishaps which'd never occur again in a thousand. No harm done, was there?"

"Oh, no. The babe merely went to a safe deposit during that half-hour she was out of your sight. I wouldn't be surprised if she got away with the prize hunk of evidence I've been running myself ragged about."

"It's positively the last time I ever trust a mouse! The word of a Shaner."

"Ah, you'll get hoodwinked every hour on the hour the rest of your life. Has she had callers?"

"Terence the Ross was up for maybe an hour, just after you called. He's biting his fingernails when he goes up an' purring with pleasure when he comes down. Figure *that* out on your horoscope!"

"She has a way with males. Feeds 'em catnip. Rubs their ears."

"Not bad, either." Shaner grinned.

Leila answered the buzzer herself. She had done a complete switch from the oomph getup; this was the sweet, home-girl type.

The short-tight-fitting blue-and-white checkered dress was becoming, he admitted; it showed as much of her figure and more of her legs than the boudoir outfit. The only incongruous touch was the emerald-studded wrist-watch on her wrist; it didn't quite give the domestic flavor.

"We're all alone," she began. "I let Netta have the night with her friends in Harlem. But I can mix you a drink, if you'd care for one."

No mention of Bill Conover, though she must be aware of the alarm out for him! No inquiry about Kim Wasson, who was supposed to be dying at St.

Vincent's! No comment about Hal Kelsey; certainly Ross must have told her about the band-leader's death! Only a suggestion about a drink!

"Not right now." He saw it lying under the bisque-shaded lamp on the center table, as if that was where it belonged and had merely been returned to its proper place. It was rich mahogany in color; the ornate clasp and lock were dull gold.

He went to it, picked it up, hefted it. A marvelous example of Florentine craftsmanship; the design on the top was *Leda and the Swan*, done in deep tooling. The thing was probably a museum piece, but Pedley didn't appreciate it. It was empty.

"So you got this little beauty back." He undid the clasp; the interior was lined with rose brocade.

"Terry brought it back. Just a little while ago."

"Just like that?"

"He happened to be looking through Ned's things at the club—my brother was a member of the Olympiad, too—he used the hand-ball courts once in a blue moon—and there in his locker, under a dirty old sweatshirt, was my case!"

"That's luck for you." Pedley looked at the bottom of the case. There was nothing beyond the maker's mark: *Tomaso Garloti, Firenze*. "Where are the contents?"

"You wouldn't be interested in them, really."

"I certainly would, if they're photos of the Body Beautiful." She'd have had time to hide whatever had been in it. But she hadn't been out of the apartment since she brought the case back here; unless she'd ditched the contents *en route* from the bank to the River-edge, they'd still be here somewhere. "Do I have to dig 'em up myself?"

"You can't!"

"I'll have a slight go at it." He started



across the sunken living-room, sizing up possible hiding places. She was undisturbed.

Well, there were the other rooms. He didn't relish the idea of searching her bedroom, but if there wasn't any alternative . . .

HE CROSSED in front of the fireplace, paused with his head cocked on one side, like a terrier listening. Pedley was sniffing.

Queer odor somewhere. Couldn't be incense, could it? Maybe she'd been putting some of those metallic salts on the logs to make colored flames. If she'd been doing that, after what happened at Horatio Street last night, she must be made of glacier ice.

No, it was burning paper! The unmistakable acridity of sulphur and sizing! He went back to the fireplace, saw the pages burning.

"A book, hah?" The leaves had been torn out in bunches, tossed in the fire. Four-fifths of the paper had been consumed; on the remaining fifth he could see handwriting—broad, back-slanting letters.

If he should douse the fire with water, trying to save the part that hadn't yet been consumed, the pages would contract and the charred cellulose would crumble to ashes. "What's so important about it?"

"It was my diary. The things I wrote in it weren't meant for other people to read. You understand."

"Hell I do." He went to the phone. "Charming? This is the Marshal. Let me talk to that Shaner . . . Shaner?"

"You need protection, coach?"

"Grab that three-gallon from the wall rack in the stairwell, bring it up here. Shake the lead out of your seat."

Leila ran toward the fireplace. He caught her on the hearth, held her by the wrists.

She glanced over her shoulder at greedy tongues of flame eating their way slowly across the pages; the top page of each handful burning faster than those underneath—curling up tighter like crumpled carbon paper until the page beneath it got going.

"You're a cad, sir!" She smiled, quite unconcerned.

"And you're mistaken," he pulled her toward the hall door, "if you think I'm not going to read what's on those pages. Just because they've burnt won't mean they're illegible."

"Why must you frighten an innocent maid?" She was still playing at melodrama.

"Put those charred pages under the ultra-violet—we'll read 'em easy as you read your fan mail." He opened the door.

It took a second for his meaning to sink in. Then her eyes blazed; she struggled frantically toward the fireplace.

He had to grip her around the waist; hold her tightly against him.

They bumped into a side table, knocked it over, fell on top of it.

SHANER found them wrestling around on the floor.

"You don't need this extinguisher personally, do you, coach?"

"Close the damper . . . in the chimney." The Marshal's face was crimson. "Shoot against . . . back of fireplace.

Want to save . . . papers that are burned. Don't mess up . . . the burnt leaves."

When Leila heard the hissing of the extinguisher, she quieted down.

Pedley stood up, pulled her to her feet, held onto one of her wrists.

"You like to play rough, we'll play rough," he growled.

"Why do you want to pry into a girl's diary!"



"You lied to me about how you got it and what was in it. I'll take six, two and even right now it's not a diary."

"It is so." She smoothed down her dress as well as she could with one hand.

"I'm not concerned with what's written on those pages. It's why they made somebody kill your brother and try to do the same thing to your arranger. If you feel like adding Hal Kelsey to the total, I won't contradict you."

She stopped trying to pull away; leaned close to him, gazing up under lowered lashes.

"Send that other man away," she whispered, "and I'll tell you, honestly, why I don't want anyone to read the . . . diary."

"You have no secrets from Shaner, anyway. He's been delving into your private life for nearly twenty-four hours. Speak freely."

"I will not!" She leaned against him. "I don't talk about it in front of *him*!"

"Don't believe that safety-in-numbers gag? All right. Shaner."

"I been in the department fifteen years, skipper—this is the fastest 'stop' I ever made. She's out cold. The fire, I mean."

"Fine. Hop out to the kitchen. Get the biggest pan you can find; a roaster'd be the nuts, if it has a top on it."

"I'm way ahead of you," Shaner couldn't forebear an appraisal of Leila with her dress pulled down over one bare shoulder, her hair disarranged, her cheeks flushed.

Pedley called after him:

"Bring a flapjack turner. Be one in the drawer somewhere." He nodded at the singer. "Go into your number."

"Well . . ." She had to make one more dramatic gesture, darting a glance from one side to the other as if to be certain there was no one within earshot.

"I'm married to Lieutenant Conover!"

"What is this? Confessions of a Young Bride?"

"Mmhm." She didn't seem a bit reluctant. "Not the ordinary kind."

SHANER bustled back with an aluminum roaster and a long nicked spatula. "This'll do it. Just the burnt papers, coach?"

"Yeah. You can leave the andirons."

Leila wouldn't continue until the deputy had finished transferring the bits of charred paper to the roasting pan.

"Ashes to ashes, coach. Some of the pieces crumbled. But I saved most of 'em."

"Handle with care, from here in. Take 'em down to Broome Street. Tell the sarge I want every last word he can get out of 'em."

"Can I wrap myself in the arms of morphia, after that?"

"Hit the hay hard's you please. But don't bust up those pages."

Shaner, carrying the roaster like a proud father holding his first baby, closed the door behind him. Leila wrenched her wrist free from the Marshal's relaxed grip.

"If that's the way you're going to treat my confidence, I won't tell you anything."

"You'd still be smart to tell all. It'll be up to me to say who sees what the lab-boys find on those pages."

She strode back and forth in front of the fireplace, struggling to reach a decision.

"Damnit! I guess I'll have to trust you."

"You're making slow headway."

"I was married *before*. But nobody knows that."

"Not even Conover?"

"No. My first husband left me. I



never knew where he went. I don't know where he is now . . . or if he's still alive."

"Divorce?"

"Yes. I got one of those Mexican things. I don't know whether it's legal or not. I don't know if I'm actually married to Bill, or if I'm a bigamist—or what."

He shook his head, morosely. "No soap."

"You don't believe me?"

"Nothing in what you've told me to cause this procession of arson and murder. Maybe some of your fairy tale is true. Might be all true, far's it goes. Doesn't go far enough. Isn't important enough. What's the rest of it?"

"That's absolutely all there is."

"If that's your story, you're going to be badly stuck with it. Because I'm putting you under arrest. Now."

She backed away from him, eyes wide with fear. She wasn't staring directly at him, but over his shoulder.

There was no mistaking the prickle at the back of his neck, now. It wasn't imagination.

"Move the point of that knife down a little, Lieutenant. Or is it a razor?"

## CHAPTER XXVIII

"**S**TICK your thumbs in your ears, dicky bird." Conover jabbed the point of the knife deeper into the Marshal's neck. "Keep your flippers up in plain sight." The Lieutenant's right hand came around, took the gun from Pedley's armpit holster. "Now squat. Right on the floor, where you are. Cross-legged. That's the pose. You can clasp your hands behind your head if your arms start to drop off."

Pedley obeyed. No sense arguing with six inches of sharp-edged steel.

The Lieutenant swung the gun to and fro by the trigger guard. "Forgot I'd

have a key to wife's apartment, didn't you?"

"Didn't think much about it," Pedley admitted. "I sort of thought Leila'd get word to you I'd be coming up here tonight, though."

"Setting a trap for me, were you?" Conover laughed. "Look whose paw is pinched. The pig stabs the butcher."

"Temporary reversal of position, sure. But with ten thousand cops on the lookout for you, you won't be able to pull stunts like that car smackup all the time. Fair to middling chance they'll pick you up before you get out of the Riveredge."

Leila put her arm on the Lieutenant's sleeve.

"I'm supposed to be under arrest, Bill."

"You won't be, Li." He sniffed. "What's the matter with the chimney?"

"He closed the damper," she answered. "I was burning some old papers in the fireplace and he thought he could put the fire out and find out what they were."

Conover scowled, puzzled.

Pedley shifted his position to ease the strain of sitting with crossed legs. "The papers have gone down to the headquarters lab on Broome Street. Nothing you can do about that."

The Lieutenant held Pedley's pistol by the barrel, swung the heavy butt in a suggestive arc.

"There's something I can do about you, Hardboiled Harry."

"Yeah. You can knock me on the head."

"And toss you out a window so nobody could prove you were tapped on the skull before you fell."

Leila cried: "*Bill!* Stop talking like that!"

He said: "I don't see any other way out of it, shugie."

"That'd be no way out." Pedley put



his hands down on his knees slowly. "The police might stop hunting for a killer, now they've announced Kelsey committed suicide. If you bop me, nobody's going to believe an old blue-shirt fell out of a window accidentally. Only make things that much worse for the girl-friend. She's in over her head already."

"We were fighting," Conover related. "The window was open on account of all the smoke in the room. We bumped against the sill and over you went. *Finis.*"

"You couldn't get your own friends to believe it," Pedley said.

CONOVER brought the butt of the gun down hard on the table; it made the leather case bounce.

"I can say I found you in here annoying Li, took a belt at you, you came back at me, I crowned you in self-defense. They'd fall for that."

"Not after Ned and Kim and Kelsey. Not after you did what you could to break my neck in the car this morning. They might not send you to the chair, because you're a vet who's risked his life for his country and there might be some excuse for your being blood-goofy. But they'd slap you in an institution for quite a while. That shouldn't appeal to a young married man."

The singer put her arms around Conover's shoulders.

"He's right, Bill. There must be a better way."

"There is," Pedley snapped irritably.

The Lieutenant looked at the top of the Marshal's head:

"I doubt it. But we're willing to listen to reason."

Pedley grimaced at the girl. "I'll take that drink now, if you don't mind."

Bill nodded. "Never refuse a drink to a dying man or you won't wind up in heaven. I'll have one, too, shugie."

"Bourbon, if there's any on the shelf." Pedley straightened out his left leg, rubbed the calf as if he had a cramp in it.

Leila disappeared into the kitchen.

"As man to man," Pedley lowered his voice confidentially, "you've married yourself a peck of trouble."

"Suits me," Conover retorted. "I've seen so much trouble I can't get along without a little."

The Marshal went on as if he hadn't heard.

"You're bright enough to be wise to one of two things: either she knows who this throat-slitting arsonist is—"

The Lieutenant's face darkened. "Don't talk behind her back."

"In which case," Pedley gave no heed to the interruption, "the thing for her to do is name him, before somebody else lands in the mortuary."

Leila came back with a tray, glasses full of ice, a bottle and a siphon.

"The gentleman's talking about you, Li."

"I was just saying," Pedley stretched his other leg a little; now he was sitting on one hip, with his hands on his thighs, "that either you know the firebug or you're a three-time killer *yourself*, Mrs. Conover."

"If I was," she fizzed soda in the glasses, "yours would be mixed with prussic acid or something."

"Isopropyl alcohol, maybe. Poison's a woman's trick more often than a man's. Like the stuff used in rigging up the fires—things a girl'd be likely to use. Flatiron, cleaning fluid, candy box."

Conover ignored the glass Leila held out to him. "Keep on, if you want to get clouted."

"Look at the way it stacks up in the reports down at my office, Lieutenant." He reached up for the drink she handed to him; Conover made a threatening



gesture with the gun. "Your wife was one of the few people who could have had access to Miss Wasson's rooms around twelve o'clock at night; she left this apartment and went down to the Village about an hour before the explosion blew her arranger's place six ways from the jack."

Conover balanced on the balls of his feet; his clenched left fist began to hammer against the table softly.

"That's enough, fireman."

"Enough to set her in the defendant's dock. But there's more. Mrs. Conover was at Columbus Circle for a while this afternoon, about the time the police estimate Kelsey had his jugular vein bisected. The Circle's only a half-mile from the spot where the band-leader's body was discovered." He took a swig at the bourbon.

LEILA put her hands to her breast as if it hurt her to breathe. The Lieutenant crouched, moved toward Pedley with cautious, cat-like steps. His mouth twisted up on one side; twitched. He held the gun like a club.

The Marshal drew one knee up under him.

"You'll want to sleep in a separate room with the door locked, Lieutenant. Married to a girl who gets around like that!"

Conover sprang, the butt of the gun swinging down.

Pedley hurled the glass, flung himself aside in a half-roll, half-dive, hit the table, sent it crashing. Lamp, tray, bottles rolled on the carpet. The Lieutenant kept coming. The gun thudded against the left forearm Pedley threw up to ward it off. The arm went numb.

The Marshal knew he was no match for a bucko ten years younger and trained for in-fighting. He might have been able to hold his own for a while if he hadn't been doing without sleep for

the last forty-eight hours. But as it was, it didn't look good.

The gun landed again; only an unconscious reflex jerked Pedley's head aside enough to take the blow on the shoulder-blade. He grabbed the bourbon bottle, smashed it against a table leg, held out the jagged neck.

It kept the Lieutenant at a distance, momentarily.

"Use some sense, Conover. Blowing your top won't make things easier for your wife. Unless, of course, you happen to know she's guilty."

Conover circled, trying for an opening. As he moved, catlike, past Leila, she grabbed at his gun arm, pulled him off balance. He whirled to shake free. Pedley hit him under the left ear with a left hook that would have dropped a grizzly.

The Lieutenant fell down on top of the lamp shade, rolled as he fell, came up fighting. Pedley gave him the knee, under the chin, as Conover rose. The Lieutenant's jaws clicked together, his head snapped back. He collapsed.

Leila threw herself on the floor beside him. "You've killed him!" she wailed.

"He'll be all right in fifteen minutes." The Marshal bent down to recover his gun.

Conover opened his eyes. The gun came up from the floor, hit Pedley on the bridge of the nose.

A million flash-bulbs went off in his head; then he was falling into darkness. . . .

## CHAPTER XXIX

SOMEWHERE a clock chimed eight.

Pedley tried opening his eyes, but it was too much exertion. He lay there trying to reason it out.

The clock must be wrong. It was close to nine when he got here—therefore it couldn't be eight now. There'd



been that angry exchange with Conover and the fight; then he'd probably been lying here on the floor . . . he turned his head.

Somebody'd put a pillow under his head. A nice, soft pillow. He moved his fingers. Nobody would put sheets on the carpet.

He wrenched his eyes open. He was in bed, all right. A four-poster. Leila's!

The venetian blinds kept out most of the sunlight, but there was enough for him to see his clothes hanging over a chair.

He closed his eyes again. Somebody had undressed him, put collodion over the cut on his neck, tucked him in with an extra comforter. He recoiled at the thought of how he'd feel when he got up from this soft mattress.

He was wearing pajamas. Blazer-striped things in blue and white. Probably the Lieutenant's.

He sat up and groaned.

The bedroom door opened. Leila looked in.

"Praise be. I was dreadfully worried that I ought to have called the doctor earlier. He'll be here any minute now."

"I don't need a doc." He groaned again. "What I need is a headstone."

"I don't believe you've any broken bones." She came into the room, to the bedside, put her hand on his forehead.

"Ouch! Easy on that welt."

"I'm so-o-o sorry." She sat on the edge of the bed. She wore a long-skirted morning coat of something soft and white, with loose-flowing sleeves, and a different perfume. "I'll bring you some coffee before the doctor comes, if you like."

"That'd be great. Where's the Lieutenant?"

"Oh, he's gone."

She went out, with no further ex-

planation. He debated whether to attempt dressing before she returned with the coffee, decided against it.

The coffee was in a silver service; there were cigarettes in a silver goblet; the morning paper was folded neatly at the edge of the tray.

"Everything but the morning mail," he said. "In time to make the 8:20. Thanks."

"How do you feel?"

"I've felt better. How's the other kilkenny cat?"

"Bill can't use his wrist very well. He thinks there may be a green fracture."

"That won't slow him down any more than a mosquito bite. He's going to kill somebody one of these days." Pedley blew on the hot coffee. "I thought he was going to punctuate me. Why didn't he?"

"Because I told him you saved my life."

"How'd you find out?"

"Terry told me." She stood in front of the door mirror, primping her hair. "I didn't know, the first time you were here. I wouldn't have been so snooty, if I had."

"Think nothing of it. Part of our service to regular customers. Conover must have been disappointed at not finishing what he started."

"It's hard to tell how Bill feels. I'm a little afraid of him myself, sometimes."

"Ah! He's as transparent as a kid on a pantry chair. He thinks you're the Glow-worm."

"So do you . . . don't you?" Her mouth and eyes were wistfully unhappy.

"He can't dope out any way to help you except the direct action method. Problem: I'm a menace to your safety and his happiness; solution: eliminate me. Primitive way of thinking. All



those marines were taught to be primitive—or else.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“You’re the one to answer it.” He emptied the coffee pot. “Not easy to lie here and look at you and remind myself that appearances are deceptive as hell. That you *were* in the dressing-room and in the Village and on Central Park West at or about the time of the crimes. That, as far as I know, you’re the only person who was at all three places.”

She sat on the bed, again, leaned over with what might have been anxiety . . . or something else.

HE’D have had to be beat-up much worse than he was, Pedley realized, not to be affected by her. He’d run across a few girls of this sort before—the kind who considered sex something to be shared casually whenever its sharing was agreeable or profitable or useful. That was the way this girl used it, had always used it, apparently. As something which could be depended on to help her over the tough spots in the road.

Leila knew he wanted her now; she was using the certainty of it for all it was worth. She rested a hand carelessly on his knee:

“Suppose I *were* . . . the Glow-worm?”

“I’d turn you in. And testify against you. I’d do that even if you were to get into bed with me this minute—”

The buzzer cut in.

“Damn!” She hurried to the door. “The doctor.”

“Tell him to go fly a kite. I’m all right.”

Out in the living-room, someone was excited.

“I don’t care who’s with you, Leila. We’ve got to settle this thing, now.”

Terry Ross! Pedley hastily set the tray on the floor.

There were low murmurings from the next room. Then Ross exclaimed: “Don’t you think you’re carrying things *too* far, sweets?”

It was a minor agony for Pedley to get out of bed; he just managed to swing his feet to the floor as Ross burst in.

“Far be it I should intrude upon an *affaire du coeur*, my fran’,—but Chuck Gaydel will be here in two shakes. Get up and put your clothes on, will you?”

“Oblige me by doing a scamola yourself. I like to sing in the shower; you’d put me off-key.”

“Oh, for *Godsake*! Just imagine the firehouse gong is clanging! You leap up. You jump into your jeans and slide down the brass pole. All in a matter of seconds.”

The buzzer zizzed again.

Ross smote his forehead with the flat of his hand. “Do you want to *ruin* Leila!” He backed out of the door with a final warning hiss: “Get . . . *dressed!*”

The door closed. Pedley stripped off the pajama top, inspected his bruises in the long mirror. There was a black and blue mark about four inches long on his forearm. The cut where the gun butt had broken the skin on his neck had been patched up with cotton and collodion but there was a ribbon of dried blood beneath it. The worst damage was just above the bridge of his nose, where there was a lump the size of a half-walnut.

He saw the bedroom door opening, in the mirror. He turned, made a grab for the bathrobe which lay folded over the foot-rail of the bed. Then he saw who it was.

“Purty, ain’t he?” drawled Dublin. “Real purty now an’ that’s a fact.”

“Which particular part of the wood-work,” Pedley inquired, “did *you* crawl from?”



"One bumps into him in the queerest places," Dublin said over his shoulder to the living-room. "Bathtubs . . . and girls' bedrooms." He turned around again to address the Marshal. "What brings you here and in this indecorous state of *deshabille*? Or should I ask?"

"Go to hell," said Pedley.

While he was tying his shoe-laces he could hear Leila being demure.

"I hope you don't have to make an official report of this, Captain."

"The truth, and nothing but the truth. Of course, where a young lady's honor is involved—" Dublin managed to be insinuating.

"I *wish* you wouldn't put the *worst* interpretation on things," Leila wailed. "Just because Ben's stayed here since nine o'clock last night and you find him in my bedroom—"

*Ben!* She'd never called him Ben, even when she'd been putting on her most appealing bedside manner a moment ago. He was hooked! A fine looking figure he'd cut on the witness stand testifying against her, now!

There might be one way out of it. He strolled to the bedroom door.

"It was fun while it lasted, wasn't it, Leila?"

"Why . . . what?" She stammered; she didn't have the nerve to call him Ben to his face.

"Ribbing the prize bull. But you ought to stop titillating Captain Dublin's taste for scandal. He'll find out soon enough that Bill's been here with us all night."

She opened her mouth, shut it again without answering. Ross looked bewildered.

Captain Dublin gazed at the Marshal in round-eyed wonder. "I didn't know," he put his hand in his coat pocket, drew out a white card, "that Miss Lownes was married to Houdini." He fished for his fountain pen, ostentatiously un-

screwed the cap. "But the gentleman must be Houdini."

Pedley went back to the bedroom for his coat.

"Because," Dublin raised his voice for the Marshal's benefit, "we've had him down at Center Street since two o'clock this morning. And I can't book him unless you sign this complaint, Benny."

## CHAPTER XXX

THE great sombre room on the fourth floor of Police Headquarters was in darkness, except for the seven 200-watt bulbs focussed on the little stage at the far end. The hands of the clock at the side of the room formed the right angle of nine o'clock. In the semi-gloom hundreds of men shuffled their feet, shifted in the hard chairs, made a low hum of mutterings.

They watched the man who swaggered to the center of the twenty-five foot platform, directly beneath the hot brilliance of the light, their eyes taking in every detail. His gait, the way he carried his head, the size of his hands. His height was shown against the scale painted on the wall close behind him.

Fifteen feet away from him, almost in line with the first row of seats, the interrogator, an Assistant Chief Inspector, sat on a dais in front of a bookkeeper's slant-top desk on which stood a shaded light and a microphone. Beside him, the plainclothesman who had made the arrest. The interrogator read from a card in front of him; the voice of the public address system struck Pedley's ears with a curious impression of hollowness:

"You're William S. Conover?"

The man under the light said: "Yes." His voice was thick, as if he had been drinking.



"American?"

"Sure."

"Formerly Lieutenant United States Marine Corps?"

"Honorable discharge. Medals; hospitalization record. Address?"

"Motorboat *Voyageur*, Sheepshead Bay."

"Age?"

"Twenty-four."

"Born?"

"Minneapolis."

"Unemployed." The police interrogator referred to the card. "No previous record of arrest. Picked up outside Bickford's Grand Central, one forty-five this morning, by Detective First Class Reiss, Shield Number seven-four-two-one. Weapon, paratrooper's knife. How'd your coat get slashed like that, Conover?"

"Ripped it myself, accidentally."

"Didn't get into a fight with anybody?"

"No." Bill's manner defied contradiction.

"Had enough fighting for awhile?"

"Yes."

He's playing it canny, Pedley decided. Doesn't know what the police know, so he won't admit anything that might involve Leila.

The interrogator continued: "What'd you been doing before the officer arrested you, Conover?"

"Drinking."

"Where?"

"Around."

"You're charged with resisting arrest and intent to do great bodily harm, by deliberately wrecking a sedan belonging to the Fire Marshal of the City of New York. You admit these charges?"

"Hell, no. I didn't personally put ice on that road."

darkness.

Sime Dublin dug his elbows into Pedley's ribs:

"Y'see, Benny boy? We draw the same blanks from all your complaints. You know what Lasti says, now he's out of your reach?"

"What?"

"Claims he never went after you in that pool at all, as alleged on the blotter. Swears you trailed him to the Turkish bath, tried to get him to make damaging statements about some of Lownes' friends and he refused to do it."

"Johnny Watson, who runs the Bosphorus, can disprove the first. I checked in before Staro did." Pedley watched Bill swagger off the stage and a wizened old man take his place with a furtive leer at the accustomed surroundings of the lineup. "Far's the second goes, Staro's right as your gun-hand, Cap."

"He states that when he failed to come across with the derogatory remarks you requested, you clipped him, threw him in the drink, half drowned him, and then took him to some fire station and put him over the hurdles."

"An addled composite of fact and fiction."

"I'm willing to rest my case on that."

"You great big roughnecks in the Fire Department ought to restrain yourselves, Benjamin."

"And let you guys have all the fun?" Pedley growled. "Now this kid Conover who was just up there—he's a hot-headed hero trying to protect the girl he's crazy about. I'm not going to press the charge against him . . . unless further unforeseen developments develop. But that Staro—he's a cobra with a record a mile long."

"Still and all, that hardly gives you *carte blanche* to maul him around like that."

"How'd it be if you took the mote

A RIPPLE of laughter went through the seats of stretching back into the



out of your own eye, Sime?"

"Tsk, tsk." Dublin clucked mournfully. "Think what a parlous state of affairs would ensue if we left matters in the hands of gents who make such a to-do about solving the case of Who Set The Fire In The Wastepaper Basket!"

"We wouldn't have reported Kelsey a suicide, anyway." The Marshal's tone was combative; his head ached, his eyes ached, he couldn't enumerate the places where he had a pain, or where Dublin gave him one. "Not without checking to make sure there were finger-prints on the razor. Identification Bureau reports there weren't any."

"The people who found him lying there might have obliterated the prints."

"Are you going to tell that to the crime experts on the dailies? What a belly laugh that'll give the city desks." Pedley looked at his watch. Nearly ten. The day was no younger than it had been; he was still in need of a double-barreled breakfast, and there was still a firebug on the loose. "It would've been a nice trick for Kelsey to slash his own throat and then wipe the handle clean. But he wasn't that good at sleight-of-hand. He was murdered. You know he was. Only reason you're not willing to admit it is because the Mayor is knocking himself out, trying to throw a blanket on this whole business. He can't smother it, Sime. Neither can you. It's too hot for you to handle."

THE Marshal left headquarters in no pleasant frame of mind. He had two men in jail; considering the fact that both had tried to kill him within the last forty-eight hours, he might have been expected to feel pretty good about that. But he didn't.

His own safety was important to him; no man who risks his life constantly in and around fires, or under any other circumstances of danger, takes risks lightly. But a lifetime of Fire Department training had bred into him a primary regard for the lives of others who were, in a very practical way, in his care. And their security—the sleep-sound-at-night sort of safety which the people in subways and busses and schools and hotels and rooming houses and elevator apartments took for granted—that was still threatened by the real firebug.

For it was apparent to Pedley that neither Bill Conover nor Staro Lasti was the instigator of the Brockhurst and Greenwich Village fires.

As far as Staro was concerned, there wasn't anything to show that he'd been at the theatre at all. He had been in durance at the Tombs when Kelsey was killed. And anyhow, he wasn't the sort of individual who could hope to gain much by wiping out Lownes, Kim Wasson or Kelsey. There *had* to be someone behind Staro.

It couldn't be Bill Conover, either, as Pedley saw it. The Lieutenant had claimed he'd been in the dressing-room when Leila and Chuck had carried Lownes up there; but if the Marshal was any judge, that was simply a chivalrous attempt to take suspicion away from the girl.

What was clear enough was that Conover wasn't the kind to adopt the devious devices which the arsonist had used. If the ex-marine had wanted to put Lownes or Kim or Kelsey out of the way, he'd have done it in hot temper and cold blood—but he wouldn't have resorted to fire as a weapon or an alibi as an excuse that he hadn't done it.

The firebug was still at liberty. And, in all likelihood, still scared, still a



potential instigator of another blaze which might turn out more disastrously than the other two.

Who was intended to be the next victim, that was the all-important question. Ross? Amery? Gaydel? Toleman? They'd all been close to Leila, to Ned Lownes. . . .

All Pedley could do, until he had his hands on the bug, was to take precautions with all these people. He'd done that. There was a deputy covering each of them; Shaner was back on the job at Leila's. The Marshal had even gone so far as to warn the district commanders in each of the sections where the possible victims resided; extra apparatus would roll on the first alarm from any of the boxes Pedley had indicated.

But he couldn't really do anything to protect people when they were moving around the city, when he didn't have any idea of the part of town in which the firebug would strike next. This wasn't ordinary commercial arson.

There were certain times when it paid off to plant extra deputies in the wholesale millinery district in the thirties—right after the spring buying season was over. He had found out that it was a good idea, right after Christmas, to put added men in the areas where the toy manufacturing and wholesaling companies were located. Fires in the fur and garment districts along Seventh Avenue were somehow much more frequent right after the department stores had done their winter buying and sellers had a lot of excess stock to carry over to the next season. But he couldn't foretell disaster in the present instance. It was a matter of watching and waiting . . . and hurrying to get the firebug before he burned down any more buildings.

HE RANG Barney from a confectionery store pay booth.

"All quiet along the Bowery?"

"As calm as could be expected," Barney was being cautious. "There's a special messenger from the Commissioner's office lurking out in the hall."

"Do him good to wait. How's about doing an errand for me?"

The clerk broke in, anxiously: "I wouldn't put it past those cops on the Shoo-Fly Squad to tap these phone wires here, boss."

"Neither would I. I'll meet you in the five-and-ten. Across the square. United we stand."

"Huh? What? Oh! Charades, no less. I'm as good as there, already."

Five minutes later Barney crossed the Plaza to the United Cigar store on the ground floor of the Woolworth Building. Pedley was there, waiting.

"Hi, Barney."

"Morning, boss. Holy cats! Whose door'd you bump into in the dark?"

"Miss Lownes'. We're going to have to drag her before a committing magistrate shortly. And then yours sincerely is going to be made to look like a badly run-down heel. I spent the night in her apartment."

The grin that spread over Barney's face was something to behold. He let out a long low whistle of envy.

"Never a word shall pass these lips, boss."

"Plenty of word will get around. Sime Dublin caught me there . . . with my pants over a chair. Lay off that lascivious leer. Her husband undressed me and put me to bed. I was unconscious until I woke up to find myself in as sweet a frame as Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*."

"She put one over on you?"

"She. And Terry Ross. And Dublin. I'm about to have heaped on me more scorn than anybody since John Wilkes Booth or sweet Benedict Arnold."

"Maybe," Barney said, "Ollie can



help."

"If Ollie hears of this, I hate to think what *she'll* do!"

"She's been calling you."

"Where is she?"

"Uptown. At *Show*."

"Alone?"

"With an editor or somebody. She said to tell you Mr. Toleman had been most helpful. And that she thought maybe she was getting somewhere. And would you please come up and see."

### CHAPTER XXXI

THE offices of *Show, the News-magazine of the Entertainment World*, were a bedlam of clacking typewriters, jangling telephones, feverish conversation. Nobody gave Pedley a second glance.

He found Ollie in the file room with an office boy in enthusiastic attendance. She grinned at the Marshal, screwing up one eye to avoid the smoke of her own cigarette.

"Hello, darling. This is worse than delving into the tomb of King Tut."

"What you expect to unearth, Ollie?"

"Something to verify my reticent cavalier's suspicions."

"How'd you make out with Wesley, the Wonder-Man?"

She glanced roguishly at the office boy. "You couldn't classify his technique as Neolithic. I escaped the fate worse'n death."

"So did I. Barely."

She was solicitous about the bump on his forehead. "Did the insidious Leila try to stun you and drag you home to her cave?"

"She succeeded."

"Why, Ben!" She clasped her hands over her heart. "Must all my pangs of passion go unrequited because of this Other Woman?"

The office boy said: "Aw! You're kiddin'!"

He left them together in the file room.

"What'd you learn, Ollie?"

"Deep in his cups . . . after the fourth claret lemonade . . . he confided to me that he knew what's in the Florentine case."

"But he'd sworn on a Gideon Bible never to reveal his knowledge?"

"It's full of love letters."

"Oh! 'My own cutie-pie . . . with remembrances of the last time we were together (underlined), from her own Matey-Watey'."

"Have you been reading them?"

"Not yet. I have hopes. Does Wesley know who they were from?"

Ollie stood up and stretched languorously. "My escort was vague on that point. My intuition tells me there may be a couple from little Wesley himself."

"That babe's worse than a grass-fire for catching everything around her."

"He didn't admit any such peccadilloes. All he'd opine for sure is, there'll be a lot of melting missives signed 'your ever-lovin' Chuck'."

"Is she blackmailing her radio producer?"

"Wesley says she's been working with Gaydel. To get brother Ned out of the way. So she and Chuck can split the profits of the program."

Pedley looked blankly at her for a long moment. Then finally he sighed.

"Close . . . but no seegar. Doesn't quite ring the bell, Ollie. Might account for several points. But there are a few that don't jibe."

"I thought that, myself. Why cut Gaydel in on it?"

"Especially when she's just married a marine who'd feed Chuck to the goldfish if he thought the producer was still fooling around."



"Wes says Kim Wasson will verify his story, soon as she can talk. Says the arranger met Leila through Chuck when he was running a one-tube station down in Baltimore four or five years ago."

"Baltimore, again. Makes the third time. Adds up." Pedley took out the snapshot of Leila and Ned. "I found this stuck in the lining of Lownes' wallet. Looked as if he'd been hanging onto it a long time. Must have been a reason. And this was snapped in Baltimore."

"Clairvoyance? Or do you have inside information?"

"Only town I know where half the houses have the same kind of low front steps. White marble. They don't really eat off 'em, but they keep 'em scrubbed clean enough to."

Ollie ruffled the pages of the magazine on the long binder-stick. "Take a little of that. Add a dash of this." She pointed to an item in an issue of *Show*, carrying the date line of March 26, 1940.

#### PROGRAM MANAGER

#### HAILS SINGING FIND

*Chaney J. 'Chuck' Gaydel, who provides entertainment for local Thousands over WBIZ, predicts a sensational success for his new songbird, Leila Lownes, who is being starred in a noontime program at 12:15 daily: 'Songs You Remember to Love.' Miss Lownes is also appearing at the Academy for the balance of the week. This is her first appearance on a radio program of her own.*

Pedley read it carefully. "That could be the tipoff, toots." He caught Ollie by the arm. "If we stay in here much longer, they'll be asking us to sign a lease. Leave us hence."

SHE didn't ask where they were heading. Not until he'd parked on Broome Street and they were entering the rattletrap old building did she comment at all.

"I'm completely in the dark, Ben. Apparently you see a gleam of light."

"One candle-power. A mile away. In a tunnel."

They went upstairs, past a row of benches at which men in laboratory dusters were sitting, eyes glued to the dual eye-pieces of comparison microscopes. One of the men crooked a finger in Pedley's direction:

"I have the analysis on those granules when you want 'em, Marshal."

"Haven't located any to check against them yet, Sol. But the boys'll come up with something from the cleaners, don't worry."

Ollie poked a finger toward a twisted shape of aluminum wire:

"What do you expect to find out from a coat-hanger, Ben?"

"Came from the dressing-room, Ollie. Buckled in the heat. Shows the temperature went above twelve hundred. Wood doesn't burn that hot. Proof there actually was naphtha in the bottle."

He stopped at the door of a long, hall-like room where two men were working with a spectograph. One of the technicians pointed to a segment of charred wood, a piece Shaner had cut out of the dressing-table. The "alligatorings," which checked the burned surface into cracked, irregular squares, had been cut through to show the depth and extent of the char.

"Comes to about eighteen minutes, close as we can average it, Marshal."

"Thanks, Johnny." To Olive he explained: "Length of time the blaze had been going. Figured from the time the wood started to burn until spray cooled the surface enough to crack it,



like that. Fixes the hour the fire was set. Some wise-boy for the defense is sure to challenge an offhand opinion, unless we can back it up with data."

They walked through into a photographic studio with more elaborate equipment than any Olive had ever seen. A sergeant in a cotton undershirt greeted Pedley boisterously.

"I must have heard Shaner wrong, Marshal. I thought he told me those pages of script had been burned in a grate fire."

"They were, Matt."

"If you say so. But they could have as well been ignited by spontaneous combustion." The sergeant flushed, glancing at Olive. "Beg your pardon, Miss. If that's your handwriting . . .?"

"It isn't." She laughed reassuringly. "I just came along for the riot."

Pedley said: "Maybe it's too torrid for her to see. She's a young thing and should not shock her mother."

"We-ell." The sergeant rubbed his hands. "They're hotter'n a cook-stove at threshing time but there's nothing to hurt a girl who's free, white and been around." He indicated chairs facing a small, silvered screen mounted on the wall at one end of the room. "We haven't had time to make negatives of the lot, but if those we have so far are a fair sample—" He whistled much as Barney had in the cigar store.

Pedley asked: "What are they? Letters?"

"No. Not exactly a diary, either." The sergeant switched off the wall lights. "It's more as if this jane was doing a strip-tease on paper. It's a cinch she didn't think her stuff would ever get on the screen."

An illuminated square showed on the wall.

"We magnified eight diameters. Lost a lot of it because the surface of the burnt pages wasn't flat. But what we

have ought to give you a working basis. This is one of her milder moments. We'll work up to speed, gradually."

ON THE screen appeared what looked like a crumpled white sheet with huge gray writing scrawled on it. Occasionally an entire line would fade away into illegibility but for the most part it wasn't difficult to read:

*I'm writing this at the Lord Calberry and Chuck has just left me. We quarreled pretty much last night but finally Chuck said nothing in the world mattered to him except having me. Not even Ned, or his own wife, or anything. I couldn't tell him so while he was here with me but I'm much more disturbed in my mind than he seems to be. Chuck is the most exciting man I've ever known and he leaves me pretty limp but whether I love him or not—*

The frame disappeared.

"Wonderful what ultra violet can do," murmured Ollie.

Pedley said: "I've had a bigger kick out of Mickey Mouse, many a time. Does it get better as it goes on?"

"This one will keep you on the edge of your seats." The sergeant pushed another slide into the projector. "There aren't any dates on these pages; the way they were mixed up when Shaner brought 'em in, no telling which came first. I expect this one was written before the one you just saw."

The white-cotton-sheet effect wasn't quite so pronounced now, the writing just a little less readable:

*I told Chuck about Ned tonight and it just about broke him up. He really hasn't had much experience*



*with troupers, so I couldn't blame him for not knowing that a lot of brother-and-sister acts aren't really brothers and sisters but more likely husband and wife. Chuck said he wouldn't have started taking me out in the first place if he'd known Ned and I were married. Then I told him a sort of lie—that Ned and I haven't actually been two-ing it for quite a while and that seemed to make him feel a little better. I guess he really is that way about me. But maybe his wife won't look at things the way Ned—*

The frame vanished.

Ollie let out a long breath.

"She was Mrs. Ned Lownes!"

"Yeah."

"That explains everything, doesn't it?"

"I wish I thought so," said Pedley.

## CHAPTER XXXII

"OLLIE"—Pedley set down his cup of thick Turkish coffee—"there's something I want to ask you."

"Why, Ben, dear!" She leaned eagerly across the Aleppo's rather soiled tablecloth. "Just . . . ask me." Her eyes were dreamy.

He put his hand over hers. "Will you be my . . . secretary?"

She sighed and closed her eyes. "I shall remember this moment all the rest of my days. The answer is 'Yes,' Benjamin. 'Yes' . . . with all my heart. When shall it be?"

"Immejut. I don't want to call Barney myself, because by now a certain highly-placed gentleman may have left orders for my clerk to notify me by telephone that I'm no longer on the job officially . . ."

"Oh, Ben! He wouldn't do *that*! I

know he wouldn't!"

"He might have to, Ollie. And in case he does, I wouldn't want to put Barnus on the spot. So if you'd buzz him for me?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Ask him if he's heard from Shaner. I couldn't get Ed up at the Riveredge. Leila must have left her apartment. I'd like to know where the hell she's gone!"

Ollie edged past a circle of card-playing Armenians, into the malodorous phone booth. Presently she emerged.

"Last minute bulletin from the front. Relayed through our local correspondent, B. Molloy. Miss Lownes and Mr. Gaydel left the Riveredge at approximately three-forty-five."

Pedley looked at his watch. "More'n an hour ago."

"They took Gaydel's car to South Ferry. Parked near the dock used by the Statue of Liberty boat."

"Sight-seeing? In this kind of weather? Must be the gypsy in them." Pedley tapped his coffee cup. "If you can flag that waiter, ask him to put a head on this." He went to the booth, used three nickels and a moderate amount of unprintables.

At the public relations office in the Graybar Building, a receptionist remembered vaguely that Mr. Ross had come in an hour or so ago; didn't think he was in now, though; finally consented to investigate; went away from the phone and returned a nickel later to announce that Terry had left his office almost immediately. She thought he'd mentioned some lawyer . . . Emerson or Amesbury or something like that . . .

Another nickel produced from Miss Bernard the information that Amery had gone to meet Ross, that the duo were Staten Island bound *via* ferry.

The ferry! Right beside the Statue of Liberty dockage! "What's so in-



teresting over on Staten Island all of a sudden, Miss Bernard?"

"Why—the show."

"The radio show? Doesn't it go on at the Broadcast Building?"

"Usually." She was astonished he didn't know. "Except when they go out of town on trips or take it to one of the hospitals for wounded vets. They can't very well bring the soldiers in to the studio."

"Miss Lownes going to be on the show, after all?"

"She wasn't," the girl explained. "With Hal Kelsey out for keeps and Leila out, too—Mr. Gaydel thought it wasn't worth while putting the show on at all. But Mr. Ross decided it wouldn't be fair to all those wounded men to disappoint them so he convinced Leila she should go ahead with it, in spite of her own feelings. So she's going to."

"What hospital?"

"Harbor View Memorial, Mr. Pedley."

"When's the show supposed to go on?"

"Six o'clock, I think."

PEDLEY hung up the phone softly, went back to the table, laid two dollar bills on the tablecloth.

"So long, my sweet."

"You're a laggard escort, to leave me in this low dive."

"I have to take a quick trip across the Bay. Those excursionists weren't after souvenirs. They were Staten Island bound to put on the Winn show for the vets at Harbor View Hospital. I smell trouble."

"Aren't you going out of your way to look for it?" She got up hastily, hurried out to the street with him.

"You ought to know, if anyone does, Ollie. In this business, if you don't look for it, trouble comes right up and smacks you in the face when you aren't

looking. Hey, you're not coming with me." He climbed behind the wheel of the borrowed sedan, switched on the short-wave.

"I wouldn't miss it for all the nylons in Macy's."

"... Get to Mitch ... to Mitch ... have her meet me at the Battery in nothing flat ... that's right ... that is all." He switched off the set. "I'll run you down, but that's the end of the line."

"Don't be ridiculous, darling. I've never been seasick in my life."

He took the shortest distance between two points; his siren could be heard ten blocks ahead, and that was a good thing because he swooped down toward Whitehall like a dive bomber riding in for the kill.

Ollie sat relaxed, her shoulder touching his, while the sedan tore around trolley cars on the wrong side and knifed through paralyzed traffic.

"Why are you running a temperature, Ben dear?"

"Thing's made to order for a firebug's *fiesta*, Ollie. Worst fires are always in crowds. Worst crowd fires are where people can't get out quickly for one reason or another. Hospitals, especially. More hospitals are touched off by incendiarists than any other single kind of building."

"Why?"

"More people likely to get hurt. More of 'em scared. So ... more excitement. Psychiatrists say a lot of arsonists get a kick out of that kind of emotional hypo."

The *John Purroy Mitchell* was steaming into Pier One at top speed, a bone of foam in her teeth, a veil of spray over her blunt nose. The big red and black fireboat, with its threatening armament of brass nozzles on their gun-like mounts, rubbed its guard-rail against the string-pieces only a few



seconds after Pedley and the girl rolled out on the dock, piled out of the sedan.

The firemen didn't bother with hawsers around the bollards. Pedley hustled Ollie over the bulwarks, hollered up to the pilot-house:

"St. George's, Dan. And cut the corners on those spar-buoys!"

THEY were rolling fearsomely down the ship-channel off the tip of Governor's Island, with the boat taking heavy spray over her quarter as she butted into the cross-chop, before Ollie asked the question that had been bothering her.

"You really believe Leila's behind this orgy of arson, Ben?"

"Sure, she's behind it." He put down the Captain's binoculars; there was no sign of smoke from the cluster of low, white buildings on the hill rising over St. George's—but with a wind like this he couldn't have seen it, anyway. "You saw the Memoirs of a Kilocycle Courtisan."

"They may not have meant the same thing to a woman they'd mean to a man. She's been hurt; she's confused; her morals are those of an alley-cat in April. But those pages out of the life of a lovelorn lady don't tell me she's a murderess and a firebug. I can't imagine the girl who'd put those things on paper slashing a man's throat and leaving his body in the snow in Central Park. What would be her motive?"

Pedley kept his eyes on the nearing piers of the Island. "Oh, the motive's been clear enough, all the way through, Ollie."

"Blackmail?"

"That's the method, Ollie. Not the motive. The motive is half a million a year Luscious Leila might earn the next twelve months. And the same, or more, the year after that. And so on, *ad infinitum*. That's a hell of a lot of

jack, even after you have deducted all the taxes."

## CHAPTER XXXIII

THE M.P. at the door of the recreation hall tapped a gloved finger against his lips in warning:

"We're on the air," he murmured. "Sit in back."

Music blared at them when they went in.

"Goodness!" Ollie whispered in astonishment at the row after row of quiet, intent men in their maroon coveralls, with their arms in splints, or their legs in casts, a good many in wheel chairs. "There must be hundreds of them here."

"Place holds close to a thousand." Pedley walked swiftly down a side aisle, toward the apron of the shallow stage at the far end of the hall.

Wes Toleman was at the microphone, his face tilted up like that of a child awaiting a kiss. He waved toward the wings. Leila came out. The roar of cheers, whistles and wolf-calls drowned out the handclapping, the pounding of canes and crutches on the floor. They followed her every movement as she swayed gracefully to the mike, raising her hand in smiling salute. The great hall became quiet except for the singing surge of the strings.

Pedley saw Shaner squatting on the floor at the end of the first row; jerked an imperative thumb at him.

The brasses softened; the rhythm section brought up the beat. Cliff Etting flicked his white wand at Leila. She threw her head back to flex her throat muscles, pushed the bronze helmet of hair back from her head, began to sing.

*Through . . . the black of night  
I got to go . . . where you are . .*



She had a marvelous sense of rhythm, Pedley realized. And she was one of those entertainers who somehow manage that magical *rappport* with an orchestra that makes every musician work with her, for her. The piano was just loud enough so she couldn't go wrong on pitch, the strings came in with exactly the right staccato, the bull-fiddle delayed smoothly on the after-beat.

Wounded men strained forward in their seats; tension disappeared from haggard faces, lips hung loose, a thousand pairs of eyes devoured her. She had that same magical effect on an audience . . . the hall was surcharged with the intensity of her appeal.

She's something more than a blues singer with a freak larynx that makes her voice husky over the mike, the Marshal told himself. She may not be a coloratura but she's something better to these vets.

She's what they haven't had, he reminded himself, what a lot of them may never have again—except through her. With that figure, those warm lips and friendly eyes, these men wouldn't care what she'd been or done—not while that voice brought back the memories and held the promise . . .

Shaner whispered close to his ear: "She ain't been out of my sight longer than to change her clothes, skipper. Everything's strictly under control."

"I hope to God you know what you're talking about. Who's in there?" He indicated the makeshift control room, improvised out of wall board and plastiglass at one side of the stage; at the angle Pedley was standing, he couldn't see anything of the booth but a glare.

"There are Three Musketeers cooped up in there with the engineer, coach. Ross and a bird everyone calls Chuck, plus a silver-hair gent with a bandage on his chops."

"Chuck's the producer. The other's their lawyer. Where's the hospital patrol?"

"I run across a corp'ral who's been giving the up and down to the sand buckets and the sprinklers and the hose-rolls. You want him?"

"Quick. Where is he? Backstage?"

"He was. You got to crawl through the orchestra."

"Snap it up."

THE hall was a natural draft-maker.

Big floor space, high-vaulted composition roof, wartime construction with the beams and girders insufficiently fireproofed. Wood floors. Wood sash. The place would go up like a box of matches. A lot of good those red globes and Exit diagrams would do if it ever caught.

And there were no steel fire-shutters to keep a blaze from spreading horizontally to other buildings, he noticed. He was glad he'd notified the nearby Richmond companies to get "on the box"; be ready to roll at a split-second's notice.

They went Indian file, stooping over, behind the percussion instruments to a tiny door under the stage apron. Above them the voice throbbed on:

*Through . . . the smoke and flame  
I gotta be . . . where you are . . .*

"Good grief!" Olive murmured, as they passed into the dimness below stage. "Does she have to sing *that*!"

They came up out of the half-light into the wings. A group of coveralled men huddled behind the heavy glass-fibre curtain. One wore khaki, with chevrons on the arm.

Shaner whispered: "Hey, corp. Fire Marshal wants you."

The corporal resented the interruption.



"Whatsamatter, Chief?"

"Sprinkler system all right?"

"Yeah. Anything—?"

"Tested the down-pipes from your roof tank?"

"They ain't frozen, if that's what you're getting at." The soldier opened his eyes very wide at Olive.

Pedley said: "You feel her lately?"

"Howzat?"

"Have you felt the walls?" Pedley strode toward the rear drop, turned to look out across the stage and up at the line of bulbs under the proscenium. The illumination which beat down on the singer's bronze hair wasn't clear and sharp; it quivered like sunlight over a midsummer pavement. "Hot air up there, buddy. Making the lights shimmy. Better feel her."

"Sure it's hot. We keep the steam high on account of our patients."

Pedley said sharply: "You wouldn't know if the seat of your pants was burning! Shaner. Take the east wall."

He didn't wait for his deputy to begin; moved swiftly along the west wall, passing his hands over the kal-somined plaster.

The plaster beneath his palms became suddenly cooler. Was there some burrowing flame back there under the floor somewhere?"

He sniffed. The strong hospital odor of ether and formalin—but no smoke. Maybe he'd been jittery for nothing.

No. He'd turned the corner, was working across behind the back drop. *The wall here was warm!*

Sweat moistened his forehead, and not from the heat. There was something more than radiation from steam pipes, here. The varnish on the wood-work was sticky!

**H** E DIDN'T hurry as he went out onto the stage, crossed to the con-

trol room. Any sign of panic, now, might be worse than a blaze.

Gaydel swung around from his campstool, scowled:

"Now, what?"

"Call Toleman," Pedley said easily. "Want an announcement over the mike."

Ross cried: "This isn't a rehearsal, you dimwit! We're on the air. You can't break up a network broadcast—"

"You'll break it up. There's a fire backstage, here, somewhere."

Amery's stood clattered to the floor. "I don't see . . ."

"Neither do I. But it's here. Get Toleman. Get him quick."

Gaydel hesitated. Leila was just going into the final chorus of *Chloe*. The heavy beat of the drums was building up to a climax. Maybe another half-minute wouldn't make any difference; maybe it wasn't anything serious; maybe—

Pedley gauged the producer's indecision, made his decision.

He went out of the control room, strolled casually to the microphone, put a hand on her arm. She half-turned, without missing a phrasing. Consternation was clear in her eyes.

He pulled her back from the microphone, as Toleman glared, started toward him from the west wings.

"You'll want to lynch me for cutting into the performance," he said into the mike, "but we'll have to call it off, temporarily. There's been an accident"—he made it purposely obscure—"there'll be rain checks. Everybody out now." He gestured with his open hand to the substitute orchestra leader to keep on playing.

Toleman pawed at him. Pedley brushed him aside. He cut across to the corporal.

"Pull your box. Then tell your M. P.'s to get these boys out of here,



fast."

The corporal ran.

Pedley used sign language to Shaner across the stage. He held both hands at his side as if gripping a rifle, then pantomimed as if he was suddenly shooting the rifle into the ground. Shaner nodded, hurried for the nearest wall-rack holding an extinguisher.

The movement toward the exits began reluctantly. Not more than a third of the invalids were on their feet. None of the wheel-chair cases had spun themselves around to head for the doors. A few veterans were filtering out. The aisles were slowly beginning to fill up. Maybe it would be all right, if they would only move a little faster. They might all get out in time. . . .

He saw the smoke. No larger than the trailing plume from a cigarette, at first. It drifted aimlessly up from the staircase they had used to climb from below-stage. Before he could reach the top of the steps, it had become a gray funnel a foot wide.

Then the cry of "Fire! *FIRE.*"

#### CHAPTER XXXIV

**I**T TOOK about ten seconds for the recreation hall to turn into pandemonium.

Pedley, jerking a fire axe from its bracket, saw what was happening. The "walking cases" weren't in any panic; they weren't crowding and fighting toward the doors at all. That was the trouble; the men who could get out easily weren't doing it. They were staying to help the others who couldn't navigate without aid—the wheelchair occupants, the two-crutch cases. Before Shaner came lumbering across the stage with his extinguisher, the two long aisles were a tangle of chairs, canes, crutches, struggling men.

The nurses, from the back rows, did

what they could. The M. P.'s carried men bodily out of the milling mass.

With the first burst of flame, the Marshal knew there'd be a stampede.

The four men in the control room had run for sand buckets. The fire was eating away under the stage somewhere; Pedley hacked away at the floor beside the hottest place on that rear wall. If he could get a draft through here, it might stop the flames from cauliflowering out over the aisles.

His axe sank through inch-thick planking as if it had been a rotten stump. When he yanked the blade free, a little sprinkle of sparks followed it. Then a thin trident of orange flame.

Beside him, Shaner yelled:

"One more sock, I can get this baby working."

The axe lifted, fell. A square foot of the planking broke away, fell out of sight, was replaced by a gush of vanilla-colored smoke. Shaner let go with the extinguisher.

A livid sheet of violet flashed as the stream squirted out of the nozzle; it blinded Shaner momentarily, left him stunned. Pedley knocked the cylinder out of the deputy's hands. It rolled along the floor, spouting lavender flame over back drop and floor!

Gasoline! *In* the extinguisher!

The Marshal seized Shaner by the collar, dragged him back from the miniature volcano roaring up through the hole in the flooring.

The backdrop blazed up with the rapidity of a window shade zipping to the top when the catch doesn't work. Pedley could see through to the stage.

Leila was at the mike again—singing. Some of the orchestra men had fled but most of them stayed with her.

Loud above the crackling and snapping of the flames, clear and cool over the terrified melee of the entangled aisles, came the husky, steady voice:



*Ain't no . . . chains can bind me  
Where you go . . . I'll find you . . .*

It wasn't exactly oil on the troubled waters; nothing could have completely calmed that fear-crazed group of sick and injured men. But it was enough. It gave them the narrow margin of confidence they had to have if they were to survive.

She had nerve enough to stand there and sing:

*Lo-o-ove . . . is calling me  
I gotta be where you are . . .*

And they wouldn't be shown up by a girl, not by the voice many of them had listened to in far-away corners of the world, on shipboard, in foxholes. If Leila could take it, they could . . .

The hospital fire crew was swarming in now, with hoses. Men flung sand and retreated before searing geysers welling up out of the floor.

The seats themselves were nearly empty. But the aisles were still clogged, the exits hopelessly jammed. Another three minutes and most of the boys would be out. They wouldn't have half that, unless that fireproof curtain shut off the flames from the stage.

It had jammed on the track somewhere. The patrol-corporal and Ollie and Toleman were tugging frantically at the rope; the thing was stuck, a third of the way across the stage.

Pedley grabbed an armful of the heavy fabric, was attempting to drag it back toward the wings to clear the pulleys, when he saw the widening, luminous circles on Leila's skirt. He dived at her, beat the flames out with his hands.

She staggered away from the mike, saw the gilt sparks racing across the material of her dress . . . and ran.

He tried to grab her, but she was

too horrified at being afire to realize that running only fanned the sparks.

IN AN instant she had reached the wings, staring over her shoulder, terrified at the trail of flame following her. She tripped over the extinguisher Pedley had knocked out of Shaner's hand, fell headlong, disappeared into the smoke belching from the flight of stairs leading below-stage.

Pedley was plunging into the smoke and down the staircase before she hit the cement floor. But he couldn't see her, couldn't find her when he felt around at the foot of the steps.

He called to her.

Her answer came faintly from somewhere toward the opening into the musicians' pit. He grouped toward her in the half light. She had crawled beside a crate of old costumes, crouched there, whimpering like an animal in pain.

He pulled her to her feet

"You're not hurt."

He had to find out if she *was* hurt; he couldn't tell if she slumped there in hysterics.

She could walk.

"Come on." He made for the mid-get door under the apron, opening into the orchestra.

When he put his hand on the knob, he knew there was no use. It burned his fingers. The paint on the door was blistering.

He could open it easily enough. But they wouldn't get through. The other side of that door would be a sea of flame.

"Have to try the stairs."

"All right." She had stopped whimpering.

The lights went out. They could still see; the orange glare was sufficient for them to find their way back to the bottom of the stairs.



They went up partway. But they couldn't get out. The fireproof curtain had fallen over the hatchway out into the stage; from beneath it angry spears of flame stabbed across the top steps.

Pedley dragged her back.

"Doesn't look so good."

"We're trapped?"

He pulled her along with him understage. "Might be another exit . . ."

There wasn't. He was pretty certain there wouldn't be.

She clung to him. "We'll never get out of this."

"Sure. They'll get us."

They would, of course. But it wouldn't do any good to tell her how the rescue crew would come through here after the fire was out and everything was soaked down, to explain about the long black rubber bag they use to carry out . . . whatever was left of them. "I've been in tougher spots than this."

"This is what Ned went through. And Kim." She didn't put it as a question; it was more as if she was understanding something for the first time.

"Uh huh. Only we . . . we'll be all right."

THE heat was a tangible thing. It needled the back of his neck, stung his nostrils, made the top of his ears ache.

"They wouldn't have had to go through it, we wouldn't be going through it, if it hadn't been for me," she said.

"Your first husband wasn't exactly free from blame." They were as far away from the flames as they could get. Pedley's back was to the wall. She clung to him, her face half buried in his shoulder.

"I forgot. You read my . . . day book."

"Yeah." He slapped at a spark that

dropped on her neck. It slid down inside her dress. He ripped the silk from her shoulders, flung the burning cloth aside. She didn't move away from him.

"You know about . . . Ned."

"I know he was some guy who came to your home town with a show and you ran away and married him, went into his vaudeville act." A portion of the stage floor fell in, some twenty feet away; it was like watching a preview of hell, Pedley thought. "I found out you never did divorce him. That you had a lot of—uh—men friends. Guys who could help you along in show business, mostly. But you never committed bigamy until this kid Conover came along."

"I never really fell in love until I found Bill. I never met anyone like him before. Maybe that was why. He wouldn't . . . have anything to do with me, unless he could marry me."

"The Lieutenant didn't know you'd played around?"

"Yes." It was getting hard for her to speak; her lips were beginning to swell from the heat. "I didn't fool him about that. But I couldn't tell him Ned and I were married." She shrank behind Pedley's shoulder as a knot in the flooring exploded and scattered fragments of glowing wood over them. "Ned knew I wanted to marry him, and he threatened to show Bill my diary, if I did."

"Why'd you put stuff like that down on paper, anyway?"

"I never had many friends . . . except boy friends. I couldn't keep them very long, either. Ned wouldn't let me. He kept breaking my friendships up, even though he didn't care for me himself. He didn't mind my—friendships with men as long as it helped get us jobs or more money for the act. But he didn't want me to *like* them."



"Dog in the manger." Pedley could smell the hair singeing on his head. Maybe it was her hair. It didn't make any difference. They were both going the same way.

"So I put my friends in my diary—where I could be sure of having them when I needed them. That was pretty often, with Ned the kind of man he was. I never meant a living soul to see the diary, of course. I hid it from Ned until one night he came in my room and caught me writing in it."

"After that he held a club over your head?" It would be better if he could keep her talking; it wasn't going to be for long, now.

"He found out Bill wanted to marry me. Then he swore he'd show the book to Bill unless I *did* marry him—Bill."

"By that time you cared enough for Conover not to want to give him up?"

"I didn't want him hurt. He's such a swell kid. And I knew if he saw . . . the things I'd written . . . it would break him all up. Besides, I loved him. I *wanted* to marry him. Only thing, I didn't want to be a bigamist. But that's what I was."

"Then Ned had you right where he wanted you."

"He'd been mean, before. After that, he was evil. He made me give him most of the money I made. He insulted me in public. And he wouldn't let Bill tell anyone we were married. Of course poor Bill doesn't know why I was so afraid of Ned. He thinks it's just because Ned was such a heel. If it should come out I'm actually a criminal, I think Bill would shoot himself."

"Somebody else found out all this? Figured if he had the book and Ned was out of the way, he'd be able to keep you under his thumb just as Lownes had?"

"I guess so . . . but . . ." She was getting faint. "I don't know . . . who

. . ."

She leaned against him weakly, sank against the wall in a crumpled heap.

Her skirt began to smoulder at her knees. It broke into flame.

He tried to put it out by flinging his coat around her. It smothered the blaze for a moment, then it flared up again.

He dropped the coat, clawed at the flaming fabric until he ripped her dress away completely.

Then he covered her body with his own and waited.

## CHAPTER XXXV

HE HAD plenty of light to scratch the name on the back of his watch. He lay across Leila's body with the shoulder-padding of his coat over his mouth so it filtered out the worst of the sparks and a little of the heat which made every breath a brief agony.

They wouldn't get to them; that was impossible, now. But they'd find the watch. Barney, at least, would have sense enough to search for some message left in the moment of extremity.

The pain seemed to be numbing him; the back of his neck even felt cool. Mirage of the nerves; it must be. They said you felt no thirst at the very end when you died on the desert, looking for water.

The coolness spread. He put one hand up at the back of his head. His hair was wet. He rolled on one side. The glow from the fire was dimmer. The air seemed full of mist. It was mist. *The fog nozzle!*

Picking its way carefully over burning planks and red-glowing beams, came a fantastic figure that might have been spawned by Frankenstein. The Suit!

No wool-clad, rubber-shod fireman could have walked into that inferno.



But The Suit!—Pedley would back The Suit against hellfire anytime, from here in . . .

That asbestos-coated grizzly-bear with the diving helmet headpiece and the square of gleaming glass for the eyes, held in its mittened paws a thin, twelve-foot applicator, an extension nozzle-tip bent at right angles to the length. From the nozzle came a mist of fine drizzling spray that cut down flame, blacked out embers and sent a cloud of steam boiling up from the floor. Pedley felt an invisible screen drop between him and that withering blast of heat.

The Suit pointed the applicator at him and Leila. The almost unbearable relief temporarily increased the fierce aching in his eyes, his face. Leila stirred, moaned. . . .

When the hospital patrol got in, Pedley made them take the girl. He could make it under his own steam. By the time he did, a group had gathered around the doctors who were wrapping Leila's bare limbs in blankets.

They stood in the shelter of the boiler-room, shivering; overhead a monstrous mushroom of smoke towered up into the sky. Chuck and Amery and Wes Toleman were in the group; Pedley looked for Ross, but the publicity man wasn't around.

Chuck said: "Calls don't come any closer than that, Marshal."

"You can quote me on that." Pedley dug his fingers into the snow, rubbed the cold crystals on his lips. "But this was the last call."

AMERY bent down to put one of Leila's shoes that had fallen off, on her stretcher. "I hope to God it is! This is the third—"

"—and last time, yeah. I started out on the wrong track, thinking of one fire-

bug. When I found anyone who had an alibi—a real, honest-to-Superior-Court alibi—I checked him off as not suspect. Bad error. Took me a while to dope out there had to be two arson experts, two killers. They were working together, naturally. And one was top man, of course. He hired the second man to do the dirty work he couldn't get around to do."

"Staro," breathed Toleman.

Pedley nodded. "The strong-arm boy was the second man, sure. He bopped me over the head at Lownes' flat because he thought I'd found Leila's caseful of dynmite. He trailed me around after he found out I was Marshal, saw me talking to Kim Wasson, frightened the sense out of her by boogey-ing at her through a drugstore window. When he found he couldn't shut her up any other way, he trailed, or took, her to her apartment down in the Village, slugged her hard enough to knock her senseless for ten or fifteen minutes. Then he found an empty candy box in her apartment, filled it with some gas he had in his car and set the box on the stove. Boom—she's in the critical ward!"

"She's dead," Gaydel retorted. "I went down to the hospital to see her and finally they admitted she was dead."

"You found that out, did you?" Pedley was surprised. "All right. She died the morning of the fire but I had the hospital people keep it quiet so the firebug might still think she'd talk. Maybe . . . just maybe . . . that's why this blaze here was set. Because the bug is afraid somebody might corroborate Kim's story."

Amery said: "But Staro couldn't have set this blaze. He's in the Tombs."

"That's right. This piece of old Portugese handiwork," Pedley waved at the soaking ruins of the recreation



hall, "was another of those remote control things. Set up by the top-man sometime earlier today. But Staro did his share. He mistook your office for a shooting gallery, Amery. He wasn't aiming at you, though. Hour or so later, he tried to drown me in a Turkish bath pool. He was trying for me, both times.

Chuck looked at the Marshal sideways, as if doubting his sanity. "Do you always find out these things *post mortem*? Hal Kelsey might have been alive now, if you'd been quicker."

"I might have saved his life if I'd figured out this top-man in time," Pedley agreed. "He met Kelsey, probably near Lownes' bank in Columbus Circle, drove around in the park with him for a while. When the head-man found out Kelsey knew quite a lot and guessed quite a lot more—Kelsey got put out with a slit windpipe. May be a little difficult to bring that one home to the murderer; lot of evidence may have been overlooked at the time. But there'll be enough else to start him marching along that last mile."

"Ned?" Toleman tucked his hands under his armpits, shivered.

"For a starter, yes. The killer was drinking in the Telebar with Lownes and Kelsey; he managed to slip a half-pint of denatured alcohol into Ned's ryeballs. When the drunk got to the theatre and was carried up to the dressing-room, he couldn't get away from the naphtha that set the place on fire. That one was figured out to a hair; the top man had his arrangements all made so he didn't even have to go up to the dressing-room to touch off the blaze. All he did was loosen the fuse plug to Leila's dressing-room until Leila went up. Then he tightened it so the current would begin to heat up the flatiron that cracked the naphtha bottle that set fire to the house that—"

"If you knew all this," Amery was skeptical, "why didn't you arrest this whoever-he-is and prevent today's—"

"Wasn't sure until this afternoon," said the Marshal. "Top man was in this to get the cut Lownes had been getting on his sister's fat income. By using the same blackmail scheme Ned had been using. So it was a certainty the Number One Boy wouldn't have wanted to do anything that would have put her in danger. Still, he did. Why? Because he hadn't counted on Leila's being on the show out here today. He didn't know Leila was going to change her mind and put on the performance anyway. Ross knew that because he convinced her she ought to do it. Gaydel knew it, too."

Amery scowled. "I didn't know it."

"That's what I meant." Pedley reached inside his coat. "Let me show you the clincher in the case, Amery."

## CHAPTER XXXVI

THE lawyer frowned contemptuously at the gun. "You can't bluff an attorney, Marshal. And you certainly can't believe I had anything to do with the theatre fire . . . when I nearly lost my life in it."

With his free hand Pedley caught hold of the lawyer's coat; fumbled at the cuff of the sleeve. "Same situation you ran into here, today. You didn't mean for Leila to get hurt. Wouldn't be any point to Lownes' demise if the money-making part of the Lownes & Lownes combination should be put out of action." He picked something out of the cuff of Amery's coat, examined it while he held the gun in the lawyer's ribs.

"When Leila ran back to the dressing-room, to save Lownes, you had to chase after her to protect your investment, so to speak. 'Course you didn't



intend to pass out, yourself. But that turned out to be a break: nobody likes to suspect the hero who's risked his life to save a girl."

Toleman giggled: "But Mr. Amery wasn't *at* the Telebar with Ned. Not when I was there."

"Okay." Pedley fished around in the attorney's coat-cuff some more; Amery tried to pull his arm away but the Marshal shoved on the muzzle of the gun a little and the lawyer subsided. "He was there with Ned before you got there. Or after you left."

Amery said tightly: "Perhaps you'll be able to explain to the Prosecutor's office how I managed to murder my friend Kelsey when I was at home under the care of a doctor!"

"No." Pedley let go of the man's sleeve. "I can't tell him that. But I can suggest several explanations. Your doctor might have been lying, though I don't think so. You might not have taken the sleeping pills at all; you could have gotten out of your own home quietly and walked to the bus-line, gone in town and taken your car out of a garage. I wouldn't be surprised if a check on your garage would show you'd had the car out last night . . ."

"You couldn't *find* twelve men stupid enough to accept that sort of imbecile supposition!" The muscles in Amery's jaws twitched with rage.

"Well, I've got quite a bit more for a jury to chew on." Pedley jiggled something on the palm of the hand that had been exploring the coat-cuff. "On the way over here on the fire-boat, I had one of my deputies make a few inquiries at that swanky private hospital where you stayed after the theatre fire put you out of business." He waved at the smouldering ruin of the Harbor View. "Not much like this place, your expensive sanitarium. Best of every-

thing, there on Madison Avenue. Good nurses. That crabby old girl who was so solicitous about you—she has a good memory, too. She identified the police photograph of Staro as that of a man who'd been to see you at the hospital not half an hour after I left."

"That is either a lie,"—the lawyer gritted, "or a complete mis-identification on her part."

"It's something for the Grand Jury to think about," the Marshal answered. "Here's something else." He opened his palm, held it out so the others could see what it was.

Gaydel bent nearer to see, asked: "What the hell is it?"

"Plaster," Pedley said. "Maybe you didn't know plaster's like fingerprints. Under the microscope. Sure. When you wash the lime and hairs out, you've got nothing but sand left. Down at the police lab they've got some of the sand grains from the plaster that came from the break in the wall that the firebug busted open in Leila's dressing-room."

Amery laughed; it was a short and involuntary sound that carried no impression of amusement.

Pedley jiggled the grains around. "The sand from the plaster they've got in at Broome Street assays about thirty-two black grains out of every hundred. Twenty-nine white quartz. Say twenty-five or six brown or amber and maybe eighteen, nineteen red sandstone. Thing is, you wouldn't find just that same sand, with the grains mixed in these same proportions, in one building out of a hundred thousand. But I'd be willing to take the short end of a long shot that these grains I just picked out of Paul Amery's coat match that Brockhurst analysis exactly." He looked down at them thoughtfully. "We checked a lot of suits, but we hadn't gotten around to the overcoats until today."



The lawyer reached out quickly, as if to poke at the bits of sand in Pedley's hand,—but slapped hard at the flat of the Marshal's palm, instead.

Pedley drew back involuntarily, to protect the evidence. The movement took the gun away from the attorney's side for an instant. He lunged, knocked the Marshal off his feet.

Amery kicked at the wrist holding the gun, knocked it spinning, ran toward it. But he didn't stop to pick up the weapon. He kept right on running.

Pedley crawled to the pistol, recovered it, propped himself on one elbow and shot the fleeing man between the shoulder-blades.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

"THE doctors in due consultation,"

Olive announced, "find that Leila has contusions, abrasions and assorted second and third-degree burns. But considering what she's been through, she's not in bad shape."

"She couldn't be." Pedley's mind flashed back regretfully to that breakfast in her bedroom. "I hope she never is."

"Leila Lownes is the luckiest girl alive. To be alive." Olive was emphatic. "To have you on her side, all the way through, Ben."

"I wasn't," Pedley insisted. "Unless you mean here at the windup."

"Well . . . it's one woman's natural instinct to suspect the worst of another. So I have to admit I thought she was up to shenanigans when she gave Magin the slip and went down to the Village the night of the explosion at Kim's place."

"You were half-right, Ollie. She did go to Kim's. Because she was afraid her arranger's emotions would get the better of her and she'd spill the beans to me. But when she got to the Wasson

apartment, nobody answered the bell. Staro'd probably just left, after slugging Kim and setting his time bomb. So Leila went right home to the Riveredge. Naturally she didn't want to bring her fruitless visit up later."

"What about her putting one over on Ed Shaner just at the time Kelsey was getting his throat cut?"

"Oh, she went to the bank to get her Florentine box with the diary, out of Ned's safe-deposit drawer. She wasn't in the park at all . . . and she certainly wouldn't have had time to put an end to a promising band-leader's career—even if she'd had the strength or the nerve. Which I doubt."

Olive led him around the corner of the unburnt end of the recreation hall.

"Here's your man of mystery, Ben."

The fireman in The Suit unsnapped the helmet from his fireproof garment. The headpiece hinged down. Shaner put up an asbestos paw and tried to scratch his nose, without success.

"Coach, seems every time I run across you lately, you're down on the floor a-bundling with this Luscious babe. Keeps up, you'll have to marry the girl."

"She's already married, old Nick of Time." Pedley grinned wearily. "And unless I'm wrong, she'll stick to this husband for a while. After we bail him out. Where'd you get that hell-diver outfit?"

Shaner waggled a flipper at Olive.

"What's the sense having the Comish's daughter around if she can't come up with a bright idea, once upon a time?"

"I knew they had one on the fireboat," Olive said. "I saw it on the way over. So I did some thimblerrigging on the two-way with Barney—and the first thing you know, here comes The Suit and there goes Shaner and here you are."



Pedley said: "First time in years Shaner hasn't lost the man he was after."

"You," Olive was reproachful, "nearly lost your firebug, Ben darling. It'll take him six weeks to be able to stand trial."

"Who?" Shaner demanded.

"Amery," said Pedley. "And he'll have more than six weeks to think it over."

"He'll have time to burn, coach."

"Yeah. My object most sublime," agreed the Marshal.

"No spik Ingles?" Shaner didn't

understand.

"It's a quotation, Ed," Olive explained. "It does seem to fit."

"I never heard it."

So Pedley finished it for him, staring up at the column of smoke towering up into the night sky from the gutted building.

*My object most sublime  
I shall achieve in time  
To make the punishment  
Fit the crime  
The punishment . . .  
Fit the crime.*

## COLONIAL QUACKS

BY GARY LEE HORTON

IT WAS back in the days when every home was equipped with its herb garden that "Quack" medical notions reached a new point of ascendancy. Home remedies were concocted from such musical-sounding plant names as catmint, pennyroyal, sage, thoroughwort, tansy, wormwood and sassafras bark. Almost all homes of the early American colonists were proud of their well-thumbed copies of Nicholas Culpepper's "English Physician Enlarged" in which was explained not only what herbs to use for what ailments but also how the herbs were to be gathered—the leaves at the beginning of spring and the seeds towards the end of summer.

In addition to these home remedies local town apothecaries and pedlars' packs supplied pills and tonics of every shape, color, and consistency. As in our own day and age, quacks and quack medicines were plentiful.

One of the earliest concoctions recorded was Tuscarora Rice, a preparation first made from Indian corn by Mrs. Sybilla Masters in 1711. She held fantastic claims for her product, going so far as to say it would relieve and cure tuberculosis. Sybilla, incidentally, was probably America's first woman inventor, with several patents listed in England under her name. In 1716 she was granted Patent No. 403 for a process of weaving palmetto chips and straws into coverings for hats and fashionable bonnets.

Many quack methods were directed toward the cure of rattlesnake poisoning. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the North Carolina legislature granted freedom and two hundred pounds to a local Negro salve named Caesar for his "charm" against snakebite poison. It consisted of equal parts of the juice of horehound and plantain taken internally.

A Frenchman of Philadelphia—Frederic Torres—advertised his Chemical Stone in 1745 claiming

it would cure snakebite immediately if applied promptly. Assuring one and all that his invention was the greatest ever created for suffering mankind, he recommended its use for those with cancer, swellings, rheumatism, toothache, labor pains, and gout.

Joseph Breintnall of Pennsylvania used every method he had ever heard of when a rattlesnake bit him in May of 1746. Apparently he didn't place much faith in Torres's Chemical Stone—or else the powers attributed to it were as yet unknown to him. Breintnall underwent a long and painful series of treatments in an effort to rid himself of the snake poison. First he killed the snake. Then he took a chicken, ripped up its belly and put it on his hand to "suck" out the poison. Immediately the fowl swelled, grew black, and stunk. Breintnall kept his elbow bent and his fingers up. He bound his arm in a plaster made of turmeric roots. To let out the "bad" blood, he slit his fingers with a razor and cupped the back of his hand. Three days later he applied ashes of white ash and vinegar made into a poultice. He became delirious. His arm "swelled, gathered and burst"—and he recovered. This treatment had lasted from May until well into Autumn and the constant pain must have been excruciating.

The forerunner of "snake oil" is thought to be William Penn's consignment of two dozen rattlesnakes which were pounded in a mortar and mixed with wine and rum. The concoction was shaken two or three times a day for five days before it was considered ready for use. For many years barkers sold it from circus platforms and recommended it for any and all ills.

These and so-called Indian remedies were in use until well into the twentieth century. The Pure Food and Drug Laws have done much to counteract false claims in recent times, but quackery is still with us.



# ***No Rest For The Wicked***

***by Ric Hasse***





**T**HOUGH he knew this night was overcast with insecurity and danger, Pat Leahy's broad grin spread out over a face that was so Irish, it was almost green. He didn't like working this extra shift any more than did his partner, but Pat had been married for years, while young Mitchell McNade's wedding was still listed as a coming attraction. A broken date demanded the huge bouquet of American Beauties the young city detective carried in his lap.

"You don't think she'll be sore, Pat?"

Leahy swung the blue police coupe

into North Drive and pulled to the curb before a large, shrubby-fronted house of natural stone.

"She'll get used to it," he said. "She'll probably give you blazes for spending that much of your dough for flowers."

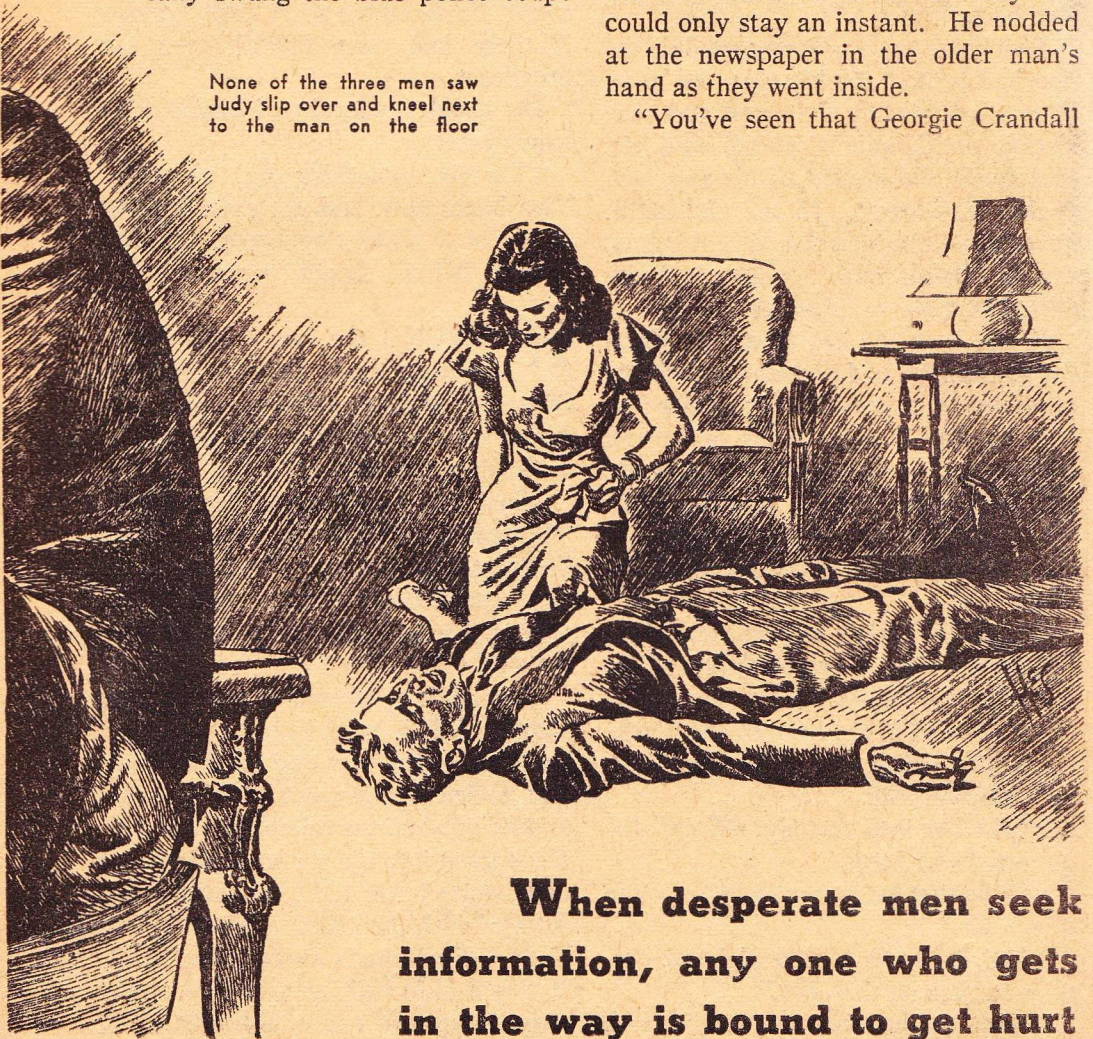
McNade's lean frame crossed the lawn quickly. His ring was answered by a white haired old man in a velvet smoking jacket whose kindly, benign face beamed over a stubby briar pipe.

"Come in, Mitch. Come in. Judy will be right down."

Mitch McNade told his future grandfather-in-law that he was on duty and could only stay an instant. He nodded at the newspaper in the older man's hand as they went inside.

"You've seen that Georgie Crandall

None of the three men saw  
Judy slip over and kneel next  
to the man on the floor



**When desperate men seek  
information, any one who gets  
in the way is bound to get hurt**



has been released?"

"Yes," the retired jurist nodded. "But I don't think he'll cause any more trouble. I think he's learned his lesson this time. He'll go straight."

"I'm afraid not, sir. He was released only yesterday, and this morning Gaff Malon, Benny Owen, and Big Louis Astuma drifted back into town. That's why I'm on duty tonight. Headquarters was tipped that something big is going to be pulled tonight. Every radio car and every cop in town is out tonight. The department's on twenty-four hour duty."

Five years ago a new city administration had broken the big vice and gambling syndicates by the arrest and conviction of Georgie Crandall and the subsequent disbarment of his attorney, Parker E. Barrett. In the aftermath, Crandall's three strong-arm lieutenants, Malon, Owen, and Astuma, had departed in favor of healthier climes.

It had been the last case over which Judge Gregory had presided. Satisfied at seeing a comparatively crime-free city, he had retired to his home and garden, and to watch his granddaughter, Judy grow from a gangling high-school girl into the lovely, long-limbed creature who was now coming down the stairs.

Mitch McNade's serious, lean face brightened like a desert daybreak as his eyes feasted on the clinging white crepe gown that emphasized the blackness of the silken hair framing his fiancée's smiling face.

"Take her into custody, officer," the old jurist chuckled.

"I'll do that permanently in two more weeks, sir."

"And I'll have a very pleasant surprise for you on that day."

"What did he mean by that," Mitch asked Judy after her grandfather had left.

"He only hints at it," she said, rubbing her satin cheek against his face, "but I think it's a small legacy left me by my father. I don't remember him, you know. I barely remember my mother."

"We'll save it," Mitch whispered in her ear, "to send Junior to Harvard!"

From outside came a short, impatient whine of the siren, and Mitch McNade said a reluctant goodbye.

"Be careful, you big lug," Judy said at the door. "For Junior's sake."

As he settled himself in the police coupe, he asked his short burly partner if there had been anything on the broadcast.

Pat shook his head and bunched his heavy brows.

"There's something up, all right. Two hours now, and not even a rolled drunk or a prowler reported. It ain't natural, Mitch. It ain't natural."

HE SWUNG the coupe into North Meridian Street, drove south until they were almost to Thirty-eighth, and pulled over to the curb and parked in a darkened section.

Their car wasn't on regular patrol. This corner was the junction of four different prowler areas. From this point they could cover quickly any of the four that went temporarily out of service on a call.

The radio sputtered a regular time signal. Mitch leaned his head against the back of the seat and tried to relax. Pat pulled a cigar out of his pocket and stripped off the cellophane wrapper. He stuck it into the corner of his mouth and started to light a match, but stopped with the match against the box as the dispatcher's voice came again. It was a code call for a holdup on the outer fringes of one of the areas they were covering.

Pat tucked the cigar back into his



pocket, started the motor and let it idle. Mitch McNade checked the time, marked the patrol car concerned out of service, and relaxed again.

A minute later the radio voice droned a hit-and-run, and almost immediately followed with another holdup call. Each of the calls left another area open, without a prowler car in immediate service for it. Only one regular car left to cover the whole northwestern exit from the city.

Mitch McNade jerked himself upright and shot a nervous glance at his partner. The burly Irishman nodded grimly. His foot gunned the idling engine, his fist knotted on the gear-shift lever.

"This is it! And it's going to be our baby!"

Before he had closed his mouth the call came in for the fourth prowler car, and the entire northeastern corner of the city was unguarded for a few minutes, save for McNade and Leahy's coupe.

"Special car six! Special car six! Shooting reported in the three hundred block on North Drive. Investigate."

"Judge Gregory's place!" Mitch's lips went white. "If anything's happened to Judy, I'll—"

Pat didn't say anything. He hunched over the wheel and put his foot against the floorboards. They whipped into North Drive on two wheels. Before the car had more than barely slowed down, Mitch McNade was out, letting the momentum of the car start him across the lawn. He slammed through the front door and across the empty living room to the Judge's study. He jerked to a sharp stop in the doorway.

The white-haired old jurist was sprawled out in front of the desk. There was no need to look twice. No man could live with those holes in his chest. Under one of his outflung wrinkled

hands was a small twenty-five caliber automatic pistol. Mitch was checking it when Pat came in. It hadn't been fired.

"Car thirty-three is on the way over here," Pat reported. "The other three are cutting off the main roads north, but they don't know what to look for. All those calls were false alarms."

Mitch pointed to the open French windows. Outside on the flagstone piazza, a bouquet of red roses was broken and scattered.

"They took Judy."

He leaned across the desk and looked into the drawers. The top one was empty.

He said, "The Judge kept two twenty-five calibers in here. One of them is gone."

"Well he certainly wasn't shot with a twenty-five. Not with those holes!"

The whine of a siren slowed and died out in front. Mitch spun on his heel and said, "Let's go, Pat!"

The stocky Irishman said, "Better take it easy, son."

"They've got Judy," McNade's voice was level and hard. "And I'll find her if I have to take this town apart brick by brick! Let's go."

Pat paused just long enough to tell the patrol cops to take over and that he and Mitch were following a lead.

At the second place they looked they got him, just coming up the stairs from a basement pool parlor.

HE WAS a nondescript little character with the wizened, narrow face of a rat, and a mouth that twitched at the corner. He looked scared when he saw the police coupe and jerked suddenly as if he wanted to duck back inside. Mitch McNade motioned him into the car.

"We're looking for Crandall, Chigger."



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"Cheeze, McNade, I don't know where he is. Honest!"

"Sing, Chigger!"

"Cheeze, I'd tell you if I could, McNade, but I don't know!"

Mitch pulled out his gun and balanced it in the palm of his hand. "I'm in a hurry, Chigger."

Chigger pleaded. "Honest, McNade! Maybe Barrett—yeah, yeah, Barrett would know, McNade!"

The hard-faced young detective stared into the cringing eyes of the little pigeon, then said softly, "Okay, Chigger, we'll check."

When the car was rolling again he asked, "Know where to locate Barrett, Pat?"

"He's got an office in the Mutual Trust Building, a big house on North Illinois, and a country estate out near Lake Wanatachee. But Parker Barrett's come up in the world since he used to work for Crandall. He's got a high-powered investment brokerage now, and he's strictly legitimate. You can't push him around, Pat."

"Try his office first; it's closest."

Most of the lights in the office building were out, but the watchman at the door told them that he thought Barrett was still upstairs. McNade went up alone.

The ex-shyster's secretary was just opening the door to leave, when Mitch McNade pushed through. She was a lush, ripe-lipped blonde whose eyes were frankly invitational as they looked over the detective's narrow hips and broad shoulders. But when his grim eyes showed no response, she shrugged her shoulders, told him that Mr. Barrett was in his private office, and left.

Parker Barrett looked up, startled, at McNade's invasion, and cradled the phone into which he'd been talking. He was a sleek, small-boned man, neatly and expensively dressed, with graying



hair and a thin face that looked as though it had been polished. He stuffed some papers into a cowhide briefcase, strapped it and locked it before he said, irritably, "Yes?"

Mitch flashed his badge and said, "I want some information. Where's Georgie Crandall?"

The little broker stood up and leaned across the desk, his face turning red as he blustered, "You've no right coming in here with that attitude! I don't know what you're talking about!"

McNade stepped around the desk, shoved the little man back into his chair, and stood over him menacingly.

"I haven't time to horse around! Crandall's a killer on the loose and I want him! If anyone would know where he would be, you're the guy!"

"Killer?" Barrett's eyes narrowed studiously and his face took on the shrewd thoughtful expression of a man about to put over a sharp deal.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, it might be better if I helped you." Then, abruptly: "I can't tell you where Crandall is, for I don't know. I haven't had any connection with the man for five years. But if I were looking for him, I'd look at the Bradley Hotel. He used to use it as a hide-out."

McNade said, "Thanks," and whipped out of the office.

**M**ITCH and Pat Leahy stepped out of the elevator at the fourth floor of the Bradley Hotel and moved purposefully down the corridor until they located room 421. The threat of an accessory-after charge had opened the hotel manager's mouth quickly.

Pat raised his knuckles to knock, but Mitch waved him aside as he heard the ring of a telephone inside. He pressed his ear to the thinnest part of the door panel, and heard a rasping voice.

"Yeah . . . yeah . . . okay, I'll come

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right out. You're sure the girl's all right? . . . she hasn't been hurt? . . . okay, I'll come, I'll come!"

Mitch gave the nod to Pat and Leahy rapped on the door.

"Who is it?" the raspy voice wanted to know.

"Telegram!"

The two cops poised tensely, guns in their hands. There was no further sound from inside. Mitch pulled a pass key from his pocket, jammed it into the lock, and threw the door open.

"The fire escape!" he snapped and ran across the room to the open window, its curtains blowing out in the wind. He and Pat leaned out of the window at the same time. Below them was an expanse of blank, smooth wall. No fire escape.

A harsh voice behind them said, "I've got a gun on you, so don't turn around! Just drop those rods on the floor behind you!"

Pat Leahy spun his bulky carcass around and lifted his gun. A bullet creased his thigh and dropped him to his hands and knees. Crandall darted across the room and kicked the gun from his hand. As Mitch McNade swung around, the ex-gang boss's heavy automatic clipped his wrist and his gun fell from numbed fingers.

Crandall was a thin chested man whose suit hung loosely on his frame. His hollow-cheeked, prison-grayed face was twisted with compassion under rumpled gray hair as he backed away, the heavy automatic levelled in his fist. From deep in his chest came a wracking cough. When it stopped, he grated, "Stay right where you are, coppers!"

He collected the two Police Positives and stuck them into the waistband of his trousers. Then he moved to the telephone and jerked the wire loose from the wall.

"I've got business to attend to that



can't be interrupted," he said. "So don't try to follow me if you want to keep breathing!" He backed through the door, taking the key with him.

Mitch McNade threw his heavy shoulder against the door three times before he decided he couldn't break the whole thing down. Then he backed up a step and kicked his heel against the thin panelling beside the lock. It splintered. He reached through the opening and turned the key, still in the lock on the outside. He turned back for Pat, but the bulky Irishman was already on his feet and hobbling toward the bathroom.

"Don't bother with me!" he yelled. "Go get him!"

THE elevator doors were just sliding closed, but Mitch made it in. He put one of his big hands over that of the elevator operator's and shoved the control all the way down. The operator took one look at the expression on the cop's face and made no objection. When the car jerked to a stop and he stepped out, Mitch McNade heard a red-faced fat woman behind him find her angry voice, "Of all the nerve! The management will hear of this!"

He dashed across the lobby and down the front steps. His fingers hooked the doorman's gaudy lapel. "A thin, pale-faced guy just came out," he snapped. "Where'd he go?"

The startled doorman stammered that the man had gone off in a taxi and that he hadn't heard the destination.

The lanky cop wheeled his big frame back through the lobby and flashed his badge at the switchboard operator behind the desk.

"Trace the call that just went through to Room 421. Rush it!"

The efficient girl glanced into his grave face and pushed in a plug. "Supervisor, please. Urgent!" A moment



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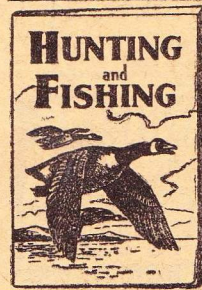
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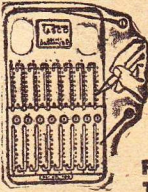
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later she swung around and said, "The call was a long distance. From a gasoline station pay phone just south of Norston."

Mitch McNade used his siren until he passed out of the city limits and was on the Lake Wanatachee highway. Then he poured on the speed and let his red light carry him through the scattered traffic.

At the third filling station he tried near Norston, the attendant took his hands from the pockets of an Army field jacket and thumbed a visored cap back from his forehead.

"Sure, Cap, I remember the guy. He had to get change from me to put into the phone box. A great big lug with an ugly puss and real little squinty eyes. He had hands like hams."

"Did you notice the way he went when he left?"

"Sure, Cap. They came from the north and went back that way. They had a big, old Buick. There was a little runt driving. Guy with a sharp, pointed nose."

Mitch nodded. He recognized the descriptions of Big Louis Astuma and Benny Owen, the two ex-Crandall hoods whose necks had been hemp bait a dozen times.

The lanky detective pushed into the filling station office and lifted the receiver of the phone on the wall. Immediately he hung it back up and passed his big hand over a tortured face. He knew that he was outside of the city police jurisdiction and should call the state cops, but he also knew that if the troopers got ahead of him, they would take no chances. They would shoot before asking questions. The thought of bullets flying around Judy's slim body made his lips tremble.

The gas attendant said casually, "There goes a guy that's making money tonight."



Mitch McNade said, "Yeah," and climbed into the police coupe.

"This is a long haul for a city cab at twenty cents a mile."

**M**ITCH'S eyes snapped up. He jerked his head around to look over his shoulder, then spun the coupe around and raced after the tail light disappearing toward the city. The fast police car overtook it rapidly and a burst of the siren stopped the cab.

"Yeah, I picked up my fare at the Bradley Hotel," the nervous cab jockey answered the detective's question. "Where? Why, out to a lake cottage a couple of miles back. It's part of a big place there that belongs to a joe named Barrett."

Mitch McNade told the cabbie to stop at the next phone and call the state troopers. Then he swung the coupe in a U turn and pushed the accelerator against the floorboards. The filling station attendant was still scratching his puzzled head when the police car shot past.

A few miles past, the coupe swung into a long private drive that led all the way to the lake front. A big sprawling house was empty and dark, but Mitch caught a few stray rays of light from one of the guest cottages a few hundred feet beyond. He cut his motor and coasted up as close as he dared.

A spot of light was showing through a tear in the curtain of one of the front window curtains. Mitch McNade eased his way across the porch and put his eye close to the hole.

Georgie Crandall was sitting at a table with paper and a pen on it. His tight lips were grayer even than the pallor of the rest of his hollow face. Behind him stood Big Louis Astuma, his piggish eyes glittering and his enormous hands gripping Crandall's shoulders, forcing him to remain in the chair.

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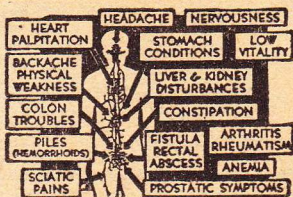
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Standing beside Astuma was the sharp-nosed Benny Owen, a heavy automatic in one hand. Parker Barrett was lounging on a bed, his pressed trouser legs crossed and an amused smile on his thin face. Beside him on the bed was an automatic and two Police Positives.

Crandall was staring at something to one side of the window through which Mitch McNade was looking. The ex-convict's face twisted convulsively and his head dropped.

"Okay, Barrett," he said. "I'll tell you! I'll tell you, only let the girl alone!"

Mitch had to press his cheek against the glass window pane to see her. Judy was sitting in a chair near the front door, barely within the line of vision from the detective's peep hole. Her white gown was rumpled and torn; her little face was twisted with pain and she held her ripe, red lower lip between her white teeth to keep from crying. One of her arms was held down to her side by the hand of a pimply faced hood with a white scar across one cheek. Gaff Malon, the third of Crandall's old lieutenants. He had Judy's other arm bent into the small of her back and, even as Mitch watched, he twisted the arm again and a little whimper escaped the girl's lips.

Mitch McNade didn't figure the odds. He just cursed and slammed the door open with one shoulder. In two steps, he was on Malon and gripping the gunman by the throat. Malon let out a terrified squawk and clawed frantically at the detective's wrists. A gun blasted behind Mitch and a streak of fire slammed his shoulder into the wall. Malon's fist on his temple sent him to the floor. A pointed shoe kicked the detective viciously in the stomach and doubled him up, only half conscious.

He heard Judy's plaintive, "Oh, darling, darling!" felt her soft arm slip



under his neck. He tried to smile at her.

CRANDALL was standing now, but with Big Louis' arms holding him back, and he was staring at Judy, beside the detective on her knees, her lifted dress showing slim, rounded legs. Crandall said, "So he's the one Judge Gregory wrote me about. I wish I'd known that back in town."

"All right, Georgie," Barrett snapped. "Let's have it. Where's the dough?"

Crandall's face sagged.

"It's in a safe deposit box. You've got the key. It's on Judge Gregory's keyring."

"I figured that was it. Now, sit down there and write an order for me to get into the box."

Crandall sat down and started to write. McNade's shoulder was full of pain and he could feel the blood running down his arm. He looked into Judy's face questioningly.

"He's my father, Mitch. He's my father, and they're going to kill him!"

Mitch didn't tell her that they were going to kill all three of them. He was watching her hand on her hip. Out of sight of the gunmen, the little hand was gathering the cloth of her dress, lifting the white hem and exposing more and more of her creamy silk clad thigh. The hem reached the top of her stocking. Tucked into it was the little .25 caliber automatic Mitch had often seen in Judge Gregory's desk drawer. He reached with his good hand, touched her warm flesh.

Big Louis Astuma glanced over at the detective. His little, piggish eyes widened and he opened his mouth. But he didn't say anything, for at that moment blood spurted from his throat as the little gun spat in Mitch's hand.

The automatic in Benny Owen's hand put a slug in the floor beside

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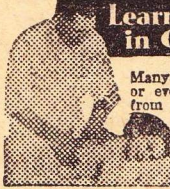
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Mitch's face, then swung to cover Crandall, as the ex-gang chief dove for the guns on the bed, bowling Barrett over.

Crandall's fingers closed over a big Police Special. He swung around and caught three slugs in his chest; two from Owen's gun and one from Gaff Malon's. Even as he went down, the big revolver blazed and Owen dropped, blood spurting from his face. Mitch swung the little .25 around and triggered as fast as he could squeeze. The small slugs made a circled pattern in Malon's stomach, the gun dropped from the hood's hand and he crumpled slowly, clutching at his middle, with a surprised frightened look on his face.

Barrett was running for the door like a frightened rabbit. Crandall raised himself on one elbow, steadied his gun wrist on the floor and fired. The little broker, ex-shyster, fell down.

Wisps of smoke curled in the still air filled with the odor of sulphur, then Georgie Crandall coughed and broke the sudden quiet.

"Don't let it get you, kid," his raspy voice whispered. "I always knew I'd go out like this . . . thought I would before this . . . didn't want you to know, though . . . about a guy like me being your father. . . . The paper on the table . . . there's four hundred grand . . . it's yours now.

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Judy was crying.

"For me?" he said in a voice filled with wonder. "No one's cried for me since your mother—" His body went limp and his head rolled to one side.

That was the way the state troopers found them.

**THE END**

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