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OCTOBER, 1958

35 CENTS

DOPE TO KILL

by
Edward Wellen

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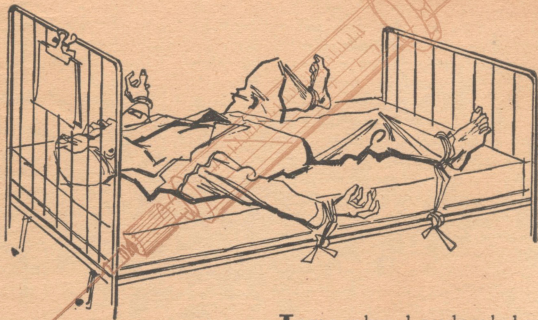
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MANHUNT VOLUME 6, NUMBER 6, October, 1958. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions, \$4.00 for 12 issues in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$5.00 (in U. S. Funds) for 12 issues. Published bi-monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Telephone MU 7-6623. Entered as Second Class matter at the Post Office, New York, N. Y. Additional entry at Concord, N. H. The entire contents of this issue are copyright 1958 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use, without express permission, of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.

Herb Doyle lifted the loose skin on his arm and inserted the needle. Normally, Doyle didn't take dope but this was a special occasion.

BY FLOYD WALLACE



Dope to Kill

IT WAS awkward, nearly as bad as the time he'd mistaken the plain-clothesman for a customer. There was no similarity between then and now except that he'd gotten out of the detective incident without scars and no doubt he'd do as well this time. Herb Doyle shook his head; it was an unusual situation. It wasn't often he was invited to meet the parents of a girl, some stray doll he hadn't seen in months. Hadn't seen and hadn't missed.

He didn't know what to expect; this threw him off balance a little. He didn't have to see them—but it was to his advantage to do so.

He'd come into contact with them sooner or later and it was better to get it over with now. At least Shirley wasn't going to be present to get in his way. The Jamisons he could handle. An old man and woman, there was nothing to it. He was already working on them. He was an hour late now and if that didn't let them know what he thought of them they were stupider than he imagined.

He drove past Jamison's Dry Cleaning. It was in a commercial district that had never been an exclusive shopping center and was now something less. Small stores mostly, manufacturing concerns in lofts, a couple of restaurants, and here and there a filling station. The district, though shabby, was as jammed as any business area in town. In half an hour or so when the stores closed the streets would be empty, but just now there wasn't a parking space available. Doyle drove around looking.

Shirley herself was vague in his mind but he had no difficulty recalling what she'd told him of her parents. They owned the building in which their dry cleaning business was located. They also owned a substantial apartment house and a number of small dwellings. Not big time, definitely not, but they had money. They weren't expecting to live on social security when they retired, but they weren't so big he'd have to watch out for a fast play. They didn't know enough.

He found a parking place and squeezed the car into it. It was a big car, bright and new, but he got it in without scraping the paint. It was a couple of blocks back to the Jamisons but for once he didn't mind walking. It would kill a few more minutes and this was good. Let them wait. He stopped for a traffic signal and someone pawed him. "Don't get friendly," he said. He'd sold to the man once or twice. Chuck Hollis, a cheap junkie.

"I've got money," said Hollis.

Doyle crossed with the light. On the other side was a filling station, already closed for the day. "Good for you. Now all you have to do is find a cigarette machine."

"No, I mean I've got it," said Hollis, trailing him. He opened his hand, disclosing fives and ones. "You can fix me."

"You know better. I don't carry it on me when I'm going out." Doyle walked on.

"I saw you. I didn't think you'd be over here in my neighborhood. I was going out to find you but you were right here." A five blew out of his hand. Hollis grabbed it up hurriedly and came after him. "Do you have a fix?" he said anxiously.

"I told you," said Doyle, stopping in the driveway of the filling station. There was a phone booth against the next building but it was unoccupied. He made sure of that. "You'll have to get it from one of

the other pushers tonight."

"It's early, not dark yet," Hollis said. "You never go anywhere at this hour."

"You know too much about me, or think you do," Doyle said. "I have to see some people. After I'm through with them I'll make a night of it. Shove off. You know where you can get it."

"People, business?" Hollis whined hopefully. "Will you have it when you come out?"

"Not for you I won't. I'm not selling tonight," Doyle said. "Get moving or I'll never let you have any again." He stood by the phone booth until Hollis was out of sight. It was a principle; he didn't let a junkie know what he was doing. Even if it was only going out to grab a sandwich he didn't let it out to junkies. He lit a cigarette and went into the Jamisons' store.

The inside of the store matched the exterior. It was clean but not new. The counter was worn and the clothing racks would look better with fresh paint. An old man stood up when Doyle came in, fifty or sixty, not tall. "You asked me to come," Doyle said. "I'm here."

"We've been waiting," said the old man. That was Jamison. "If you'll go in back I'll close up."

He stepped aside to let Doyle go behind the counter and enter the back room while he locked the front door and turned out the lights. The room behind the counter was pleasant. No more than that, but

better than Doyle expected. He knew the Jamisons had a nice home in the suburbs, but evidently they spent quite a bit of time at the store. There was a table and four chairs, no style or period, but good, a small stove, refrigerator, sink, an upholstered chair, and a low sofa. The floor was carpeted and there were prints on the wall that Doyle thought he ought to recognize but didn't. An old woman was at the sink when he came in, Shirley's mother. She dried her hands on a towel and turned around. She didn't say anything, she just watched him.

Doyle nodded to her and sat down at the table. In a moment or so Jamison entered and closed the door behind him. "Glad you came," he said.

"I'm late," Doyle said. He didn't like that witch staring at him. "I kept thinking it was seven I was supposed to be here but when I was ready I remembered you said six."

"It's all right. We kept the store open."

"You would have waited until I came. You would have been here at midnight if I hadn't showed up. Isn't that so?"

"I suppose it is."

"Good. As long as you understand that there won't be any trouble," Doyle said. "I didn't have to come. You can't do anything to me. I knew Shirley, and that's why I'm here, so don't try anything."

"Have we threatened you?" Shirley's mother asked.

"So far you haven't. And don't try it," he said.

"Let's be calm," Jamison said. "We asked you here because Shirley's getting out. Did you know that?"

He hadn't thought of Shirley at all but the time was about right. She should be getting out. "What's the date?" he said.

"We'll discuss that later," Jamison said. "Can't we be friendly, at least in the beginning? Would you like some coffee?"

"I've had all I want today."

"A drink?"

"It's too early."

"There isn't much else we can offer. However such as it is you're welcome." Jamison motioned to his wife who took a small box from the refrigerator and set it on the table in front of Doyle. He looked at them questioningly and then opened the box. It was a complete kit, elaborate.

"Some of this was Shirley's. We found it in her room after she was gone," Jamison said. "The rest is new, including the hypodermic and the needle. We sterilized it in the pressure cooker, just before you came. While a pressure cooker isn't an autoclave it's much more sanitary than what Shirley used."

Doyle stared at them. They were serious. It was difficult to believe, they expected him to take a jolt!

Jamison took a small plastic bot-

tle from the box. There had been the name of a drugstore on it but it was removed. "This is heroin. I believe it's called H in the trade. It was chemically pure when we got it and we haven't adulterated it in any way."

It was funny, Doyle thought. He'd never heard of anything like it. They wanted to be hurt, sitting there waiting for him to take a fix. And with Shirley's kit. They didn't know that he sold it but didn't use it. Still, it was a fine touch. He took a pinch of the drug, smelled and tasted it.

"Good stuff," he said. "You didn't get this from a drugstore."

"We didn't. How did you know?" Jamison asked.

"Easy. Heroin is outlawed in the United States. No drugstore can carry it."

"We found that out," said Jamison. "We went to a lot of trouble to get it for you. We made sure it was pure."

Doyle could guess how they scrounged to get it. They weren't influential but they did have connections. Someone from the Narcotics Squad could have gotten it for them. Periodically heroin was seized and a cop could hold back some of it, substituting an equal amount by weight of a harmless adulterant, mixing it well. This wouldn't be detected. Nobody expected heroin to be absolutely pure.

The Jamisons were as stupid as people could be, but this suited

Doyle, and he decided to go along with them. It wouldn't harm him a bit but it would make them squirm. He'd enjoy watching them squirm.

He took off his coat and rolled up his sleeve. He made himself a fix, using water from the pressure cooker Shirley's mother had on the stove. It was a show, unnecessarily elaborate, but they didn't know that. Doyle knew all the gestures and used them. He'd done it many times for prospective customers, mostly kids, to show them how harmless it was. Usually he was able to work a switch for himself, using milk, sugar or something like that, about as powerful as a lollipop, giving the H to the initiate. Once in a while Doyle couldn't manage the switch, or there wasn't time to set it up, and those times he'd have to take a real fix. But he was adept at that too, and always made it seem that he'd taken much more than he had.

Doyle went through the production for them, making it last. His hands trembled before he got the needle in and then he relaxed. When he finished he closed his eyes, pretending a muscular spasm of relief. It isn't me they're watching, Doyle thought; it's Shirley they see, their darling daughter. She wasn't at all what they thought she was, not when she was on H. And she was always on it when she was with him. He wasn't running a nursery.

Doyle opened his eyes. He wasn't having a ball, but there had been times he'd enjoyed himself less. Casually he put the small plastic bottle in his pocket. There was quite a bit in it, much more after it was cut. And he wouldn't have to split it with the top. J. W. wouldn't know a thing about it. It was nothing but money.

"That was great," he said. "You're sharp, thinking of this. It's just what I needed."

"But you sell it. You should have all you want."

"Yeah, but I don't let myself get in deep. Sometimes I let myself go longer than I should."

Shirley's mother sat across the table from him. She didn't seem as unfriendly as she had been. Possibly this was an effect of the drug. It was stronger than what he was used to and it got him. And this was one thing he'd have to take up with the top. Carefully, of course. J. W. didn't like anyone's questioning the prices he established. But there it was. The stuff Doyle was getting had been cut at least once before he got it, and then he cut it again. If he could get it like this, unadulterated, he'd really clean up.

"It doesn't seem to affect you," Shirley's mother said. "How do you keep yourself within limits?"

"In my business I have to," he said, amused at the line he was handing them. "As I was saying, it was sharp to think of getting this for me."

Jamison sat down in the upholstered chair, away from the table. Doyle didn't like this. He would have preferred to have them near each other, where he could watch them closely. It didn't much matter, though. He'd handle them, through Shirley. Shirley was his and they knew it. They'd do anything for her.

"I'm afraid you credit us with being smarter than we are," said Jamison, letting his arms dangle over the sides of the chair. "We failed Shirley. I don't know what we could have done, but we failed her when she needed us."

"Seems to me you did all right. She was up on a possession charge but you got her out of it and into a private sanitarium without anything in the papers or on her record. Anyone else would have gone to jail."

"It wouldn't have helped her to go to jail," Jamison said. "She's better off where we put her."

"Don't blame yourself for what she did. You helped her as much as you could. And you used a lot of influence to do it."

"We have very little influence. We grew up in this town, so we do know some people in law enforcement."

"Cops?"

"Some of them. I also went to school with a few judges. Since we had the money, everyone agreed a sanitarium was the best thing for her. Basically she's decent."

"Sure she is," Doyle said.

"We weren't able to get you. We tried, but there was nothing to tie you in with her."

"Nobody's been able to get anything on me. They've had me in, and I drew one suspended sentence, but other than that they've always had to let me go. I've got protection."

"We know. If Shirley had talked, this time they might have got you. But she wouldn't."

"She'd never say anything against me," Doyle said.

"Unfortunately that's true," Jamison said. "That's why we asked you here tonight. She's getting out soon."

"When?"

"We don't know exactly. It'll be a few days before we find out."

They're lying, Doyle thought. They knew all right. But it didn't matter whether they told him. Shirley wouldn't be able to stay away. "What you're getting at is that you don't want me to have anything to do with her. Is that it?"

"It is," Jamison said. "She'll be discharged from the sanitarium as cured, and actually she will be. But you'll keep after her to take drugs and, since that's what you want, she will."

"Drugs aren't as habit-forming as that. It's habit-forming people that are the cause of it."

"You're her habit," Jamison said. "I don't know why. She's intelligent enough—except when it comes

to you. For you she becomes incredibly foolish."

"Dolls like me." Doyle grinned expansively. "Next you're going to ask me to stay away from her. What's your offer—in cash?"

Jamison glanced at his wife. She didn't signal back but they didn't seem to need consultation. "We hadn't planned on offering money. We thought we'd tell you to stay away from her."

"You're not telling me anything where my business is concerned. I've got to make a living. What's your offer?"

"Five thousand," Jamison said with some hesitation. "We'll give you five thousand if you don't see her again."

"I don't think I'll take up your offer," Doyle said cheerfully. "I'm not a blackmailer. My line's different."

"Cash tomorrow. It will be all yours. You won't have to split with anyone."

"Not even ten thousand," Doyle said. "You won't go any higher."

"We won't," Jamison said. "If five thousand isn't enough there's no use talking."

"You've got the idea. Five thousand or ten, I'll get it sooner or later, my way. If she has to have it, you'll give it to her."

"You're mistaken. We'll put her back in the sanitarium before we'll do that."

"The second time you won't. Your cop friends and judges won't

be able to help themselves, or you. They'll have to put her in prison. You don't want that, so you'll have to do it her way. H is expensive, just as expensive as I want to make it. You'll give her what she needs and what you don't give her she'll earn."

Doyle smiled, got up and slipped on his coat. "After she's hooked again she'll get money any way I tell her to. And she won't mind. Guys go for her. I don't know why. After a few times she's boring."

"You won't listen," Jamison said. It was not a question. He slumped in the chair.

"Not to you I won't. Just remember that what you want doesn't matter to me. So I'm shoving off." He went to the door but it didn't open. He glanced back at Jamison, still in the chair.

"I forgot," Jamison said tiredly. "I always lock the door when I close up for the night." He got up and fumbled behind the chair and when he turned around there was a shotgun in his hands.

He shouldn't have come. He should have had better sense. Still the control was essentially his. The gun made a difference—he hadn't figured them for that—but he didn't have to panic just because they showed it to him. "Put it down, dad," he said. "You're not going to shoot me."

"I don't want to," Jamison said. "But if I should decide to, this is a pumpgun."

The gun was new but the old man handled it as if he knew what it could do. Doyle glanced at Shirley's mother. If he could get behind her—. But she was watching him, her hands spread flat on the table. The instant he moved she'd shove the table in his gut. He'd never get to her. He had to talk his way out of this. "That'll be just great," he said. "If you shoot me you'll go to prison. You'll be able to take care of Shirley real good from there, won't you?"

"There may not be any charges," said Jamison.

"You think so. I haven't got a gun."

"You've overlooked a few things."

He had, but not what they were thinking of. "What? One suspended sentence? You can't kill me for that and get away with it."

"The suspended sentence is the least, though it will help. What I am counting on is the fix you took half an hour ago. It will show in the autopsy."

His mouth was dry. He hadn't noticed it, but he was sweating. "You can't get away with that."

"Maybe I can. I'm a respectable citizen, and there is a good chance the jury will believe that under the influence of drugs you broke in to rob us. In which case I would be perfectly justified in killing you."

Jamison handled the gun casually. "And then there is the heroin you took from us. I saw which pocket you put it in. I'll aim for

it, breaking the bottle and driving bits of glass and the drug into your flesh. You'll die, but it will establish that you had the supply on your person before I fired."

He should have had more sense. He ought to have known they would fight. "We can talk," he said.

"We're through talking to you. You don't know when you've been warned," Jamison said. "Sit down."

He sat down. Shirley's mother got up from the table. She wasn't letting him get near her.

"I ought to tell you about the gun," Jamison said. "I used to be a good shot as a kid. I haven't hunted in years, but I haven't forgotten how. I bought the gun several months ago and went out hunting a few times, once with a policeman. I didn't get a duck, but that was because I shot to miss."

"You don't shoot ducks but you'd kill me."

"You'd make it worthwhile."

Jamison motioned to his wife, who nodded and went to the refrigerator. When she came back she placed another bottle of heroin on the table. Doyle stared at it. "What the hell is this? You think you can frame me?"

"You were framed when you walked in the door. But don't blame yourself. If you hadn't come I would have gone out and brought you here."

"I'm not easily persuaded to do things I don't want to do."

"No, but this is very important

to us. I would have got you."

He believed the old guy. Now he believed him. It was a hell of a time to learn. "That five thousand we were talking about—"

"The offer is withdrawn. It was never seriously intended. We simply wanted you to see what Shirley means to us, and that we stand behind what we believe in. But you didn't understand any of it. We don't make bargains with people like you."

"What are you going to do?" Doyle whispered.

"We may kill you. But if we do we'll give you a chance, about the same chance you gave Shirley and all the other fools you push your drugs on." Jamison jerked his head at the hypo. "Make yourself a fix."

"I've had one."

"Have another."

He began to see what they were getting at. He could get around them. "You're going to a lot of trouble."

"No trouble. The fix."

He mixed it slowly, giving himself time to think. His thoughts weren't productive. The gun bothered him. He laid down the hypo. "I've got to take off my coat."

"Take it off."

He removed it but this didn't give him an opening. He sat down and took the hypo but Jamison stopped him before he got the needle to his arm.

"That's not much for a man as big as you. You should have more."

"I've already had one. This is strong."

"That's what we want. Make it a big one."

He made it bigger, as small as he dared, but still far too much. He took it quickly but Jamison saw through his stratagem.

"Wipe off your arm. Next time don't squirt half of it on your skin."

"You're really on it, aren't you?" Doyle said thickly. The thickness was assumed. The old guy was hell to get around but one thing he didn't know, how much a man could take. Doyle had him there. He knew.

"No, I'm not," Jamison said. "I knew a long time ago what I had to do, but it wasn't easy to bring myself to do it."

Jamison took a chair from the table, moved it back and sat down, crossing the gun on his knees. Shirley's mother sat down also, well out of his reach. Even if he leaped over the table he'd never get to them. "Now what?" Doyle said.

"Sit there. Sit and wait."

He waited, five minutes or half an hour, he couldn't tell. The drug hit him, not with the same initial power, but there was more of it. He grew sluggish.

"How do you feel?" Jamison asked after a long time elapsed.

"Weak," Doyle said. That wasn't true; he felt strong, able to crush them both. But this was an illusion caused by the drug.

"Can you stand up?"

He stood, swaying.

"You're not good at concealing your condition," Jamison said. "It's time for another."

Doyle lurched against the table, sprawling on top of it. It was no good. He was weaker than he thought. "You're killing me!"

"That's what we have in mind," Jamison said. "However if you're wise you won't force us to do it immediately. Play for time."

"Sure, I'll do what you want."

"You will. Take another."

He took it, in the amount Jamison told him. He couldn't help it. And he was clumsy, unable to throw any of it away. It all went inside him. Again they waited, and when Jamison finally asked him how he felt Doyle didn't answer. He was weak, drowsy.

Jamison looked at his eyes. "I think you've had all you can take for awhile. We can't hurry this too much. Better have some coffee."

Mrs. Jamison made coffee, strong and black and hot. He drank it eagerly, several cups. It burned his mouth but he didn't notice the heat. All this took time and he tried to think. He didn't get it. They didn't seem to enjoy what they were doing to him and yet they were prolonging it. He couldn't understand why. They could just kill him and get it over with, but then they'd have to dispose of his body.

"Stand up," Jamison said.

He stood.

"You're nearly there, but I think

there's room for a little more." He nodded to his wife. "Mix this one for him. I don't think he can do it himself. About half of what he's been getting."

He stared at them dully and when Mrs. Jamison approached with the hypodermic he grabbed her, but she twisted loose and slapped him, and he fell back into the chair. He didn't resist her then, and she inserted the needle and squeezed the heroin into him.

Jamison watched him for a few minutes. "Get up," he said. "Put on your coat."

He got up and struggled into his coat.

"Where's your car?" Jamison asked.

"Couple of blocks away."

"Give me your keys."

His mind wasn't working, so he didn't immediately think of lying about the keys. When he did think of it the key case was out of his pocket.

"Throw it here."

He tossed the case and it fell to the floor. Jamison stooped to pick it up. Earlier he might have been able to jump the old man but now it was an effort to stand. He couldn't try for the gun.

Jamison opened the case and snapped the car key from its clip. From a drawer near the sink he took pliers, bending the key back and forth until the end broke off. He tossed the case and the broken key on the table. "Put them in your

pocket. It will explain why you weren't able to use your car, and it will also keep you from killing people on the road."

Doyle obeyed. He wanted to get away from them. It was all he could think of.

Jamison nodded to his wife. "See if anyone's outside."

She opened the door behind Doyle and disappeared into the store. He didn't hear what she said when she came back but it satisfied Jamison. He turned Doyle around and prodded him through the darkened store to the entrance. Opening the door, he shoved Doyle outside.

"We're through with you," he said. "You're on your own now. Maybe you'll make it. Jamison slammed the door behind Doyle and locked it.

Doyle was alone on the street, completely alone. They expected him to die. If he did the Jamisons were clear. They'd never be connected with his death. There was nothing unusual about an overdose of drugs. It happened frequently. The cops wouldn't bother to inquire. They'd take it for what it seemed to be: a pusher who'd finally hooked himself and misjudged his capacity. They knew well enough that he was a pusher though they hadn't been able to pin a conviction on him. The cops would be glad to close their books, no questions asked.

And even if he survived there

was nothing he could do to the Jamisons officially. Their word against his—and the cops wouldn't be on his side. They'd laugh at his story. But it didn't matter. He'd take care of the Jamisons in his own way. They'd get everything they had coming to them—if he lived.

The problem now, though, was to live. It wasn't going to be easy. The Jamisons had been clever. They hadn't kept him in the store so long just to torture him. They'd saturated him with heroin, weakening his resistance. And they had used up time. They knew the district much better than he did. It was commercial, no residences at all, and when the stores closed everyone went home. At this hour there was no one on the street, not even a car passing by. He was isolated.

Numbly, Doyle leaned against the building. If he wasn't careful he'd fall, and if he went down his eyes might close. Once his eyes closed—no, he couldn't risk that. But he didn't have to do what they expected. He struggled and kept his eyes open. It was an effort to breathe.

He became aware that Jamison was watching him through the window of the darkened store. He had to get away. The night air was fresh and seemed to revive him. He wasn't as groggy as he had been inside. There were people he could depend on, if he could get in touch

with them. They'd rush to help him. First he had to find a phone, but he couldn't remember where one was. Vaguely he thought there must be one somewhere nearby—he'd have to find it. He wasn't going to stand there and die on his feet.

He took a step and dizziness washed over him. It wasn't bad when he held onto something but when he let go he was certain he'd fall. It frightened him, made his heart pump faster. This is what he needed. It roused him. He took another step and his legs held. He could scarcely see where he was going. There was nothing wrong with his eyes; it was the lighting on the street. A block away was a weak street lamp, but none of the stores were illuminated, not even with service lights. The Jamisons counted on this. They wouldn't have let him out if there was a chance someone would come by to help him.

He walked on, swaying drunkenly. At the intersection he misjudged the curb and lurched, staggering down the street instead of across it. He managed to turn himself in the right direction and reached the opposite curb. It was a triumph. Each second he lived was a victory. He looked around. It was very dark on this side of the street, though the other side was brighter. There must be a moon, but he couldn't see it.

He tried to remember where he'd

seen the phone. He had stood near a booth while talking to Hollis but he had no idea where this was. He walked on. The initial effect of the night air passed and he was becoming dizzy again. He groped along the sides of buildings but their support didn't help much. He had to get to the phone. He was beginning to doubt he'd make it, when suddenly he found himself in front of the service station.

The station was dark but the phone booth was open and he fell into it. He had strength now; he'd last. He leaned against the inside of the booth, breathing heavily. Finally he closed the door and the light went on. His fingers were stiff and clumsy, and it took several attempts to dial the correct number. There was no answer, and suddenly panic seized him as he remembered he hadn't put in a coin.

He searched his pockets but had to stop before he found change. With the door closed the booth was stifling and his head kept dropping down. Fumbling wildly, he pulled the door open and leaned out, gasping. That was close; he'd have to be careful not to keep the door closed long. He breathed great gulps of air, and when he felt better he dug out a handful of coins. Some of them slipped through his fingers, rolling along the sidewalk into the darkness. He didn't mind this. He always had plenty of change. Closing the door he in-

served a dime and dialed; as soon as the ringing started he opened the door again. When he heard the voice that answered, he knew that he was safe.

"J. W.," he said, thankfully. "This is me, Herb."

"Let's see. I don't think I know any Herb."

"Herb Doyle," he said thickly. "Listen to me. I'm bad. I know your phone's not tapped."

"That's more than I know," was the answer. "Doyle? You sound drunk as hell to me."

"J. W. It's me, Doyle," he said. "You've got to listen."

"Do I?" There was silence. "If it's the police, you know who to call to handle them. I don't like to do a lot of talking on this phone."

"It's not police." He stopped to gasp. "I'm drugged. Shot full of H. They made me take it."

"Oh. Much?"

"I don't know. I couldn't keep track of all they made me take."

"Ours?"

"Theirs. Pure. It wasn't cut."

"Looks bad for you. Who did it?"

"Jamison," he mouthed. His lips were heavy, his jaw stiff from talking. "Goddamned parents of Shirley Jamison."

"You'll have to speak plainer. Charlie Johnson? He's new to me."

"Jamison," he said thickly. "Shirley Jamison."

"Never mind about Charlie. If he shows around here we'll know

what to do with him. How long can you last?"

"Five minutes. Ten. Get here as soon as you can. I'll stay alive."

"I'm not so sure, the way you sound to me. Doyle, listen. How's your place? Anything there?"

"It's clean. I don't keep stuff in my apartment," he said. "Don't worry about that. Come and get me."

"Just the same I'll send some of the boys to look over your place. We don't want an investigation. Damn nice of you to call."

"Mel!" he said. "You've got to come and get me. If you don't I'll die."

"Be reasonable Doyle. What can we do if we do get you? Take you to a hospital? How can we explain your condition?"

"If you don't I'll die," he choked.

"Sure, but we've got to look out for ourselves. You know that."

"J. W.," he said. J. W. didn't answer. He wasn't on the phone.

Doyle hung up, slumping against the booth. He wanted to vomit but he didn't have the strength. He groped for support and might have crumbled, but somehow he didn't. He stared out at the street that wavered and twisted in his sight. Nobody on it; nothing except the headlights of a car that had stopped at the boulevard sign on the corner.

Although he saw the car clearly, it meant nothing at first. Finally it occurred to him that someone was in the car, and that it wasn't mov-

ing. He left the booth slowly and carefully. He staggered across the sidewalk and stepped off the curb, losing his balance and stumbling the last few feet to the fender of the car.

A woman was in the car, alone. She was bent over a map. He could see her face in the light from the dash. She was plump and in her thirties, but he had never been so attracted to any woman. She'd get him to a doctor, and that was all he needed. But he couldn't get in the car to tell her. The door on his side was locked. She was one of those women who were afraid of being attacked, and this was the precaution she took. He pulled on the door but it didn't open.

She looked up from the map when he leaned against the car, her mouth framing a scream that she suppressed. Shrinking away from him, she crumpled the map. "Help me," he muttered. "You can help."

Her face reflected what she thought he was saying. She tried to drive away but in her haste forgot to release the emergency brake. The car moved a few feet, the break took hold and the motor died. She tried to start the motor but didn't succeed at once.

Frantically he pressed his face against the glass, shoving his fingers into the crack at the deflector pane. "Please," he begged. "I couldn't rape you if I wanted to. I need help. Can't you look at me

and see? You've got to help."

The starter whined; she didn't hear him and wouldn't have listened if she had. The motor coughed and caught and died again, and he raked his fingers on the glass. His face twisted in fear at the thought that she would start the car and drive away. This didn't improve the impression he made—but he couldn't change his face. It was fear, not lust—but she didn't understand. He beat against the glass and then thought of the rear door. Maybe she'd forgotten to lock it.

He stumbled toward the rear as the motor caught. He had at most a few seconds but he couldn't move fast. The rear door wasn't locked but it was difficult to open. He swung it outward a few inches, but the car moved. He clutched at the opening as the tires squealed and the car jerked away. He fell down in the street. He watched the tail lights dim and finally disappear in the distance.

He lay there. Another car might come by and hit him. He wished it would. They'd have to stop. Or maybe they'd see him first and think he was an accident victim. He didn't care how it happened as long as someone stopped. But there was no traffic on the street and he knew there would be very little until morning.

After awhile, he got up. His clothes were torn and his hands were bleeding. It didn't hurt. Noth-

ing hurt except the increasing numbness. He couldn't feel his heart but it must be beating. His fingers had no sensation. He walked in the street because he didn't know whether he could climb the curb, but more important, he wanted to be seen. If anyone passed, they'd be bound to see him in the street.

How far he went he didn't know but at last he realized the footsteps he heard were not his own. He turned; he was being followed. "You've got to help," he mumbled.

The man stopped some distance behind, eyeing him warily. "Got to help," Doyle said feebly. He wanted to scream but he didn't have the strength.

The man edged closer. He swung a length of pipe partly concealed by his leg. Doyle knew what the man was after but it didn't matter. "Got to get a doctor," he said.

The man stood a few feet away. He still held the pipe but he wasn't swinging it. "Say, aren't you Doyle?"

"Yes, yes. You've gotta help."

"You sure looked different when I saw you early this evening. Drunk?"

"Hollis," said Doyle. Relief swelled over him. Hollis would do what he said. "You found me."

"Can't figure why you're still wandering around my neighborhood," said Hollis. "You been mugged?"

"Drugged. I might die."

"Don't try to tell me that. You don't hit it. You pretend to, but you don't."

"Gun on me. Made me take it."

"H?"

"Big H."

Hollis started away. "Hollis," he cried. "Can't leave. Get a doctor."

"That's great. Me getting a doctor. You're pretty hot."

"Dying. Can't last," he mumbled.

"You should have thought of that."

"Hollis." His breath fluttered in his throat. "I'll see you get all you want. Anything. Just ask and I'll give it to you free."

"I've had my fix this evening. Got it where you told me, from one of the others." Hollis laughed. "Don't tempt me."

"But you'll have to have it other times."

"I'll worry about it then."

Hollis meant it; he was leaving. Doyle sickened. "Don't go," he begged. "Money. More than you've ever had."

He had the money he'd collected during the day. He hadn't counted it but it was several hundred. He took out his wallet and removed the currency, even thrust his numbed hands into his pockets for the change that was there. Coins fell to the pavement and scattered. He heaped the money together and extended his hands. Hollis came back doubtfully.

"It's yours," Doyle said. "Get a doctor. It's all I ask."

"Who do you think I am?" said Hollis. "A doctor's going to come out here at this hour? The most I could do would be to take you to the hospital, and there are always half a dozen cops hanging around there."

"I don't care about cops. Take me there."

"You don't care," said Hollis. "What do you think the cops would do to me?"

"They've got nothing against you. You're helping me."

"Yeah. They'll believe it. With my record, and needle marks, fresh ones. They'll be glad to have me, particularly since you're an overdose. I can see it."

"It doesn't matter. If they lock you up I'll get you out."

"A guy like me doesn't have anyone to get him out once he's in."

"I will. I'm your friend. Believe me."

"Sure you are," said Hollis. "I can see myself serving a stretch, telling myself you're a friend."

"It won't be that way. I mean it."

"It won't, but you don't have to mean anything." Hollis moved suddenly but even if Doyle had known what the other had intended he couldn't have prevented it. Hollis lunged at the money, getting most of it.

"I'm giving it to you. You don't have to take it," Doyle said. He held the money closer, clutching it tightly.

"I think it's better if I take it,"

said Hollis. He circled warily and darted in, grappling with Doyle. Doyle was much larger and another time could have crushed Hollis. Now he couldn't. He couldn't keep Hollis from taking the money. Hollis wrenched it from his hands, scattering coins over the pavement. Doyle clawed at him, his nails digging into Hollis' face. Hollis screamed, slugging him with fists that suddenly seemed powerful. Doyle staggered and fell.

He lay there. "Take it. I'll get you more," he gasped. "Help me. That's all I want. Do you hear?"

Hollis didn't hear. He was running down the street and wasn't listening. Presently there was no sound at all except that of his own breathing. Doyle moved, trying to rise. He got to his knees but couldn't stand. Even on hands and knees he felt weak and knew that he might topple. He should have thought of the police sooner. He might have—in the phone booth after calling J. W. But the woman in the car had come along and that had seemed better. At least faster. So he hadn't thought of the police when he should have.

They'd book him; that was certain. They were waiting to pin something on him and they'd use this. They might actually believe his story, but they wouldn't follow up on it. They'd stick him for being an addict. He'd serve a few years—but just now a few years seemed great. It was more than

a few minutes. They couldn't refuse to save his life. No one else would help him, but they'd have to.

He couldn't walk so he crawled. He pulled himself along the pavement toward the phone booth. His hands began bleeding again and fresh cuts opened on his knees. He had to get off the pavement anyway so he angled to the curb. He raised himself up to look and thought he recognized where he was. The phone was less than a block away. He'd make it, but would he have the strength to pull himself to his feet so he could call? If he got there he would.

He crawled over the curb and had dragged himself to the sidewalk when he was disturbed by another thought. Did he have the control over his hands to put money in the phone. Even—did he have money? He always had plenty, but Hollis had taken a lot.

He stopped, searching his pockets. Nothing. He'd taken out everything he had and Hollis had stolen every cent. He went through his pockets again, even his shirt. He had no money, not one coin.

In his coat he did find a small bottle. He took it out, staring at it. The pupils of his eyes were small; he had difficulty seeing. Finally he recognized the bottle: the heroin he'd taken from the Jamisons. Pure, it was worth a lot, but not to him. It would have been fine if he needed a fix, but he didn't. Instead he had to have a coin to call the police—anything that would operate the phone—but he had nothing.

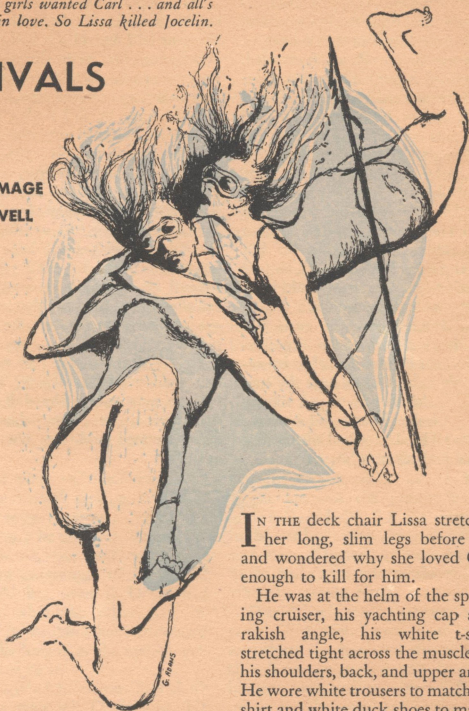
He lay down in the dim moon-cast shadow of a building. There was no pain except the dull ache that spread over him when his heart stopped and did not start again.



*Both girls wanted Carl . . . and all's
fair in love. So Lissa killed Jocelin.*

RIVALS

BY
TALMAGE
POWELL



IN THE deck chair Lissa stretched her long, slim legs before her and wondered why she loved Carl enough to kill for him.

He was at the helm of the speeding cruiser, his yachting cap at a rakish angle, his white t-shirt stretched tight across the muscles of his shoulders, back, and upper arms. He wore white trousers to match the shirt and white duck shoes to match the trousers.

As the cruiser sliced through the salty green water of the Gulf, Lissa

studied Carl, knowing she would find no reason for her decision in the outer man. He was not a really handsome man. His features were all too pronounced and coldly blunt. His lips were heavy, his eyes almost cruel. He was a very dark man, and very hairy. The long black hair gleamed in the brilliant sun on the backs of his hands and arms.

Lissa felt the animal magnetism of the man even as she sat looking at him. And he became handsome. Feeling the inner power of him, his features took on a softer cut. But still, he was remote. And perhaps there lay the reason. He was a world unto himself. Lissa had felt that the first moment she'd met him. He could be completely selfish. He could make the slightest concession or gesture of tenderness to a woman seem like an act of earth-shaking importance. Somehow, he could make a woman weak with gratitude just for a gentle touch of his hand.

He was also very wealthy. But that was only a part of it. He had been born with money, and with his physical strength and the money to back him up, he could afford to be an arrogant, overbearing man.

But I could be his without so much money, Lissa thought, although it's nice to live in a world of luxury.

He was generous, but he handed out his money only because there was so much of it. But his kind of

generosity didn't underline her reasons for committing murder.

He despised just about all people. He saw their weaknesses, where he had none. He met a great number of people who groveled before his money, and he had never groveled to any man.

He possessed no great humanitarian traits to inspire a woman to the supreme act for his sake.

The question was a knife in her mind now. Why do I intend to kill Jocelin?

Because he's mine.

There the crux of the thing lay. There'd been a steady parade of women, like toys, in Carl's life. He could have his pick. He'd never married and probably never would. Women like Jocelin were always seeking him out. He looked upon them with a mingling of cynicism and contempt; and they were too stupid to realize it.

No woman had ever interested him for long.

Except me, Lissa thought.

He's mine.

I simply intend to keep him.

That's all there was to it.

She lifted her gaze to Jocelin, who lay on her stomach on the foredecking.

You have about one hour of life left, dear.

Jocelin was a strikingly beautiful woman even in the Gulf Coast resort city of Sarasota where beauty, spawned in luxury, is little more than commonplace.

Jocelin was tall, slender, and dark. With the figure of a Venus, the face of a madonna, and the morals of an alley cat. She was the kind of woman who lived enwrapped in her sleek inner satisfaction. She petted herself with a self-delight and self-assurance that was unholy.

Right now she was wearing a white bathing suit that was startling against her deep tan. She turned slowly and sat up, almost as if she had felt the weight of Lissa's gaze.

The eyes of the two women met and a thin smile came to life on Jocelin's full red mouth. She looked at the golden blonde beauty with a sneer for something that was second rate. A little gleam of triumph was in her eyes.

A small red explosion took place inside Lissa's head as the silent communication of rivalry and hate continued.

Lissa was trembling with hatred.

Never had she hated anyone so much.

And there was the second part of the reason. Killing Jocelin was going to be a pleasure.

Under the bright sun and kind beauty of the deep blue sky the cruiser cut its way past Longboat key. There in the distance, solid and pleasant, stood the pastel houses and private docks with bobbing cruisers. The surf whispered lazily against the pure whiteness of the beach. The cruiser turned in a

long arc away from the key, its prow showering glittering jewels of spray, its wake a path of silver. A swooping pelican gliding over the cruiser spread his webbed feet and came to a skiing contact with the water. He folded his wings, shook himself, and bobbed contentedly, as if the beauty of the whole scene were plucked out of heaven itself.

Lissa felt the wave of redness leave her brain, and her vision cleared. Her head still pounded a little at the temples.

She broke the interlocking of gazes and glanced at Carl. A pulse jumped in her throat. He was looking at her; then at Jocelin.

As if the two-way silent conversation of hate had become a three-way communication. His eyes were narrow and cold.

"Fix me a drink," he said.

"Yes, Carl," Lissa said, getting out of the deck chair.

Jocelin smiled faintly and patted a yawn with the back of her hand. "I'll have scotch on the rocks, darling."

Lissa was trembling when she went into the small, gleaming stainless steel and chrome galley below deck. "I'll have scotch, darling," she mimicked as she raged inwardly. "Enjoy your scotch, you cheap pig. Enjoy every last moment you've got left."

Lissa fixed the drinks and carried them up on deck. As she came up, the breeze, light as feathers, ran

its fingers through her hair and touched her fevered cheek lightly. The breeze helped. So did the drink.

She wouldn't have another. She must have a completely clear head and all her resources for the act ahead.

It would be very simple.

Lissa had the agility of a tawny amphibious animal in the water, and an ability to hold her breath that would have brought admiration from a pearl-diving South Seas native.

Once they were in the water, Jocelin simply couldn't match her.

"Here you are, darling," she handed Carl his drink. She could feel the weight of his eyes on her. She gave him a smile. It brought no change to his face.

With a forced lightness, she turned and rounded the flying bridge of the cruiser to pass a drink to Jocelin.

"Is it poisoned, darling?" Jocelin asked softly, not loud enough for Carl, at the helm, to hear.

"Of course it is," Lissa said.

Jocelin laughed, sipped the drink, and said, "Why don't you give up? You haven't a chance, you know."

"I don't care to discuss it."

"Why not? You'll have to sometime—unless you are capable of bowing out with grace." Jocelin looked at her over the rim of her glass. "Don't be such a greedy minx, Lissa. You've had him far longer than anyone else."

"Long enough for it to become an unbreakable habit," Lissa said.

Jocelin sighed. "It's really going to be quite painful for you, poor dear."

Uninterested in any reply Lissa might make, Jocelin turned forward, lay on her stomach, propped on her elbows, her drink held in her two hands.

Lissa looked at the dark tanned back and felt dizzy for a moment. It's going to be sweet, she thought, so very damned sweet.

She didn't return to her deck chair. She stood on the foredeck a moment, little droplets of spray catching on her tight blue bathing suit like rhinestones.

She held the thought of the future moment in her mind. It had been easy to arrange it. Jocelin had been more than willing to go when Lissa had suggested the jaunt last night.

Lissa turned, went to the bridge and stood beside Carl. He was remote, giving no indication he knew she was there. He stood solidly on his rather short muscular legs, handling the boat with the touch of a master, like a man who feels stronger than the sea itself.

She wished he would say something. Anything. He said nothing, and the old burn began to grow in her. It was a devil inside her. It lashed her senses and seethed within her flesh. It made her willing to do anything to have him admit she was there, flesh and

blood. A desirable woman. A human being.

She laid her hand lightly on his arm.

He looked at her. "Having fun?"

"I always do."

"That's one thing I've always liked about you, Lissa."

"Boredom and me," she said.

"We don't mix."

She went aft and sat down, feeling buoyed up, as if from a victory.

Carl looked back long enough to take a sighting from two landmarks. He turned the boat a little, until he had the angle he wanted between the tall, white water tower, a tiny bulb in the distance on its spidery stilts, and the final channel marker. Then he headed the boat into the open Gulf and the land fell below the horizon.

They were quite alone on the endless, swelling, falling sea. The other boats had gone further north today, to the waters off Mullet Key, where mackerel had been reported running.

No friends around. No other eyes.

Just the three of us.

Carl throttled down the cruiser's twin Continentals. The engines putted softly and the boat rose and fell with the gentle sighing of the Gulf.

"I guess this is it," he said.

Lissa's heart throbbed with fear and anticipation.

Jocelin had come aft and put

on a face mask. "Sure I can get a giant snapper?"

"No guarantee," Carl said. "But you've got a good chance. A lot of snapper and sheepshead around the old wreck down there. Really monstrous sheepshead."

"I'll leave them for Lissa," Jocelin said, the veneer of a smile on her face as she glanced at Lissa.

Sheepshead, Lissa thought. I know what she means. Lissa can have the sheep.

Side by side they stood on the aft decking, over the baitwells. The baitwells were always empty. They'd never been filled since Carl had bought the boat. Carl had only contempt for tackle fishing.

Carl stayed at the helm, keeping the drift of the boat corrected.

"One shot only," he said. "Then I'll show you how to haul the granddaddy of all snappers out."

Lissa stood inhaling through her mouth, deeply and rapidly, charging her blood with oxygen.

Jocelin went into the water like a sleek blade. Lissa counted four seconds and followed her dive.

As she shot down through the clean green world of water, Lissa saw Jocelin ahead of her.

Ten, fifteen, twenty feet down.

Lissa felt the pressure on her eardrums and the little needles that reached out into her brain. A small fish backed off and stared at her.

Below were the shadowy outlines of the old wreck. She lay on her side, covered with moss, half

buried in sand, one broken mast sticking out like a finger, yawning holes in her decks and planking. She'd been a proud one, sailing these waters when Florida was young.

The driving flippers on her feet drove Lissa closer to Jocelin. Jocelin was intent on the wreck below, as if determined to get in the first shot and bring the first snapper to surface.

A sheepshead, enormous for his breed, drifted up out of the old hull through a hole in the deck. He was big game, but Jocelin ignored him, and Lissa stayed close behind Jocelin.

The big snapper came drifting over the prow of the wreck. He floated gently, in curiosity. He backed away with slow movements of his fins as Jocelin glided to a standstill in the water.

Jocelin fired, missed, and the big fish wheeled with great speed and was gone in the greenery of water and waving seaweed.

Now, Lissa thought.

She fired.

Straight into the old timbers. The missile struck and embedded its barbed steel head deeply. Lissa snapped the line tight around her left wrist.

Now that she was anchored to the bottom, she threw herself against Jocelin and clamped Jocelin's slender neck tight in the crook of her right elbow.

We shall see who is stronger . . .

Jocelin froze, stunned by Lissa's attack. Then she came to explosive life. She twisted her body. She clawed at Lissa's arm. She was a thrashing fish. Much bigger game than a sheepshead.

Lissa felt the struggling body grow limp. Jocelin made a last feeble attempt to pull Lissa's arm free of her throat. Then Jocelin was draped over her arm, arms, head, and legs dangling, her hair a black cloud floating about her face.

A ringing had begun in Lissa's ears, but she couldn't surface yet.

With the line, she pulled herself and Jocelin down to the rotting hole. Where timbers had broken jaggedly, she wedged Jocelin's ankle until it was secure. Jocelin bobbed against the wreckage like a figurehead that had come to life only to go down with the ship she had adorned.

Lissa felt the blood boiling in her veins. Everything was growing dim and far away. Hard steel spikes were being driven through her chest.

For a moment, she was lost.

She almost opened her mouth to suck in a great gasp of air.

Panic hit her, and cleared her head.

She freed her wrist of the line and started up. She could see sunlight shafting down into the water. It seemed so very far away . . .

Her face broke water, and air burned into her lungs. She closed her eyes, gulping greedily.

She opened her eyes and looked around. Then she screamed. Her wild gaze followed the wake of the boat. She saw Carl look back and give her a tired, bored wave. Then Carl and the boat were gone.



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TO

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The girl removed her dress slowly, tantalizing him as if she knew he was there watching

BY

IVAN

LYONS-PLESKOW



HE PROMISED himself that he'd never look again. He swore it, and he had meant it. But Thursday night, after the card game, long after the smell of stale smoke and warm beer had swept out through the open window, he felt himself weakening. Sitting in the worn leather armchair, he stared at the window with the drawn blinds, the blinds he had drawn the last time he saw her.

He promised himself that he'd never look again. Don't do it, George, he said to himself. You're only looking for trouble. Remember

THE NUDE NEXT DOOR

the promise. Be strong. But his strength was as flimsy as the smoke that swept out through the open window, and as he sat there in the worn leather armchair, he wanted to open the blinds more than he wanted, or had wanted, or would want, anything else, ever again.

With a start, he got up, turned out all the lights and then slowly, softly, so as not to make any noise, he raised the blinds, his hopes rising with each tug of the cord.

Her light was on. The alley between the two buildings was narrow and he could see her window clearly even if he moved back and lay on his bed. That was when he first saw her, he was lying in bed one night and her light went on, some of its rays spilling onto his window sill. It was as if an angel had appeared, his angel.

He moved back to the bed and sat there not daring to light a cigarette. He was afraid she would see the flame. He sat there, still and quiet and sweating. A moment later she appeared. Her jet black hair caressed the shoulders of her tight red dress. He caught his breath as she turned and stood profiled in front of her mirror. The sight of her breasts, encased in the redness of her dress, covered over and shaped by the warm fabric started his pulse beating. Her face was small and white, and she looked like an illustration from a children's book, perhaps Snow White or Rose Red. She was alone

tonight. Other nights there had been other men with her, and never the same man twice. He began to cough softly, nervously, as he thought that maybe tonight would be his night.

She began to unzip her dress and let it fall from her pale white shoulders. George got off the bed and took off his shirt. She removed the dress slowly, almost as if she knew someone were watching, almost as if she knew he were there. George took off his pants.

He crawled over to the window, his chin resting on the sill. His eyes widened as she lifted her leg and began removing her stockings, once silken and tight and then as she took them off they became soft and shapeless, but still warm from her body. George took off his socks. She sighed heavily and stretched her arms in the air, as if reaching for something, almost as if she were reaching for George. She wore no slip, and in a moment removed her bra and panties. George ripped at his underwear and tore it from his body, his chin pressed hard against the window sill, his knees aching against the wooden floor.

She was nude. His mouth was dry and he moistened his lips with his tongue. His heart was beating wildly, and unconsciously, he put his hand over his heart for fear she'd hear the beating and look up and scream and run and put on her clothes and draw the shade and lock the window and Lock George

Out. Lock George Out. Lock George Out.

He had to know. To hell with promises and oaths. He had to know. George walked over to the light switch. He turned it on and walked slowly to the window. His eyes were closed. And he stood there, naked in front of the open window, his eyes clamped shut, his mouth open, and his fists clenched.

It was like in the dreams, he thought. Only this was no dream. This was happening, like they said on television, this was live. He, George, was standing naked in front of the open window, naked in front of a woman for the very first time. He opened his eyes slowly, the light filtering through his bruised lids, and his head and heart melted together into the pounding and surging within his bare body.

She was smiling. Smiling, he thought. Not laughing or frowning, but smiling. He smiled back weakly, and she stood up and walked closer to the window. She opened her mouth slowly and said, "Coming over?"

"Meet you downstairs," he answered thickly. And then she drew the shade. But it didn't matter now.

The corner was dark and a few people strolled by without noticing George. He turned away from them, almost afraid they knew who he was meeting and what he was going to do. And then suddenly, he became angry. What if they did

know? And then, just as suddenly, he realized that he was angry at himself, angry for feeling awkward and clumsy and afraid. But then he thought of tomorrow, and how after waking up for twenty-seven years alone, tomorrow morning he would wake up a man.

His eye was caught by a bright spot on the pavement. He bent down to pick it up and as he began to straighten up, he saw her standing in front of him. His throat was tight and he held out his hand to show her what he had found.

"Found a penny," he said.

"Keep it. It's lucky," she answered, and as she spoke he noticed the hard lines around her mouth.

"You wanna come up?" she asked, her eyes covering his body in a single swift glance.

George nodded.

The room was small and the flowers on the wallpaper seemed to be reaching out for him. There was a chair and a bed and a table in the room. And then he saw the mirror.

It was in back of the bed, covering the entire wall from ceiling to floor, but it wasn't a single mirror. It was made up of jagged bits and pieces from different mirrors, all hung up next to one another. Some of the pieces were round, some were ragged squares, others triangular, all shapes, all hung up to cover the wall in back of the bed.

As George stood there, looking

in a large broken piece of mirror, he saw her reflection as she began coming closer. Each mirror caught her image and held it fast as she came to him, dropping her clothes along the way. It was as if any army of naked women were approaching. Suddenly her arms were around him, and he turned, pressing his lips to hers. He could feel her teeth against his mouth, biting his tongue, scraping against his gums.

He took her to the bed, and they lay down. But as he went to embrace her, as he moved closer to her, she turned and sat on top of him, her thighs straddling his stomach and pressing his ribs with her knees. She opened his shirt and he looked up surprised. This wasn't the way, he thought. But before he could say anything, she reached over to the wall and took off a

piece of mirror. She put it close to her face and looked into it for a long moment. George was breathing heavily and she was beginning to hurt him. Then she spit into the image on the mirror and brought its sharp jagged edge down across his chest, leaving a trail of blood. George moaned and tried to get up, but he couldn't move. He looked up at her, into the small gray eyes narrowed with rage.

She looked at him and bent down to kiss him. Her lips touched his softly and for a moment the pain in his chest was gone. The warmth of her breath was over his face and he thought that it would begin now.

He didn't mind the ripped flesh on his arms, or the slashing at his throat. He felt nothing but the heat of her breath against his face. And as he began to die, he heard her whisper, "I love you."

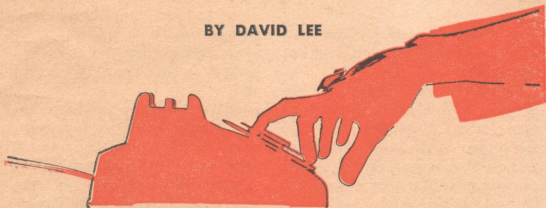


MY PAL ISSAC

vator operator in a residential area hotel, always on the look out for the easy bill, and it was rumored in several local pool halls that he knocked down a good sized bundle every week.

Anyhow, Issac and I used to sit around the local boozeries during his afternoons off having a sold gold

BY DAVID LEE



*Issac Sweeny was a perfectionist, his calling card
a forty-five caliber hole straight between the eyes*

IT ALL happened so long ago that I hardly know where to begin. If my memory serves me correctly it started about fifteen years ago, and the missing gaps were supplied by the person who ought to know as he was the main party involved.

I'll start about nineteen-forty in Denver with Issac Sweeney. Issac was a very fast man with a buck, although he still had the first dollar he ever made, and it didn't have to be a legal deal with Issac. At this time Issac was working as an ele-

ball. Issac loved to talk about the characters who lived in the hotel, and Issac would swear on a can of sardines they were all crazy. After three or four beers, Issac, giving me a heavy slap on the back, would say, "Pete, what do you think old Mrs. Golden did the other afternoon?" And without telling me what the lady did he would bust out laughing so hard he had to run to the men's room. He was sure that half of the tenants in the hotel had graduated from some

looney bin, and he always complained how tight they were with a buck. For instance, the time he carried Mr. Perone's bags to his room and was informed that Mr. Perone would like a bucket of ice. Issac, figuring the guy worth a few bucks, breaks his neck running down and back with the ice just to get a pat on the back, and a request, "Put it on the bill son and everything will be taken care of when I leave." It's a good thing Issac didn't shave that evening because he probably would have cut his throat.

To tell the truth, Issac didn't like working nights and I guess it all stems from an incident that had taken place at the hotel while Issac was on duty during the cold hours of early morning. Seems as though he was sitting on the main floor in his elevator, when six or seven business-like hoods walk into the hotel. Two of the hoods stayed in the lobby and the other five headed for Issac's car. The guy in the lead, as Issac recalls, says, "Seven, and make it quiet," which started Issac shaking. He must have thought that this was going to be a heist, and he almost passed out before he could close the door. Reaching the seventh this same guy asks, "What room is Mr. Wedge in?" Issac is shaking so bad his uppers keep sliding out of place but he manages to get out a strangled "703 Sir." Moving quietly down the hall, the five hoods pull out

guns and when they reached 703 the big guy and another bust in the door. After being revived by the hotel manager, Issac found out that the seven gangsters were FBI men, and a notorious bandit had been killed in 703. One FBI man had been shot up, but he was expected to live. I don't have to tell you that Issac was the local hero for several days.

It was not too long after the shooting that I noticed a peculiar change coming over Issac. His manner of dress, which had been haphazard at best, now became neat and conservative. The thing that struck me as being very, very, odd was the complete fascination he now had for money. The word got around that Issac was making book at the hotel, and knocking down in a week as much as he made in a month operating the elevator. Our afternoons became hollow and a little embarrassing as he would say no more than five or six words in about as many hours. The fact of his making book bothered me not at all, but the silence got to me. Issac never again mentioned the shooting incident at the hotel, and I thought it best not to approach the subject.

II

About ten or eleven months after the shooting I received a telephone call late in the night. It was Issac asking if I would mind very much

coming over to his house as he wanted to show me something very special. While talking to him on the phone it dawned on me that I had seen Issac no more than three or four times during the past months; so I told him that I would be right over, thinking that this thing that had changed him so completely had finally loosed its grip and he wanted to celebrate. What a shock I was in for.

After parking my car in front of Issac's house I rang the door bell and reached for a cigarette. As I threw the match away the door opened and Issac said brusquely, "Come in." He led me into his den, mixed me a drink, and opened a beer for himself. Issac may have changed in other things but he always would be a beer drinker to his dying day. He never used a glass either, just drank from the bottle. After sitting around and inquiring about each other's health, (and I wondering just what it was all about), Issac finally said, "Pete come down to the basement with me for a minute." Thinking that perhaps he had made a small bar for himself I picked up my glass and followed him. Going down the basement steps I noticed how bright the place looked, and then I saw the pistol range he had set up. Issac told me that he had spent most of his roll on building and stocking the range, and he also said that I had not seen much of him lately because he spent most

of his waking hours practicing his marksmanship here in the basement. Taking me to the table he picked up a thirty-eight, pushed five rounds in the cylinder, raised the gun, and squeezed them off just as fast as his finger could move the trigger. Laying the gun down he looked at me and said, "Let's take a look." As I looked at the target, which was of a type known as a silhouette, I noticed the five neatly spaced holes leading across the forehead. It was then that I began one of the most interesting hours that I have ever spent.

Issac began by showing me several forms of trick shooting, followed by lightning draws from the hip, armpit, belt, back pocket, and leg. He fired nearly four boxes of shells and he never once missed the forehead of the target. Finally laying his guns down he came over, looked at me as if he were looking through me and said, "I'm ready."

Isaac stayed at the hotel for eighteen months and then, although no one knew the reason, he left. The general opinion was that the book-making became too hot and Issac received a good offer from a man by the name of Mr. Gerry Kort. Mr. Kort, better known as Dandy, was a killer and a muscle man in organized crime. One evening Dandy had been seen in the hotel talking to Issac, and when Dandy left Issac went with him still dressed in his uniform.

It was some weeks after this that most of the national newspapers screamed with headlines of a Senator O'Brien, from Massachusetts, whose body was found dead in his car with two bullet holes in his forehead. There was a roundup of all the known hoods and the papers yelled for blood, but no body ever learned who the killer was. About a month after the shooting, Issac, for the first time, found his name in the papers. Seems he was picked up for carrying a concealed weapon, but as it was his first offense he was put on a years probation, and received a three hundred dollar fine. That was the first and last time Issac ever spent a night in jail.

III

As time went by we had a major war on our hands. The Allies were in Italy and the Philippines, and things were looking pretty rough. The papers were full of war, but the space that was left belonged to Issac, who was no newcomer to the headlines any more. He was rejected from the service because of a bad heart and the snoopers were finding Issac a very meaty subject. Of course, nothing was ever pinned on Issac although everybody tried pretty hard. It was soon after this that the body of Dandy Kort was found far out in the country and, again, two neatly placed holes in his forehead

identified the cause of death. Although the pattern of forehead shot was becoming familiar to the police, they did not press very hard to find the killer. They were satisfied that their future dealings with the racketeer, Kort, would be the handling of his final will and casket.

In the summer of forty-four, on my usual day-off, I was sitting in Mike's Bar, lifting a few, when who should walk in but Issac, dressed to kill, and with the most beautiful Brunette I've ever layed eyes on. Issac came over toward the bar, stopped about four feet from my stool, and looked at me for a full thirty seconds. There were about nine guys and a couple of noisy dolls in the joint at the time but as soon as Issac walked in you would have thought you were in a tomb. Finally Issac, with a faint smile, extended a white, well manicured hand, and said, "Good afternoon Pete," and I just nodded. Having the joint to ourselves by this time, I took stock of Issac. He was a long way from the hotel now. Beautiful girl, tailored clothes, expensive but not loud, snap brim hat, and fifty dollar shoes. He took the stool next to mine and ordered a bottle of beer. After sipping at his beer, he seemed to remember the doll standing next to him. Turning his head a little he quietly told her to sit down and I've never seen a jet move as fast as that doll, flying to the stool.

As I sat looking at Issac I suddenly realized that he wasn't a very big man. Perhaps five eight, and he weighed about one fifty. Some people have called him handsome, but as I looked at him toying with his beer, I knew that handsome was the last word you would use in connection with Mr. Sweeney. On the other hand, the little doll (I found out that her name was Billie Manchuso) was beautiful, well proportioned, and her father was the owner of several night clubs throughout the country. I guessed her age at about twenty-two. Even though she was obviously terrified of Issac, she seemed to adore the ground he walked on.

Trying to start a conversation I asked Issac how things were going, but instead of answering, he just glanced at Billie and she got up and with her eyes on the floor walked quickly to the women's washroom.

If Issac had anything on his mind he was certainly in no hurry to answer questions. We talked for awhile, and, as Issac was ordering another round, Billie came out of the washroom. She walked over to the juke box, dropped a coin in the slot and pushed a few selections. In a moment the current hit tune, 'Don't Fence Me In,' came blaring out. When she came back to join us, Issac reached into his pocket, pulled out a set of car keys, threw them on the floor behind her

stool, and quietly told her to beat it. The girl, knowing better than to hesitate, picked up the keys, and obediently walked out.

It was a full five minutes after Billie had left when Issac picked up his bottle of beer and without saying a word threw it through the glass window of the juke box. Records smashed, several bulbs broke, and the remainder of the beer began dripping on the selection board, blurring the names of the tunes. The bartender, a kid of about twenty-two came over and grabbed Issac by the shirt, and with a hard fast right hook knocked Issac off the stool and against the wall. Bleeding from the nose and mouth Issac got off the floor, dusted his trousers, glanced at the kid, and walked out.

I was still sitting there about an hour later when Issac returned wearing a different suit and his face cleaned up. The kid was still on duty, and by this time he knew just who he had slugged as I had made it a point to tell him. When he saw Issac coming in, he reached below the counter for the gun that is always there in case of emergencies. As I looked back to Issac I saw the blue-black thirty-eight in his hand and, knowing that the kid had never been closer to death in his life, I told him to come up clean. I don't think the boy knew Issac had a gun in his hand as his eyes never strayed that far, but he did come up clean, and Issac drop-

ped the thirty-eight back into his coat pocket and simply told the kid to get two beers. Now I'm not a hero and I've seen a few guys die in my time, but when I saw the kid go for his gun, and the blank look in Issac's face, I kind of thought Issac was praying for the kid to blast him even though Issac had the drop on the kid.

As soon as the kid brought the beer over, Issac reached into his breast pocket, and counted ten one-hundred dollar bills out of his billfold, and told the kid to buy himself a new juke box. After another round, Issac looked at me with that thin smile of his and said that it was time for a ride. Dropping my change in my pocket, and picking up my cigarettes I turned to leave when I noticed Issac drop three more ten dollar bills on the bar. I looked questioningly at the size of the tip, but Issac just shrugged his shoulders and said, "You only live once. That one has a short life. Might as well let him enjoy it."

After we got started, Issac asked me if I would like to go to Ft. Collins, which naturally was OK with me, but after watching Issac drive, I knew that he didn't pull this chore very often. We had driven about ten miles when he stopped the car and asked me if I'd mind taking the wheel. This was all right with me because his driving was giving me the shakes, and I welcomed the chance to get behind the wheel of a new Cad.

We drove for a few miles, and Issac turned on the radio but as all you could get were war bulletins and news, he snapped it off and leaned back smoking.

Rolling into Ft. Collins, Issac directed me to a private club where an attendant parked the car while we entered the dim foyer of the bar. After much bowing and scraping, the manager led us to a table in the far corner and Issac very carefully sat with his back to the wall. A minute or two passed and a doll of about nineteen came over to take our order. Issac ordered his beer, but as I can't hold beer too well, I switched to bourbon and water. After being served, Issac glanced over at me and said, "Pete, I guess you're wondering a lot of things about me. Right?" Shrugging my shoulders I answered, "One and one make two, Issac. Things add up. Don't they?"

"I'm not the same guy, Pete. I suppose you're wonderin' about the Senator and about Kort. There're others, Pete, a lot of them. It's not the money I'm interested in, because I've got money in twenty different banks from Maine to California. No, Pete, it's not the money. I'm not going to tell you I knocked off those people, and I'm not going to tell you I didn't. I've lost count, Pete, honest to God, I've lost count. I'm not a mad dog, Pete. I'm working to get to the top, and some day I'm going to be there. Of course, I'm pretty high

now, and there have been people in the way, all the way, but they had to go. To me, Pete, this is business, big business, and I want to be the number one boy. Some day I will. The cops have nothing on me because a Mr. Big has kept them from me. But he is right where I want to be, and he has to go too. Just how he goes, I haven't figured out yet, but I swear on my mother's grave he is going. I'm telling all this to you Pete . . . well . . . I really don't have any friends but you, Pete, and I know you won't talk."

Issac was right about one thing. I would never talk, but I also knew that he was crazy with lust for power and his best friend, the one in his coat pocket, would be the thing that stopped him.

I began to keep a closer check on the papers and I watched Issac get to be a big man. There was the trip he made to the Coast where he stayed for three days. Twenty-four hours after coming back to Denver, the number one man on the Coast in charge of the slots was ice-picked. Issac moved in, but only with the permission of Mr. Big. He knew that Issac was a good boy to have around, loyal to his boss, and the best hood in the business. This, then, was Issac's praise, his real beginning, the big man on the coast. He was the man who gave the orders and, just for the hell of it, carried out a few of his own contracts; but when he did, I al-

ways knew by the stories of the few well placed holes in the forehead that another luckless person was no longer in Issac's way.

About two months after Issac moved into the upper bracket of the underworld, a bright gunnie from Detroit hit the coast and decided to muscle in on the loot Issac was now rolling in. Not being a very bright lad, the newcomer figured that the easiest way to start the green stuff flowing in his direction, was to put the number one guy on ice and just step in. From what the papers had to say, this boy Fowler entered Issac's apartment building and lay waiting for Issac to return from the evening's festivities. Along about eleven, Issac's lawyer, arrived, by a previous appointment and started up to Issac's apartment. Issac had come in about thirty seconds after and when Issac stepped out of the elevator he was just in time to see the gunnie pump five shots into the lawyer and Issac promptly drew his gun and put the entire contents into Mr. Fowler's belly. I realized afterward that Issac had thought better about leaving his trademark, the forehead shots, on a man the police were going to be positive he shot. Of course there was an inquest, but it was self defense, and Issac received a thank you from the Coroner for, "Ridding our fine country of a known gunman."

I guess that this killing put Issac

on his guard because the very next day he hired a bodyguard, a hulking brute of a man whose reputation with knife, gun, and muscle was taken for granted in the underworld. They made a strange pair, these two, the bodyguard went by the name of Stan Foreman—big, hulking, sloppy dresser, and smoked cheap cigars. Issac, on the other hand, was of slight build, neatly dressed at all times, and smoked nothing but the best imported cigarettes. Strangely enough, Issac treated Stan like his own brother, and I guess that Stan would have died a dozen deaths for Issac, he thought that much of him.

For instance—there was this time Issac had to go to the coast for a few days. He had decided that they would drive, thinking that it might relax them to see the country which was at it's best at that time of the year. They had stopped at a roadside diner to get something to eat, and Stan hesitated a bit at the door. Looking at the mountains, he grunted one of his few sentences.

"Jeez! Ain't they pretty, boss?"

Issac, noticing that Stan was looking at mountains and not girls, bit back a smile and said, "I didn't know you cared for nature, Stan. How come?"

With this, Stan crossed his arms across his massive chest and said, "You know, boss? Someday I'm going to get out of this racket and

settle down on a nice farm and raise chickens. Might even have a wife and some kids, you never can tell."

Just a little startled at hearing so many words in a row, Issac said nothing, but looked a little thoughtful as he walked into the diner.

Later that afternoon, as they were driving along, Issac noticed a well kept farm posted with "For Sale" signs. Glancing at his companion, he broke the silence which had lasted for the last hundred miles and said, "Pull up, will you, Stan? I want to stretch my legs a little."

"What do you think of this?" Issac said, sweeping his arm to take in the farm. "Looks like a nice little place."

"It sure is nice, boss," growled Stan. "Somebody has been taking pretty good care of this place." He sighed a little. "A man could live like a king on a place like that."

"Get the address of the real estate office for me, Stan. I think that we'll make that our next stop."

Stan got the address, which was in Las Vegas, and they continued on their way, arriving in Las Vegas in the evening. After a comfortable night and a good breakfast Issac told Stan to drive over to the real estate office where they were greeted by a tall thin man with a big smile.

"Good morning, gentlemen. May I help you?"

"I am Issac Sweeney, and this Mr. Foreman," answered Issac. "I

noticed the farm you have for sale east of here, just off the highway, and I would like to have the particulars on it."

"The farm is a real bargain," the salesman said. "You may find the price a little steep, sixty-thousand, but the soil is in A-1 condition, the farming equipment is new, and the house itself is worth the full price. It is a farm no man would be ashamed of, Mr. Sweeney."

"What do you think, Stan?" Issac asked.

"Don't think you could do better, boss."

Issac smiled a little to himself and turned to the salesman. "How long will it take to draw up the papers and will a check do?"

With a little gasp, the answer came back. "The papers can be signed now. I am a Notary, and a check will do nicely, sir." Mr. Weiser, as the nameplate on the desk proclaimed him, shuffled some papers together, and put them in the typewriter.

"The name please?"

"Foreman, Stanley Foreman." Issac answered, and laughed out loud at the look of utter stupefaction that crept over Stan's face.

Half an hour later two men emerged from a realtors office, the first with a slight smile lurking at the corners of his mouth, and the other looking as if he had just been clobbered by a truck.

During the second week of December, I received a call from

Issac in Los Angeles, where he had taken up permanent residence. He asked me if it would be all right for him to come and spend Christmas at my house. I told him I couldn't wait to see him, and it would be just like old times again, although I knew that the old days were lost forever. Issac arrived on the twenty-third bringing one of his long-stemmed angels with him. She floated in on nylon cased illusions, and what she was carrying above the waist would have given Dagmar sleepless nights. Issac followed her, his arms full of packages, and I started with surprise when he dropped them on the sofa and I got a good look at him. He was a lot thinner than the last time I had seen him, his face tauter, shoulders bowed, and he looked haggard.

"This is Ann Barbour, Pete." Then, turning to the girl, "Fix some drinks."

There was something changed about Issac. His eyes darted about the room, furtively. "Are the doors and windows locked, Pete?" Issac was scared! This was something new but I decided to wait it out and I knew that if he wanted to tell me what it was all about he would get to it in his own sweet time.

After he had made his own tour of the doors and windows, we all settled back with the drinks Ann fixed from the things on the sideboard. I noticed that Issac was sip-

ping on his mixed drink but, true to form, he made a face at the taste and he asked if I had any beer. I checked and found one dusty bottle in the far corner of the refrigerator. Issac, who had followed me out to the kitchen, noted the lack of his favorite amber colored poison, and went back to the living room.

"Hey Ann, how about going down to a grocery store and getting some beer for us?"

The tone of his voice surprised me. I believe that it was the first time he had ever made a request of one of his women. Was he getting soft now that he seemed to be getting somewhere in a field that allowed no softness whatever? The girl stared at him hesitatingly. She looked as if she were going to tell him to go to hell. Things were really changing. She finally shrugged her shoulders and picked up her purse.

After the girl left, we sat in the living room and exchanged meaningless talk for about ten minutes. Finally Issac sat a little straighter and quietly, with a touch of his old self, said, "This is it, Pete. This is the payoff."

He seemed to get a little nervous just talking about it, and started walking nervously about. "I'm moving in, Pete, the works! It's all going to be mine! I've waited years for it, and it will be all over in just a couple of weeks! Think of it, Pete! I'll control the

whole syndicate! Nothing can stop me. I've dreamed of being the Number One. I've done a lot of dirty work, Pete. Just think, Issac Sweeney, ex-elevator op, ex-bookie, ex-small time everything. I can't miss, Pete! I'm doing this one all by myself."

Issac was sweating although it was cool, and he was talking so fast by this time that I had trouble keeping up with him.

"Mr. Big is going to go, Pete! This plan is so perfect that he has to go! Being Big Man of California is ok, Pete, but I want the whole thing. I want the whole show, instead of giving the syndicate the orders of Mr. Big, I'm going to give my own orders. Mr. Big is getting old, says the young guys moving in don't know how to operate yet. Says they will start the gang wars of the twenties all over again. He's wrong, Pete. Did you ever wonder who Mr. Big was, Pete? A lot of people have been guessing about it, but do you know who Mr. Big is, Pete? Mr. Big who has been on top for twenty years? The Brain? The man who just says the word and ten people stop breathing? Do you want to know now, Pete? It doesn't matter now because in another week Mr. Big will be dead. Ok, they won't know that it is Mr. Big. Just an important guy found dead. You want to know who it is, Pete? Grab a good hold! Mr. Big is none other than George Perkins! Financier, millionaire, and

part time adviser to the President, himself! There will be hell to pay, Pete, but I've got it all figured out and it can't miss! Just one more week and there is another Mr. Big! Me! Issac Sweeney!

I looked at Issac, again, slouched deep in the easy chair of my living room, and he looked like a sick man. After all his fine talk, he was beat. It was as if he had talked all of his available strength away. When he started speaking again it was so low that I hardly heard him.

"I'm going to go to New York on the twenty-seventh, Pete. I want you to keep Ann here where she will be out of the way." Yes, it was beginning to look as if Issac was going soft.

The next few days brought back some of the memories of the old days for Issac and myself. We did nothing but sit in the house and drink a little, gabbing about the old days. Issac seemed to regain some of his self possession, and he even laughed once in a while, but the haunting look remained in his eyes and I knew that this last "Contract" of his was seldom out of his mind.

Christmas night, while we were playing some three handed bridge, I noticed that Issac was getting a little nervous again, and he finally dropped his cards and looked over at Ann. "We're out of beer again, Honey. How about running down and getting some refills? He

glanced over at me. "Bourbon?" I told him that the supply was still high, so he gave the girl some money and she got her coat.

After she had closed the door, Issac wandered around aimlessly, finally snapping the radio on. Getting some soft music he turned to me.

"How come no TV, Pete?"

"I keep thinking about it, Issac," I answered, "But just don't seem to get around to it. I'll see about getting one in the morning."

Issac plopped himself back in his chair, and we played rummy far into the night until we could all drop off to sleep with no trouble at all. It was a cheap anesthetic and I knew that Issac needed one.

IV

As I finished preparing breakfast the next morning, Issac came down. "Hey, Issac," I called, "About that television set, I called Wilson's this morning, and they will bring it out this afternoon."

"Swell idea, Pete," he answered scanning the paper. "There is a good show starting at two and it may be just what I need to take my mind off that little job tomorrow."

About one o'clock that afternoon I was in the kitchen putting some beer in the refrigerator. Ann was upstairs changing, and Issac was reading in the living room when the door bell rang. I noticed Issac

peek around the edge of the curtain and yell back.

"Hey Pete, the television guys are here."

I yelled out to let them in as I had my hands full and watched through the crack in the door.

Issac walked over and unlocked the door and two men came in carrying a large TV set. They very carefully put the set on the floor and turned to face Issac, each with a forty-five automatic in his hand. The explosions rocked the room.

Issac was slammed against the sofa. He rolled to the floor, dead. Ann came running down the stairs, but her scream was cut off abruptly, when a lead slug went through her throat. The men turned Issac over to make sure that he was dead, then, satisfied, they left.

It was too bad about Ann, she was a pretty doll. I guess I was smiling as I dialed the number Mr. Perkins had instructed me to call before notifying the police.

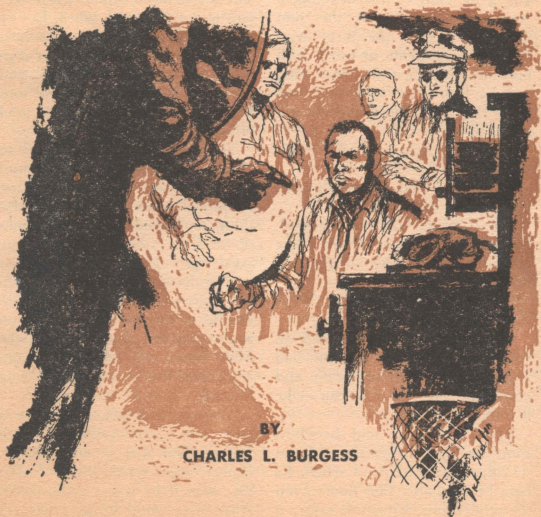


"I'd do anything for you," Dawson told the girl. "Anything you want. If you wanted . . ."

PINEVILLE WAS a tiresome twelve-hour drive from the city, most of it over bumpy back roads a million miles from nowhere. But Dawson didn't mind. Angela was there and she needed him. That was all that mattered.

It was four months since that crazy night when she eloped with

I'D DIE FOR YOU



BY
CHARLES L. BURGESS

Richard Emory III, but to Dawson it seemed like four years. There had been a void in his stomach ever since; a slow, gnawing emptiness that made him so sick he wanted to crawl away somewheres and die. He gripped the wheel hard and glanced at the dashboard clock. Two bells. In less than four hours they'd be together again. Just like always.

Hearing from her again was like a miracle. Only last night he was sitting in Tony's place drinking a beer and listening to the rain splashing against the dirty windows. He was alone, as usual, with his blues. And then the phone rang and he heard her voice and suddenly the rain stopped and the sun came out . . .

"Miss me, Johnny?" she whispered.

"Miss you? God, I never thought it would be this bad!"

She laughed, soft and musical. I've missed you, too, Johnny." She paused. "How about joining me up here?"

"Pineville?" he exclaimed. "What about Emory?"

"That's what I want to talk to you about," she said. "I've just had a great big wonderful dream, and you're the only one who can make it come true, Johnny."

That's when he told her he'd come, and that's when she told him where to meet her and when. So here he was, only four hours from the rendezvous, a roadside tavern a

few miles south of Pineville. Come to think of it, it wasn't a tavern at all. And Pineville wasn't a sun-baked little town in southeastern Missouri. It was a castle in Spain. It was the jackpot at the end of the rainbow.

He smiled, lit a cigarette, and let his mind roll back to the last time he saw Angela. It was at the Club Royale, and Emory was with her. Tall, sleek, smug-faced Emory, with his two-hundred dollar suits and supercilious smile. He'd had one too many, and when Emory said something he didn't like, he'd belted him on the button. The cops came and hauled him away, and the next day the judge gave him sixty days in the stockade to cool off.

The sixty days wasn't hard to take, but not having Angie around when he came out, was. At first he thought he'd go crazy. Everything he looked at reminded him of the places they'd been and the good times they'd had. Sometimes he wondered why they hadn't gotten married. He shook his head. Maybe it was because he was an angle guy, and anybody along the Main Stem will tell you that an angle guy has no business getting hitched.

Anyway, it knocked him for a loop when she went off with Emory. Not that he blamed her. Emory was loaded. He had class too, even if he was a yellow-belly. And what could he give her? A

smelly room in a fifth-rate hotel. Meals cooked on a two-burner hot-stove. Three-buck shoes. No, he didn't blame her one bit. Just the same, her leaving sure blasted hell out of his insides.

Maybe she was leaving Emory, he mused hopefully. He nurtured the thought for several minutes, found it savory. Not tonight, of course, but maybe some day soon he could ask her to marry him. She'd have to get rid of Emory first, but divorce laws being what they were, it wouldn't be too difficult. He pressed harder on the accelerator. He wanted to hold her in his arms so bad it hurt.

The tavern was crowded, but he spotted her right off. She was tucked away in a corner booth, and the smile she gave him made his heart do handsprings. She was a tall, willowy brunette, with olive skin, wide-set, tilted green eyes and soft, kissable lips. He could almost taste them as he slid into the booth.

"You're right on time, Johnny," she said softly.

He grinned. "I had a good reason."

They ordered bourbons and waited until the waiter brought them and left. "It seems like years," she said.

"I know."

"You're looking good, Johnny."

Dawson nodded, "How's Emory?"

"I loathe him!"

Hope flickered in his eyes. "Oh?"

She sipped her drink slowly. "It meant when I said I had a wonderful dream, Johnny," she said, their eyes locking. "You're in it all the way. But first we need money. Lots of it. And Emory's going to give it to us."

Dawson smiled indulgently. "Just like that, eh?" he said, snapping his fingers.

Angela smiled. "That's right, Johnny. Just like that." Her green eyes glowed in the dim light. He had never seen her so keyed up. "I've got it all figured out. Are you with me?"

"I'd die for you, baby," he whispered passionately. "You know that."

Angela nodded. "Yeah, I guess I do. Now listen closely and remember everything I tell you. First, remember how I can swim?"

He remembered everything about her, the touch of her hand on his; the way her hips swayed when she walked; the good, clean fragrance of her lithe body when she came out of the water. Yes, he remembered that she was an excellent swimmer. One of the best he'd ever seen.

Angela leaned forward, squeezed his hand with flame-tipped fingers. "He doesn't know how good I really am," she said. "I've never told him, and now I'm glad. We've got a cabin nearby, and several nights a week we go canoeing on the lake. We're going out tonight. After we're out a while I'll start

an argument. He's easily riled, so it won't be hard. We'll scuffle and I'll fall overboard. Only I won't come up. I'll stay underwater until I'm sure he won't see me. He'll think I've drowned."

"Suppose he dives in after you?"

"Un unh. He can't swim."

Dawson frowned. "Where do I come in?"

Angela stared at him over the rim of her glass. "You were standing on the bank and saw us fighting," she said, a note of intensity creeping into her voice. "You saw him push me into the water. Later, you'll call him on the phone and tell him you saw the whole thing. You'll make it sound like murder."

"Blackmail," said Dawson tightly. "Think he'll go for it?"

"Hook, line and sinker," Angela assured him. "He's afraid of his own shadow. You know that."

"He'll recognize me."

"So what? If he gets curious, tell him you were passing through Pineville on your way to the coast, and just happened to stop off to pay us a visit."

"What happens when they don't find your body?"

Angela laughed. "Don't let it worry you, Johnny. There's a strong undercurrent that sweeps downstream into the Mississippi. Several people have drowned in that lake and their bodies have never been found."

Dawson lit a cigarette thoughtfully. It wasn't a bad idea. Not bad

at all, and it just might work. Emory frightened easily, he had proof of that.

"How much do we ask for?"

"A hundred grand," said Angela. "All in cash. And don't let him put you off. He can lay his hands on that much within twenty-four hours."

"It sounds good," Dawson admitted.

"It is good. Now listen; when I surface, I'll go straight to the cabin. You wait for me there. Then you can take me to a motel on one of the back roads somewheres. Once there, I'll dye my hair and change into low-heeled shoes and horn-rimmed glasses. Nobody'll know me. When you get the dough we'll head for Mexico."

"Won't Emory go to the cabin, too?"

Angela shook her dark tresses impatiently. "Not a chance. He'll be too busy trying to get help. That'll give us plenty of time to get to a motel." She checked her wristwatch. "It's six-thirty. Come on, we've got to work fast."

Outside, Angela headed for a cream-colored Cadillac. "Hop in," she said. "First, I'll show you where our cabin is. Then we'll come back to your car."

Easing into the car, Dawson felt something hard and metallic under his legs. It was a heavy wrench.

"Throw it in back," snapped Angela. "The dumb cluck is always leaving his tools around."

Ten minutes later she braked on a lonely dirt road. Scrubby bushes and tall, gaunt-looking pines met Dawson's roving scrutiny.

"The cabin is straight ahead, about a hundred yards," said Angela, pointing.

Dawson could make out a tiny light flickering through the trees. "Any other cabins around?"

"It's the only one this side of the lake," Angela explained. "How about it? Got everything straight?"

"I think so," said Dawson. Quickly, he went over the plan she had outlined in the tavern. Angela listened carefully, nodded when he was through.

"Good," she said, wetting her lips. "How about a kiss for old times' sake?"

Dawson took her in his arms and kissed her hungrily. She was soft and purry, like a kitten. Time always seemed to stand still when they were in each other's arms. And in a few short hours she would be his forever. Thinking about it made him want to shout.

Later, when they had returned to the tavern, she said, "Be at the cabin at nine sharp." She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "Good luck, Johnny."

Dawson smiled as he watched the big Caddy's taillight fade into the gathering dusk. All his life he had dreamed of the Big Cap. The Big Deal. The One Job that would put him on Easy Street for the rest of

his life. Now he was getting it and Angela in a single evening. He rubbed his chin in disbelief. It seemed too good to be true . . .

It was exactly nine o'clock when he parked his Chevvy alongside the cabin. He looked around cautiously before getting out. The cabin was dark, and only the night sounds of the woods disturbed the eerie silence. He went up on the porch and relaxed in a rocker. There was a full moon, and from where he sat he could see the water shimmering through the trees.

For time to time he checked the luminous hands of his watch. Nine-five. Then nine-ten. If everything went according to schedule, Angela should be in the water by now. He got up and began pacing the porch. He wished he wasn't so nervous. A premonition of disaster assailed him, but he shook it off. What could possibly go wrong? Angela had everything figured to the minutest detail. Despite the humid weather, his hands were like ice, and he cursed himself for being a fool.

He patted his pockets for his cigarette case before remembering he had given it to Angela when she asked for a cigarette. She had probably put it in her bag by mistake. And no wonder, he grinned. She had a lot on her mind. A hundred grand worth.

It was nine-fifteen when he heard a car turn into the dirt road that led to the cabin. A moment later

the headlights picked him out, held him in their harsh glare. Controlling himself with an effort, Dawson suppressed a desire to flee. Something had gone wrong, he sensed it now. But what? He stuck his hands in his pockets to keep them from shaking.

Two figures emerged from the car and approached him warily. It wasn't until they were a few yards away that he saw the green and blue uniforms. State Police. His body went rigid. They were pointing guns at him!

"What are you doing here, Buddy?" one of them asked.

"I'm waiting for Mr. and Mrs. Emory," said Dawson calmly. "No law against it, is there?"

"Mebbe," said the shorter of the two officers. "What's your name?"

"Dawson. Johnny Dawson. I'm an old friend of Mrs. Emory's."

The two officers studied him a moment. "Take a look inside, Bob," said the shorter man. "I'll keep him covered."

"You're wasting your time," said Dawson irritably. "There's nobody home."

"We'll look anyway."

Dawson watched the man called Bob climb the steps and test the door. It was unlocked and the officer stepped inside, gun poised. A moment later a light snapped on. Dawson fidgeted nervously.

"Holy Cow, Jim!" exclaimed Bob harshly. "Get in here fast."

"Okay, Buddy," said Jim. "Walk

straight ahead and no tricks."

Dawson stepped inside the cabin. The room, he saw, was a shambles. Chairs and tables lay overturned and smashed. Glassware was broken.

"Over here, Jim," said Bob. "Behind the couch."

A man lay on his back, his face bruised and battered. His blonde hair was matted with blood. It was Richard Emory III, and he was dead.

"There's the murder weapon," said Bob, pointing with his gun.

It was a heavy wrench. Dawson recognized it as the same one he had handled in the car.

The older officer, Jim, gave him a quizzical glance. "If we find your prints on it, Buddy, you're a dead duck," he said.

Dawson choked back a laugh. How stupid could you get? He had walked into it like a five-year-old kid. He had to hand it to Angela. She was a smart cookie. Sweet Angela. Even the fight he'd had with Emory would be evidence against him. And then, from somewhere in his subconscious, he remembered telling her he would die for her.

"And here's a cigarette case," said Bob, stooping. "There's some initials on it. Let's see. They're J.D. What'd you say your name was, Buddy?"

Dawson didn't answer. He couldn't. He was laughing so hard he was crying.

The gunman's face was a deathly white, his eyes black holes of hate. He pressed the muzzle of the pistol into Barton's stomach...and Barton laughed.

TIME TO KILL

BY
BRYCE WALTON

TEN PALMS, advertised as A Garden In The Desert, was originally planned to bring in sick people who hoped to recover, and old people who wanted a healthy, sunny and dry climate to die in.

Many of these people had a great deal of money. The gamblers moved in. Soon there were gilted casinos, nightclubs, a number of tanned girls, and slot machines everywhere, even in the restrooms.

None of these things interested Allan Barton anymore. He didn't go into town so much, but instead he took long evening walks in the dead silence of the desert, watching jackrabbits play in the moonlight, mice and packrats hopping about under the sagebrush.

Sometimes this silence was too heavy for Barton. It reminded him



of all the dull years of his life when nothing interesting had ever happened to him. Even the war, because of his bad lung, had passed him by.

Then he would walk a few cabins down the path from his own, and talk with Steve Milton who never talked about himself, but who was always a good listener.

Tonight, Steve's cabin was dark. Evidently he hadn't come back from Ten Palms yet, and probably wouldn't the rest of the night. Steve spent a lot of time in town.

As Barton started to walk on past the shadowed cabin he stepped on Steve's hand. Barton leaned down, then coughed and stumbled back and put his hand against the cabin.

Why Steve's dead, Barton thought in an oddly detached way, dead, with a bullet hole in his forehead.

The body resembled one of those broken sprawled corpses seen in war photographs. The coagulated blood on the face resembled oil.

Barton looked around, feeling that he was being watched from out there in the sagebrush somewhere. He didn't see anything. Voices, laughter, came from other cabins. A guitar twanged.

Barton's thin face was usually taciturn, but now a peculiar smile appeared on his lips. He felt a kind of unfamiliar excitement growing inside. It simply was something that not only had never happened, but never could happen. A sudden feeling of being alive when he had

resigned himself to being dead. It was this feeling of danger, genuine danger, breathing down his neck.

The dull years as a kid, the dull years in business college, the dull years with Johnson Belt and Dye Company, the dull years of marriage and the commuting back and forth every day, the dull divorce and his wife marrying an assistant vice-president. It was like all his life he had been a member of the walking dead.

He heard cars droning down the highway toward Las Vegas. A pale dusty moonlight lay over the sand like glass. A small wind whispered in the sage. And oddly, he thought, I ought to stretch it out, make it last a while, like a glass of good imported whiskey.

Who was Steve? Why had he been murdered? Who were these people who had lived around Barton all his life and whom he had never met, never, never even seen, and knew nothing about? These people who were all around, and who lived so far away from his own dull world? Who were these ghosts who lived dangerously?

He turned the wall lamp on inside Steve's cabin. The two rooms had been ransacked, everything broken up, cut open, torn apart, including the mattress and the rug. They had done this after bringing Steve back home, because the place had been neat a few hours ago when Steve had left to go into Ten Palms. Steve was alive then.

Barton wondered if someone had found whatever they were looking for. Was it worth a killing? What was worth dying for?

"A guy's supposed to show here, but he's been delayed," Steve had said that afternoon. "He's a tall guy, and he'll be wearing a gray stetson and his name's Leo Stinson. He's got a room reserved at the Del Rey Hotel. I may not be around, so he can pick the stuff up there."

"What stuff?" Barton had wanted to ask. He hadn't asked.

"And thanks a lot, Al. He may not show at all."

The conversation hadn't seemed important a few hours ago.

On his way in to Ten Palms, Barton stopped off in his cabin and took a stiff shot of morphine, the doctor's remedy for the growing pain in his chest. He put the kit in his pocket before he left.

When Barton asked the night clerk in the Del Rey lobby for his key, saying he was Leo Stinson, the clerk hardly noticed him. So evidently Steve had never run into Leo Stinson, or if he had, it didn't seem that Stinson had been at the Del Rey. The Del Rey Hotel was a second rater on Main Street. The lobby was filled mostly with old people sitting, staring at potted palms and Reader's Digests, waiting for the night to go and the sun to come up one more time.

The room number, 204, was on the key tag. Barton went in and

turned on a naked ceiling light. A straight-backed chair, narrow bed, throw rug, bureau, small bathroom, picture of the Vanishing American. Empty, lonely and smelling of antiseptic.

He made a thorough search and found nothing. He started to feel rage, cheated, the show folding before it even got started. And then he heard a squeak behind him, felt a draft on his neck. As he turned, he remembered he hadn't locked the door. Two men entered. Then a woman, who stepped to one side and leaned against the wall. The taller man kicked the door shut with his heel. The woman snapped the nightlock. The younger man stepped nervously toward Barton. His hand stayed under an expensive Shetland jacket. Barton wondered if the nice looking, neat, tanned young man really had a gun under there.

"Feel him down," the taller one drawled, slouching inside an expensive suede jacket. "And watch yourself. This Stinson's supposed to be a really rough boy."

Larry ran his hands insolently in the search, then puzzled, said, "He isn't carrying anything."

"He isn't?"

"Not a thing, Jay."

Jay looked around the room. "Don't even see any harness."

"Maybe he just scares people to death," Larry said.

The woman told Larry to close the window. She had a striking

figure under the thin summer dress, wide hips, thin waist, and high full loose breasts. She had long bare legs too, and Barton found himself staring at her body and the moulded thighs as she sat down on the creaking bed and crossed her legs.

"Look all over in here for it," the woman said, watching Barton closely. She reacted to Barton's appraisal and her breasts tightened against the low-cut bodice. Her leg began moving nervously back and forth.

Jay started looking everywhere, while Larry watched Barton. And Barton kept staring at the woman's flat stomach, and the long provocative sweep of her thighs.

He remembered all those women, all turning stale over the years, until it turned into dull routine and after that stopped meaning anything at all. His wife coming to bed with him only on specified nights, and performing with all the ardor of an electric toaster popping up bread browned exactly the same every time.

This one would be different, he knew. Maybe so different it would even seem new. He hadn't felt so stirred up and excited about it since he was a sophomore at the Palo Alto School of Business Management.

"Look him over again for papers or something," the woman said.

Larry came up this time with his wallet, and the morphine kit. He

threw the morphine kit against the wall and spilled a few meaningless items, including a few dollar bills, out of the wallet.

Larry looked at the inside of the wallet and tossed it on the floor. "He's traveling under the name of Allan Barton."

Barton hoped the bottle of morphine in the kit hadn't broken. If it had, he would be in for some bad pains and that would spoil the fun.

Larry's short vicious jab slammed Barton into the wall. A roaring pain ballooned up out of his chest and burned in his head. The room blurred. He put his hand to his mouth and looked at the blood on his fingers. It resembled someone else's blood.

Jay was leaning out the window and feeling up and down the outside walls. Barton hadn't thought of that. Something could have been taped to the wall outside the window.

Only Jay didn't find anything out there. Jay shut the window again and lowered the blind. Barton wondered how these three had known about the Leo Stinson business. Maybe they had gotten that much out of Steve before they killed him. Maybe they had been out there by the cabin and had trailed Barton into town and one of them had been in the lobby when he gave the name of Stinson.

"We knew your two-timing friend was coming in to pick up

that stuff," the woman said. "Steve was watched. We lost him for a while this afternoon and he must have put the stuff in here. It wasn't packaged for mailing, and he couldn't have ditched it anywhere else, not anywhere it would ever do anyone any good. It's here, Mr. Stinson. Or you know where it is."

She watched him with heavy lidded eyes. Her toe moved nervously up and down. She's afraid of me, Barton thought, incredulously. Then he smiled at the idea. It was very amusing. Also suddenly she seemed more exciting and desirable than ever. The bed creaked as she shifted her wide hips.

"Nothing's hid in here," Jay said. "He doesn't have it. It isn't in here. It's someplace else."

Larry hit him again in the stomach. Barton coughed and almost fell as a deadly weakness crept up through his legs. He felt that quivering inside, the feeling that his chest was crumbling like dry clay.

Larry jerked a revolver from under his sport jacket. "I'll get it out of him. I'll chop it out and I'll shoot the bum."

Looking at the gun, Barton couldn't help laughing.

"What the hell?" Larry said.

Barton laughed louder. He walked toward the gun.

"Hold it, fella," Larry said quickly.

"I'm going to scare you to death," Barton said. He laughed again.

"Watch it, watch it," Larry said, his voice higher.

"Go on and shoot me," Barton said. He couldn't stop laughing.

"He's nuts," Larry whispered.

Barton picked up the chair by the back slats. "Why shoot me though? Why not use a switch-blade knife, you're a juvenile delinquent aren't you, kid?"

"I'm telling you, you cheap—"

"A shot will bring the police. And if I know where the stuff is, as you call it, shooting me would be stupid. And anyway, if you guys don't get the hell out of here I'm going to heave this chair right through the window. Broken glass, chairs falling down on the main street. You're asking for trouble that way."

"You better shut up, mister," Larry said. He was sweating.

"Ah," taunted Barton, "I dare you to shoot me. Go on, shoot, see if I care."

"I'm telling you," Larry said. "He's nuts." His deep tan seemed to be turning a slight gray color.

The bed creaked as the woman stood up. "He's probably got a load on," she said. "Cool off a little now, Larry."

"I'm going to cool this guy off all right."

"What's your hurry?" Barton asked. "This isn't a proper place to torture information out of someone and then kill them. I don't intend leaving town. I'll probably be around for quite a while."

Larry started to lunge at him but Jay grabbed him by the upper arms and swung him back toward the wall.

"You two get out now," Barton said, smiling. "Or the chair goes out the window." He turned and looked at the woman. "But I'll talk to you."

She studied him with fear and curiosity, then motioned to Jay and Larry. "Outside," she said in a very low voice, "I'll meet you downstairs."

When the door shut, Barton went over and snapped the nightlock, then went over to the bed and pushed the woman back down to a sitting position. The touch of her flesh burned up his arm. She looked at him with eyes full of fear. He reached down and slid her dress up the white length of her thigh. Her hands gripped his wrist. He dug his fingers into her flesh until she gasped.

Everything seemed so sharply focused now, Barton thought. Everything was important now. It was as if he had never had it before, instead of as if he would never have it again. Or maybe it was the same thing.

He wiped his mouth with his handkerchief.

"What the hell kind of a guy are you anyway, Stinson?"

"You want to find out I guess," he said. He had never seen one afraid of him before. Passive, accepting, because of fear, and at the

same time liking it herself because she was afraid and had to give in. She probably likes, wants to be afraid of it, he thought. Anyway it added something, a special and necessary ingredient. It was a new experience for him.

The bed sagged under his added weight. Her voice was muffled. "You have a big reputation. A friend of mine knew a guy who ran into you up in Frisco. I knew about you even before I found out you were a pal of Steve's. Steve was stupid. You aren't stupid."

"What does that matter?"

"You could really cause trouble. I can offer you five thousand—"

"Just be quiet now," he said, his voice getting thick.

"Don't hurt me," she said in a faint voice. "Please don't hurt me. Steve two-timed me. Maybe you don't know about that . . . we had it all worked out together . . . and he two-timed me. He was going to use it to get the Club. Hell, he would have told Marsten everything just for a slice of . . ."

"Forget all that," Barton whispered. "Forget all that stuff now, you understand? The hell with all that."

"I'll make a deal with you too—only promise you won't—"

She gasped, and then she struggled a little, and after that she lay back with her eyes closed, shivering and then moaning and half-sobbing against his face. . . .

After that he lay there for a while looking at the neon sign bleeding outside the hotel window. It was the best he had ever had, nothing ever like it before. Yet she probably wasn't really much different. She had helped murder Steve, he knew, and maybe that had made it better. He hated her, and she was afraid of him, and there was death in it, and danger everywhere, and blood in it too.

It didn't happen much among the respectable crowd he had known all his life. Most of them hadn't even known they were alive. Because they all wanted to feel safe, safe and dead.

He went into the bathroom and when he came out, she was standing up, adjusting the dress. Her face was damp. She was wiping at her smudged mouth with kleenex.

"Now let's pick up that box and burn it," she said. She was trying to smile at him, but her face did not look happy or anything like that. "Just forget it, that's all I ask. That's all Steve had to do. Knock off Marsten. He was getting ten grand cash to knock off Marsten, and he wanted the whole hog. You can have twenty thousand. You name it. Anything you want, Stinson. But I won't sign over any part of the Club. That's out. Anything else—"

He interrupted. "I want to explain something now."

He looked at her standing in the bathroom putting on makeup.

"You name it, honey," she said, looking at him from the mirror. "But no cut-in on the Club. Steve wanted the works. He would have ground me right out. He said he loved me even, the phony bum. And he gets all that stuff on tape and he's going to let Marsten listen if I don't—what do you want to explain?"

"I'm not Leo Stinson. Like it says in my wallet, I'm Allan Baer Barton. Formerly of Johnson's Belt and Dye Company, but sort of retired now."

"What's that, honey?"

"I'm not connected with Steve Milton in anyway. I just happened to be living out there near his cabin. He mentioned that Leo Stinson might show and that he had a room here. When Steve was murdered, I was curious, that's all. I'm still curious."

She moved past him with a noiseless glide, and opened the door. Her face had a blank look. "I don't believe you. But if it's true—you'll die a lot harder than Steve did."

That could very well be true, Barton thought as he shut the door and locked it. Anyway, it would happen to him under his correct name. He picked up the wallet, replaced the bills and other items in it neatly. He picked up the medical kit and went into the bathroom and gave himself another shot.

The unaccustomed excitement had put a little color under the false tan of his face. He looked

rather healthy, on the outside. Looks were certainly misleading. He could do with a little plasma right now. But that was hardly possible. Turning to go back into the other room, he looked at the water-closet. He remembered something from one of the thousands of crime novels he had read, and he lifted the lid and looked into the water.

A packet of water-proof plastic floated in the tank. Barton lay down to rest on the bed. He opened the packet. It contained a roll of recording tape, and a note addressed Dear Leo, and signed, Steve.

The note said:

"I've written several times telling you about making contact with me here at the Del Rey. If you haven't received any of those letters and are reading this because of a tip from a guy out there by my cabin named Allan Barton, he's okay. Don't worry about Barton at all. He isn't interested. Just forget him because he's a sort of an all right screwball.

"Now here's the ticket, Leo. I don't have time to write much here, so this is going to be brief. As you know, Julie Laverne hired me to come in here and knock off Lloyd Marsten. Now here's the score up to this point.

"Marsten's got a hot record back East, and in Nevada no one with a record can own a casino. So the Club Laverne. It's in her name, see, Leo, but Marsten's the guy who

cleans up a fabulous profit. She's his mistress. She wanted Marsten knocked off so she not only would own the Club, but enjoy all of its benefits, you see?

"I'm supposed to get a lousy ten grand for this job. But I go along with it. Julie gets me a job bouncing in the Club, and I spot everything in there. Marsten's built up a sweet extortion mill there. Lots of playrooms upstairs, equipped with cameras and hidden mikes. You know, the works. And all these money bags come in here, anything for a good time. They have a good time, and then they get a phone call from Marsten. He puts on the bite. It's good for millions, and the mine's just starting to be worked.

"Turns out this Julie is a push-over for the strong arm treatment. The second day here I was combining a lot of pleasure with business. We went out on the desert for a real good time and I got the whole thing on tape, including Julie talking about how happy she would be soon as I knocked off Marsten.

"I played it for Julie later and she started to crack up. I tell Julie I want everything in Marsten's safe, plus a partnership in the Club. And I think I'm going to come off the winner, Leo. If you're reading this it may mean I never won the spin, but it's sure worth the gamble. Anyway, this may be so-long, pal. And the stuff's all yours. But be careful. It turns out this Julie has

some torpedos around who are real trigger happy. One of them's kill-crazy. A kid named Larry.

"If you need an inside guy for anything, contact Hunky Shannon. He's a flunky who does all kinds of dirty work for Marsten because Marsten's got something on him. Seems Hunky is wanted under another name in Crowell, Kentucky, for killing a girl down there. So you can use Hunky. But watch yourself, Leo. Maybe you'd better call in a couple of guys from Boston."

Barton lay there with his hands under his head looking up at the pale yellow ceiling. So that was the mysterious Steve Milton. A torpedo. The young, blond, good-looking kid sitting in the deck chair and listening to Barton while the two of them sipped beer and talked about sundry things.

Extortion racket. He thought of the people coming into Ten Palms, having a good time, then having to pay out thousands of dollars. Play rooms above The Club Laverne. It was pretty sordid, all of it, from beginning to end.

He thought about all of it, and then he thought about someone named Hunky Shannon. He smiled and stood up. His head felt a little light, and the room not too substantial, but his interest was sustaining itself. He was even anticipating more excitement. Hunky Shannon, and then another run-in with Jay and Larry and Julie Laverne, and Lloyd Marsten. The

point was to get up there, right up there above the Club Laverne and see it. See what it was that made people pay out their life-earnings.

He was beginning to see why so many people stayed respectable. Respectable and dull and never knowing they were alive. Even having fun on a weekend was dangerous.

He went into the hall. He remembered there was no elevator. The hotel was cheap and only three stories. He went to the end of the hall and saw the dull surface of a metal fire-escape platform.

They would be waiting below for him, but when he looked out and down into the alley, he didn't see anyone down there. They could be hiding down there. But they were more likely to be down in the lobby. Anyway, he had to get out, and so he started climbing down the fire-escape.

They certainly didn't believe at this point that he really was not Leo Stinson. On the other hand, they might do a little investigating and determine exactly who he was. They still would be likely to watch him, thinking he knew about the roll of tape.

The tape was in his pocket. As he climbed down to the alley and stood there watching for a sign of somebody, he wondered about the tape.

He walked several blocks down a street paralleling Main, then cut back to Main and got into a cab.

"Just drive around a while," Bar-

ton said, leaning back. "I've never been here before."

"It's a sweet little town to die in," the driver said. And laughed.

"It sure seems healthy all right," Barton said. "For dying."

"Old folks come here from everywhere just to die right," the driver said. "A couple came in here all the way from Europe the other day. I drove them out to the Springs Motel. All they want is a place to pass away easy and quiet by one of those swimming pools."

"It's a lot healthier to die here than it is in Europe these days," Barton said.

"I wouldn't know about that."

Barton was sure he wasn't being followed. He went into an Owl Drug store while the cab waited. He looked up the address of Shannon, and there was fortunately only one Shannon in Ten Palms.

On the way out to Hunky Shannon's on the outskirts of town, Barton let the roll of recording tape flutter away foot by foot into the night.

As the cab drove away, Barton walked between orange trees toward the front of Shannon's sprawling ranch-type house. The air was heavy with orange blossoms, and the scent of bougainvillea and swimming pools.

Whatever dirty work Shannon had been forced to do for Marsten had certainly paid well. Almost as well as the board of directors of Johnson's Belt and Dye Company.

Barton heard the sounds of laughter in the night from neighboring houses, and illuminated back yards, and lawns of dark green devil grass. The smells of barbecuing steaks was redolent. Also, it awakened memories in Barton.

This was so much like the suburban home Barton had once commuted back and forth from daily with clocklike regularity. The home into which he would come tired but looking cheerful if he could. How many evenings had he spent on his knees in the back yard pulling devil grass, or donning the little apron marked "His" and barbecuing steaks in the back yard?

"Tired, darling?" his ever loving wife would ask.

"Tired, but satisfied," Barton would say. "Had another challenging day, another challenge to courage and valor—at Johnson's Belt and Dye."

His daughter would be lying before the fireplace talking interminably to some high school crush. There had been some nice moments. But it never got off the ground and now there was no place to go.

You had to live dangerously. Or you just didn't live. A few cared and they were eliminated.

At any time, he thought as he pressed the buzzer on the Shannon's front door, I could just have walked around the corner and started living dangerously. And I never did until somebody threw a

corpse at me, and by then the river was almost down to the sea.

A girl who couldn't have been over sixteen physically, opened the door. She was wearing only a thin negligee. She had a tight pale little face and wispy blond hair. Her eyes seemed quite old. "What do you want?"

"Mr. Shannon."

He shoved past her into a long, dimly-lighted room so full of green plants it seemed out doors. The girl swayed listlessly toward him, whispering something unintelligible. Barton had seen it while he was layed up in the hospital. In there they were given the stuff to deaden otherwise intolerable physical pain. This girl had been taking it to kill something just as painful but less tangible. She had the dull, glazed eyes of someone whose illusions had already died.

"Baby, baby, what's matter in there?"

"We got company," the girl said dully, looking at Barton as though he resembled everybody.

"We ain't expecting nobody."

"That's right," the girl said to Barton, dazedly.

"We're busy now," the voice called from the next room. "Tell 'em to go way."

"Go way," the girl said.

She turned and almost fell. The negligee opened all the way down and Barton saw the blue bruise marks on her thin boyish thighs. He closed his eyes a moment, then

walked past her into the next room, a music room, lots of records and a hi-fi pulsing in the walls. A short stocky man with a pug nose got up from a long furry gray couch and was belting a pink dressing gown around his middle.

"You Shannon?"

"That's right. But it's trouble you're looking for. I said to go way."

He stood on short, wide-spread legs, leaning forward belligerently, squinting little eyes. He seemed to have a driving but frightened arrogance, like a rooster threatened by hawks as he stood with his hands in his pockets.

Barton smiled. Hunky Shannon was funny. They were all funny. Every damned one of them, the whole situation, everything getting funnier all the time.

"How would you like to take a plane trip tonight?" Barton asked.

Hunky's eyes flickered toward the door, then the windows. He stuck out his lower lip.

"Flying ain't safe."

"It's fast," Barton said. "And that's the way they told me to bring you back to Crowell, Kentucky."

Shannon sat down heavily and sweat burst out over his knobby face.

"Marsten," he said. He said it several times. Suppressed fury dribbled out with the words.

"Don't try anything with me," Barton said. "I've got a couple of friends outside. And Marsten will

have you extradited anyway. He must not like you."

Shannon leaned back and put his hand over his eyes. He didn't seem to be breathing.

"I knowed it was coming. It's been coming for years. Hell, I couldn't live with it anyway. I've had it. I've had it all the way up. I knew that he would do it one of these days sure."

Shannon jerked his hand away from his eyes and leaned forward. His face was white. "Listen—I'll go. But let me take a crack at Marsten first. I'll give you ten, twenty grand in cash. Just let me blow that guy's head all over his ceiling, that's all I ask. Twenty grand. I got it stashed right here. Get-away money. You want it. It's yours."

Barton laughed. "I was only kidding, Hunky. I'm not a cop from Crowell, Kentucky. I'm friend of Steve Milton. You know Steve Milton?"

Shannon wiped at his face, and nodded dumbly.

"Well, Steve's dead. Julie Laverne had him shot. He was a friend of mine."

"Then what's the idea—?"

"Just wanted to remind you of how it will feel if and when it does happen to you, Hunky."

"I don't need to be reminded." Hunky didn't sound relieved. He sounded tired. He leaned back again and shut his eyes. Sweat ran down his face. "Marsten will do it. He'll do it pretty soon now. I know

it. I got to gun the creep. But then you know too. That damned Steve—he nosed it out of someone over at the Club."

"And I've got a letter written telling all about how you're wanted in Crowell, Kentucky," Barton said. "If anything happens to me tonight, that letter goes to the cops. Otherwise only Marsten and I know, and I've got nothing against you, Hunky. Not if you dig up that twenty-grand for me and take me over to the Club Laverne tonight. I want to get Marsten, or the Laverne woman, and preferably both of them. You're going to show me the safest and easiest way up there, Hunky."

"That's all right with me," Hunky said thinly. "That's good. It's cheap at the price. You get rid of Marsten—then there'll just be you, and I really don't think you'd bother with me any more. Twenty grand—"

"Get it out here now, Hunky. And let's go on over to the Club."

Hunky went out the door, and Barton leaned back and looked into the small flames in the fireplace. The record on the turntable was playing some vague familiar tune he couldn't remember the name of.

He had an eerie feeling that at any moment he would wake up and be on a train heading back out to the suburbs, and he was going over that stock deal, going over and over it trying to figure out why he was bothering to go over it at all.

Then Hunky was coming back in a little wobby on his bowed legs, dressed in flashy sport clothes and carrying a shiny leather briefcase. Barton opened the briefcase. It was full of neatly packaged fifty and hundred dollar bills. He took some of the stuff out and looked at it and dropped it back in the case.

"Let's go now," Barton said. When he stood up, he felt the pain stirring in his chest.

Hunky drove a powder blue Cadillac back toward the Main Street of Ten Palms. As they started down the street, Barton opened the briefcase and started throwing handfuls of fifty and hundred dollar bills and out the window.

He heard incredulous whining sounds come through Hunky's teeth. Finally Hunky half screamed. "Stop it—what you want to do that for?"

"Just keep driving, Hunky. I'm in a hurry." Barton threw thousands of dollars into the night air.

"Jesus—you can't do that. Oh Jesus—"

Hunky stopped saying anything. His shoulders quivered. Barton saw that Hunky was crying. Barton tossed out the rest of the bills and laughed.

After they parked on a lot and started walking down an alley paralleling Main Street, Hunky said. "I get it. You've had it too, right? You've had it. You don't figure you'll be able to spend it anyway."

"I don't know why," Barton said. "Except that it was amusing."

"Jesus," Hunky said.

The Club Laverne was one of the biggest in Ten Palms, bright and gilded in the front. The back of it was dark and smelled of stale garbage as Hunky opened an iron door and stepped inside ahead of Barton.

It smelled worse inside. Barton heard the high distorted pounding of a swing band mixed with abortive jazz, and the shrill wails of a woman singing.

Hunky went up dark narrow stairs that curved to the left. Barton followed him.

"Marsten's no trouble," Hunky said. "But you run into Larry or Jay, you'll be sleeping on a slab tonight."

Hunky walked on up and into a long hallway with red carpeting. A number of doors opened off this hall, and Barton heard laughter, giggles, and other less recognizable sounds behind them.

"Marsten's and Julie's apartment is at the end of the hall. The door at the end there. But Marsten's probably in the play room. Maybe Julie's in there too. I'd take a look there first."

Hunky walked down the other exit, turned left and through a narrow door marked *exit*. Barton followed him up a narrow iron stairwell and along a rickety catwalk. Hunky slid a paneled door open, Barton right behind him.

It was a small attic room, dark and warm. A square of glass was in the floor between a couple of suspension beams, and over the glass was an intricate camera arrangement. Someone was crouched down there looking through the glass to the floor below. Whoever it was was too interested in the scene below to be distracted by visitors.

"How's the show tonight, Joey?" Hunk asked softly.

"Great," Joey said. "Marsten's got that real estate guy's daughter down there. He's really giving that kid the business tonight!"

Hunky got down on his knees and looked.

"It's a super production," Hunky said, and Barton heard his voice quivering.

"That's Lifton's daughter, and this'll be worth fifty grand to Marsten."

"At least that," Hunky said.

"That little girl's so hopped up she don't know what the hell she's doing. But she sure is doing it."

Barton saw Hunky's hand raise. There was a gun in it. The barrel came down twice on Joey's head, and Joey rolled over without making a sound.

Hunky turned, and looked at Barton in the dim light. His face was white and shining with sweat, but his eyes were bright. "The Laverne woman's in the apartment I showed you. If she ain't there, she'll be downstairs watching the croupiers. But she's usually in that

apartment this time of night. Marsten's right here, and I'm going to take care of him now."

"You've had it," Barton said.

"Yeah, I knew that tonight. It's all over me all the time, and it ain't worth it. Every day what I have to do for Marsten gets dirtier, and it ain't worth it any more." Hunky turned away and looked down through the glass. It must be a one-way mirror set-up, Barton thought.

"You know when I really felt how it had to be for me?" Hunky said.

"No?"

"When you tossed all that greenery out the window. There it went, and I thought, this guy must be screwy. But then what about me, I thought—what kind of a life does a guy live for the stuff?"

"I know how it is," Barton said. "Like living in jail."

"That's right. Now I'm getting out."

A slight groan came out of Hunky as he crouched down and started firing through the glass. The roars seemed to explode inside Barton's head. Flashing lights went off around his eyes as glass crashed. A girl's scream came up from below.

In the mental flash, Barton saw his daughter again—he really hadn't seen her for over five years—but he saw her now. It might have been his daughter down there, he thought. Hunky was shooting at Marsten and didn't care about

somebody's laughter down there.

Barton lunged to drag Hunky back, thinking of the girl and when his foot tripped on the rafter, he fell full length and grabbed Hunky's leg and dragged at him. Hunky yelled as his shoulder smashed into the glass. He half turned as the glass gave way. His neck caught on a jagged splinter and stretched out like a fish when someone's pulling a hook from its throat. Blood spurted as Hunky's neck tore and he plunged down out of sight.

Looking down through the jagged framework, Barton saw a huge bed directly under the one-way mirror. The walls were covered with red drapes, the rug was a deep rich red. A fireplace gave out soft flame, and there were several candles burning. Piano blues drifted up through the broken opening with perfumed heat and smoke.

A girl with short brown curls was curled up naked in the middle of the bed. She seemed even younger than the one at Hunky's house. She was staring at Hunky sprawled on the floor in a pool of blood, and at the naked body of Marsten bent backward over the foot of the bed, blood running from his chest and stomach.

The girl was sobbing and making unintelligible noises in her throat. The record player started over again, and then again, playing the same thing twice and Barton

sat up there looking at the scene below.

No one entered the room. The music went on. The girl sat there sobbing and moaning in her throat. Her eyes staring wide and fixed. The fireplace wavered, and the candles burned on. And the corpses lay there giving the scene a frozen quality, like some grotesque animated painting.

That room would be heavily sound-proofed, Barton thought. No one outside that room had heard the shots, screams, or glass crashing. The orchestra downstairs had helped too.

She might be my daughter. Somewhere, he thought, my daughter might be wanting to break out the way Lifton's daughter had. Barton smiled, a bit sadly this time. He understood them, all of them. They wanted to get away from the walking dead, they wanted to feel alive. They wanted to live dangerously, get into any kind of world at all where something unexpected might happen tomorrow.

Barton picked up the gun Hunky had dropped on the way down. He went back down to the second floor hallway and started for the door at the other end.

They didn't give you much choice, Barton thought as he stopped before the door. Respectability was dull, and the rest seemed pretty dirty, and you could tire of it in an evening.

He knocked on the door with his

left hand. He remembered something about a safety catch, and he moved his thumb on the gun and felt the metallic movement shiver up his arm.

A panel in the door slid open. Julie Laverne's eye looked through at Barton and widened.

"You want the tape?" Barton asked, "Open the door."

The panel slid shut and the door opened at once. Barton walked in past her, with the gun raised. Julie Laverne's body was wrapped in a tight, bright red sheath dress. He glanced at her breasts swaying as she walked sidewise from him toward a fireplace on the right wall. Dimly, Barton realized that she wasn't interesting any more.

"Let's have it then," Julie Laverne said in a tight voice.

Barton walked on past her toward Jay who stood by the fireplace.

Jay jabbed his hand into his jacket pocket. His lips were hanging apart.

"I was only kidding," Barton said. "I don't have the tape. But don't worry about it. Marsten's dead."

The morphine had really taken hold of Barton. He had an eerie detached sensation. His feet seemed to float, not quite on the floor, and the room itself had the look of a dream. The long shadowed room, the fire place on the right, and the feeling that he was floating toward Jay and the woman beside him.

"But I've got something else for you," Barton heard himself saying. "Something even better. Just what you've always wanted."

"Hold it," Jay whispered. "Listen—"

Barton started pulling the trigger. Jay screamed and rolled along the wall into the corner.

"I told you he was nuts!" Barton heard Larry's voice from behind him. He felt the dull heavy blow in his back, and the sound of the shot. But there wasn't any pain, and the shot seemed dulled and distant. He couldn't feel much of anything. He was too doped up to feel pain. If you didn't feel any pain it was almost as though nothing had happened.

His legs were numb and they didn't seem to want to walk, but Barton concentrated on them and he turned and walked toward Larry.

Larry was about ten feet away, or was it a mile—waving and blurred like something seen through watered glass. The gun jumped in Larry's hand as Larry backed away down the length of the room. His lips were quivering and sweat streamed down his face.

Barton laughed and walked on toward Larry. Larry backed into the couch. The gun jumped again. Larry yelled. His voice cracked. He fell backward over the couch.

Larry was sliding back along the rug and by this time Barton was close enough and he knew he

couldn't miss. He fired several shots.

If I stop walking I'll fall down, Barton thought; so he continued walking in a long circle around the wavering room. He drifted toward Julie and she backed into the wall by the fireplace. She slid down the wall a little and put her hands over her eyes as though hands could ward off bullets.

"It's important. Isn't it important?" he said, and then he was on his face. He couldn't move any more. He never would move again, he knew that. The fireplace moving and dancing between the andirons only a few feet away. It reminded him with a sudden clarity of the fireplace in the living room in Van Nuys where his ever-loving wife had been waiting for him every evening to come home late and tired

but smiling from the office. His daughter would be lying here in front of the fire working algebra problems. And his wife would be coming bravely across the room, looking her charming best just for him, holding out a martini to reward him for a courageous day of battle with Johnson Belt and Dye.

Well, he thought, there were some things to be said for all that.

Someone was bending over him, and he never did know who it was.

"Name's Allan Baer Barton, formerly with Johnson Belt and Dye." Barton knew he was laughing again, but he couldn't hear it. "Tell Doctor Linderman—in Los Angeles—tell him—remind him that I told him he was wrong. Six months he gave me—that's all, he said—six months. And here it's been only two."



Jason had dreamed of someday finding a lot of money and that's why he could hardly believe his eyes when he looked in the box

BY
DON
LOMBARDY

SURPRISE!



JASON BARTLETT watched the twin red lights of the subway train dwindle and vanish into the yawning blackness of the tunnel and with a sad, tired sigh Jason strode over to the nearest bench. He bent down and tested the brown seat carefully with his fingertips, and then with an expression of distaste, gingerly sat on the edge of the seat and waited for the next train to arrive. He eased the crease of his trousers away from his knees, and

opened the early morning edition of the Daily Tabloid.

Now, ordinarily Jason read the staid and venerable Herald, but at three o'clock in the morning, in a deserted subway station, there was little danger that his dereliction would be observed. The Herald, if the truth be known, bored Jason. Whereas the vivid racy prose, the rather vulgar pictures and the sly innuendoes of the Tabloid never failed to excite him. To a minor bookkeeper in the giant firm of Bromley and Bromley, one of America's largest accounting firms, the facts of life were all too clear. One purchased the Herald and wore it to work like a Republican campaign button during the excitement of the months prior to a presidential election. It was as much a part of Jason's costume as his plain gray suit and sober tie. After twenty years of constant practice, Jason had

finally achieved the exquisite combination of clothes, manner and tone of voice that resulted in the picture of faceless, anonymous efficiency so richly desired, and poorly rewarded by Bromley, the elder. Now, at forty-three years of age, in the prime of bachelorhood, Jason could let his supremely conditioned reflexes carry him through the years ahead to the inevitable dinner, at which time, after clearing his throat, and patting his mouth delicately with a napkin, he would thank Bertram B. Bromley for the dinner and the lovely gold watch rendered him on the eve of his retirement from the firm.

However, at this moment, seated on a bench in the vastness of a deserted subway, Jason Bartlett prepared to read the Tabloid, without a trace of a qualm.

This was his night off. Once a month, Jason, with admirable insight, indulged himself in an orgy of foreign films, cigar smoking, a visit to a discreetly located bar, and the huge satisfaction of reading the Tabloid in public.

This particular edition of the city's largest selling newspaper, had the usual variety of murder, mishap and mayhem, which he read slowly and lovingly with occasional references to the pictures. As he progressed slowly from the front page toward the center of the paper, his interest abated at the same pace that the stories dwindled in provocativeness. Arriving at page eleven,

he glanced casually at a picture of a man in overalls holding a large square package and wearing a face splitting grin. "FINDS LOST FORTUNE" the caption read. Jason began reading desultorily and then rapidly lost his casual air.

The man in the picture was a farmer. He had withdrawn his life savings, in small bills, wrapped them in a large brown paper package, and then left the whole business on a seat in the subway. The package had been found and turned over to the Lost Property Department. Upon examination it was found to contain Ten Thousand Dollars.

Jason's mind reeled slightly under the impact. His highly trained brain began an automatic estimation of the type of income that could be derived from the proper investment of the total sum. Digits, decimals and dollars flicked back and forth like the counters on a child's abacus. Sums were calculated, divided, reinvested at the same time taxes were estimated and balance sheets prepared. All this took place in the space of a few seconds. Jason sighed and resumed reading.

The package had been missed by the farmer upon reaching his destination. He made a frantic call to the subway offices, and then, after proper identification, and confirmation from the bank where he'd withdrawn the money, he finally recovered his lost fortune.

Jason closed the paper, dropped it on the bench beside him and stared at the wall. He stared at the dirty tile wall opposite him with a stale taste in his mouth. The bubbles had gone out of the gingerale of his evening.

When the train finally roared into the station, the old conditioned reflexes took hold of Jason again. He yawned delicately, rose and waited patiently for the train to stop.

After entering and selecting a seat next to the window in the rear of the last car, he folded his hands in his lap and promptly went to sleep, fully confident that his sixth sense would awaken him exactly one station before his own. His confidence was justified in light of the fact that in all the years he had ridden the subways, he had never missed his station.

This particular morning however, Fate, as she often does, threw a curve in the shape of a burst water main. The mishap occurred halfway between stations. The sudden braking of the train almost threw Jason from his seat. He thrust his hands outward instinctively and managed to save himself from a nasty fall. Then, holding onto the vertical porcelain post, he stared about him in bewilderment. The car's interior was feebly lighted by the small, yellow emergency bulbs. He tried to make his mind operate coherently as he adjusted to this unexpected development. A pang

of fear went through him as he glanced at his watch and saw that it was 4:05. Then he remembered that it was Sunday morning and he relaxed. He smiled faintly, and as he walked towards the front of the subway car, hoped that it was something that would make an interesting anecdote for tomorrow's coffee break at the office.

He suddenly noticed a dim shape on one of the seats. As he drew closer he could see that it was a package of some sort, tied with thick fuzzy cord. He wondered why it looked so familiar and then he suddenly remembered the package that the farmer had held in the newspaper picture. His eyes widened as he stared at it. A slight chill went through him. The longer he stared at it the stronger the possibility grew. It *was* possible. Entirely possible that lightning could strike twice. He rapidly estimated the amount of money it could contain if the denomination of the bills were fives. Then tens. Then twenties. He felt a little dizzy as the sum mounted in his mind. He realized that he was breathing heavily.

The lights came up at that moment and the train began to move forward slowly. Jason took hold of the brass seat handle and steadied himself while he kept looking at the package. An almost overpowering urge to take it, came over him. Suppose he were caught? A shudder went through him

at the terrible consequences. A lifetime of work destroyed, gambled away on the remote possibility that the package contained a huge sum of money. He sat down slowly, took out a handkerchief, and wiped away the little beads of sweat that had formed on his forehead.

The train was gathering speed now. It would be in the station soon. A frightening sense of urgency took hold of him. He had to decide quickly. There might be people on the platform. Once they had entered the car, it would be too late. He would never have the nerve to pick up the package with someone watching him.

The train began to slow down. Jason stood up. Through the interconnecting doors ahead, he could see the brightly lighted station rushing towards him. He looked at the package and then back at the lights ahead. He had to make up his mind now! Time was running out.

As the train entered the station and the platform glided past the windows, Jason moved over like a man in a dream, picked up the package by the cord and stood at the door with his heart pounding wildly. His white faced reflection stared at him from the thick wired glass in the door. His eyes were wide open and terribly frightened looking. His lips were parted and he was breathing heavily as though he had been running.

He took a deep, gulping breath

and tried to compose himself. He had to be calm. Had to look normal. Had to erase this look of guilt that screamed aloud from every pore of his body.

The train shuddered to a stop and Jason leaned forward expectantly but the doors remained closed. He stared at them in horror as a ripple of panic went through him. A terrible thought occurred to him. Suppose the owner had phoned? There had been enough time. They had been held up in the tunnel.

Suddenly he heard a crashing, banging noise up ahead, and someone shouting on the platform. He stepped back and looked through the connecting doors. His eyes widened in horror as he saw the blue uniformed conductor rushing through the cars towards him. The noise he had heard was the sound of the connecting doors being flung open and then crashing closed automatically. Jason felt the blood draining out of his face as the man came running down the car just ahead. He felt as if his body had turned to stone.

As the man opened the last set of doors, he slowed down, looked at Jason and then walked up and put his hand on his shoulder and smiled.

"Nothing to worry about sir. The doors will be opened in a moment. Just have to use the emergency controls," he said in a soothing voice. Then he brushed past Jason and ran to the end of the car where he

unlocked the door of the driver's cab. He reached inside and the doors hissed open.

Jason walked slowly out of the train in a state of shock. His mind was numb, his fingers tingled and his whole body felt as if it had been dipped in strong acid. As he reached the stairs and started up them slowly, the rubbery feeling in his legs gave way to a terrible aching sensation. His mind cleared at that moment and he realized what he was doing.

A thrill of pure terror went through him as he heard the conductor behind him yell,

"Hey! Mister! Wait a minute! I want to talk to you!"

Something snapped in Jason's mind. With a moan of anguish he pounded up the rest of the steps, down the upper platform, past the man in the change booth, out through the exit gates and up the stairs to the street.

He burst out of the subway entrance into the street, his lungs pumping like bellows, his heart beating wildly, streams of perspiration coursing down his face. He began to run down the empty street. He didn't know where he was running; he knew that he had to get away. He had to.

A sudden shout behind Jason galvanized him into greater effort. His feet, pounding on the pavement, made a harsh ringing sound in the cool morning air. He could hear someone running behind him.

Then another sound came to his ears. A police siren. Jason gave up. He collapsed to the sidewalk sobbing convulsively.

The police car screamed to a stop behind Jason and he heard the car doors slam as two policemen got out. The running sounds behind him had slowed to a walk.

"What's this all about?" one of the policemen asked.

"I only asked him to wait a minute. I wanted to get a statement from him. We had a little trouble in the tunnel and a few passengers were hurt. He took off like a jack-rabbit when I yelled at him to wait," the conductor explained.

"Oh he did? Well, let's see what this is all about."

The policeman leaned down and helped Jason to his feet. Jason just stared at him while he tried to catch his breath.

"What were you running away from Mister?" the policeman asked him. Jason just shook his head helplessly. "What's in the package Mister?" he went on and when Jason just licked his lips and shook his head he shrugged. "Okay. Let's open it up and see."

He took out a jackknife, opened the small blade and began sawing at the thick fuzzy cord. Jason watched him without interest. What difference did it make now? He had gambled and lost. His stupidity would mean the end of his job at Bromley and Bromley.

The policeman had cut through

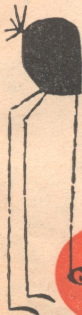
the cord now. He peeled back the paper and stared at the thick cardboard box inside the paper for a moment and then eased off the lid. There was a lot of excelsior. He took off the thick, top layer with both hands and then suddenly sucked in his breath as though he had cut himself.

"My God!" the conductor said as he stared into the box. The other policeman looked as if he was go-

ing to be sick. The three men turned and looked at Jason with horror written on their faces. Jason stared back at them in wonderment and then he moved forward so that he could see into the box.

Jason's eyes bulged in terror and he gasped as if some one had hit him in the stomach.

Staring up at him, framed in a pool of dried blood, was the severed head of a young teenage girl.



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ROY TENNEY's day began at eleven in the morning.

I followed Cawber into the bedroom and sat down in an easy chair facing the bed, I crossed my legs,

lit a cigar and blew a cloud of smoke at the ceiling.

Cawber pulled aside the long drapes and the bright sun slanted through the apartment windows.

Deadline Murder

BY JACK RITCHIE

*Tenney ran the kind of scandal magazine everyone hated.
The price on his head was \$35,000.00 and going up daily.*



It always took Tenney about ten minutes before he'd let go of sleep and take a look at another day. He was a thin, little man of forty-five with sick-looking reddish hair. He opened his eyes wide in a quick stare. I was there and that made the world safer.

Then he sat up in nervous alarm. "Where's your gun, Eddie?"

I brushed some cigar ash off my shirt sleeve. "In the kitchen, boss."

His voice was high and skittish. "Get it right away."

In the kitchen, Cawber was pouring coffee. "You scared the hell out of him. You had your fun for today."

I strapped on my shoulder holster and grinned. "Somehow I keep forgetting this damn thing."

Cawber followed me back into the bedroom with a tray. He put the tray on Tenney's lap and left the room.

Tenney picked up the coffee cup with the fingertips of both hands and sipped. "I've got a lot of enemies, Eddie. You never know when they'll try to get me."

"I wouldn't be worried," I said. "We're twenty-two stories up and there are two locked doors between us and the corridor. And then you got me."

Tenney shook his head. "You never know. They can strike when we expect it least. A man like me has to be careful. Anybody who prints the truth has to be."

Cawber came back into the

room carrying the morning's mail.

Tenney slit open the first letter and began reading. After a while he giggled. "Jenny Williams is suing me. She wants a hundred thousand."

Jenny Williams is doing a Broadway show now, but she feels more at home before a Hollywood camera. Column talk has it that she's first in line for the big part in the film version of this year's best-seller.

I calculated for a moment. "That puts it over the two million mark."

His small jaw tried to be firm. "Nobody's collected a cent yet."

"That's right, boss," I said. "Your magazine prints nothing but the truth."

He nodded. "They all lead dirty lives. Every one of them. I can always dig up more about them and they know it. They're just after free publicity. Once they've got that, they drop their suits."

He took another sip of coffee and sighed. "It makes me ill. All this incredible filth in the world."

I glanced at the ceiling. "It's tough on a sensitive man. What you need is a vacation, boss. Why don't you try a little hunting trip?"

His face whitened. "No. You can never tell what might happen. I can't trust anyone."

He pushed the buzzer on his headboard three times and Miss Janicki came into the room with her pad and pencil.

Miss Janicki has a sallow skin,

small features and she is a tense thirty-five.

Tenney began dictating answers to his letters. After a while he used his high giggle again and handed me a letter. "This is from Rick Balboa."

I read the letter and it compared favorably with one a President had written to a music critic. I handed it to Miss Janicki.

Her face became splotchy crimson as she read. Her eyes gleamed and she went over it again. "Horrible," she said. "Vile."

"I guess Balboa doesn't care for your kind of publicity, boss," I said. "He's got a wife and two kids now. Maybe he figures that being a prostitute's regular customer fifteen years ago is something that should be dead and forgotten."

"Time doesn't erase such things," Tenney snapped. "It's the public's right to know just what kind of a man provides its teenagers with entertainment."

I looked out of the window at the spears of buildings hiding the Sound. "Did you hear his new recording, boss? It'll probably get him another gold record."

Tenney sat up. "He's a rotten singer. He's got no voice at all." He wiped coffee drip from a corner of his mouth. "Only those depraved teenagers can stand him."

I rolled some smoke in my mouth and blew it out gently. "But you like Balboa, don't you, Stella?"

"Of course not," Miss Janicki

snapped indignantly. "He has a voice like a crow."

Tenney got out of bed and took the letter from her. "I'm going to put this away," he said. "I may even send it to the postal authorities. There is no place for obscenity in our mails."

He walked bare-footed to the small wall safe and waited. Miss Janicki and I dutifully turned our heads away while he spun the dial.

While Tenney dressed, Miss Janicki, Cawber, and I had coffee in the kitchen.

"Of all the gall," Miss Janicki said. "That Jenny Williams has the nerve to use. That wanton slut!"

I put sugar in my coffee. "Tell me about it, Stella."

"Why, she had three lovers at the same time," Miss Janicki said.

I took a shocked breath. "Imaginel"

Miss Janicki was trying to. Her eyes were bright.

I leaned forward. "I missed the article."

She took an eager breath. "Well, this first one was a producer who . . ." She noticed something in my eyes and drew herself up. "I don't care to talk about such things."

I put my chin on my hands and stared at her. "I tried your door again last night, Stella. Why do you keep locking it? You're fighting fate."

She went scarlet and got to her feet. "Beast! That's all men like

you think about." She stalked out of the room.

Cawber stirred his coffee. "The perpetual virgin. One of our greatest untapped natural resources. Her idea of love is a communion of minds. She'd get hysterics if anybody tried to touch her." He glanced at me. "Are you that desperate?"

I grinned. "I'd have to be drunk."

Tenney and I were in the entryway, ready to leave for his office, when the door buzzer sounded.

He jumped nervously, the way he usually does, and looked at me. "Don't take off the chain until you're sure who it is."

I opened the thick door as far as the chain would go.

Jenny Williams' smoke-gray eyes met mine. She looked me over. "I didn't come to see you." There was the faint odor of scotch on her breath.

"Who is it, Eddie?" Tenney demanded.

"Jenny Williams," I said. "She's primed to meet you."

Tenney's voice was peevish. "I don't want to see her. I don't want to see anybody. Get rid of her."

I unchained the door and stepped into the hall. Tenney snapped the lock behind me.

Jenny smiled faintly. "How cute. The little man's afraid of me."

I put my hand around the suede handbag dangling from her arm and fingered the outlines of a small gun. A twenty-five automatic, I fig-

ured. "Did you have the idea of using this?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. One more drink and I'd be sure."

"You're suing him," I said. "Be satisfied with that."

There was deep anger smouldering behind the haze in her eyes. "That's no damn good and I know it." Her words were slightly slurred. "That dirty bum," she whispered tensely. "Do you know what he did?"

"Sure," I said.

She shook her head and the ash-blond hair swirled. "No, you don't." She swayed slightly and put her hand on my lapel to steady herself. "The best, the biggest part I ever had." She snapped her fingers. "Gone. Just like that."

She leaned closer and laughed lazily. "They don't want a woman who had three lovers in their damn movie."

She cocked her head and studied me. "How much do you get for bodyguarding that louse? A hundred a week? Two hundred?"

I smiled and said nothing.

She laughed. "Then you could stand the smell of ten thousand?" She stroked the side of my jaw. "That's what I'm offering you to get rid of that dirty rat."

"It's the liquor talking," I said.

She shook her head and the hair swirled again. "Ten thousand in cash."

Our eyes met and for a few seconds she was dead sober.

"I mean it," she said savagely. "I mean every word of it."

Then she smiled and kissed me lightly on the cheek. "Ten thousand. And anything else you want."

She made her way down the hall to the elevators. She pressed the button and looked back. "Phone me when it's over. I don't care how you do it, but make him dead."

Tenney's car has about a ton of extra steel in it and it's hell to handle in traffic.

He stared moodily through the heavy windows as I drove.

"What about that girl I had last night?" he asked. "What's her name? That model or something?"

"I kicked her out at nine this morning," I said. "You were still asleep."

He was silent for a while and then glanced at me suspiciously. "How much did you give her?"

"Five hundred," I said. It was really two-fifty. The other two-fifty was in my pocket. She raised a squawk, but a hand across her mouth made her satisfied with what she got.

He waited until I braked to a stop at a light. "I don't always have to pay them, you know."

"Sure, boss," I said.

"I'm an important man," he said. "They come to me."

The light changed and I stepped on the accelerator.

"Sometimes I don't even touch them," Tenney said.

Never is more likely, I thought. At least that's what I get from the stories the girls tell me. "Sure, boss," I said. "You just want companionship."

He was satisfied with the word. "A lot of them are diseased, you know. Especially the models."

I kept my face straight. "Why don't you see a doctor?"

He looked out of the window and shrugged. "Someday."

We were almost at the Randall Building when he spoke again. "What you thinking about, Eddie? You haven't said a word in ten minutes."

Ten thousand. I smiled. "I was thinking that the carburetor needs adjusting. I don't get the pick-up I want."

I turned the car over to the basement parking attendant and we took the executive elevator to the seventeenth floor.

When Tenney was settled in his soft insulated office, he used the inter-com to let his secretary know he was ready to grant audiences.

The picture editor brought in some layouts on Mavis Kennedy. She is a taut actress who is being mentioned for an Academy Award.

Tenney scowled as he examined the pictures. "Too tame. These are nothing but portraits. She was a model, wasn't she?"

The editor blinked cigarette smoke out of his eyes. "That was twenty years ago."

"So what," Tenney snapped.

"Get the photographs. Touch up the hair a little so they look like they were taken yesterday. Use your brush to make the poses look interesting. You know what I mean?"

The editor nodded.

"And get some pictures of junkies. Or better yet, get some of the spoons and needles and stuff like that. Let the public know what a dirty thing narcotics is."

The editor picked up the layouts. "It'll be a ticklish writing job. We can't say anything too definite about her. We don't know for sure."

Tenney glared. "Her first husband took dope. They lived together for three years. He probably got her started too. It always works that way."

The editor shrugged and left the room.

Sweeney came in to report. He was a heavy man with dull tired skin and he wasn't much interested in his job any more. He got out his notebook. "I found a couple open weeks on Howard. In 1952, he took a canoe trip up in the Minnesota lake country. He went alone and he was gone for two weeks."

Jeff Howard was now in television and he had a high rating.

Tenney's eyes brightened. "Two weeks? No witnesses? He can't prove he was there?"

Sweeney nodded.

Tenney smiled and pounded a

small fist on his palm. "He used the trip as a cover-up. He was probably in St. Paul or Minneapolis all the time."

Sweeney sighed. "I'll work it that way."

"Pictures," Tenney said. "We want pictures of call girls."

Sweeney put the notebook back in his pocket. "I'll get a couple of girls to make statements. It'll probably cost a few thousand."

When Sweeney was gone, Tenney paced the thick rug. "Nobody can get as far as Howard has and still be a saint. Show business is dirty. What difference does it make if he was in a brothel in 1952 or 1955? The public has a right to know."

At four o'clock, Tenney's secretary buzzed. "There's a Mr. James Nitti to see you."

Tenney frowned, trying to place the name.

"Coppo Nitti," I said.

Tenney whitened. "I won't see him."

"He'll just want talk," I said. "It's too crowded in here for him to do anything."

Tenney bit his fingernails. "I can't see him. I refuse to be intimidated."

I lit a cigar. "I can see what he wants?"

Tenney thought it over. "You do that, Eddie. But remember, I don't back down."

I heard him snap the lock after me as I left the office.

Coppo Nitti was seated in the

soft-lighted waiting room, waiting patiently. His long thin fingers absently stroked the brim of the Homburg on his lap.

He glanced up and raised a few fingers. "You look good, Eddie."

I sat down beside him. "Anything special, Coppo?"

"James," he said. "What about Tenney?"

"He refuses to be intimidated." I crossed my legs. "How did you hear that Tenney was going to run a story on you?"

Nitti showed even white teeth. "I still got devoted friends."

"You don't want it run?"

Nitti shrugged. "If it's just a re-hash of what I see every time I look at the Sunday papers, I don't care."

"But you don't want him to dig up anything new?"

"Or invent anything. I'm having trouble enough now with those investigating committees." He grinned. "They want to ship me back to Italy. What would I do in Italy? I can hardly speak the language any more."

He sighed. "I'm respectable, but nobody believes me. I get my income from General Motors and G.E."

"And you got a daughter at Vassar?"

He grinned. "She's not too bright. I got her in a Florida college majoring in tennis. She don't mind what kind of a reputation I got, just so long as I'm steady with

her allowance. What worries me is Congress."

He stopped his smile and met my eyes. "What about the story, Eddie?"

"It's hot," I said. "Start brushing up on your Italian."

He was thoughtful and then raised an eyebrow. "Will money heal things?"

I shook my head. "He's as rich as you are. This place is a money maker."

He was silent as his eyes moved over the rich waiting room. "Is Tenney the keystone? Would this magazine fold if he weren't here?"

"I don't know," I said. "A lot of people with ten cents like to get their thoughts sweaty reading the sort of stuff printed here. This magazine is the kind of thing that doesn't die easy."

Nitti took a cigarette out of a gold case. He sighed. "It looks like I'll have to go back to the old ways then, Eddie." He lit the cigarette. "Would the story run if Tenney died?"

I took a while to examine my manicure. "It was Tenney's idea. His baby. Everybody else here is nervous about it. They know you still got teeth."

Nitti cocked his head. "What makes Tenney so brave?"

"Locked doors," I said. "And people like me. He's got great faith in these things."

Nitti waited.

"The story would be buried with

him," I said finally. "That's my good guess."

Nitti got to his feet. "It's nice to know that, Eddie." He slipped into his gray gloves. "You look hungry. Would fifteen thousand look good to you?"

I said nothing. But I didn't throw him out.

He smiled and tapped me on the shoulder. "If you're nervous, farm it out. Hire somebody. That's the smart way."

When he was gone, I knocked on the door of Tenney's office.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"It's me, Eddie. I'm alone."

He opened the door cautiously. "Well?" he demanded.

"He was just curious," I said. "No threats."

Tenney looked relieved. "I print what I want. Nobody scares me."

I met his red-rimmed eyes for a moment. You're worth twenty-five thousand to me now, I thought. But you have to be dead. I wondered if I could arrange it; if it would be worth the risk.

I took Tenney back to his apartment for a nap at six, and at ten-thirty we were at the Club Majorca.

Tenney took his regular table in the safety of a corner and he picked at his food as he studied the other tables. His eyes brightened as he watched two couples make their way to a table.

He poked me with his elbow. "There's Ronnie Hendon."

Hendon was starring on Broadway. He was a pale young man who walked with a superfluous amount of hip motion. I didn't think it had to mean anything, but Tenney had other ideas.

He watched the table and after a while he ran his tongue over his lips. "Notice how he spends most of his time whispering in that other man's ear? He gives him all his attention."

Tenney scowled at the two hard-bright girls with Hendon and his companion. "Sometimes they go out with girls as a cover-up. So that the public won't know the real truth."

Tenney sipped his ice water. "I think he uses lipstick. I can see it from here."

"You got good eyes, boss," I said.

He nodded. "Nothing escapes me." He took out his notebook and wrote down Hendon's name. "I can't stand people like that. They're depraved."

I glanced across the big room and noticed the headwaiter talking to Rick Balboa and his manager. Rick was about Tenney's size, but what was there was hard. I set myself for trouble.

The headwaiter, followed by Balboa and his manager, began threading his way toward an empty table.

Tenney noticed Balboa and he clutched my arm. "You see him, don't you?"

Balboa almost passed us. Then

his eyes flicked in our direction and he stopped in his tracks. Dark temper flooded his face.

He stalked over to our table and stood glaring down at Tenney. "You dirty liar!"

Tenney's face was white and his eyes big with panic.

Balboa's hand reached for a fistful of Tenney's shirt, but it never got there. I stood up and overturned the table. I spun Balboa, to get behind him, and pinned his arms to his sides. He cursed and tried to dig into my shins with his heels, but he was helpless.

Tenney's fright dissolved fast and a yellow glow came into his eyes. He lunged forward, his small fists flailing at Balboa's face.

I waited until he drew a little blood from Balboa's lip before I freed my left arm. I chopped Balboa under the chin with the edge of my hand. He collapsed and I lowered him to floor.

Tenney wasn't through with Balboa yet. He began kicking the unconscious singer.

I dragged Tenney away. "Take it easy, boss. No use in killing him."

After a while Tenney calmed down, but there was still a wild satisfaction in his eyes. He reached for his handkerchief and wiped the dribble from his chin.

The club manager forced his way through the half a hundred excited diners surrounding us.

Tenney stopped his loud talk by

reaching for his wallet. He pulled out a couple of hundreds and his sharp little teeth showed in a smile. "This ought to help clear up the mess."

Tenney followed in my footsteps as I shouldered my way through the crowd and out into the street.

The attendant had just brought up our car, when the doors of the club opened and Balboa staggered out, his face still dark with rage. He was a bantam cock who never knows when he's had enough.

The whiteness came back into Tenney's face and he looked for me to hold Balboa's arms.

"I'll take care of this alone, boss," I said. "You shouldn't strain yourself."

I hustled Balboa back into the club, nearly carrying him. I put both my hands on his shoulders and pressed him down into a chair. "Give it up, Rick," I said. "You won't get anywhere. Not today and not while I'm in the way."

I guess that then he really saw me for the first time. Before that I was just a wall that kept him from doing what he wanted.

The fighting anger seeped slowly out of him. He ran his fingers through his hair and started at the floor. "My wife's going to divorce me. All because of that damn article."

His fingers touched the cut lip. "She'll get the kids too." He looked at me. "Is Tenney something extra special to you?"

I shrugged. "I don't give a damn one way or the other."

I think I knew what was coming next. I had the feeling and I waited.

Balboa looked me over before he spoke again. "I'd give ten thousand to go to Tenney's funeral. You know what I mean?"

His face flushed. "I'm serious. What the hell you grinning about?"

"Nothing much," I said. "I was just thinking that things come in threes." And that they add up to thirty-five thousand dollars, I added in my thoughts.

He grasped the sleeve of my coat. "You can get to him," he said urgently. "You'd know how to do it without taking a risk."

"Maybe," I said. "Just maybe."

Tenney was sitting in the car when I came out. I tapped on the window.

He came out of his happy dream and looked at me. "It's unlocked," he snapped.

When I pulled the big car into traffic, Tenney was back to smiling at his thoughts. "I think it was that last right that knocked him out."

"Sure," I said.

"They don't scare me," he said. "Nobody."

I nodded absently. "You're small, but wiry."

"Eddie," he said. "I almost killed him. You got to help me control my temper."

"That's right," I said. "You got a terrible temper."

He nodded. "That's part of your job, Eddie. To help me control my temper. That's my one danger. I'm liable to lose my temper and kill somebody."

"Sure," I said. "You got a mean punch."

He agreed. "I don't know my own strength."

I looked at him. He really believed it.

At the apartment, Tenney walked back and forth with his excitement and he told me what happened. As far as he was concerned, I hadn't been there.

Then he went to the buzzer and pressed it twice.

"Cawber's not here," I said. "This is his night off."

He shrugged. "Fix me a drink, Eddie."

I hesitated. Tenney isn't the kind that can take liquor and he usually knows it.

He frowned. "Do it now, Eddie. Not next week."

I went into the kitchen and got the only bottle of whiskey in the house. Tenney keeps it for his guests.

I made drinks for both of us.

Tenney took a couple of swallows. "Get me that girl in the accounting department. The brunette."

I knew which one he meant. She had been here before.

"Offer her five hundred," Tenney said. "No more."

I dialed her number. There was

no answer. "She's probably out on a date," I said.

"Damn," Tenney said. "Damn it. I know that tonight . . ." He was through with his drink now and he felt two inches taller. It showed in the way he walked back and forth, almost on tiptoe. "Get me that one who paints," he ordered.

I dialed the number of the cat-eyed blonde who claims she earns a living painting portraits. There was no answer.

Tenney made himself a second drink. He walked back and forth and rubbed his head irritably. "It ought to be in all the papers."

I was thinking about thirty-five thousand. "What?"

"The fight," he snapped. "The fight."

I shrugged.

"Get me the newspapers," Tenney said.

"It's too early. It wouldn't be in yet."

Tenney was six feet tall now. "I said get me the newspapers."

For a second I considered throwing him out of the window. Then I put aside the idea and got my hat. I took the elevator down and walked two blocks to a newsstand and bought the latest papers. There wasn't anything about Tenney in any one of them.

I walked back slowly and I was still thinking about the thirty-five grand.

Upstairs in front of the apartment door, I pressed the buzzer

and waited. After a while I used my keys.

Miss Janicki stood frozen in the middle of the living room, staring down at something on the floor. Here eyes were large with fright and her hands were in front of her mouth as though she were about to eat her fingers.

I tossed the papers aside and went to see what she was looking at.

Tenney lay sprawled on his back, the upper part of his body lying on the tile around the fireplace. The blood around his head had a dull shine.

"He's dead," Miss Janicki whispered. "He's dead." She began crying and the dry-sounding sobs grated on my nerves.

I pulled the hands away from her face and slapped her hard. "What happened?"

Tears trickled down her cheeks. "He rang for me," she said, her voice breaking around the words. She looked at me for desperate confirmation. "He often does that. Even late at night when he wants to dictate a letter."

"Go on," I said.

Her face was splotted with color. She tried speaking and then shook her head helplessly.

I thought I could figure it out. I knew what Tenney was like when he drank. "He started getting damn friendly?" I asked impatiently.

She nodded dumbly. "It was horrible. He was never like that

before. Never." She stared at the body again. "I just pushed him . . . and he fell. He hit his head on the tile."

I looked down at Tenney. Dead, he could be worth thirty-five thousand to me. But not this way. Not if some hysterical female took the credit for it. I could feel the money slipping away.

And then the answer came to me. I would have to make an accident look like murder.

"I guess I'd better call the police," Miss Janicki said dully.

"Sure," I said. "Do that."

She saw what I wanted her to see in my eyes. She licked her lips uncertainly. "It was an accident. Nothing can happen to me."

I laughed softly. "You got witnesses?"

She spoke in frantic hurry. "He had some drinks. I could smell the liquor."

"Think of the publicity," I said. "Jealous secretary kills boss."

Her voice was high with denial. "But that's ridiculous. There was never anything between us. I respected him as a . . . a person, a mind."

I grinned. "You live in his apartment, don't you?"

It was true. Locked doors or no locked doors. Separate suites or no separate suites. Technically she lived in Tenney's apartment. He was the one who paid the rent.

Her face showed that she had never quite thought of it that way.

I lit a fresh cigar. After a while I spoke softly. "You don't have to go through that. It doesn't have to be that way."

She looked at me and after fifteen seconds I was the god who was going to save her.

I moved closer. "This is the way things went. Tenney and I came home at eleven. He seemed exhilarated and he began drinking. Both of us were in here with him. He wanted company."

She nodded.

"And then the buzzer sounded. I let in a man of about twenty-five. Everything about him was medium. He was about five foot six or seven. His hair was brown. His eyes were brown. Neither of us had ever seen him before, but Tenney seemed to know him."

I met her eyes. "We won't be able to identify him. Not if we look at a thousand pictures. You understand?"

She swallowed. "I understand."

"Tenney told you and me to leave the room. He wanted to talk to the stranger privately. We went into the kitchen and had coffee."

I began pacing the room. "After about a half an hour, I began to worry. I'm his bodyguard and that gives me the right. I came into this room and you came with me. You wanted to ask if they'd like some coffee."

I stopped in front of her. "Remember. We were never out of each other's sight. Neither one of

us was in the room alone with Tenney after the stranger arrived. That protects us both in case the police get ideas."

She nodded.

"We found Tenney just as he is now and the poker was next to his body. The stranger was gone."

Her eyes went to the clean poker in its stand and then she looked at me. "Why are you doing this?"

"It's the only thing to do," I said. "There's no need for your life to be ruined because of this . . . this accident."

There was a warm glow in her eyes. "Is it for me?"

"Of course it's for you," I snapped. And then I got it. Good Lord, I thought, it's got to be personal with her. I killed the laugh I felt coming. So much the better. She'd really stick to our story then.

"Remember," I said. "We identify nobody. Tenney had a thousand enemies who could hire a thousand killers. We'll let the cops try to figure it out."

"I understand perfectly, Eddie," she said softly.

"We can't forget the little things

that might trip us up," I said. "You'd better go into the kitchen and make some coffee."

She was calm now. "All right, Eddie." She went into the kitchen.

I sat down to think about it again. It was so simple and I was even on the side of the angels. I was actually helping someone. No murder. No risk.

I grinned and took out my handkerchief. I wrapped it around the poker and dipped the end of it into the blood.

And then Tenney groaned.

I froze in my crouch and looked at his face. His eyes were half-slitted with returning consciousness and he stirred faintly.

The tips of my fingers were ice cold.

Miss Janicki's voice came from the kitchen. "The coffee's ready now, Eddie. Would you care for a cup?"

"Just a second, Stella," I said. "I'll be right with you."

I took a firm grip on the poker and swung hard. I don't think the sound carried to the kitchen.

Stella made good coffee.



Hummel enjoyed dry shooting with the big Webley .455. He took a bead on the door knob, click; the light bulb, click; his wife's head...

THE SHOOTER

BY CRAIG MOONEY

HUMMEL permitted himself one single fluttery sigh of satisfaction. He could not have imagined a better set-up. The street-light was lower than his veranda and dropped a bright funnel of light onto the street. While he could not be seen standing there in the darkness above he had perfect command of everything below.

At the sound of the door closing behind him, or perhaps from the frightened whimpering of his wife that came through, the scene below had frozen into stillness and silence. There was the long black blot of the car on the far side of the street with its door hanging open. There was the sculptured white body of the half-naked woman lying across the sidewalk with one arm reaching towards the apartment doors. There was the fore-shortened ape-like bulk of the man who bent over her pulling on her other arm—who now



peered up startled by the unexpected sound that had come out of the darkness above.

He had all the time in the world—one long luxurious second that became two seconds and then, marvelously, three—while the man stared straight up into the huge barrel of the Webley that reached out from Hummel's bulging right fist. The man was already dead, he thought idly, as he realized that there would yet be a second or two before he would move. The fellow would be dead before that. He couldn't miss him. He'd made this shot a thousand times. The barrel, his hand, his arm, his whole body—all were absolutely still as his fist slowly squeezed tighter and tighter around the revolver. He could do nothing more about the final moment. The imminent second of death lay somewhere between the tightening muscles of his arm and the straining mechanism of the revolver. He waited for the explosion and the leap of the ugly weapon and for the feel of the crushing blow at the far end.

The very particular feel of this very particular crushing blow—this was what he had to know. It was a feeling he *almost* knew, that he could very *nearly* imagine. But the *almost* knowing was not quite enough. He thought, as he waited—as he had often thought before—how each weapon brought its own feeling, how its fascination lay in this unique possibility. In his

mind he could take up a sword. The grip and the balance, the singular simplicity of the long sharp blade—he could imagine the feeling here with the first rubbery pressure against the point and then the sudden yielding as the steel slid all the way through. Or he could take up a dagger. It was short, stubby, close—he would stab with it, straight down, with his fist jolting home behind it. He could think of the whip flashing out like a snake and the pull following after like a jerking fish. Then the hatchet that came down with a cleaving chop. And now the revolver in his clenched fist that was like the lethal hand of God dealing death across space with a thunder-clap.

He had waited for years to know the feeling. He could easily wait this final second or two.

Many thoughts came rushing through his mind as he stood there tensely waiting. Back over the years—thoughts of himself playing with this Webley .455, a monstrous square-barrelled chunk of blue steel taking snub-nosed cartridges an inch long and half an inch thick. He used to hold it as gently in his outstretched hand as if it were a clinging kitten. He would break it open, catch the cartridges as they were kicked out by the ejector, and put them in his pocket. He would spin the cylinder, squint down the barrel at the glinting spiral of the bore, and sniff at the fine film of

oil. He would give it a sharp flip upwards and the barrel automatically locked itself back in position. Then he would practise cocking and uncocking rapidly, his thumb on the hammer playing against his forefinger on the trigger. Then he would hold it loosely in front of him, letting it dangle while he kept his elbow pressed in against his side. Suddenly he would dart a fierce glance at an ink-bottle on a wall-shelf, swing the revolver towards it like a long finger, and as he did so he would squeeze tighter and tighter with his whole hand so that the hammer fell at the precise second the barrel had levelled itself on the ink-bottle. He would swing on cups, lamps, pictures, door-knobs, and other scattered objects in the room seeing how quickly he could make an instantaneous dead-set and snap at each. It always seemed to him that he could blast the ink-bottle, the vase, or the fly on the ceiling with a single crashing shot. He used to feel quite certain of this, although he had never fired a revolver.

He'd been going through this routine once or twice a week for years. And Mrs. Hummel—how could such a big woman be so timid?—would always shrink down in her chair and pat her hair and pluck at her bosom and start saying the same words every time—oh dear, Fred, you do frighten me with that, oh dear, Fred, I just wish you'd put it away, oh dear, Fred,

you should send it back to your uncle. He never said anything until he slipped the cartridges back in the cylinder and put the revolver in the bottom drawer of his dresser. Then he would say—well, I don't know but what it's a good thing to have something around these days with so much crime going on and a decent citizen's got a right to protect himself if the police can't do it. Then Mrs. Hummel always said she had a good mind to send it back herself, but he knew she wouldn't as long as he put it away loaded every time.

And mixed up with these thoughts was the memory of how he happened to have this great bloody revolver that he'd never fired.

Back in 1943 he had gone off to war, the red ferment of battle in his mind. The Army took him as a junior officer. It didn't care about the ferment in his mind. It listed him as over-age and under-size, an accountant that it could use in a static headquarters to relieve a younger man for combat duties. But he hadn't known this at the time. He was going to war, and so he paid his fateful last visits to relatives and friends. An uncle who had driven a locomotive with the Royal Engineers in the British Army in the first world war; got a bit drunk with him and recalled some of his own military experiences to warn him of the dangers that lay ahead. The old boy sud-

denly remembered something, went up to his attic, rummaged through a trunkful of wartime souvenirs, and came back with a big, grease-encrusted revolver which he solemnly presented to Fred on the understanding that if he survived and still had the revolver he might return it since it had a certain sentimental value. Then he told him how it was that he, Uncle Henry, at this moment, in this mid-western city, happened to have this Webley .455, the official British Army Service Revolver, actually the property of His Majesty—see the crown stamped here and the serial number?

Hummel could remember the story almost exactly as his uncle had told it.

"It was a cold dark night, just back of the Somme, and my fireman and I were inching a trainload of ammunition up to the terminal and wondering which of the flashes on the horizon was going to blow us to glory. We got the signal to stop the train for a while until something got straightened out up ahead. While we were resting and having a smoke a soldier climbed up the engine and half fell into the cab. He was an artillery sergeant and in bad shape. His uniform was in shreds, caked with dirt and blood, his left arm bare, slashed down the side, and hanging like a stick. You could hardly hear him talk and he took a long time between words. Could he stay in the

cab for a while? Sure thing. Could we get him anywhere near a hospital? Sure, Mac—when we get back to base. Got a cigarette. You bet, Mac, my fireman said—now what was his name?—anyhow he put one in the sergeant's mouth and lit it for him. Then Mac sat down on the floor and propped himself in the corner, pulling his knees up to his chin. After a while he asked for a drink. I didn't have anything with me. Joe—Joe Cassidy, by God! I been trying to remember his name—didn't have anything either, but he said he knew where there were some cases of rum back on the cars; so I gave Joe the nod and he was back pretty soon with a couple of bottles. We filled up a tin cup and gave it to Mac and it was good to see the way he took it down. After he finished he pulled at his holster with his good arm and got it off his belt and he handed the holster and revolver to Joe and said he might as well have it because if he got to the hospital the orderly blokes would steal everything he had anyhow. Joe thanked Mac but Joe didn't want it; so Mac held it out to me. There was a kind of look in his eyes which made me feel it would be a great favor to him if I took it, which I did, thanking him kindly. We filled up his cup again and Mac took it down and settled in the corner and went to sleep. By this time we got the go-ahead and were busy till we stopped a couple

of hours later at the terminal and remembered Mac there in the corner. But we found Mac wasn't asleep. He was dead. So we never did know who he was or what happened to him. But this here is his revolver, and this old holster, and I guess Mac would be glad if he knew it was going off to war again after all these years. Mac, there—I can see him plain as anything. A nice guy, and sitting there dying all the time.”

So he had taken the revolver and cleaned it up and had it re-blued. An armaments officer had found him a dozen rounds for it, and gave him a military training pamphlet explaining its care and use. He had practised by himself all the dry-shooting exercises, and so—except for using live ammunition—he had been ready. But he never got to fire it. He never got to the war. He stayed on as an assistant records officer in the same headquarters building all through the war. Each time he made up his mind to see his commanding officer to demand a posting overseas Mrs. Hummel would weep and cling to him and beg him not to leave her alone. After the war he stayed on in the same city at his former trade of accountant. The revolver itself and the story about it—these had been the high-points of his military career. But he had hung on to the revolver, and he'd kept on with his practice exercises, and he waited for his chance—just once to fire it.

So there was all that, he thought. And nothing might have come of it at all if it hadn't been for these screams that had just wakened him.

It had been a single chilling note of terror that went on and on monotonously in the highest register of a human voice until something finally smothered it down to a few choking sounds that soon stopped. Then silence and darkness had come rushing in to fill the space that the cry had torn open. While it went on it had held him rigid in the bed, scalp tight, and heart pounding.

“Fred! What is it? Something awful's going on out there!”

“Sounds like a woman in trouble,” he whispered shakily, pushing her arms away and hoisting himself up on the edge of the bed. “Where are my slippers?”

“Fred, you're not going! The police will—”

“Ha! With all the dives there are around here? Why, the police are paid to stay away. Don't turn on the light. My revolver—here in the drawer—”

“No, no, Fred! I'm frightened. Don't leave me alone. Don't go out. It's none of our business. Put it away, Fred, please put it away!”

He managed to pull on his trousers, hitch the braces over his shoulders, and slither into his slippers. Once he had the revolver in his hand he felt strong and sure of himself.

The cry came again. A car door

banged. There was a gruff oath, and scuffling sounds. It seemed to be in the street right below them.

Mrs. Hummel burst into a loud whimpering and began pawing for him as if she had eight arms.

"Get away, let go of me or you'll get shot!"

He shoved her furiously back onto the bed, reached the door to the upstairs veranda in a single stride, and swiftly stepped out into the darkness.

He got the picture below, under the light just as it formed—the running woman, half-naked, tripping at the curb and sprawling face down across the sidewalk the scuttling, crab-like pursuit of the squat fat man, the vicious jerk as he tried to pull her up by her arm—all freezing at the opening and closing of the door and his wife's whimpering voice that came out for a moment.

"Damn him! Dirty swine!"

He had all the time in the world as the man stared balefully up, unable to see beyond the light, his gaze in the same straight line as the barrel of the revolver.

And so Hummel was waiting unflinching for the final modicum of pressure in the final fraction of the last second.

The tense mechanism fired.

There was an empty click.

At the little metallic sound above him in the stillness the man straightened up, glanced around uncertainly, then swiftly bent down

and picked up the woman.

Misfire! He snapped the trigger furiously. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Nothing! It was empty.

Into the bedroom!

"The bullets, woman! The bullets! Where in the name of God are the bullets?"

He rushed up to the white bulk of his wife on the bed and shook her savagely.

"Answer me! What did you do with the bullets?"

"I took them out. I watched you doing it. I took them out the way you did. I couldn't stand it any more, Fred—I couldn't stand it being loaded in there all the time—"

"Never mind that! Where are they?"

"Still there—in the bottom drawer. Oh, Fred, don't! Don't Fred!"

He yanked open the drawer and scurried his hand around the bottom. One of them! Two, three—enough! He rammed them into the cylinder and snapped it shut as he rushed back to the veranda.

Man and woman had vanished. There was only the telescoped series of sounds—slamming door, starter whirring, roar of motor, tires screeching, black shape of the car rushing away, the rising, receding whine of climbing gears. He flung the revolver out at arms length, but before he could sight it the car was gone.

"Fred? Oh, Fred! Thank God! It's gone! Fred, dear?"

She was talking on the high-pitched coaxing tones of a little girl.

He turned slowly and looked at her in a dazed way. She had turned on the bedroom lights and was standing in her nightgown outlined in the doorway. She was very big and filled the doorway. She kept patting her hair and plucking at her bosom and saying oh dear.

"I could kill you," he complained. And jokingly—since it was all so familiar—he swung the revolver up and fired in one single consummate motion.

He was dead on. It was perfect—the crashing explosion, the leaping weapon, the ripe, bursting feeling as the bullet shattered the solid head.

"I'll be damned!" he whispered.



NEXT ISSUE:

...Now that he had her trussed tightly, Al stood back admiring the girl, his eyes savoring her weakness, her bruises, her nakedness. He was breathing fast. He reached out a hand, a blunt thumb and pressed it into her stomach, grinning, slowly increasing the pressure. Harder and harder until he could almost feel her backbone—until the girl's screams had penetrated to the core of his warped brain.

THE ABOVE PARAGRAPH IS FROM *DESERT CHASE*, A FULL-LENGTH NOVEL BY THURBER JENSEN, WHICH WILL APPEAR IN THE DECEMBER *MANHUNT*—ON SALE SEPTEMBER 25TH. ASK YOUR NEWSDEALER TO RESERVE YOUR COPY TODAY.



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THAT HAS
ENDURED WITH THE
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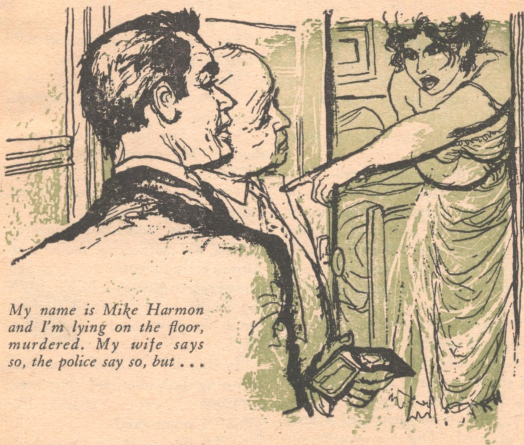
(AMORC)

CALIFORNIA

A Full-Length Novel

BY

CARL MILTON



*My name is Mike Harmon
and I'm lying on the floor,
murdered. My wife says
so, the police say so, but . . .*

I'm
Not
Dead

I COULDN'T TEAR myself away from the eyes that stared sightlessly up at me from the cold, waxen face of death. It had been like getting hit in the gut with a sledge hammer when I flicked on the light in my apartment and first saw the body sprawled like a twisted rag doll on the floor. My legs still trembled

as I looked down at the dark red stain that plastered the white shirt against his chest. But the thing that really chilled the blood in my veins was the guy's face. He had my face! He looked so much like me that it was almost like staring into a mirror. I felt like I was looking at my own corpse. It scared the hell out of me. I could feel the hard knot growing in the pit of my stomach until it was a large nauseating fist with icy fingers that clenched and unclenched spasmodically.

I was still standing there when the police arrived. The officer in charge was Sergeant Franklin of Homicide. He was cold, impersonal, and all cop. He took a quick look at the corpse and when he turned to me, there was a puzzled frown on his face.

"Relative?" he asked curtly. I shook my head.

"Know who he is?"

I shook my head again. "I never saw him before," I said.

"It's almost unbelievable," Franklin grunted. "Did you touch anything after you came into the apartment?"

"Just the light switch. And the phone, when I called you," I answered.

"You didn't touch the body?"

"No."

He knelt again beside the body and I watched dazedly as his hands moved deftly through the dead man's pockets. In a moment, he

stood up and, when he swung around slowly to face me, there was a funny glint in his eyes. He held a wallet in his hand.

"What'd you say your name was?" he asked.

"Harmon. Mike Harmon," I said.

"You have any identification?" Franklin asked.

"Identification?"

"That's right. Driver's license—something like that."

"I . . . lost my wallet," I said slowly. "My driver's license . . . everything."

Franklin scowled at me. "When did you lose your wallet?"

"Sometime today—this morning, I guess. My wife drove me over to Aurora early this morning and then came back to Chicago. I didn't miss my wallet until I started to look for a phone number I was carrying."

"Is this it?" Franklin snapped, thrusting the wallet under my nose.

"Why . . . yes . . . it looks like mine," I stammered.

"According to the cards in here, he's Mike Harmon," Franklin said, nodding towards the corpse.

"Look, I don't know how he got my wallet but I'm Mike Harmon," I insisted.

"Prove it," Franklin challenged.

"I . . . how?"

"Know anybody who can identify you?"

"Gloria—my wife," I said quickly.

"Okay. Where's Gloria?" he asked.

"I . . . don't know," I said hesitantly. "She was supposed to pick me up in Aurora this afternoon but she didn't show up. I had to hitch-hike back to town."

"And you don't know where we can find her now?" Franklin queried suspiciously.

"I haven't the slightest idea," I said.

"Well, anybody else?" he asked impatiently. "Friends—relatives?"

"Mr. Cupper, the landlord. He's downstairs in apartment One."

One of the uniformed cops took off at Franklin's command and returned shortly with Mr. Cupper. I relaxed confidently when Cupper stood before me and studied my face as Franklin directed. Then I watched helplessly as his gray head bobbed from me to the corpse and back with the confused uncertainty of a hungry sparrow pecking hopelessly in the snow for crumbs.

"Well?" Franklin demanded.

"I . . . I don't know," Cupper whimpered, "I didn't know Mr. Harmon too well. Mrs. Harmon always paid me the rent."

"Take another look," Franklin ordered.

Cupper adjusted his bifocals and looked at me again almost apologetically. Then he turned and stared at the body on the floor.

"I think . . . yes, that's Mr. Harmon. I'm sure of it," he blurted suddenly. He pointed to the corpse.

"No! Wait—I'm Mike Harmon!" I protested loudly.

"Shut up!" Franklin growled. "How can you be sure?" he asked Cupper.

"That onyx ring he's wearing. I recognize it. I fished it out of the commode for Mr. Harmon about two months ago. I had to pull the bowl clear loose from the floor to get the ring."

Franklin sighed and gave me a long, hard look. "Okay, Mac," he said curtly, "it's your move."

"This is crazy. He's lying. We've only been in Chicago two weeks. That proves he's lying," I said desperately.

Cupper's face turned red and he glared at me angrily. "This man is an imposter," he said with a tremor in his voice. "Mr. and Mrs. Harmon have been with me for three months. I can show you their receipt stubs in my book."

Franklin moved close and stared into my face. He looked as though he'd like to belt me across the mouth. "You ready to tell me who you are?" he snapped.

"I've already told you," I said with a tremble in my own voice. "I don't care what Cupper says, I'm Mike Harmon!"

The door opened just then and the patrolman stationed in the hall stepped into the room.

"Sergeant, there's a lady out here says she's Mrs. Harmon."

"Send her in," Franklin ordered. He smiled crookedly at me and

said, "Now maybe we'll get this straightened out once and for all."

"Gloria will identify me," I said.

I watched thankfully as Gloria entered the apartment. She stared bewilderedly as Franklin met her at the door and took her arm.

"Gloria—" I began, but Franklin cut me short.

"I'll handle this," he said harshly.

He stopped in front of me and asked Gloria if she could identify me. Her eyes refused to meet mine and her lips twisted nervously. She turned slightly and looked past Franklin toward the body. Somehow, I wasn't expecting her scream and it grated across my nerves like coarse sandpaper. She identified the corpse as me and exploded into painful sobs that rocked her shoulders and caused her breasts to pulsate against the snug cashmere sweater she wore.

"Gloria! For God's sake!" I pleaded but Franklin wouldn't let me near her. He ushered her into the bedroom and came back a few minutes later to telephone for a doctor.

I sat slumped in a chair with my brain spinning like some kind of a crazy merry-go-round suddenly gone out of control. Franklin towered over me like a sinister, avenging shadow.

"All right, punk, start talking," he said coldly.

2.

I looked up at him and I could feel my mouth quivering as I spoke.

"I don't know what's going on," I said. "I just don't know. I'm Mike Harmon and that's my wife in there—I swear it!"

Franklin leaned over suddenly and grabbed a fistful of my shirt and tie. He jerked me to my feet as though I were a child and glared at me menacingly.

"Come off it, buster!" he shouted savagely. "Why did you kill him?"

"Kill him? I didn't kill him!" I gasped, the rising panic throttling the words in my throat.

Franklin's fingers tightened in my shirt and he drew me closer until his cigarette-tainted breath fanned across my face.

"Are you going to open up, or do I have to beat it out of you?" he hissed.

I shook my head dumbly and stared helplessly around the room. There was no trace of sympathy in the angry eyes of the men standing around the room and there was nothing but blankness in the cold, dead eyes of the corpse.

Slowly, Franklin released his grip on my clothes and motioned to two of the plainclothesmen.

"Take him down and book him on suspicion," he said disgustingly. "I'll be along later."

I was dazed and confused as I stood before the desk at the police station. The desk sergeant recorded me in the blotter and ordered me to empty my pockets. Then they took my tie, belt, and shoelaces and ushered me down a corridor to a

small, stale-smelling cell. The metal bars clanked shut with an ominous finality and my legs buckled, dumping me to the hard cot along the wall. I sat there for several minutes with my head bowed and my hands hanging limply between my knees. My mind was a cold, black void.

Gradually, the thoughts crept in—jumbled, meaningless fragments swirling around in the emptiness of my mind. It just didn't figure. Nothing made sense. I was entitled to one phone call they had told me, but who could I call? In all Chicago, I knew only two people—Cupper, the landlord, and Gloria. I groaned aloud. Cupper could have made a mistake. But not Gloria—not my own wife. What the hell kind of a deal was this?

I dropped back on the cot with one leg hanging over the edge and tried to find some logical explanation for what had happened. My imagination failed me completely. Somehow, I slipped into a fitful, nightmare-ridden sleep only to be wakened during the night by a policeman shaking me roughly.

"Huh! What . . . what is it?" I mumbled groggily.

"Come on. Let's go!" the cop ordered.

He led me down the corridor and steered me into a brightly lighted, sparsely furnished interrogation room where Franklin was waiting.

I don't know how long they kept me there. It seemed like two—may-

be three hours. I couldn't think clearly. I couldn't convince him that I was Mike Harmon and, after a while, I almost stopped caring.

Franklin sat across the long wooden table from me and fired questions at me. He paced the floor and asked questions. Finally, he just leaned against the wall and repeated the questions.

"Your name?" he asked wearily for about the twentieth time.

"Mike Harmon."

"How long have you been in Chicago?"

"Two weeks."

"Where did you live before?"

"Rockford."

"How long?"

"Ten years."

"Occupation?"

"Auto mechanic. I came here to look around for a small garage of my own. Or a gas station, maybe."

"Who'd you work for in Rockford?"

"Sam Garson—Garson's garage."

"Can Garson identify you?"

"He died . . . three weeks ago."

Franklin gave up and one of his stooges took over. And then another, and another, and, finally, Franklin again. Same questions. Same answers. After an eternity, it was over and they led me back to the cell. I collapsed on the hard cot and passed out.

It was just starting to get light when they came after me again. I leaned against the stained, chipped

washbowl in the corner and splashed cold water into my face. My eyes were swollen and my beard was coarse against my hands. They brought me breakfast but I couldn't eat. I drank the bitter, black coffee from the tin mug that was so hot it burned my fingers. I felt a little better.

A guard escorted me back to the interrogation room and Franklin and another cop put me through the question routine again. After we had gone around and around awhile, Franklin stood up and cursed.

"I can't hold you," he said bitterly. "I can't tie Harmon's murder to you—yet. I think you're in this up to your ears and if you are, I'll tag you for it. So help me!" He turned abruptly and walked out.

They checked me out at the desk and I stumbled down the steps into the bright, early morning sunshine. I lifted my wrist and squinted at my watch but I had forgotten to wind it.

I hurried down the street away from the police station. After I had gone two or three blocks, I slowed my pace and rubbed my temples wearily. My utter helplessness was driving me crazy. I had to clear myself—do something. But I didn't know how to begin—where to start.

I stood on the corner and looked around wildly. I needed help but I was surrounded by strangers. I saw the guy in the tan sport coat and the dark brown trousers stand-

ing in front of the drugstore and I could feel fear spreading through my body. He was watching me. He was a cop. I could feel it. They were going to follow me—hound me day and night.

I started walking again and the guy in the tan coat trailed behind me. I changed directions, cut down side streets, and backtracked but he was always behind me. I became obsessed with the desire to lose him—to get away. The streets were crowded but he never lost sight of me. Suddenly, I twisted around two women and darted through the Wabash Avenue entrance to Marshall Field. I ran across the corner of the big store, pushing my way through the crowd, and headed for the Randolph Street doors. As I pushed through the doors, I glanced fearfully over my shoulder and caught a glimpse of the tan coat hurrying down the main aisle from the Wabash doors. He had his head on a swivel but he didn't spot me.

My legs ached and quivered as I hurried west on Randolph Street. When I reached the corner at Wabash Avenue, the light was just turning against me but I broke into a stumbling run and crossed the street anyhow. A cab charging down Wabash honked angrily and the tires squealed in my ears as the driver slammed on the brakes. He shouted curses at me as he whizzed by. I made the curb with my legs wobbling beneath me. There was a

strange pounding buzz in my head and the inside of my mouth felt like a dry, dirty rag. I stumbled through the rolling sea of people to the building on the corner and leaned against the wall. My eyes closed involuntarily and my breath came in heavy, wheezing grunts. I opened my eyes and saw the people nudging one another and staring at me as though I were drunk or throwing a fit. I pushed away from the building and moved slowly down Randolph Street.

Gloria. I had to see Gloria, I decided suddenly. Vaguely, I remembered that there was an I. C. station on Randolph Street near Michigan Avenue. The I.C. seemed like my best bet for getting back to our Hyde Park apartment and Gloria. I had to see Gloria alone—talk to her. I had to find out what was going on. I retraced my steps down Randolph Street, half expecting to see the guy in the tan sport coat come rushing out of Marshall Field as I passed.

3.

My legs were still quivering as I started down the enclosed steps to the I.C. station and I gripped the cold metal railing to steady myself. The waiting room was crowded and I stood confused, my eyes searching for the ticket window. When I had located the window, I moved into the line and, instinctively, reached for my wallet. I had

no wallet but I did have some change—thirty-five cents. As I moved up to the window, I was still wondering if I had enough for a ticket to Hyde Park. The thought struck me quite suddenly that I was being a fool. If I went to the apartment I would be walking right into the waiting arms of the police. I was sure they would be watching for me there. I mumbled an apology to the impatient clerk and stepped quickly out of line. I would call Gloria and arrange for her to meet me someplace where we could talk.

The phone rang five times before Gloria's familiar voice purred softly in my ear.

"Hello."

"Gloria—Gloria, this is Mike!" I said breathlessly.

"What? Who . . . who is this?" her voice quavered.

"Mike, honey—it's Mike. I've got to talk to you."

"Mike is dead," she whispered. "Mike is dead."

"No, Gloria. It's me—Mike. Please . . . you've got to help me," I pleaded.

"Let me alone or I'll call the police." Her threat was punctuated by the sharp click of the receiver.

For a moment I was stunned, bewildered. "Damn you!" I screamed into the silent phone. "What are you trying to do to me?"

I slammed the receiver back on the hook and wandered aimlessly across the waiting room to the

men's room. I was tired again—so damned tired and confused. I pushed the door open with my shoulder and locked myself in one of the stalls. At least if the police were looking for me, they wouldn't spot me in here. I sat down heavily on the stool. My head dropped forward wearily and I popped my chin in my hands with my elbows resting on my knees. It seemed as though I fell asleep almost immediately.

The loud slamming bang against the wooden door brought me awake with my heart pounding madly in my throat. My whole body seemed numb. My neck was stiff and both legs felt as though they had been carved from wood. Scarcely daring to breathe, I listened . . . waiting for the police to pound on the door again, demanding that I surrender myself. It turned out to be only a couple of kids engaged in a friendly scuffle. I shuffled out of the booth with the tingling numbness of my legs and feet turning to sharp prickling pains that stabbed clear up to my thighs.

It felt late and the lights had been turned on in the washroom. I washed my hands and face and winced at the haggard bearded face that stared bleary-eyed at me from the mirror.

According to the big clock in the waiting room, it was seven o'clock. I set my watch and went back up the stairs to Randolph

Street. I walked . . . just to be doing something, but it tired me very quickly and the pulse in my temples began to pound sickeningly.

I was faint from hunger. Except for the cup of coffee at the police station this morning, I hadn't put anything into my stomach since yesterday morning. I passed a restaurant and a bar and grill. They both looked too rich for my small change. Around the corner, I stopped in front of a small, brightly-lighted cafe. There were only two other guys sitting at the counter when I entered. I sat at the far end of the counter and fingered the menu.

Only one waitress was on duty. She was a vivacious young brunette—very well built. She moved quickly to where I sat and welcomed me with a friendly smile as she placed a glass of water before me.

"Hi," she said cheerfully.

"Hello," I said. "Give me a cup of coffee, please."

"That's all?"

"Yeah . . . yeah. For now," I said.

She brought the mug of hot coffee and I took it in both hands. She turned her back but I could see her watching my trembling hands in the mirror. I sipped at the coffee and tried to keep my eyes from wandering to the hamburger that was sizzling on the grill. I watched hungrily as the waitress fixed the hamburger for the cus-

tomer at the other end of the counter.

The guy sitting halfway down the row of stools was staring hard at me but he jerked his eyes away when I turned my head in his direction. At first, I had the cold frightening feeling that he might be a cop but the thin face and close-set squinty eyes didn't look the part. The waitress came back and stood near me.

"How's the coffee?" she asked.

"Fine. Just fine." I managed a smile. Hers was the first friendly voice I'd heard in two days and I wanted to encourage her.

"Feel like something to eat now?" she coaxed.

"I . . . no . . . just another cup of coffee," I stammered.

She picked up my cup and while she was filling it, I noticed the thin faced man leaving his stool and walking toward me.

"You got a match, buddy?" he asked when he was standing beside me.

I nodded silently and dug a book of matches from my coat pocket. I could feel his eyes crawling over my face while he lit his cigarette.

"Thanks," he said. He handed the matches back and the squinty eyes bored into mine while the corners of his thin mouth tugged into a sneering grin. He turned and walked to the phone booth. I was suddenly afraid of him and I felt compelled to run. I was half off the stool when the warm, reassur-

ing voice of the waitress arrested me.

"Here's your coffee," she said.

"Oh . . . thanks," I mumbled.

I turned around just as she placed a large hamburger and a side of french fries on the counter in front of me. I started to protest but she smiled and said, "I fixed this for a fellow who comes in here every night at the same time for a 'burger and fries. He's ten minutes late tonight and if I hold this any longer it'll be ruined. Go ahead—it's on the house."

"Okay, if you insist," I said, reaching eagerly for the hamburger.

"I'm Joni Jordan. What's your name?"

"Mike. Mike Harmon," I said slowly. I half expected her to throw back her head and laugh and tell me that Mike Harmon was dead.

"I'm glad to know you, Mike," she said softly.

"Why?" I asked, puzzled. "Why are you doing this? Do you usually give free handouts to bums like this?"

"You're no bum, Mike," she said solemnly. "Your face . . . your clothes . . . everything about you says you're not a bum. Down on your luck for the moment, maybe, but not a bum."

"Thanks, Miss Jordan," I said. "But if you don't stop being so nice to me, I'm liable to start crying on your shoulder."

"Call me Joni. You'll find that I'm a very good listener."

"I don't get it," I said. "I'm a perfect stranger. Why should you be interested in my troubles?"

"Just an impulse, I guess, Mike. Maybe because I'm kind of lonely—despondent, and you look like you're in the same leaky boat. Maybe I hope it'll make me feel better if I can cheer you up a little. Besides, I've always been interested in people and what makes them tick."

"How do you mean?"

"Now you want my sad little story," she said smiling sadly. "Why am I so interested in people? The result of a frustrated dream, you might say. I had a notion that I wanted to be a brilliant female psychiatrist. While I was still in pre-med school, my father was killed in an automobile accident. My mother had a nervous breakdown and by the time all of the medical bills and expenses were paid, there wasn't anything left in the kitty for Joni's medical education. I don't have the degree but I still have the inquisitive, probing mind, I guess. So tell Doctor Jordan your troubles—the consultation is on the house, too."

"Okay, Doctor," I grinned, "I've got to talk to someone about it before I go crazy. Just remember, you asked for it." I leaned on the counter and told her the whole fantastic story and, for some unexplainable reason, she believed it. She sincerely believed it and somehow, things didn't seem quite so dark after I had shared my story with her. She

made me promise to meet her at a bar around the corner called Stacey's when she got off at eight-thirty. She said that Danny, the bartender, was a friend of hers and that he could give me a place to stay until I knew what I was going to do.

After thanking Joni again and assuring her that I'd be at Stacey's, I left the cafe. The minute I stepped out onto the sidewalk, some guy pushed up against me and I felt something hard jammed into my ribs.

"Okay, Barrackman," the guy snapped, "you know a gun when you feel one—just keep walking and don't get funny."

"Hey—wait!" I protested.

"Keep your mouth shut and walk!" the guy ordered. He steered me around the corner toward a black Caddy with the engine idling. He jerked the rear door open and gave me a shove.

"Get in!" he snapped. He climbed in beside me and the Cad shot away from the curb with a roar. The car swung wide and fast around a corner and pinned me against the left door. I saw the guy beside me bracing to keep from sliding across the seat toward me. From the lights blinking through the windows, I could see the glint of the gun in his hand.

"What's the big idea?" I asked.

"Nothing much, Teddy boy," he sneered. "We're just collecting a debt for Louie Castro."

He leaned forward and snapped at the driver. "Slow down, jerk! We don't want to pick up a motor-cycle escort."

"You've made a mistake—I'm not the guy you want," I said.

"Look chiseler," the guy growled, "you lost five gees at Louie's club and you tried to welsh. Louie don't like welshers."

"But you've got the wrong man," I insisted. "My name's Mike Harmon."

"Nuts! You were fingered in that hamburger joint, Barrackman."

"My name isn't Barrackman. I never heard of him."

"Castro said you were a jellyfish," the guy laughed. "You're the right guy all right."

My stomach was churning like a cement mixer and I felt like I was coming apart at the seams.

"Slow down, you idiot!" the guy beside me hissed at the driver. "You're driving too damned fast."

"Okay! Okay!" the driver snapped irritably.

I clenched my fists and leaned back against the seat with my eyes shut tight. I tried to think. I had to get out of this car. I had to get out.

The car was still whipping around corners in wide skidding arcs and I decided to take a desperate chance and try to use this to my advantage. I forced myself to relax, and sat limp in the seat—waiting.

Suddenly, it came. The tires

squealed wildly as the driver wheeled the big car sharply to the left around a corner. The guy in the back seat with me cursed as he was thrown against the right door and I lunged with the force that threw me in his direction. I hit him hard in the gut and heard the gun hit the floor as he doubled up with a loud grunt. I leaned forward and grabbed the driver's coat collar, jerking his head back until his scream was drowned out by the thumping crash of our car side-swiping a cab.

I was thrown to the floor and the guy in back with me slid off the seat and nearly smothered me. I untangled myself from his flailing arms and legs and pushed my way out through the door. I dodged through the crowd bearing down on the accident and ran like hell. I twisted and turned around one corner after another and ran until my lungs burned raw and my chest felt like it was going to explode. The dryness in my mouth extended into my throat and when I tried to swallow, the root of my tongue rasped against the back of my throat like a coarse file.

Without warning, the street-lights started to spin crazily and I cut sharply into an alley where my legs turned to rubber and dumped me to my hands and knees in the filth and spilled garbage. My stomach turned upside down, dumping my supper into my throat and it spewed back from my mouth.

When it was finished, I was weak and shaky. I crawled to the building nearest me and sat in the rubbish, leaning against the grimy brick wall. The perspiration on my forehead turned clammy and I mopped it with my coat sleeve. My pulse was fast and each breath burned my throat like a flash of fire.

Gradually, the warmth crept back into my face and I felt stronger. I pulled myself to my feet and brushed my clothes with my hands. It took me two painful hours to find my way back to the neighborhood of Stacey's Bar. I was nearly three hours late but Joni, bless her, was still waiting for me. Danny, the bartender was sick and hadn't come to work, so I still needed a place to sleep. I was afraid to risk a hotel for fear the police would be checking them. When Joni saw how beat I was, she offered to let me spend the night at her place a couple of blocks from the cafe where she worked. I protested feebly about imposing and about her being too kind to a guy who was practically a stranger but she insisted and we ended up walking the two blocks to her apartment.

4.

The pleasant sound of music crept into my sleeping consciousness from far off and gently massaged me to wakefulness. I rolled

over in the bed and came awake slowly, a little at a time. It took me a moment to remember where I was and why. I remembered arguing with Joni over her insistence that I take her bed while she slept on the sofa. I listened to the soft strains of the radio from beyond the closed bedroom door. I crawled out of bed and pulled on my trousers. They had been freshly pressed. In place of the grimy white shirt I had been wearing, was a new shirt with the wrinkles already ironed out.

I opened the door and Joni called out from the kitchen. "You up, Mike?"

"Yeah, finally. What time is it? My watch has stopped."

"One-thirty—in the afternoon," she laughed, coming into the living room. "How do you feel?"

"Pretty good. Mind if I take a shower?"

"Help yourself. While I was out shopping this morning, I stopped at the drugstore and bought a razor and some shaving cream. You'll find them there in the bathroom."

"You're quite a wonderful girl, Joni," I said huskily. "Thanks for slicking up my wardrobe for me."

"Just part of the Jordan Hotel customer service, sir," she laughed with a mock curtsy. "Run in and take your shower and by the time you finish, I'll have a late breakfast ready for you."

The shower and shave nearly restored me to my old status of hu-

man being and the breakfast Joni had waiting for me packed new hope into my rested body.

We discussed my narrow escape of last night and Joni suggested I get in touch with Danny for sure. She said that he used to work behind the bar at Louie Castro's club and might be able to give me some information on the Barrackman character I'd been mistaken for. It seemed obvious that if I looked that much like Barrackman, he must have been the corpse in my apartment. Joni called Danny and he said that he would do anything he could to give me a hand.

It was three-thirty when I met Danny at Stacey's. He was a real likeable guy and seemed sincere in his desire to help me. We sat in one of the booths and had coffee. Danny lit a cigarette and shook the match until the flame disappeared into a thin wisp of blue-grey smoke.

"Joni says you think the body you found in your apartment was Barrackman," he said slowly.

"It must have been him," I said.

"You sure are a dead-ringer for him," Danny said, shaking his head as though he could hardly believe his eyes.

"You knew him?" I asked.

"Slightly. He spent a lot of time at the club when I used to work there. What do you figure he was doing at your place?"

"I wish I knew. I still can't understand why Gloria couldn't or wouldn't recognize me," I said.

"Gloria—that's your wife?"

"Yes."

"What's she like? I mean, what does she look like?" Danny asked suddenly.

"Well, she's a platinum blonde—a real good looking girl. She used to be a model before we got married," I told him. "Why?"

Danny took a sip of coffee and hesitated a moment. "I was just wondering if Barrackman might have known your wife. I mean—well, he was nuts about good looking women and they all seemed to go for him."

"That's impossible," I objected, "we've only been in Chicago two weeks."

"Well—maybe before you got married. Teddy specialized in models and showgirls."

"That might be," I admitted reluctantly, "Gloria spent a lot of time in Chicago before we were married. She grew up in Elgin. She never mentioned his name though. What kind of a guy was he?"

"A punk!" Danny grunted disgustedly. "Playboy type. He inherited a little dough from his old man but he went through that gambling and playing the horses, on liquor and women too."

"If only I knew where to start looking," I groaned.

"The Silver Cup would be the best place to pick up a fast background on Barrackman," Danny said. "That's Louie Castro's club down on the south side."

"Louie Castro. Maybe I ought to start with him," I said desperately.

"Soft pedal it there, friend," Danny said with a sour grin. "Castro's a plenty rough customer."

"Well, what the hell am I going to do?" I snapped impatiently. "I can't just sit around waiting to see who's going to get to me first—the cops or Castro's boys."

"Look, suppose I go over to the Silver Cup this evening and nose around a little," Danny suggested. "At least, I know the layout."

"What about me?" I asked.

"You sit tight until you hear from me. If I don't cop a lead at the Chalice, we'll figure another angle."

"Why should you bother getting involved in this?" I asked. "You didn't even know me an hour ago."

Danny shrugged indifferently. "You're a friend of Joni's. She asked me to help you. I'd do anything for that gal—it's as simple as that. You got a picture of your wife on you?"

"No. I had some in my wallet but the police have that now. Why?"

"It might help if I had one to flash around over at the club. Some of the help or the regulars might have seen her in there with Barackman at one time or another."

"Well, there are a couple of good reprints of her in the current issue of Fashion Annual. Page twenty-four, I think. Her name was Gloria Carson then," I told him.

"Fashion Annual. Gloria Carson.

I'll pick up a copy on my way over to the club," Danny said.

I thanked him and went by the diner to see Joni. She was refreshing and unbelievably lovely in the starched green and white uniform she wore behind the counter. I had more coffee and we talked—mostly about my trouble and what Danny might be able to find out at the Silver Cup. But we talked about her too, and the more I learned about her, the more I felt drawn to her. She told me that Danny had proposed to her several times. She regarded him as a dear personal friend but she was still waiting for the right guy to come along and sweep her off her feet. She gave me a funny little look as she talked and I felt a crazy wonderful pain digging into my heart as I listened to her.

It was getting dark. I supplemented my coffee with a meal and when I had finished, I felt better than I had in days—stronger, more confident—almost happy. I decided to risk seeing Gloria at the apartment.

"Mike, do you think you should?" Joni asked.

"I don't know but I've got to give it a try. The longer I wait, the more risky things are going to get for me."

"I guess you're right," she admitted slowly. "Be careful, won't you?"

"Sure," I said.

She fumbled in the pocket of her

apron and handed me a ten. "You'll need cab fare," she said. "We'll call it a loan," she smiled as I protested.

"I'll be through at midnight," she reminded me as I slid off the stool.

"I'll meet you here," I said.

Her hand dipped into the apron pocket again and this time she handed me a key. "You might want to take a nap or freshen up between now and midnight," she said. "Besides, you'll spend the night at my place anyhow."

"Maybe I shouldn't. You've done too much for me already," I said.

"Nonsense. I like having a man around the house. It makes me feel adventuresome and romantic—and a little naughty," she smiled impishly.

I promised to meet her at midnight and left the diner. I took a cab to the Hyde Park apartment to see Gloria. There appeared to be no signs of waiting police officers in the vicinity of the partment building but I had the cabbie drive past the building twice before I got out.

Gloria wasn't home. I waited in the shadows across the street for about an hour, then decided to try again later. I took a cab back to Joni's place and sat down to wait for some word from Danny.

It was warm in the apartment and I grew sleepy. I pulled off my coat and loosened my tie. I turned the radio on low and stretched out on the sofa to wait. I don't remember falling asleep but the sharp, in-

sistent ringing of the telephone brought me out of the thick sleep fog with a sudden jolt.

I rolled off the sofa and stumbled to the telephone.

"Hello," I mumbled.

"Mike! Mike, they've killed Danny!" Joni sobbed hysterically.

I was awake instantly. The sharp-edged words cut through me like cold steel. "What do you mean? Who killed him?" I demanded hoarsely.

"He's dead! Danny's dead! The police were just here—they found Danny in an alley. It was Louie Castro — I know it was Louie Castro."

"But . . . but why? Why Danny?"

"I don't know, Mike. I don't know."

"I'll be right over," I said.

I hung up and grabbed my coat. I pulled it on as I rushed from the apartment.

5.

When I reached the cafe, Joni met me at the door. She was fighting hard to keep back the tears.

"I'm taking the rest of the night off," she said. "Louise is going to work part of my shift for me."

I put my arm around her and walked her back to the apartment. Neither of us spoke until I had closed the door behind us. Joni turned and pressed her head against my chest like a small child seeking comfort. I held her close and tried

to tell her how sorry I was. I felt that I was to blame for letting Danny get involved.

"Do the police know who killed him?" I asked gently.

"No. Officer Jim Duncan came by the restaurant and told me about it. He was a good friend of Danny's and he knew I'd want to know. I told him that Danny had gone over to the Silver Cup. Oh Mike—I just know they killed him."

"It's all my fault, Joni," I groaned. "I had no business sitting back and letting someone else do the job."

"No, Mike. Don't blame yourself, please. There was no reason for them to kill him. Why did they have to kill him?"

"I don't know, Joni. But I'm going to find out!"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to see Louie Castro myself," I said grimly. "I'm going to convince him that I'm not Barrackman. Then I'm going to prove that he killed Danny."

"Mike—you're crazy! He'll kill you!" Joni protested through her tears.

"I think he'll hear me out," I said. "That would be the last thing in the world that Barrackman would do—go to Castro. That may be just the way to prove to him that I'm not Barrackman."

Joni clutched at me desperately. "Oh Mike," she sobbed. "Please be careful. I couldn't bear to have anything happen to you too."

"I'll be careful," I said tightly. "I don't know how all this is going to end, Joni but I have a feeling that Gloria and I are all washed up. Maybe you'll hang around and sort of help me pick up the pieces when this is all over."

"Oh yes, if you want me!"

I kissed her and her mouth was warm and alive. She clung to me and kissed my cheek.

"I love you, Mike. Oh, I love you," she murmured through her kisses.

"I love you, too, Joni," I said softly, my mouth seeking hers. "Wait here and don't worry. I'll be all right."

"I'll wait. Hurry back to me... Darling."

6.

I caught a cab right in front of the apartment building and asked the driver if he knew where the Silver Cup was. He did and made good time getting me there. I paid him and stepped out of the cab before I noticed the cop standing in front of the heavy glass doors of the club. It was too late to turn back so I sucked in a deep breath and pushed past him. I could feel his eyes boring into me and I felt certain that he recognized me but he made no move to stop me.

I stood uncertainly for a moment inside the door and then headed for the cocktail lounge. One of the bartenders came up to me at the end

of the bar and smiled pleasantly. "Good evening, sir. What'll it be tonight?"

"Is Louie Castro around?" I asked, trying to keep the knot in my stomach from sending out a quiver in my voice.

"He expecting you?" the bartender countered suspiciously.

"Yeah, I think so."

He nodded toward the drapes at the other end of the bar. "Through there. Tell Joey you have an appointment with Mr. Castro."

I mumbled my thanks and threaded my way through the bar crowd to the draped archway he had indicated. Beyond, was a small room with a wall lamp casting a yellow glow over the deep leather chair. The chair was empty. A table nearby was cluttered with magazines and newspapers and a half-smoked cigar balanced on the edge of a massive ashtray and sent blue smoke curling up into the lamp-light.

Just past the chair and table was a heavy-looking wooden door of polished oak with a gleaming oversized brass doorknob. I moved over to the door and listened but I could hear nothing. I started to knock but changed my mind and tried the knob. Despite its apparent mass, the door swung open easily and silently. Inside, was a spacious, well-lighted office with a tremendous desk flanked on either side by two large split-leaf philodendrons in brass-trimmed iron buckets.

I hadn't made a sound but the corpulent, shirt-sleeved character sprawled on the big, ultra-modern sofa sat up and blinked sleepily.

"That damn hour gone by already, Joey?" he grumbled, rubbing his eyes with pudgy fingers.

"You Louie Castro?" I asked. My voice seemed to quake mockingly in my ears. The big guy on the sofa sat up straight and blinked at me only there was no sleep in his eyes now. Only surprise and disbelief.

"What the hell? Well, I'll be ...!" he bellowed. "You know who I am. You don't forget Louie Castro so easy!" He stood up and struggled into a coat that looked large enough to double as a tent.

"This don't figure," he said uneasily as he moved behind the desk and sat down. The massiveness of the desk seemed to shrink in comparison with Castro's bulk.

"Teddy boy, I never knew you to have such guts," he said, almost admiringly. "Here I got my best boys out looking for you. I promise one grand to the bright boy who knocks you off and you walk right into my arms and save me all this trouble. Maybe you ain't quite the punk I had you figgered for."

"I came here to straighten you out on a couple of things, Castro," I said. "First, I'm not Barrackman. My name's Mike Harmon. And second, Barrackman is already dead so how about calling your bloodhounds off my back?"

"Huh!" Castro snorted contemptuously. "Now what kind of cock and bull story is that, Teddy boy? You take me for a big fool, that it?"

"I'm telling you the truth, Castro," I snapped. "If I really were Barrackman, do you think I'd be crazy enough to walk right in here and let you have me? I'd be hiding out someplace or still running. You know Barrackman wouldn't have the guts to face the music."

"I think I see your little scheme," Castro said slowly. "You want to pull the wool over Louie Castro's eyes, eh? I read about this fellow Harmon getting bumped in his apartment and the cops finding a guy who looked a lot like him. So you're the guy who looks like Harmon and all you got to do is convince me that he was you, and you are some guy I don't know from a hole in the wall, and I let you go. Then you spend the rest of your days laughing at how you put one over good on Louie Castro, eh? You think I got to be such a big shot by letting every punk who comes along put something over on me? Not on your life. I'm not that stupid. You're clutching at straws, Teddy boy."

"You're stupid, all right," I snapped angrily. "You wanted Barrackman dead. He's dead. How or why, I don't know but he's dead and your hands are clean. Kill me and you haven't gained a thing but an invitation to the death house."

"You're wasting your breath,

Teddy boy," Castro growled. He jabbed a button in the triple row on his desk and looked expectantly at the door behind me. "We got company, Joey," he said. "Unfortunately, he ain't staying long."

"It's Barrackman!" the guy behind me gasped.

Castro started to say something but stopped and listened as the faint wail of a siren somewhere on the outside grew rapidly into a demanding, screaming banshee that seemed to flood the office.

"What the hell?" Joey choked. "They're right out front! They..." his words were swept away by the shrill screaming siren that blasted through a small door behind Castro's desk. Squealing brakes and tires took up the dirge as the siren shifted into a low, throaty howl.

"My God, they're in the alley, too!" Joey wailed. His face was turning a sickly white.

"Hey—what is this?" Castro demanded angrily, looking accusingly at me.

"They probably came to nail you for the murder of Danny Stacey," I said coldly.

"You're crazy!" he snapped. He turned to Joey and jerked a thumb in my direction. "Get him out of here. We'll take care of him later."

But Joey stood rooted to the spot. He was terror-stricken. "How... how'd they find out?" he stammered. "You said they couldn't tie Stacey's killing to us in a million years!"

"Shut your big face!" Castro screamed. "This punk, he don't know nothing. He's just making a noise. Take him down in the basement."

Joey drew a snub-nosed thirty-eight from his shoulder holster. His eyes rolled wildly. "Not me. I got to get out of here. They won't take me!" He turned and bolted through the big door to the anteroom.

Someone was pounding on the door behind Castro's desk. I turned toward the door Joey had just used. I wasn't anxious to meet the police just yet, myself.

Castro's snarling voice stopped me cold. "Hold it, Teddy boy. You're not going anywhere."

I turned to face him. He was coming around the end of his desk with a forty-five clutched in his beefy fist. He punched another button on his desk and a section of the wall panelling slid noiselessly aside to reveal a complete private bar in a large closetlike cubicle.

"In there," Castro hissed, motioning with the gun. "I'm going to put you to sleep until I get rid of those cops."

As I turned slowly toward the bar, I saw Castro shift his grip from the butt to the barrel of the .45 and raise it high to strike. I ducked and swung around low, driving a hard right deep into Castro's ample belly. The gun butt bounced off my left shoulder and spun to the floor. Castro grunted like a winded horse and doubled up against the edge of his

desk. He straightened up and I saw his blunt fingers curling around the hilt of the dagger-like letter opener on the desk.

I stooped and lifted the heavy potted plant nearest me. I brought it up from the floor in a deceptively slow, swinging arc and sent it thudding high against Castro's chest just as he lunged toward me with the letter opener.

The heavy wrought iron bucket whipped into Castro's face and sent him reeling back against the desk with a scream rattling in his throat. He did a slow roll off the desk and crashed to the floor, bleeding profusely from the deep lacerations in his face. I turned and bolted through the door to the anteroom. I couldn't go back through the cocktail lounge. Already, I could hear the police commands stilling the startled hubbub of the customers.

There was a small door to my left, just inside the drapes separating me from the cocktail lounge. I turned the knob and found myself staring down the well-lighted basement stairs. I pulled the door shut behind me and descended slowly, half-expecting to find Joey waiting for me at the foot of the stairs. It was very quiet in the basement. However, I had scarcely reached the last step when the stillness was punctuated by running feet pounding past the basement windows in the alley outside. There were several shouts, a curse, and three or

four shots—then silence. I crept up the stairs to the alley door and listened, hardly daring to breathe. I pushed the door open slightly and saw an empty police car sitting about ten feet away with both front doors ajar. I opened the door farther and looked out. Down at the far end of the alley, I could see three or four cops huddled around the prone figure in the alley. Joey wasn't doing so well. The alley seemed clear in the opposite direction so I eased through the doorway and pressed my back against the brick building. Slowly, I inched my way along the dirty brick wall, hoping against hope that one of the cops wouldn't look up and spot me.

I fastened my eyes to the streetlight at the end of the alley and it seemed to grow brighter as I approached it. I was almost there. I glanced back over my shoulder at the figures that seemed almost immobile in the shadows.

My foot struck something soft and my heart pole-vaulted into my mouth at the angry screech of the cat. I froze against the wall and watched the group standing over Joey. They didn't move. I clung to the shadows and moved toward the streetlight. The sweat was cutting grimy rivulets down my cheeks as I stepped out of the alley into the full yellow glow of the light. And there under the streetlight, was a police car waiting expectantly. It was all over. I couldn't move. I just stood there, trembling all over,

waiting for them to come and get me. People, hurrying to the scene of the shooting, pushed around me and bumped me unconcernedly and, finally, I realized that the car was empty.

7.

I walked four blocks before I slowed to a normal pace and hailed a cab. There was only one avenue of hope left now—Gloria. Ten minutes later I was standing outside the apartment door listening to the booming richness of the hi-fi music that Gloria so dearly loved. I knocked lightly on the door, then louder as the music seemed to swell and overpower the whole building. She heard me, finally, and lowered the volume slightly before coming to the door.

"Yes, who is it?" she asked.

"Police. Sergeant Franklin," I grunted.

The door opened and Gloria stared in open-mouthed bewilderment when she saw me. Her eyes grew wide with a tinge of fright.

"M...M... what do you want?" she stammered.

I pushed past her and closed the door behind me. "Hi, Gloria," I said coldly.

"What... what do you want?" she asked again. Her voice sounded hoarse and her face seemed to grow paler by the second.

She was wearing the pale, green satin robe that emphasized her

green eyes and highlighted the little golden flecks that always seemed to be dancing deep in their depths. I couldn't help noticing the way the robe clung to her hips and molded her thighs. She turned away from me and my eyes followed the gentle roll of her buttocks against the smooth satin. I knew she was wearing nothing under the robe. She half-turned and, involuntarily, my gaze shifted to the shimmering satin peaks that jutted out firm and prominent — almost defiantly. She had always been proud of her bust and delighted in inviting the admiring stares of other men by accentuating its prominence with sheer blouses, tight sweaters, and low-cut gowns.

She faced me abruptly and smiled faintly at the look in my eyes. Then she said coldly, "If you don't get out of here, I'll call the police."

"I came here for the truth, Gloria. Who killed Barrackman?" I asked.

Her eyes widened slightly at the mention of his name. She picked up a pack of cigarettes from the table and placed one between her sensuous, neatly-painted lips.

"Do you have a light?" she asked softly.

I fumbled in my pockets for the book of matches and tore out the one remaining match. I watched her face closely as I struck the match and held it to her cigarette. She inhaled deeply, then tossed her head back and exhaled in a slow, careless sigh.

"Sergeant Franklin thinks you killed my husband," she said matter-of-factly.

"It's no good, Gloria," I snapped harshly, throwing the empty match book onto the coffee table. "You know who I am. How did you ever get mixed up with Barrackman, anyhow?"

"It's a long story, Sweetie," she said softly.

"I've got time," I said. "Let's hear it."

"Suppose you're right and the police are wrong," she said. "Knowing that won't do you any good unless I tell the police myself. They'd never believe you."

"Come on. Quit stalling and tell me what happened," I ordered impatiently.

"All right, Mike," Gloria sighed. "So the poor dope you found in here last night was Ted Barrackman." She sat down on the sofa and leaned back comfortably. I stood over her while she talked.

"I met him about six months ago," she continued. "The time I went to Elgin when Mother was sick. My sister Eileen and her husband were coming into Chicago for the weekend and invited me to come with them. We stopped in at a place called the Silver Cup and I noticed Ted at the bar." She paused and flicked her cigarette ashes into an ashtray.

"Go on," I demanded.

"I thought it was you, Sweetie," she smiled. "I rushed over to see

what in the world you were doing in Chicago. Naturally, I was embarrassed when I discovered my mistake. Ted was a real good sport about it, especially after I told him how much you two looked alike. It was really incredible. You two looked so very much alike. But from there on, you were as different as day and night. He knew how to live . . . and how to love. He knew how to make life gay and wonderful for me."

"You sound as though you got to know this Barrackman real well," I interrupted bitterly.

"Oh, I did," Gloria smiled, arching her eyebrows tauntingly. "Intimately, you might say."

"I knew you were bored with our marriage but I never thought it would come to this," I said.

"Bored?" Gloria echoed. "Bored!" She laughed sarcastically. "Sweetie, you just don't know. I was sick of it! Fed up! Day in and day out with you working in that stinking, greasy garage and always yakking about how someday we'd own our own little gas station and, maybe later, even a small motel. Big deal! And all that time, I was dreaming of what I could have had if I had stayed in the modelling racket and married the right guy — furs . . . jewelry . . . expensive gowns . . . traveling. I always wanted to go to South America."

"You think Barrackman was the right guy?" I raged in anger. "That two-bit, chiselling punk!"

"He was different when I first met him," Gloria said defensively. "He was okay until he was cheated out of some money by Louie Castro."

"How did you get to know him so well?" I asked.

"It wasn't hard, with you working your fool head off all day and half the night. Remember all the trips I made to Elgin to take care of Mother?" she reminded me.

"Yeah. You spent more time with her than you did with me during the past six months."

"Not really, Sweetie. I only saw Mother that first time. After that, I came directly to Chicago to be with Ted for a few days. We lived in this very apartment."

"You what?" I choked.

"Shocked? Oh, come on now, Sweetie. You're a big boy," Gloria taunted, "things like that happen every day of the week."

"You little tramp!" I hissed. "You filthy, rotten, little tramp. I could kill you!"

"But, you won't," Gloria purred confidently, "because I'm the only one who can prove who you really are. Without me, the police will probably pin Ted's murder right on you."

"Who did kill him, Gloria? Was it you?" I shouted.

"Don't be ridiculous, Sweetie," Gloria said, smiling disarmingly.

"Well—who, then? Who did it?" I demanded.

Gloria eyed me thoughtfully as

she leaned forward and crushed her cigarette in the ashtray.

"I didn't say I knew who killed him," she said slowly. "I said that I could prove you are Mike Harmon. Nothing more."

"Who killed him?" I repeated, moving closer to the sofa. I could feel the anger boiling, churning inside me.

"I...I don't know, Sweetie. Really I don't," she said. Her voice seemed to falter slightly as she watched my face. Cautiously, she rose from the sofa.

"Tell me, Gloria!" I stormed. "Tell me, or, so help me, I'll beat it out of you!"

"Mike! This is silly. I'd tell you if I knew. Honest." Her eyes darted nervously toward the bedroom. "I'm getting a dreadful headache, Sweetie. I have some aspirin in the bedroom."

She attempted to move past me but I reached out and caught her wrist. "I want to know who killed Barrackman," I gritted through clenched teeth.

She winced at the grip on her wrist but she didn't struggle. Instead, she moved closer to me and looked up into my eyes.

"What difference does it make who killed him, darling—even if I did know?" she whispered. "He deserved to die, didn't he? He almost took me away from you. He almost made me forget how much I truly love you. But that's all over now and we still have each other.

We can go on working for our little gas station just as though none of this ever happened."

Stunned, I released my grip on her wrist and stared at her.

"What manner of creature are you?" I asked in amazement.

She threw her arms around my neck and pressed tight against me. "I love you, Mike," she breathed in my ear. "I never stopped loving you, really. I realize that now. I was just bored but I'll make it up to you. I promise."

The words tumbled out softly, swiftly, like a small stream rippling over water-smoothed pebbles and her warm breath caressed my cheek. I pried her arms loose and shoved her violently. She screamed and stumbled backwards against the glass-topped coffee table, upsetting it with a crash as she fought to regain her balance. I glared at her in disgust.

"A man has been murdered," I snapped, "and you want to forget all about it? Just pretend that it never happened? You talk as though you had only been caught sneaking a kiss behind my back at a party or something. You want me to shut my eyes, snap my fingers and say, 'It never happened.' Are you out of your mind?"

Gloria's eyes clung to me, wide and frightened. Her face was pale but her fingers were steady as she slowly unfastened the snaps on her robe.

"I love you, Mike," she repeated

slowly. Her fingers reached the last snap. She held the robe together for a moment, teasing. Then she shrugged out of the gleaming satin and let it slide in shimmering green waves down to her feet. The sight was unnerving. Her high-heeled slippers enhanced the flawless curves of her long, pin-up legs and caused her to stand erect with shoulders well back thrusting the shapely breasts toward me. The tip of her tongue darted out and moistened her lips until they glistened in the lamplight. She ran her hands slowly along her hips and stretched toward me.

"I'm yours, Mike," she said softly. "All yours. Come into the bedroom with me and I'll prove it. I'll make you forget."

Blind rage blasted through me. The sight of her standing before me like that triggered my emotions and sent me reeling across an infinite void of unthinking fury. I lunged forward and grasped her slender neck savagely in my two hands.

8.

The sensuous, triumphant glow in her green eyes gave way to a startled look of disbelief which, in turn, yielded to an agonizing, eye-rolling of sheer terror as my thumbs bit deep into the soft white flesh of her throat. She clawed at my hands and gagged loudly. I watched her beautiful face change

to a hideous, distorted mask of puffed veins and protruding eyes and, as suddenly as it had come upon me, it passed, leaving me weak and shaken.

I flung her from me and trembled violently, resisting an inner compulsion to laugh at the sight of her sprawled naked upon the floor, writhing awkwardly—almost obscenely in her efforts to appease her tortured lungs. Then, she was scrambling past me on hands and knees, clawing frantically at the carpet. Before I could force myself to move, she had lurched erect and ran stumbling to the bedroom. I followed and saw her fall heavily against the bureau, supporting herself and breathing erratically between racking, hysterical sobs.

She whirled about as I approached her and I saw the gun—a thirty-two automatic that bore menacingly against my belly despite the tremble in her hand.

"Now," she gasped hoarsely, "keep away from me!"

"Is that the gun that killed Barackman?" I asked.

She nodded mutely and motioned toward a chair with the gun. "Sit down.. Over there," she commanded huskily.

"You did kill him, didn't you?" I gasped. She glanced sharply at me as she moved past me and closed the bedroom door.

"Yes, I killed him," she admitted with a small, twisted smile tugging at her lips, "with his own gun. This

gun. And when I kill you, everything will be neat and tidy. I'll be in the clear then. Completely in the clear."

"How do you figure?" I asked.

"It's quite simple. The police already suspect you of killing 'my husband'. You eluded them and came back here to kill me with the same gun. I managed to get the gun away from you and shot you in self-defense."

"It won't work," I protested.

"Why not?"

"The police will want a motive, for one thing."

"I think attempted robbery will do very nicely," Gloria said matter-of-factly. "I have Ted's wallet. I'll put it in your pocket and let the police identify you properly. It won't be hard for them to learn that Ted needed a lot of money to pay Louie Castro."

"You can't get away with it, Gloria," I insisted. "Too many things won't add up right."

"For instance," she challenged.

I shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. I'm no cop. But the police will find them. They'll dig and dig until they come up with all the facts."

Gloria tilted her head and laughed sarcastically. "You let me worry about the police, Sweetie. I can handle them."

I stared at her in disbelief. Was it possible that this was the same lovely woman to whom I had been married for nearly fifteen months—

this cold-blooded, murderous creature who now stood naked before me with a gun calmly outlining how she intended to kill me? She misinterpreted the look in my eyes and smiled pleasedly as she drew her body erect.

"Take a good look, Sweetie," she purred. "Feast your eyes on my warm loveliness. Drink in the perfection of my body while you are still able to appreciate me. I want you to realize what you are losing because you didn't have the brains and the guts to get out and make something of yourself for me."

She levelled the gun at me and crookedly like some omnipotent goddess about to mete out just punishment to an insignificant mortal.

"Why did you kill Barrackman?" I blurted out quickly.

"What difference does it make?" she countered. "In a few seconds, nothing will matter to you."

"Why did you kill him?" I insisted.

"All right, I'll tell you," she said slowly. "You won't like it but I'll enjoy seeing you squirm while I tell you. But don't move out of that chair or I'll blow your handsome head off!"

I watched her with a weird fascination as she began to talk. She moved slowly back and forth in front of me, her eyes darting away from me only for brief seconds at a time. The gun was always ready. She talked faster and faster as she

moved restlessly to and fro telling me of her double life for the past six months. She told me how Barackman had posed as her husband and had used my name while they lived together in this apartment.

I listened as she talked, but all the while my mind was working frantically, desperately. I didn't know whether Gloria was mentally sick or not but I didn't doubt for one moment that she would kill me when she finished her story. My eyes kept straying to the small gas heater that squatted on four stubby legs about eighteen inches from my chair. A length of dusty, fabric-covered hose connected the heater to the gas pipe that protruded from the wall.

"Ted had plenty of money at first," Gloria was saying. "Then he started having bad luck at Castro's club."

The heater fascinated me. I had an idea. It seemed crazy as hell, still it might work. She was excited and moving back and forth—breathing rapidly. If I sat very still and watched my breathing I should be able to outlast her. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like a screwball idea. Still, it was a lot better than just sitting there waiting to be blasted into eternity by a lead slug.

Cautiously, I twisted sideways in the chair and stuck one foot behind the heater. Gloria jerked toward me as I moved but relaxed

and continued her pacing when she saw that I wasn't attempting to leave the chair. I propped my foot against the hose where it joined the gas pipe and wiggled it slowly back and forth. It seemed to give a little.

Suddenly, Gloria stopped and leaned toward me. "Ted didn't laugh when I talked about going to South America," she snapped. "He wanted to go too."

She started walking again and I pressed hard with my foot. The hose fell away from the pipe and the gas spilled into the room with a gentle hiss. I was sure she would hear it, it sounded so loud to my ears but she continued talking.

"It was his idea," she was saying, "to kill you. Then he tried to back out."

"Kill me?" I asked, thinking I had misunderstood her. "You were going to kill me?"

"Of course, Sweetie. Like I've been telling you, Ted and I were going to Rio. Then when he lost all of his money to Castro, he got the idea of killing you so I could collect your insurance. Twenty thousand dollars worth!"

I shook my head dumbly. The gas filled my nostrils with a sickening forcefulness now and I tried to will the pounding of my heart to a slower beat. I breathed very slowly and very shallowly but I could feel myself growing light-headed.

"Ted worked out all the details,"

Gloria said, her words dimly penetrating my befuddled brain. "I didn't pay much attention to the details of the plan he worked out. I just wanted him to get it over with so I could collect the money. My part in it was to be quite simple, really. All I had to do was to talk you into coming to Chicago to look for a station and Ted was going to take care of everything else."

"So that's why you were so insistent that we come to Chicago to make a fresh start," I said thickly. I concentrated even harder upon limiting my breathing.

"That's right, Sweetie. Remember, I left a couple of days early to find us an apartment. Actually, it was just a matter of getting Ted moved out and substituting you in his place."

"Weren't you afraid I might find out—bringing me to the same place?" I asked. My head felt funny. Maybe it wasn't going to work after all. I was sitting too close to that damned heater.

Gloria dropped her gun hand slightly and rubbed her forehead with her free hand. "It's getting stuffy in here," she complained. She crossed her arms across her bare breasts and clutched the gun tightly. "That really didn't worry us," she said, getting back to my question. "Ted and I made it a point not to get chummy with anyone in the building. We even avoided old man Cupper as much

as possible and he's so dull-witted anyhow."

I slumped down in the chair and watched Gloria. She stumbled and staggered against the bureau. She shook her head in bewilderment.

"So damned stuffy in here," she murmured.

"Why'd you kill Barrackman?" I mumbled. I had to keep my mind occupied. Watch my breathing.

"He was going to chicken out—that's why," Gloria said dully. She crossed the room and sat heavily in a chair facing mine. She rested the gun on her knee. "He got me all hopped up on the idea of getting that twenty thousand and going to Rio, then he wanted out."

"So you just killed him instead," I prompted. I licked my lips, they seemed so dry. The room was getting dim and kind of fuzzy.

"I saw him the night before you went to Aurora to look at the station. That was a bum lead I gave you about a guy named Sam having a gas station for sale in Aurora," Gloria said, moistening her lips with her tongue. "That was part of the plan. Ted was going to take care of you in Aurora."

"No wonder I couldn't find the station," I said bitterly. "No one had ever heard of your Sam Weaver."

Gloria laughed a hollow, irritated laugh. "You always were a gullible chump, Sweetie. Damn! I feel sick." She pulled herself out of

the chair and stumbled across the room to the large, drape-covered corner windows. She reached out and perked the drapes violently until the rods tore loose from the brackets and dumped the heavy material to the floor.

"Need some air in here," she grunted, tugging at the window.

I half rose from the chair. I couldn't hold out much longer myself but an open window would put an end to my plan. Gloria pulled and tugged but the window wouldn't budge. "Hell with it!" she cursed suddenly, panting from her exertion. She turned and walked unevenly back to the bureau, twisting her body sideways from the waist so she could keep her eyes on me. She picked up a pack of cigarettes from the bureau and shook one halfway out of the pack. Her hand shook violently and her shoulders trembled as she lifted the cigarette to her lips.

"Got a light, Sweetie?" she asked. Her voice was quavering.

I shook my head. It made the room spin and for a moment, I thought I was going to pass out. The gas was getting thick now.

"No matches," I mumbled. "Used my last one in the living room. Remember?"

Gloria stared at me blankly. She was shaking all over. "Ted was supposed to be in Aurora," she said almost incoherently. "You were never supposed to come back. When I came back to the apart-

ment that morning, he was here waiting for me. He said he couldn't go through with it."

"So you shot him."

She nodded her head in a jerky up and down movement. She moved in an erratic path to the bedside table and picked up the silver cigarette lighter.

My body stiffened in horror. Oh God—not now, I thought. Just a few more seconds—she couldn't last any longer than that. My eyes followed the lighter as she lifted it to the cigarette. My lips moved wordlessly and I tensed, waiting for the explosion. I sucked in an agonized breath and swayed weakly in the chair as she thumbed the lighter. The click sounded loud and clear in the silent, gas-filled room but there was no explosion. There was not even a spark from the lighter. Again and again, she clocked it but the flint was worn beyond use.

"Goddamit!" she snarled, throwing the lighter across the bed. She tore the cigarette from her lips in sudden anger. Her legs quivered and her whole body lurched from side to side.

"He's dead," she rasped, "and everybody thinks he's you. So I'll still get the money. And when I get rid of you, no one will ever know." She thrust the gun out before the heaving mound of her small round belly and started around the bed toward me.

"This is goodbye, Sweetie. For

keeps," she whispered. Then her knees bent beneath her and her body sagged heavily to the bed. She rolled along the edge of the bed making strange little gasping sounds and dropped to the floor face up with a dull little thud.

I pushed myself out of the chair and staggered uncertainly toward her. She looked almost childlike sprawled grotesquely on the floor with the gun at her fingertips like some strange forbidden toy. I stared down at the whiteness of her flesh and felt a tinge of pity. I reached across her to the bed and jerked the bedspread loose, dragging it over her to cover her nakedness.

My legs collapsed and I went down on my knees beside Gloria. I had to get to the door—get it open. I forced myself to my feet and took one faltering step toward the door. It seemed so very far away. My vision was fading around the edges leaving the door at the end of a long, bright tunnel. Suddenly, the door spun crazily and the floor tilted sharply, slamming me hard in the face and my vision faded entirely leaving only blackness.

9.

When I opened my eyes again, it was like waking from a hideous nightmare—a dream of horror that never happened. But there was a dull ache in my head and a funny

taste in my mouth. I rolled my head on the floor and saw Gloria stirring faintly beneath the bedspread.

"How you feeling, Mr. Harmon?" a voice above me asked.

I turned my head and looked up into the face of Sergeant Franklin. I pushed myself up on my elbows and waited for the dizziness to subside.

"Close," Franklin said softly. "Mighty close."

"Yeah, I guess so," I said. "You know who I am—that I'm Mike Harmon?"

"Yeah. We do now. I had Cupper keeping his eyes and ears open for me. When he heard some commotion up here, he called the police. He also did some eavesdropping outside the apartment door and caught enough to give me a rough idea of your wife's little fiasco."

"How's Gloria?" I asked.

"She's coming around all right. Might have been easier on her if she hadn't."

Gloria moaned just then and I came to a sitting position on the floor and twisted around to look at her. She was sitting up also and clutched the bedspread to her. Two uniformed policemen and one of Franklin's plainclothesmen stood near her. The man kneeling beside her was a doctor. His stethoscope still hung from his neck. He wrapped the bedspread completely around Gloria and picked her up as though she were a small child. He placed her upon the bed.

"I had to kill him, you know!" Gloria blurted suddenly in a high little voice. Her green eyes rolled wildly from the doctor to Sergeant Franklin.

"It was self-defense," she continued. "He was going to kill me!"

The doctor attempted to calm her down but she sat up in the bed and sobbed, "He had a gun. I got it away from him and shot him."

"You're talking about Barrackman?" Franklin asked.

"Yes. He was going to kill me. I shot him in self-defense."

"It wasn't self-defense, Gloria," I said wearily. "It was murder. You knew Wednesday night that he wasn't going to be in Aurora to kill me the next morning. You had him meet you here after you drove me to Aurora because you had already planned to kill him and pass his corpse off as mine. It must have been planned that way because you removed my wallet from my trousers Wednesday night so you could plant it on Barrackman."

"There are an awful lot of things you're going to have a tough time explaining, Mrs. Harmon," Franklin said. "If you had killed Barrackman in self-defense, you wouldn't have had your husband's wallet handy to slip into his pocket. And you wouldn't have insisted that he was your husband. It was premeditated murder, wasn't it?"

Gloria sobbed hysterically. She drew her feet up under her and

stood up suddenly, letting the bedspread fall from her body. She teetered precariously on the soft bed in her high-heeled slippers.

"You're all against me!" she screamed. "I was bored. I wanted to enjoy life—not dry up and wither away in some hick town. Is that a crime?"

"Take it easy, Mrs. Harmon," the doctor said soothingly.

Franklin moved toward the bad and the doctor held out his hand to Gloria and talked to her very calmly.

"Keep away from me!" she screamed. "Don't touch me!" She stepped back and lost her balance on the springy mattress. She fell backwards off the bed with a scream strangling in her throat. The bedside table broke her fall and, as we watched in horror, it tipped and sent her sliding head-first through the large window she had uncovered.

Her terrified scream mingled with the crisp crack of splintering glass and faded abruptly into silence while the glass fragments still fell to the floor with musical little tinkles.

I lurched to my feet and staggered to the jagged window. The ground, three stories below, was lit by the garish spotlight of the streetlight. I could see the long, perfectly formed, pin-up girl legs angling crazily up from the hedge that mercifully shielded the rest of her body. One slipper was miss-

ing and, in the pale glow of the streetlight, the brightly painted toenails looked like five little red berries against the green of the hedge.

I groaned and moved away from the window. My hands felt sticky

and when I looked at them, they were red and wet with blood.

"A lousy way to go," Franklin mumbled gruffly.

I nodded and stumbled across the room toward the bathroom. I knew I was going to be sick.



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*Blake waited nervously for the man to kill him.
Then he heard them — two shots, the job was done.*

BY
AL JAMES



MURDER by Appointment

ANTHONY BLAKE looked uncomfortable. The white templed figure in the expensive suit was out of place in the surroundings. He stared guardedly at the gaudy in-

terior of the cheap Main street bar. The stench of cheap whiskey crawled up his nose. He toyed with the drink in front of him, studying the other occupied booths stretching

into the blackness at the end of the room.

Loud music from a small box recessed in one grimy wall wailed noisily, fighting the crowd for attention.

Satisfied that no one was paying any attention to him, Blake swallowed the drink in a single gulp. He had to admit it tasted good. He selected a cigarette from a gold case and lighted it absentmindedly, studying the remains of whiskey clinging to the edge of the glass. There'd been a time when he'd have been damn glad to have it. But now he was used to the finer things of life. The finer things—crap. Blake scowled through the smoke. What the hell were they worth?

He shifted in his seat so he could see the front door. Frosted ice traced a pattern across the streaked glass. Outside snow flakes pelted the window. He squinted at the men sitting along the bar. Machines, he thought. Take a drink, ogle the women, another drink, strip the girls—and so on into the night. What a hell of a way to live.

Was his way any better? Blake sucked at the expensive cigarette, pondering the answer. A big house on Lake Shore drive. Friends who patted your fanny every step of the way. Fakes. Every damned bit of it.

He thought back to the days when he was just a field engineer for the government. Seventy-five a

week. That was it. Enough to get drunk on, take a woman to bed and eat regularly. No worries. Just living.

Blake whistled down the big busted waitress and dropped a five on the table. She flew to the bar without touching the floor and scampered back with his fresh drink, scooping up the money before he changed his mind.

Blake checked his watch. Quarter after ten. It was growing late. Rose would be getting worried. He discarded the thought savagely. What the hell did it matter what she thought—now? He looked towards the front door again. A drunk staggered through the opening, his tattered coat sprinkled with snow.

Blake swore and swallowed his drink. Maybe the whole idea was crazy.

"This the third booth from the rear?"

Startled, Blake looked up from the table to the man who'd just spoken. A slight smile spread across the stranger's face as he accepted the examination. His topcoat was draped across one arm of the silk suit that moulded itself to the athletic body.

Blake hesitated, then said, "Yes. It's the third booth. Who are you?"

The man's eyes laughed. But the thin lips were serious. "I was supposed to meet a friend here." He put extra accent on 'friend'.

Blake looked at his watch. "What time was this meeting supposed to

take place?" he asked guardedly.

The man sat down. The motion was fluid. Like a can of mollasses spilling across the seat. "Ten o'clock." He lighted a cigar, broke the match in half and carefully placed it in the ash tray. "But my car stalled in the snow."

Blake snuffed out his cigarette and replaced it with a fresh one, glancing around the dimly lighted room to see if anyone was listening. "You know Steve French?"

The nod was barely perceptible. Blake breathed a little easier. He studied the middle aged man with new interest. "You don't look at all like what I expected."

The man laughed. It was a sprinkling of icy snowflakes in the air. "What'd you expect?" he said easily. "A drunken slob in a trench-coat?"

Blake shook his head, nervously tapping ashes into the tray. "Maybe. I don't know. This is the first time I've ever done anything like this."

The stranger's face was impassive as he drew at the cigarette. "It usually is." He paused, his dark eyes piercing at Blake through the smoke clouded room. "One thing. How'd you know about me?"

Blake had expected the question. He was prepared. "Steve French mentioned your name."

The man across the table glowered. "French talks too much for a private detective."

"Expensive talk," Blake agreed, adding, "For me."

"You receive what you pay for," the men said slowly. "Now what's the job?"

Blake tried to control his nervousness so it wouldn't show. It wasn't much use. He felt beads of sweat gathering under his hair. He steadied his voice. "I want you to kill a man."

The stranger smiled evenly, his teeth sparkling in the semi-darkness. "That figures," he said. "Just why the hell else would I be here?" He lighted another cigar. "Who?"

Blake wiped his forehead with a silk handkerchief. "Me."

The stranger startled, his eyes clouding suspiciously. "What the hell you trying to hand me?" he spat angrily.

Blake shook his head. "Nothing at all. It's true. I want you to kill me."

"Why?"

Blake smiled. It was a forced action. "I can't tell you that."

The man across from him waved to the waitress. "I need a drink," he explained.

Blake waited until it came before he continued. "I've got it all figured out. How much will it cost me?"

The taller man stroked his chin, thinking. "This is a little different job. I'll want all the money in advance."

"How much?"

Blake reached into his breast pocket and brought out a wallet, carefully counting out four one thousand dollar bills onto the table.

The man accepted the money and leaned forward. "Look, Blake," he began.

"How'd you know my name?"

The man shook his head. "Hell, you're a big figure in Chicago. But that isn't what I want to talk about. What about your wife, Rose?"

Blake felt the nape of his neck reddening. "Just what about her?" he said controlling himself. Deep down he was gratified that his suspicions were right.

"I thought you were so crazy about her. Hell, the gossip columns are full of it. You go nuts if she even looks at another man. So why get yourself killed?" He paused, sipping at his drink. "It's not that I don't want the money but . . ."

"But what?" Blake cut in.

The man shrugged. "Never mind. It'll keep."

"You certainly don't act like I thought you would," Blake admitted, smiling wryly. "You talk as if you've got a conscience."

The man tipped an ash into the tray, glancing to the front of the bar where a drunk was being tossed into the snow. "You got a lot of crazy ideas, Blake," he said. "This is a business with me. I do what I do neat and clean. Now give me the layout on what you want done."

"It's simple enough," Blake said. He placed a sheet of paper on the table, pointing at the sketch. "This is my house. There are a lot of grounds surrounding it. There's a

door at the rear opening onto the patio. Beyond this is my study. Tonight."

"Tonight?" the man cut in.

"Yes, tonight," Blake repeated.

"I want to get it over fast."

The tall man shrugged, continuing to study the paper.

"At one o'clock I'll step out of this door. You will be behind the bushes about forty feet away. There won't be any light. Can you be accurate under those conditions?"

"Hell, yes," the man snorted. "It'll be child's play. But how do I get away? I can't come back onto Lake Shore with all hell breaking loose."

Blake smiled. "That's easy. To the rear of the study there's a fence. I'll leave the gate unlocked. You should be able to get down the alley in plenty of time."

"Seems pretty good," the man admitted. He hesitated, then added. "You sure you wouldn't want me to know why you're doing this?"

Blake lighted a cigarette, glancing around at the crowded bar. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt," he said at last, pulling out a clipping from his pocket and handling it to the man. "Read this."

The figure scanned it rapidly, then glanced at Blake. "I don't get it," he admitted. "This is just about some dam that busted and killed a flock of people. What's it to do with you?"

Blake shrugged sadly. "That dam

was designed by me. I'm responsible for all those deaths."

"So what?" the man snorted.

"It means I'm dead broke. There are a million dollars worth of lawsuits on my desk. Ten years ago my wife and I set up untouchable annuities. When one of us died the other received the money. This way she won't have to go back and live in a one room hole."

The man opened his mouth to say something, instead shuffling to his feet. "I'll be going. See you at one."

Blake watched the retreating back, then drained his drink. "Damn him," he spat under his breath.

"Anthony, you seem pre-occupied."

Blake looked up from the book at his wife sitting across the rug. The clock behind her head stood at twelve-thirty. He shook his head. "It's nothing. Just tired."

The woman smiled. "Let's go to bed," she suggested, getting to her feet and moving in front of the fireplace. The shadow of her full figure showed through the thin dressing gown.

"In a little while," Blake said. "Let me finish this chapter."

But he couldn't concentrate. He glanced up at the woman warming her hands. The low cut gown dipped forward, revealing the full breasts. Her face, young and

smooth, reflected the flickering flames.

Blake swore to himself. Why was he feeling sorry for her? He couldn't deny that he was still in love with her. He'd been a fool to marry a woman ten years younger than himself. But he'd given her everything. Where the hell had he missed? He was jealous, sure. He had a right to be. He couldn't step out of the house with Rose without some slob leering at her, stripping off the expensive clothes he'd bought her. And she loved it. And now that the money had run out how could he hold her?

Blake glanced at the clock. Fifteen minutes to go. It would serve her right. He thought back to the scene in Steve Fench's office. Thinking of it made him sick. Fench was shabby but he was a hell of a good detective.

"I hate to tell you this, Mr. Blake," he'd said in that obnoxious twang. "But your wife's been stepping out on you."

Blake remembered how indignant he'd been. But Fench was persistent. "Twice this week she's met this guy. The first time at the Blue Angel and again last night." The man had hesitated, almost afraid to continue. "She gave him money last night. You better check your account."

And Blake had. It was short a considerable amount. Just at the time when he'd needed it most.

The print was a blur as his mind

thought back. How the hell could she do a thing like that to him? He'd pressed Fench for details. And he got them.

"The man's a real bum, Mr. Blake," he'd said. "The kind some women really go for. You just can't tell about dames. They can pick some real creeps. This guy's a pro gunman. Never caught but the cops would sure like to get their hands on him. It looks to me like she knew him before you was married and they figured you as a prime sucker. If I was you I'd do something about it."

And he had. Blake smiled grimly to himself. It would be real touching. He glanced at the clock. Three minutes to one. He snapped the book shut and got to his feet.

Rose turned to face him, the smile on her face warm. "Let's get upstairs, dear," she suggested, adding, "But I have something to do first."

Blake forced a smile. "I'd like you to do me a favor first," he said, trying to appear cheerful. Sweat gathered at the roots of his hair as he continued. "I left some papers in the study. Would you get them? I'm afraid I'm catching cold and don't want to take a chance going outside."

The woman smiled. "Of course. It'll just take me a minute." She started for the hall but Blake stopped her, reaching for his topcoat draped across the couch. "You'd better wear this. You aren't

appropriately dressed for snow."

Rose laughed. A sweet sound blended with the crackling of the fireplace. "Thanks," she said simply, sliding into the oversized coat.

His stomach clawing at his throat, Blake watched the figure vanish into the darkness, listening to the click of the heels on the wood. When he knew she was near the kitchen he picked up the phone. "Get me the police," he whispered into the receiver.

The seconds turned into hours as Blake stood with his back to the flames. The clock struck once. Outside the wind howled off the lake. He listened intently, the suspense wrapping him in a quivering blanket.

And then he heard them. Two shots, distant and faint above the howl of the storm.

Blake smiled. It was working perfectly. He moved to the bar and poured a drink. He needed it. At the same time he heard sirens, distant and closing fast.

He heard something else and spun to face the entrance to the hall. The man he'd met at the bar stood there, his face livid with rage, the gun in his hand held steady on Blake's stomach.

"You dirty yellow bum," the man spat, snow flipping off his black hair as he talked. "Thanks for unlocking the gate."

Blake froze, the drink halfway to his lips. This was something he hadn't counted on. He'd figured the

gunman would panic. He hadn't. He tried to control the tremor in his voice. "You better get the hell out of here," he snapped. "You've just killed your girlfriend, my wife. That should give the cops plenty of proof to wrap you up."

The gunman didn't move, his eyes ablaze as he studied the figure next to the bar. "You slob," he spat. "So that's what you think." The finger tightened on the trigger. Blake felt his stomach flip. The gunman went on, his lips tight. "I been paid to kill and I intend to do just that."

Blake moved his tongue across bone dry lips. "You've already done what you were paid for."

The man shook his head slowly. "You got it wrong, mister," he snapped. "I'm only half finished."

Cold feet climbed Blake's spine.

The sirens were closer now. How long could he stall? "You and my wife had a perfect scheme," he snapped. "Only it didn't work did it? You two thought you could kill me and get away with it." Gaining confidence, Blake moved towards the man. "You just killed your meal ticket."

The gunman smiled without mirth. "Blake," he said slowly. "I feel sorry for you. Your wife hired me to kill her so you'd have the trust fund. I did just that. She loved you enough to die for you. You aren't worth it. Now I'm going to give you just what you paid for."

Blake's stomach drained onto the carpet. He turned to run but his feet were glued to the floor. The sirens roared in his ears. So did something else. He felt pain stab at him and suck him under.



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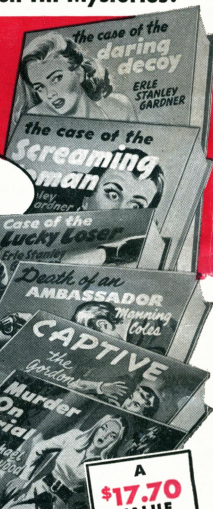
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