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MAGAZINE



DEAD MAN'S HOLIDAY

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by **LESLIE T. WHITE**

BLOOD ON MY DOORSTEP

A TALE OF
HAUNTING MYSTERY
by **BRUNO FISCHER**

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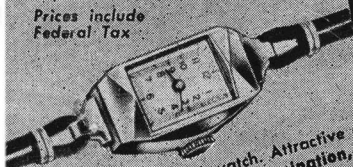
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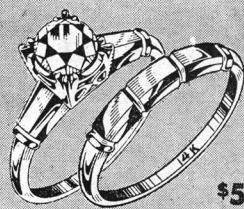
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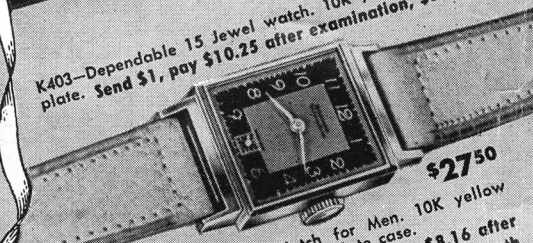


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MAGAZINE

Vol. 6

Contents for January, 1945

No. 2

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THREE NOVELETTES

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THE WITNESS CHAIR.....A Department 6

Talking your way into trouble.

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THE WITNESS CHAIR

WORDS spoken carelessly have a way of coming back like haunting ghosts to bring disaster to the speaker. Carlo Cain had more than once, in bars or elsewhere, boasted lightly of his attraction for women and how ruthless he would be in getting rid of them.

And now these words were coming back to him as he stood in the basement room of the lodging house, looking down with startled eyes at the body of a woman.

MURDERED! The walls of the squalid room housing the dead woman seemed to fling back the word in his face, a face which, mirrored in a spotted glass, stared pale and drawn at him, with terror etched upon it.

Outside on the crowded beaches of the seaside resort, there was noise, gaiety, happiness.

But here there was only a man and a dead woman. And words were coming fast from the past, words that someone would remember and use against him. He was lost. Two times already he had been in prison. Who would believe the word of an ex-convict? Were there footsteps now on the stone stair, the steady tramp of those who were coming to take him to a cell and in time from thence to where the hangman stood with a rope?

No, anything but that. He was young. He had not yet drained life of all its pleasures. He must live. The dead woman must not give her damning evidence. He advanced towards the staring corpse. Murder had trapped him. He would escape the trap. . . .

Early in June the discovery of the torso of a woman in a trunk at the baggage room of the local railroad station set the town abuzz. Police went over lists of missing women. One was the wife of a man giving the name of Mr. Batson. She had been last seen on May 7th. Mr. Batson said she had run away to France. But he moved on May 8th, with a large black trunk.

July 14th, the police found Mr. Batson. Suspicion was lifted when he said his wife was in her forties. The torso in the trunk was that of a woman in her twenties. Next day, however, two detectives decided to go to see Batson at his lodgings. They were told he had just gone but had left a trunk. There was a strange, significant odor in the room, and the two men cut the rope and opened the trunk. Within was the body of another woman, who, Scotland Yard's medical experts said, had died of a fractured skull.

Next morning one of Scotland Yard's Flying Squad picked up Batson, alias Carlo Cain, alias several other names, in the neighborhood of London. Charged with the murder of his wife, he said he was innocent.

But when he stood in the prisoner's dock there seemed not the ghost of a chance for him. He had forged a telegram to the dead woman's sister saying she had taken a theatrical engagement and was going abroad. He had taken several friends to the room in which stood the trunk with its ghastly contents, had even given one of them some of

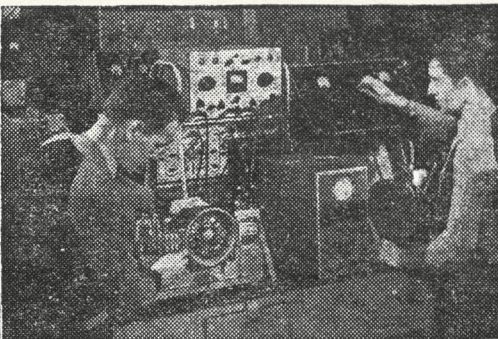
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his wife's clothes. He had asked another to wash a bloodstained shirt. Then the prisoner took the stand in his own defence.

He told of his domestic life and how on that fatal night he could get no answer when he rang the bell, and had made his entry through a window. He heard no sound and called his wife by name. Getting no answer he went into the bedroom, and there he found her dead, blood on her mouth.

He was beside himself with worry, forced to live in hideous companionship with the dreadful thing in the trunk, questioned about it by friends, having to think up new lies, tortured, tormented even more than if he had actually killed his wife.

The jury was out two hours.

"What is your verdict?"

"Not guilty!"

Twelve just men had looked beyond the appearance of crime and found a poor weak mortal but no murderer. Things had not been what they had seemed to be.

WHAT might be called the strange case of the severed hand is a classic example of what a damning interpretation may be placed on a few words spoken in the heat of anger.

George Manners and Edmund Lascelles were two country squires in the small village of Beckfield, Middlesex, England. For four years Manners had been paying court to Lascelles' sister Eva. The young lady was willing, but not so her brother who was also her guardian and the trustee of her estate. He forbade Manners' meeting his sister or calling at the house.

The trembling servants in the hall heard their master bellow with fury:

"Get out of this house. I'll not give my hand to a blackguard. Get out, get out."

There was a momentary pause and then they heard Squire Manners answer:

"Very well, but I give you warning, whether you will it or not, I marry Eva. And as for your hand, the next time we meet, I'll not ask for your right hand, I'll take it."

Manners left the house of his enemy with fury in his heart, but as he walked in the night, his anger began to leave him. All he could think of was the girl he wished to marry, and how he might induce her to elope with him to his aunts and there be wedded. He kept walking with his thoughts, until close to midnight, when suddenly he realized he must be turning home. Rain had begun to fall.

All at once he stumbled over an object lying in the road, stumbled and fell on his knees. Reaching out his hand he felt the body of a man. He had no light with him, so getting up on his feet he began to call loudly.

He kept on until he saw the faint light of a lantern weaving its way from a farmhouse. When the man carrying it came near he recognized him as James Crosby, a laborer.

"Thank God," said Manners. "Hold your light here."

"That I will, Squire Manners . . . Heaven help us all, this be Squire Lascelles. Be he drunk?"

"No," said Manners. "He is dead—dead!"

The dead man's hand had been hacked off at the wrist.

Manners was arrested.

The prosecution dwelt heavily on Manners' words so hideously confirmed by the reality of the severed hand. Crosby told of hearing cries for help and of finding Manners standing over the body of Lascelles. He believed it was Lascelles who had called for help.

George Manners was sentenced to death by hanging. He had by now lost all hope, but not so his friends. They were successful in obtaining commutation of the sentence to life imprisonment. They went to even greater lengths for their friend. They hired a couple of London detectives to come to the neighborhood disguised as farm hands. The two men started discussions of the crime in the local taverns and gradually they cut down the list of those who had any grudge against the late Squire Lascelles to one of the tenants of his farms, Charles Parker.

So, quietly, when all were asleep, the two detectives began to search in the barns and dig around the farm. It took weeks but one night when they tackled a heap of rubbish they came on what they sought, the missing hand and a bloodstained knife.

Parker was at once roused from his bed and confronted with the evidence of his crime. He was so stunned that he broke down and confessed. He gave the detectives a large diamond ring which he had hidden in the barrel of a shot gun.

He had been out tending to a sick cow when he ran into Lascelles. The squire began to press him for the overdue rent and jeered at him for being a worthless fellow until something snapped in his brain. He had a knife in his hand and he sprang at his tormentor and stabbed him in the throat. Lascelles fought him, but he beat him down with a cudgel and kept striking until all at once he realized what he was doing. Lascelles lay at his feet, motionless. He noticed a glint on his hand, and bending, saw the ring. He made up his mind to take it, sell it, and make for America. But when he tried to remove the ring it was too tight on the finger, so he hurriedly hacked off the hand.

Parker was tried, found guilty and hanged. Manners was released and sometime later he married Eva.

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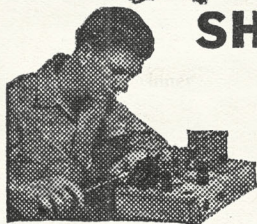
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DEAD MAN'S HOLIDAY

By
Leslie T.
White

CHAPTER ONE

Last Place On Earth

SAM WIRE'S big hands began to tremble with excitement, so he knew he'd better rest a moment. He sat back on the edge of the lower bunk and dribbled a little Duke's Mixture onto a brown paper and twisted the ends. In the adjacent cell, a phonograph wailed something about a *Japanese Sandman*. Sam grinned crookedly. A swell piece to be playing these days! But the poor old Portagee didn't know any better; he'd been locked up so long he was stir-simple. Anyway, you





*The new Sam, recreated by
four years of hell, took
over. . . .*

didn't worry about such trivia as war in San Jacinto penitentiary; you thought only of escape, if you could still think at all.

Sam laid his cigarette on the rim of the wash-basin, and went back to his task. He had made an ingenious cutting tool of a diamond-tipped phonograph needle, a nail, and a piece of string. One end of the string was attached

Nick Chastain, who ruled San Carlos' crime, had a face like a map of Sam Wire's four years in hell—and one Sam could borrow for a holiday from a coffin claimed by too many corpses!

to the nail, which Sam held steadily in a tiny pit in the iron door of his cell. The hard-tipped needle was tied to the other end of the string, about three inches from the nail. By revolving the needle against the door, Sam had tediously cut a six inch circle in the metal, near the lock. It was hard work, and it took time, but in the past seven weeks, he had almost penetrated the door.

When the Portagee's phonograph stopped, Sam stopped. He made a dun-colored paste of water and floor dust and plugged the cut. His hands started to shake again. Bobo Jenkins, his cell mate, lowered the confession magazine he was reading and leaned out of the upper bunk.

"Don't you ever get enough, Sam?"

Sam secreted his implement behind a pipe. "I'm through, Bobo!" he said softly. "Through! I can punch it out with my fist." He took a restless turn around the cell and picked up his half-smoked butt.

Bobo made a sighing noise through his false teeth. He was a thin, dried out little man in his sixties, with sunken cheeks from going without a plate for too long, and wiry snow-white brows. His eyes were bad, and constant squinting had puckered the skin around them. At one time, he had been tops in the engraving racket, but when the Federal men began to recognize his handiwork and salted him away on a counterfeiting rap, he turned to forgery on his release. After a few lush seasons, however, his eyes began to trouble him. He muffed a few good takes and did another jolt. He dropped down the scale to writing checks. He made a killing in that, too, and kited enough wall-paper from Seattle to Miami to retire. But somehow it had slipped through his fingers, and when he was nailed in California, his prior convictions finished him. A tough D.A. sent him up for life under the Habitual Criminal Law. Now, resigned to the inevitable, he spent his time studying the fate of girls gone wrong.

He avoided Sam's eyes and rustled the magazine in his hand. "This dame, now, she fell for a married man, an' . . ."

Sam jerked the tattered magazine from the old man's hand and tossed it on the table.

"Forget dames. Talk to me. Didn't you hear me say I was through?"

Bobo sidled out of his bunk like a tired spider and sat with Sam on the lower one. Sam built him a smoke.

"I don't wanna talk about it," whined the old convict. "You're crazy, Sam! The screws'll blow you in half before you get out of this block. If you do make it into the yard, the gun-bulls in the tower'll git you. Lissen, boy, you ain't got a chance in a million. God A'mighty, I've seen more'n a dozen kids chopped down in my time."

Sam laughed and clapped the old man on the leg. "We've been all over that, Bobo. Four years has been too long. Four more, and I'd be as stir-simple as the Portagee." He cocked his head, listening for the cat-footed tread of the guard, then went on, "I'll make it tonight when they change shifts at midnight. The fresh bulls won't have time to get their eyes used to the darkness. I'll make it. It's you I'm worried about, Bobo. Come with me."

Bobo wagged his head. "Ha! Not me, kid. Not a chance. I wouldn't go if I was sure we could cut it."

"Why?"

"Lot's o' reasons. In the first place, I can't swim enough to buck them currents to the mainland. But that ain't it. Look—I know what it's like to be hunted; you don't. You lie out in the rain, hungry, cold, scared of the sound of your own heart poundin'. You can't trust nobody. Then there's always a dame. Why, I was just readin' about a dame who . . ."

"Never mind that," Sam interrupted. "Remember this—whether I make it or not, they'll take it out on you."

"So what?"

"I don't want it that way."

Bobo shrugged. "There ain't no choice. I'm not rat enough to squeal, an' I can't talk you out of it."

"No, you can't talk me out of it."

"Okay. So, I get thirty days in the hole."

"On bread and water."

"I've done it before, an' I'll do it again. That don't worry me."

"Well, it worries me," Sam grumbled. "I don't like it. I've got a swell angle when we get out of here. There's a certain guy, a big-shot, who'll be tickled . . ."

Bobo stopped him. "Nix! I don't want to know nothin' about it, boy. What I don't hear, I can't repeat."

Sam knew the futility of argument with the old man, so he gave up. He rose and studied his own reflection in the wavy mirror above the wash-stand.

"Tell me, on the level, Bobo: Have I changed much since I was thrown into this hell four years ago?"

Bobo wiped his watery eyes and angled for a better look. "Yep, you're different, Sam," he temporized. "Mebbe fer the better, I dunno. You was a nice scrawny, wide-eyed kid who talked too much. How old're you, son?"

"Twenty-three."

"No kiddin'? Geez, you look ten years older'n that now. Hm'n! You've hardened, kid, inside an' out. I hates to see a lad get hard. It shows in his eyes, most. It's a look the bulls an' coppers spot first. You're marked, Sam."

Sam stared at his image. "It'll wear off," he reasoned. But he wondered if it would. He stopped smiling. In the glass, he saw a grey man; grey clothes, grey skin. There was no surplus fat on the hard, bitter face. The eyes were pointed and bright as the chip-diamond of his needle. The nose and chin were almost excessively firm. The high forehead leading up to the tawny, close-cropped curls, redeemed the face somewhat. He tried a smile, and the bitterness vanished. He made a mental note of that phenomena.

"Maybe I've just grown up," he offered.

"Maybe," grunted Bobo, and climbed back up to his berth.

Sam reached under his mattress and pulled out an old magazine. It fell open naturally to a full-page portrait of a man. Sam took it over to the mirror and compared the portrait with his own image, as he had a hundred times in the past. Except for a certain dissolute quality and a difference in ages, the picture might have been of his own face. It was not. He tore out the page, shredded it methodically, and flushed it down the toilet. After that, he stretched out in his bunk.

"Call me at eleven thirty," he called up to Bobo. "So I'll have time to say good-by."

IN THE new cell blocks, the doors were made of steel bars, opened by a central control, but here in the old block, the panels were solid iron, each with its own old-fashioned lock. When Sam had first cooked up his scheme for escape, nearly eight months ago, he had wrangled a transfer to this old block. Now his plans had matured, and he was set for the crushout.

It was no trouble to pry away the disc he had cut in the door, and picking the lock was a cinch. The wrench came when he had to say good-by to Bobo. Sam was surprised how deep was his affection for the old forger. Damned if his eyes didn't smart when they shook hands. Both knew it was for the last time. Sam was on a one-way junket; either he'd cut it, or he'd wind up in the morgue.

Sam waited until the new guard passed along the catwalk on his first round, then eased himself into the corridor. A hundred convicts could see him, yet that gave him no worry. No one of them would dare raise an alarm; a rat wouldn't last forty-eight hours in San Jacinto. He paused a moment, and the corridor was so quiet it startled him. He saw Bobo's pallid face watching him from the small circular opening in the cell door. He smiled and padded on his way.

He scrambled to the roof of the old block, and, as he expected, found a skylight ajar. That deal had cost Sam a six months' supply of tobacco; cheap enough. There was a fog outside, but not as much as he had prayed for.

Well, he couldn't turn back now, even if he wanted to.

He edged along the roof, and lay belly-flat until a car drove up outside the main gate and honked to attract the tower-bull. Some guard coming home from a double-billed show in the City. Sam set his jaw. Some day soon, *he'd* be going to city shows—if luck held.

He chose the moment to drop off the roof and dart across the open space to the shadows of the high stone wall. He crouched there, staring up. The top of the wall was brightly illuminated by floodlights, broken by darkened towers where the gun-guards sat with thirty-thirties cocked. Sam hated them; hated more the thing they stood for. Eight hours daily, year in and year out, they waited like tireless cats, tensed for the moment when some fool-hardy con would try the wall. Sam had his own grudges, but he couldn't imagine sitting for years waiting to kill a man he didn't even know.

But that wall had to be scaled; there was no other out. Sam cursed the gun-bulls thoroughly, and the outburst relieved his tension. For four years he had been studying this wall, and he knew his spot. He removed his shoes and, with a broken file, chiseled out enough mortar for a toe-hold. It took him the better part of an hour before he worked up to where he could reach the rim with his hands.

He clung there a moment, dreading to run the gauntlet. The old Sam came back to haunt him; the wide-eyed kid that Bobo had spoken about. He was scared. Then the new Sam, recreated by four years of hell, took over. He gave a growl that was a half-prayer, half-oath—and heaved himself into the light.

In the silence, the crash of the rifle was stunning. An unseen hand seemed to pluck at Sam's shirt and nearly jerked him back into the prison yard. The light blinded him so that he couldn't see the swirling black waters below. Momentarily, he lost his sense of direction. Then he bent his knees and precipitated his body into space. . . .

The rifles barked twice more before the water took him in. The cold of it knocked the breath out of him, but he stayed under until his lungs could stand no more. When he surfaced, the sirens were screaming. Inquisitive fingers of lights laid a pattern on the water, searching for him. He submerged hastily, swimming with long, cautious strokes so as not to mar the black surface.

Somehow, he started to think of old Bobo Jenkins, sitting back there in the cell, haunted by the sounds of siren and barking guns. Bobo would be taking it worse than Sam—much worse. A good guy, Bobo. Sam would never forget him—if he lived to remember anything. Bobo had taught him a thousand tricks of forgery in the endless hours of their confine-

ment, because it was a necessary facet in the bright diamond of Sam's plan. But it was well that Bobo had stayed. He couldn't have made that wall. Bobo had been locked up too long, and now his only interest lay in the stories of girls gone wrong. . . .

The powerful currents were sweeping Sam towards the point. The tower guards knew that; the spotlights set the water on fire, and a machine gun beat a tireless tattoo. But Sam Wire knew about that current, too, and instead of fighting it, as others had before him, he swam with it, working in close to the wall. Neither the spotlights nor the machine guns could be depressed enough to reach him there. He smiled bitterly. That's what planning could do for a man.

The siren died away, as if tired, then began to shriek again in a rising crescendo. . . .

SAM spent the balance of the night and the following day in the hold of an ancient schooner, long abandoned on the mud flats. Twice, a police launch came by, but did not stop. In the late afternoon, the sun edged through the fog, making it warm without too much visibility. Sam stripped, and while his clothes were drying on the rotting deck, he ate a few of the shellfish he found clinging to the hulk. The fresh water contained in them revived him. When the sun disappeared beyond the Gate, he slid into the water and struck out on the long haul to the mainland.

When he finally reached Valencia, he crawled under a fishing pier. Resting there, he heard the steam whistle of a war plant mark the end of the swing shift. Midnight! Sam grinned. He'd been free just twenty-four hours, and the first hurdle was over.

He stayed hidden until the defense workers cleared off the streets, and when at last the old town settled down, he made his way up the main drag. The sight of so many young men in uniform surprised him, and twice he passed little groups of shore patrols. He had a sudden desire to get into the Army; to bury himself among the millions in the comforting non-entity of a uniform. But a moment's reflection told him that was not for him. His fingerprints would land him back in prison.

In the Swiss-Italian section of the town, he found an old second-hand store. The rear door gave him no trouble, and he traded his sodden prison garb for a nondescript brown suit and a pair of worn tennis shoes. He stumbled over an old crutch which gave him an idea, and when he made the highway, it won him a ride on a fruit truck bound for Los Lobos. The driver was a good little guy who had recently come out from Arkansas. He was talkative, so Sam let him ramble, without paying too much attention.

"We come out here to Calyforny to help

win this war," the driver explained. "My wife's a riveter, my darter's a guard, an' my boy's in the Coast Guard. But me—they wouldn't gimme no defense job."

"Tough," muttered Sam. He wished he'd remember to steal a pack of smokes someplace. He could use a few good drags.

"Why?" babbled the driver, as if Sam had asked. "I don't mind tellin' ya; I ain't 'shamed. I done time, see. It's all over an' done fer, but still, they won't gimme a job."

Sam gave him a suspicious glance, but the poor boob was leveling.

"Yes'r, I done time. Fer peddlin' hooch, an', mister, it was good stuff, if'n I do say it." He detailed his formula. "The bes' people was me customers, even the D.A. himself; the very guy what sent me up. I can't figger why they won't let me work in no defense plant."

"Tough," Sam repeated. The man's whine was grating on his nerves.

"Ah, hell, I don't care. This is a job, anyhow. Say, bub, how fur you a-goin'?"

"You said you were going to Los Lobos?"

"Sure, but—"

"That's where I'm going."

"Yeah, but—"

"That's all of it," Sam cut him short.

"Well, hell, I was tryin' to be neighborly," grumbled the driver, aggrieved.

It was a thirteen mile walk to San Carlos, and Sam reached the outskirts by dawn. It was too late to do anything, so he spent the day in a culvert, alternately dozing and rehearsing his act. For the past year, he had mentally written and revised the script until it had seemed perfection itself. But now that the time had come for the first and only performance, he felt restless and uneasy. There would be no repeat; if he muffed his first chance, he was through. As it started to rain, Bobo's warning came back to him. *I know what it's like to be hunted . . . you lay out in the rain, hungry and cold, scared of the sound of your own heart poundin' . . .*

By dusk, the culvert began to flow, so Sam crawled into an orchard where he sat hunched and miserable until sometime after midnight. A small inner voice kept urging him to scam and hop a freight east, any place away from San Carlos, but Sam stubbornly closed his mind against it. Gambling had got him into trouble in the first place, and he was determined to gamble on this one chance—a chance in a million—to come up on top. If the wheel of fate dealt him a double-O, he was set for life; if not, he'd take it without a squawk. So far, he had two full days of freedom. He shivered. Bobo called the shots, up to now. He half-yearned for the comparative warmth of his old cell.

Walking again, he felt better. The crutch was a damned nuisance, but a good blind, so

he clung to it. Passing an alley, the smell of fresh coffee tantalized him to the point where he almost tried to panhandle a cup. But he resisted the impulse, and continued across town.

He came to the big house at last. His knees began to shake so hard he really found use for the crutch. The house was dark, but Sam had expected that. He scrunched down behind the hedge to wait. He could afford to wait, now that he had reached his objective. His performance could not start until his audience had arrived.

A little later, he heard a siren wail somewhere uptown. It gave him an unpleasant constriction in his diaphragm, even though he assured himself it could not be for him. San Carlos was the last place on earth the law would expect to find Sam Wire.

CHAPTER TWO

When There's a Face There's a Way . . .

IT WAS a perfect California night. The sky was clear and mottled with stars, and the rain had brought out the perfume of flowers and the rich scent of the earth. It was cold, clean.

Sam, crouched behind the hedge, was torn by conflicting emotions. Perhaps it would be

more accurate to say that there were two Sam Wires: One, the boy who desired to escape from all the evil and misery that had come to him, and sought only peace and happiness; and the other Sam, older, harder, who was guided by four years of pent-up hate and wanted revenge against what he considered an injustice. Sure, he'd been guilty—to a degree. But not for what they'd hung on him.

He jerked back into the shadows as a car turned the corner. Lights swept across the carefully manicured lawn as the machine swerved towards the curb and stopped. A car door slammed; then two men walked up the flag-stones to the house. Even in the semi-darkness, Sam could mark the difference in the pair. One was tall, smooth-limbed, clean appearing; the other squat, shambling, monkey-armed. The tall man keyed his way inside the mansion, and the shaggy gorilla shuffled back to the car.

When the machine had gone, Sam crawled out of hiding and sat watching the house. A light appeared in a second floor room. Sam carefully counted off the windows from the rear, orienting the room in his mind. There must be no mistakes. Satisfied, he settled back. He looked at his hands, flexed them and grinned. They were strong hands; they could be lethal.

After the lights went out, Sam waited an-

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other half hour for the house to settle down. It was not difficult to wait; he had learned patience in San Jacinto. So he spent his time conning the place. There was a trumpet-vine reaching close to the window he sought, and he was tempted to use it. But eventually he decided on his original plan to use the back door. He had never been in this house, but he had dreamed of entering it for so long that it seemed almost familiar ground.

A thin flat of steel, inserted back of the moulding opposite the lock, opened the door. Standing inside in the utter darkness, Sam had his first twinge of fear. He hadn't been in any kind of a house in over four years, and there were strange odors that disturbed him. He skirted the kitchen, recognizing it by the smell, and eased his way along a hall. *Funny*, Sam thought, *how a guy's palms will sweat*.

He went on up and when he stepped onto the landing, he knew he was lost. In desperation, he eased open a door and sidled into a room. He stood absolutely motionless, trying to sense if this was the right spot . . . *Scared of the sound of your own heart poundin'!*

The scent of perfume came to him, opening old wounds. He heard gentle breathing off to his left. Panic nearly betrayed him. He waited, wondering what he should do. Then rage welled up, and he knew he'd never quit his search until this thing was done. This was the wrong room. He backed into the corridor.

He leaned against the wall and exhaled heavily, trying to stop the crazy thudding of his own heart. Somehow, in all his methodical scheming, he had not reckoned on Nick Chastain's having a wife. *I ought to scam*, the gentler Sam argued, *I ought to get the hell out of San Carlos and stay out!* But the old hates were stronger, so he tiptoed down the hall and tried another door.

This time he knew he had reached the trail's end. The aroma of Scotch and good Havana smoke told him that. He turned slowly, as his ears located the irregular breathing of the man in the bed. The hard Sam took over. His heart steadied. He actually smiled as he groped along the wall for the light switch.

He flipped the switch, calling softly, "Nick!"

THE man's head reared off the pillow and blinked unbelievably at Sam Wire over the edge of the sheet. His features were a blueprint of fear. Then with incredible swiftness, he whipped a snub-nosed revolver from under his pillow.

Sam said, "Take it easy, Chastain! I'm not armed."

The face, framed against the snowy linen like a disembodied entity, fascinated Sam. It looked older than the picture in the magazine

had led him to believe; there were salt-and-pepper patches on the temples, and little purple-rimmed pouches under the eyes. Yet essentially, it was Sam's own face staring back at him from a different world.

Chastain found his voice. "What in hell are you doing here? Who are you?" With his empty hand, he felt for the telephone on the bed-stand.

"Hold it!" Sam cautioned. "You've nothing to be afraid of. Hear what I've got to say. After that, you can call the cops—if you still want to."

"What's to stop me calling them now?"

"Nothing."

Chastain kept his hand on the instrument. "Talk fast," he warned.

Sam turned his back and crossed to the dresser. He picked up a small hand mirror and tossed it onto the bed.

"Take a gander in that," he suggested. "Then look at me."

"So what? I've never seen you before."

"You've seen me every day of your life, Nick. *I'm you!*"

"Crazy as a loon!" growled Chastain, and picked up the receiver.

Sam felt the sweat ooze onto his forehead and dampen his palms. This was the moment on which he had built all his hopes; a play that had to be completed to perfection, and he was bungling it.

"What I'm trying to tell you," he said hoarsely, "is that we're dead ringers for each other! Can't you grasp the possibilities of that?"

Chastain hesitated, then lowered the receiver back onto its prong. He picked up the mirror, stole a quick glance at his reflection, then scowled at Sam. *It's registering*, thought Sam prayerfully.

"No, I don't get it! Why'd you come sneaking into my house like a thief?"

"I am a thief," Sam admitted dryly. "A thief and a gambler. But so are you. Look—I just crushed out of San Jacinto two days ago. I came directly here to offer you a good deal." He paused to let the impact of that soak in. "Nick, I know a lot about you; I've studied your set-up for years. You operate the gambling concession here in San Carlos. You're tied into the political machine here. You're a big shot. But you're also poison to some people. There's at least a dozen guys in San Jacinto right now who just live for the day when they can get out to stick a slug into you. You're hot, man! Hot!"

"Go on," Chastain urged softly. He had a grip on himself now.

"Okay. I'm hot, too, in a different way. We got several things in common; we look alike, we're hot, and we want to live off the fat of the land. You're my one chance; maybe I'm

yours. I'll do anything, and no holds barred. You're a rat and a coward, Nick; you're plain yellow, and you know it. But you're smart and cunning. You're beginning right now to see plenty of ways I could take the heat off you."

"But who in the hell are you?"

Sam smiled bitterly. "I'm *you*, Nick. I got no other identity. When you want a dirty job done that you haven't the guts to do yourself, I'm you."

"Mm'n! And the rest of the time?"

"I'll keep out of sight. What I do then is my own business?"

"Ah! You've got some angles of your own, eh?"

Sam shrugged. "Haven't we all?"

Nick Chastain digested that, then keeping Sam covered with the gun, he lifted the receiver.

"Police headquarters," he called softly.

Sam went stiff. He thought of running, but he couldn't make the door. So he stood there while Chastain got his number.

"Captain Hogan, please," the gambler requested, and shifted his gun to a more comfortable position.

As Sam waited, he studied the other man. The picture had fooled him. Outwardly, they looked alike, but there the resemblance ceased. Chastain might be a coward inside, but he had gambler's trick of stilling his features, like a drawn shade. His eyes stayed bright, yet reflected nothing. His lips grew thin and flat and remained that way. It ceased to be a face, and became a mask instead.

The phone clicked. The gambler said, "Hogan? Nick, Nick Chastain. . . Sure, fine. . . Say, who was the mug who broke out of the State prison a couple of days ago? . . . Wire? Never heard of him. . . Oh! . . . Ah! A local boy. Yeah, I remember the case, vaguely. . . Murder, eh? Hm'n!" As he listened, his eyes half closed and he watched Sam sleepily. "How do you know he's dead if you didn't find the body? . . . Oh, I see. . . swept out to sea. No, no, no particular reason. . . Some guy mentioned it during the game tonight. I was just curious. I'll be in to see you one of these days. . . Sure. Thanks, Hogan." Chastain pronged the receiver.

Sam exhaled relievedly, and managed a grin. "You're smart, Nick."

There was a long pause. Nick still had his hand on the telephone. His face seemed pale, and his lips were tightly compressed. Sam held his breath again.

Suddenly, Nick said, "Help yourself to a drink. On the stand, behind you."

"I can sure use one," Sam laughed, turning to the bottle. "Although I'd rather have a sandwich. Haven't eaten for three days."

He was lifting the glass when he heard a

door open down the hall. Nick had thrown back the covers and was sitting on the edge of the bed. He frowned, and gestured Sam into a clothes closet. As Sam ducked out of sight, a woman entered the room.

"Well, hello Rachel," Nick greeted her. "This is a surprise."

The closet door stood slightly ajar, and when she moved within his sector, Sam saw a small, proud figure in a white chenille robe.

"I thought I heard voices," she said, a little stiffly.

"Oh, that. I was on the telephone," Nick told her.

Sam saw she didn't believe him. She glanced around the room and, for an instant, stared directly into the closet. Although Sam was standing in total darkness, he couldn't believe she didn't see him.

But he had a good look at her, and he was surprised. She wasn't at all the sort of woman he would have expected to find around Nick Chastain. She was quality—her oval face was finely chiseled and sensitive. She had soft brown hair hung loosely over her shoulders, and her eyes were clear, and a little cold. Sam tried to read her expression and failed. The way she looked at her husband puzzled Sam. He couldn't tell whether it was contempt, or just plain hopelessness. He knew only that hers was a good face, and that it contrasted with Chastain's.

"Nick," she said exasperatedly. "You're not bringing your filthy business here into this house, are you? I won't have it!"

Whew! breathed Sam to himself. *She does know I'm here!*

Chastain grunted, and stood up. He was a big man, as big as Sam Wire, but not as straight. He had a noticeable paunch.

"You're dreaming," he grumbled. "We've been all over that stuff, Rachel. Now go back to bed."

She ignored the command. "Where are you going?"

"Out."

"Out, where?"

"Out!" Nick repeated harshly.

The woman hesitated, and her firm little chin rose to an aggressive angle. She seemed about to flare up, then changed her mind. Her shoulders sagged perceptibly. Sam felt suddenly very sorry for her. Despite her patrician poise, she was only a kid. Maybe twenty-two.

"Nick," she said tiredly, "I've about reached the end of my rope. I'm not going on like this. Someday you'll come home and not find me here."

"You're too smart for that, Rachel," Nick said coldly. "You'll never leave me—and live. You know too much, baby. And don't forget it!"

She went white at his threat; then without a word walked out of the room.

Sam waited a moment, and when he heard her door slam, he stepped out of the closet.

"She knew I was there, Nick."

Chastain gestured impatiently. "She believes what I tell her. She'd better." He peeled off his pajamas and crossed to a row of drawers. Sam sat on the edge of the bed while the other dressed.

"I ought to have an outfit like you," he suggested.

Nick glanced at him. "I haven't made up my mind yet," he said. "I'll get another opinion." He finished his toilet. "Come on. Let's go."

Sam shrugged and got to his feet. The Scotch had hit his empty stomach hard. He followed the gambler out of the house without question. It didn't make any difference to Sam where they were going.

IT WAS a long, lithe coupe, and Nick drove slowly. There was no talk. Long habit had taught Sam Wire the futility of thinking when the decision was out of his hands, so he interested himself in the machine. Automobiles had changed considerably since he had been salted away, and he marveled at the silence of the motor and the sense of vast power in reserve. They swung into a tree-shaded side street near the Civic Center, and Nick slowed down.

"I need time to think this over," he mused. "Meanwhile, I'll cache you in a private spot with some friends of mine."

"Don't let too many people in on this, Nick."

"This is one pair I can trust."

Nick eased the big car up to the curb before an apartment house. Sam sat tight until Nick gave him the nod; then they both got out and Nick keyed open the front door and they went into the building. A self-operated elevator conveyed them to the fifth floor. Sam grinned inwardly. He had a pretty good idea where they were going. They walked down a carpeted hallway to the last door. Nick played a brief tattoo on the buzzer.

There was a long pause, then the door opened to the width of the stop-chain and a battered, sleepy face appeared in the crack.

Nick said, "It's me, Dumbo, open up."

The man blinked confusedly. "Oh, hi'ya, chief," he mumbled, and let them in.

He stood with his back to the closed door, a worried look on his broken face. He put Sam in mind of a groggy St. Bernard pup. He knew the type; a broken-down wrestler who'd had his head squeezed and pounded once too often. Now, in rumpled pajamas much too small for him, he resembled nothing quite so much as a great, slow-witted ape. Sam felt

sorry for him, without quite knowing why.

"Where's Pat?" snapped Nick. "I want to talk with her." He waved Sam Wire into a chair and started for the next room. The man called Dumbo looked owlishly at Sam a moment, then padded hurriedly after Nick. The door closed behind them.

Sam chuckled, and stretched out in an easy chair. He bounced up and down to test it, like a kid, then opening an inlaid box on an end table, chose a cigarette. There was an open box of chocolates nearby, so he stuffed a couple in his mouth. Now if he could just navigate this next hurdle! He drew the smoke into his lungs and stared about him.

It was a flashy apartment, furnished for lazing. The chairs were deep and the lights shaded. A studio piano stood across one corner, with a lot of cheap music on the rack. The smell slapped Sam right in the nose, a blend of perfume, liquor and tobacco smoke. Boy, thought Sam, *there's nothing subtle about this set-up!*

The other door opened eventually, and Nick came out with a girl. Dumbo shambled along behind, like a faithful dog. Sam started to rise, then changed his mind and stayed out. Nick and the girl stood together, staring at him so long it was his turn to feel like a dog—a mutt at a bench-show.

Well, she was smoother than Sam expected, and much better looking. She had a heart-shaped face, marred by make-up, and a little on the soft side, like an overripe peach. Her copper-colored hair was piled high on her head in small ringlets. Mascara outlined eyes that might have been green; Sam couldn't be sure in the diffused light. Her lips were full, especially the lower one. Her figure was encased in a pale green hostess gown.

"Well?" Nick asked finally. "What do you think?"

"Nice," Sam grinned. "Very nice."

Nick frowned. "I wasn't talking to you!" he snapped.

"Could be," the girl said, nodding. "It'll take a lot of work, but the resemblance is remarkable."

Nick took a chair opposite to Sam. "Let's squat," he suggested.

The girl curled up on a couch to one side of Sam, so she could study him without meeting his eyes. She carried such a load of perfume he could have located her in a blackout. Dumbo settled himself anxiously on the edge of a chair.

"Now let's go over this deal," Nick began. "I'm still not sold, but we'll give it a whirl for a day or two. Let's make sure we understand each other. Sam, you're to do exactly as I tell you?"

"Check!"

"You couldn't fool a blind man right now.

Maybe Patricia, here, can coach you enough to get by. She's an actress. For the time being, you'll stay here until I can find a suitable hide-out for you."

"Suits me," grinned Sam.

"You'll have to get rid of that prison pal-lor, and take on a little weight."

"A sun-lamp and a few meals will fix that."

Nick rose to his feet. "Dumbo'll loan you a razor. Pat'll show you where to bunk. I'll see you tomorrow." He turned to the ex-wrestler. "Slip on a shirt and pants, Dumbo. I want you to drive over to the house with me and get some clothes for this rummy. You can bring the car back here."

"Ah, hell, chief," whined the big man. "Can't that wait until—"

"Oh, shut up and do like Nick asks you," snapped the girl. "I'll wait up for you."

As the big lout shuffled into the other room, the girl winked at Nick. Sam saw this, and saw the slow, knowing smile that touched Nick's lips. *Probably a good thing the poor sap's a little slug-nutty*, he reflected. Well, it was none of his business; not that.

CHAPTER THREE

"I'll Have to Kill. . ."

WHEN NICK and Dumbo had gone, Sam went back to his easy chair and lighted another cigarette. The girl kept staring at him, so he scrunched around until he could meet her eyes.

He was afraid of her, in a way. A whacky broad like this could wreck the best of plans. As old Bobo had remarked: "There's always a dame!" He'd have to play along with her, but not play too hard. It wasn't ethics, but he knew now how Nick Chastain felt about her. She was dynamite.

"Whose idea was this?" she asked finally.

"Mine."

"Why?"

Watch her boy! She's smart. Sam smiled. "What did Nick tell you?"

"Enough."

"Well, I guess you know all there is to know."

She lit a fresh smoke from the butt of the old one. In the silence Sam began to sweat. He stood it as long as he could.

"How about some food? I haven't eaten for years."

She didn't move. "The kitchen's over there. I'm not going to wait on you."

Sam slapped his knees and stood up. "Fair enough, Mabel. I'll scramble some eggs. Have some?"

She stared at him in silence, so he sauntered on out to the kitchen. It was small and modern, with a tiny breakfast alcove adjoining.

In the refrigerator, he found eggs, a few slices of bacon, and a quart of milk.

He was humming softly over the frying pan when he glanced over his shoulder to find her watching him from the doorway.

"Change your mind?" he asked.

Her eyes *were* green. "Where'd you get that Mabel stuff?"

"Slip o' the tongue," he grinned. "I'd forgotten you'd changed your handle."

She slid onto a seat in the nook, so she could see his face.

"Nick didn't tell you that, Sam."

"Uh-uh! He never mentioned you."

"Give, Sam."

He laughed. "I'm a cross between an elephant and a clam. I never forget, and seldom talk."

"Forget, hell!" she snapped irritably. "You never saw me before!"

"I never saw Europe, but I know about it."

"Go on, Sam."

He mangled the eggs with a fork. "It's coming to me, slowly, slowly," he said, imitating a mystic. "The voices tell me you were born Mabel Jobel, on the other side of the tracks. You were always smart; no matter how hard they threw you, you landed on your feet—with coin stuck between your toes. I see you trying to crash Hollywood and landing in burlesque."

He turned the heat off, and poured a glass of milk.

"But that was too much work, so you married a penny-ante bootlegger named Haines. When he died of lead-poisoning, judiciously administered in the paunch, you had already established contact with the bright boys in the blue chips. Two years ago, you marked Nick. But he was married, and so to get next to him you married old Dumbo Hammerstein, Nick's bodyguard. I suppose it complicates things somewhat to have the big clown in love with you, but you're smart enough to handle that. The voices fade, now." He laughed. "How'm I doin', babe?"

"Anything else?"

Sam shrugged. "Only that you're still a pin-up gal to some of the old-timers up in San Jacinto."

She crushed out her cigarette. "I've changed my mind," she murmured. "Deal me a round of eggs, Sam."

He set a plate before her, and divided the eggs. He emptied a glass of milk to lay a foundation on his empty stomach, then sat down across from her.

"No hard feelings, Mabel?"

"No. Only the name is Patricia."

"Milk—Pat?"

She shook her head. "I'll take Scotch." She toyed with her food, not eating it. Then, "You're not much like Nick."

"Coming from you, Pat, that's a slam," he grinned.

"Not necessarily. I just can't make up my mind about you, is all."

He got up and brought her some Scotch from the other room. After pouring her a stiff jolt, he took a glass of the stuff himself. The food upset him a little, and he resisted the temptation to gorge himself.

The girl said nothing during the meal. But when he had finished, and relaxed with his cigarette and drink, she suggested:

"Level off, Sam. What's your angle?"

H E WONDERED if she was asking this for Nick, or if she was putting on the bite for herself. She was about as trustworthy as a hungry cobra, and he sensed she was a little afraid of him. Perhaps he had said too much. She wasn't any chicken; in her thirties, at least, and she was riding high. If she lost this berth, there wouldn't be much between her and the pavements. She wouldn't stop at anything to hold what she had.

"It shouldn't be hard for you to understand, Pat. I just want to live. That's about all. I want to see something besides grey walls, grey clothes, and grey men. I want to eat like this when I'm hungry, wear colored clothing, smoke tailor-mades, hear doors that slam, and not clank." He smiled a little. "And I want to be able to sit and talk with beautiful wrens like you, Pat, and smell perfume. That, babe, is living."

She pursed her lips. "How long do you think you can get away with it?" she asked abruptly.

"That depends—on a lot of things."

"You were sent up for murder."

Sam's face went hard. "That's what I was sent up for."

"Trying to make me believe you were innocent?"

Sam shook his head. "I'm not trying to make you believe anything."

"Lord, you're hard!" She shivered. "Hard as nails. You'd kill a man with your bare hands!"

"That's right. There's a couple I hope to get before long."

"Tell me about it, Sam." Her green eyes began to dilate until he wondered if she was a snowbird.

"This is getting lopsided," he grumbled. "How about me asking a few?"

"Try me."

"Okay. Let's start off with Merko. He still the D.A.?"

She nodded. "Of course. With the machine in, he'll have the berth as long as he wants it—and does as he's told. He sent you up, didn't he, Sam?"

Sam nodded. "The rest of the set-up is the

same, I suppose?" Her green eyes flickered.

Pat shrugged. "The only change in the last five or six years came when Nolan died, and they put Murphy in as chief of police. He's only a figurehead, of course; Hogan is still head of the vice squad, and runs the department. Candell is mayor. I guess that covers it."

"Old Judge Trask still on the bench?"

"Uh-huh! Funny old buzzard." She laughed, but stopped short at the look on Sam's face.

"Nick should be doing all right, with all these yokels from the Midwest floating into the region."

"Oh, he has his troubles. Right now, it's a mug named Jake Schultz, an ex-labor racketeer. He's setting up a chain of cheap dives to milk the Filipinos, Chinks, and fruit tramps."

"Nick never kidded around with that kind of traffic."

"He doesn't like it," Pat said. "He's paid Hogan for the whole concession." She frowned, as if she had said too much. "Now let's talk about you, Sam."

Sam drained his glass and poured himself another. A warm glow was stealing over him, and he felt deliciously weary. He knew he'd had enough, for he couldn't risk getting tight around a dame like this one. He pushed his glass away.

"That's very simple," he said at last. "A few years ago, I believed in Santa Claus. After a stretch in the stir, I don't. That's all."

"You're not playing fair. Why were you sent up?"

"Hogan and Merko said it was murder."

"But was it?"

"Technically, yes."

Her eyes burned into him. He knew he should stop talking now, for he was already a little drunk. But suddenly he was overwhelmed with loneliness, and he wanted more than anything else to unburden himself. Her nearness was drugging him. *What the hell?* he thought, and raised the glass to his lips.

"Was it a girl, Sam?"

He set the drink down, and the lines of bitterness deepened his face.

"Isn't it always?" he growled. "But that's no part of the story, not directly. I'd worked all summer and had a roll. It wasn't enough to do what I wanted with, so I tried to double it in a game. It was a crooked game. Later, in a bar, I got to talking too much. A guy I knew slightly told me he'd been cleaned by the same outfit, and said he was going to strong-arm his dough back. He asked me to drive the car. Well, he didn't say anything about a gun, and I didn't think to ask. I was a little tight, anyhow." Sam sighed, emptied his glass.

"So that's how it was. They said he killed a cop. I didn't see him; I was sitting in the car downstairs. They sweat my name out of him, and said he'd hung himself in his cell. Maybe he did, but I think Hogan beat him to death. Anyhow, I was the goat. They stuck me for technical murder, and pinned a dozen other stick-ups onto me in the bargain. Sam-my Shawhan, my lawyer, told me to cop a plea; that he had a drag with Merko, and would get the jolt lowered to manslaughter. He double-crossed me. Old Judge Trask was in on the play, so he threw the book at me, and I was salted away for keeps."

Pat started outlining her mouth with lipstick. Sam watched her, and felt his eyes smart.

He wanted badly to be believed, yet hated himself for caring.

"You were crazy to come back to this same town, Sam!"

"You're probably right."

She leaned towards him, and he saw the shadows under her chin. "Look, Sam—why don't you lam? If you're broke, why I've a little sugar—"

Sam grinned. "Let's string along with Nick. I won't hurt your game, whatever it is."

"And yours?"

Sam stood up a trifle unsteadily. "This is where I came in," he grinned. "Let's not sit through the newsreel again. He chuckled at the flush that darkened her features. "Where do I flop, babe?"

She flounced across the apartment and showed him the spare bedroom. He was undressing, when he heard Dumbo key his way

into the apartment. After that, the murmur of voices. He couldn't hear what was being said as he drifted off to sleep.

SAM floated back to consciousness around noon. It was hard to believe he was actually in a real bed, with celan sheets. He lay still, flexing his toes, liking the feel of it. After a time he rose and raised the shades, then stripped in the rectangle of warm sunshine. He peeked into the living room. There was no sign of either Dumbo or his wife, but on a chair was a brown suit with a pin stripe, brown, pebble-grained shoes, shirt, underwear, ties and socks. Sam padded out and retrieved them; then went into the shower. He took his time, enjoying every moment of it. He found a razor and accessories, and after shaving, doused his face and body with cologne. He was lacing his shoes when someone knocked.

He jerked up, facing the door, feeling again the old tension. The knock was repeated, then Pat's voice, "Sam! You up?"

"Sure."

"I can't wait breakfast all day, mister. Come and get it."

Pat was humming around, dressed in a short gingham housedress. There was only one place set on the table.

"Don't you eat?"

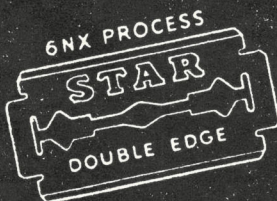
"Have done—with Dumbo. He's gone over to get Nick with the car, so you'd better get busy." She waved him to a seat. "I thought you'd like waffles and sausage for a change."

Sam rubbed his hands. "It'll be a change all right. My God! You're an accomplished wench!"

"You forget I'm married."

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"Not me, babe; I forget nothing. Tell me—do I look like Nick Chastain in the mornings, or don't you know?"

She studied him intently. "No-o-o, I can't say that you do. Nick wakes up bloodshot with sacks of coal under each eye. But I can make you up to look like that."

As he was eating, he tried to figure her out. Sam was no psychologist, yet he reasoned that she possessed a multiple personality. One facet was as diamond-tough and ruthless as only a hard woman can be, but she had her softer side and a wealth of understanding that might bridge the gap. The same life that had made of her a chiseler had also made her human. It made her dangerous, too. Maybe she was the wild joker in this game which he had cut himself into.

After his second cup of coffee, she said briskly, "Okay, Sam. Let's go to work. Nick expects miracles in a hell of a hurry. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise?"

She shrugged. "Well, Tip Hogan's still around the corner."

He crushed his smoke. "I'm ready when you are."

"Let's start with that cigarette," the girl suggested. "Nick doesn't handle it that way; he sort of squashes it between his long, restless fingers. Like this—see?" She demonstrated with her own butt.

Sam imitated the motion, and she nodded her approval. "You learn quick."

"Don't I, though?"

She colored a little. "And don't be so damned fast with your come-backs. Nick is always the gambler, and he never steps out of character. He keeps a dead pan, thinks over everything he's going to say, and doesn't telegraph his thoughts, like you do. You're still an open-faced kid, Sam."

"Thanks. How's this?" He made a long, horsy face, and pretended to crush a cigarette. Pat shrilled gayly. They were both laughing when Nick and Dumbo walked in on them.

"Having fun?" Nick asked dryly.

They turned and stared at him in unison. His dead expression was so much like Sam's imitation that they burst out laughing again. Nick didn't even smile.

Pat sprang out of her seat.

"Oh, Nickie! You should see the idiot trying to be like you! He's a riot!"

Dumbo leaned against the door, watching, but Nick scaled his hat onto the couch and sat down. "Go into your act, Sam," he said.

Sam Wire walked over to another chair and flopped down exactly as Nick had done. "Go into your act, Sam," he parroted in the same flat tone.

Nick permitted himself a dry smile. "Not bad. I suppose it's funnier to someone else."

He touched the tips of his fingers together, and scowled a little as Sam continued to imitate him.

"I ran into Hogan this morning."

You're a liar! Sam thought. *You looked him up deliberately.* He waited.

Nick took his time. "Hogan mentioned you, Sam. He doesn't agree with the prison officials that you've drowned. He looked up your school record, and found you were a crack swimmer."

I'll have to kill Hogan sooner than I expected, Sam told himself. Aloud, he said, "Hell, he's just on a fishing expedition, that's all."

Nick shrugged. "I dunno. Hogan's plenty smart. I can't afford to cross him. I'd about decided not to go ahead with this crazy deal, Sam."

Sam's heart skipped a beat, but he forced his eyes to meet the other's steady gaze, tried to keep his own expression as inscrutable as Nick's. This was a squeeze play, and he had to see Nick's hand.

"However," Nick went on finally, "I'm a gambler. I'll always take a chance—if the stakes make it worth while." He rolled his head and glanced at the girl. "How about it, Pat—can you have him ready for a premiere by Saturday?"

Pat looked startled. "My God, Nickie! This is Thursday already! That doesn't give us much time!"

"Then you better stick a little closer to business and make it good."

Sam didn't like the odor. "What's the job, Nick?"

"Scared?"

"No, just curious."

Nick pushed to his feet. "You'll play the cards as I deal 'em," he reminded Sam. "But I'll give you this much of a tip—muff this play, and there won't be a second chance, ever. Understand?"

Sam winced inside, but held his ground. This looked like a beautiful frame to brush him off. Hogan, Nick, Merko, Trask! God, he'd been a sucker to think he could buck that machine!

"Understand?" repeated Nick.

"Perfectly!" said Sam Wire.

Nick looked at Dumbo. "I won't need you today, chum. You stay here. Pick me up to-night about nine."

"Okey-dokey, chief."

When Nick had gone, the big ape slumped wearily into a chair and groped for a cigarette. He studied Sam intently, as if trying to make up his mind whether to resent him or not.

Sam grinned pleasantly. "He keeps you busy, eh, pal?"

Dumbo said, "Yeah!" and it seemed to cost

him an effort. Pat crossed over and sat on the edge of his chair. She brushed his forehead with her painted lips, and the wrinkles vanished.

"Now, darling," she said lightly, "you sit there while I train Sam. You'll be a great help, for you understand Nick so perfectly."

Dumbo smiled. "Sure," he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shakedown

SATURDAY night was foggy, for which Sam Wire offered up a little prayer of thanks. Despite the brief time they had had, Pat said he was ready and, after a dress rehearsal in the little apartment Saturday evening, Nick thought so, too. Sam had nearly burned his hide off under a sun-lamp, but at least it took away the prison pallor, and gave him the semblance of a tan. Sitting around the place, eating chocolate creams and drinking malted milks had filled him out a little. He slipped out to a little corner joint and got a hair-cut like Nick's and, because he couldn't grow a full mustache in the time allotted, Nick cut his own down to the same trim as Sam's. Pat swore she couldn't tell them apart, and Nick threatened to cut her gullet if she made a mistake. He laughed when he said it, and the girl took it as a gag. But Sam wasn't fooled. Nick already hated him, and he wasn't sure just why.

The deal involved the ex-racketeer, Jake Schultz, whom Pat had spoken of that first night. Jake had organized all the cheap joints milching the migrants, and while it didn't cut in on the high class trade Nick Chastain was working, Nick resented it. He further suspected that Captain Hogan was covering Jake, at the same time that he was selling protection and the exclusive gambling concession to Nick. He had learned that the sugar was turned in at Jake's headquarters in an urban night club every Sunday morning, about two A.M. He wanted Sam to heist the joint at that time, not only to grab the money, but so he could find out how big a take there was in the migrant traffic.

It sounded to Sam like sheer suicide. That kind of money would be well gunned. But Nick reasoned that since he was a known friend of Jake's, and had often dropped in to visit him at the club, that Sam could get past the rodmen. After that, it was up to him.

"But suppose I do fool 'em into thinking it's you," Sam argued. "That puts you behind the eight ball."

Nick smiled. "Don't worry about me. I've got a little date with the right kind of witnesses."

"They better be good," Sam grunted.

"The best. When you take the joint, I'll be sitting in the backroom at police headquarters, with Tip Hogan and Jake Schultz."

Sam whistled admiringly. "You're smart, Nick."

"Wait a minute," the girl cut in. "Suppose Sam fumbles?"

"That's just too bad," Nick said. "What difference does it make to you, anyhow?"

"None, but—"

"Then keep your damn nose out of my business!" he snapped at her.

Sam got red around the neck, but kept his mouth shut. Nick glanced at the clock. It was after midnight. He took a gun out of his pocket, and after carefully wiping his own prints off it, handed it to Sam.

"Try not to kill anybody—if you can help it."

"You think of everything, don't you?" Sam said grimly.

"Everything," Nick agreed, and got up. "Come on—Dumbo'll drive you near enough to the joint to hike."

IT WAS just one thirty when Nick drove up in front of police headquarters. He left Dumbo sitting in the car, and sauntered into the stationhouse. He paused for a word with the young desk sergeant. Then he walked on through the detective bureau to the airless little room behind the captain's office.

Hogan was tilted back in his swivel chair with his tremendous feet resting on the desk. Schultz sat facing the door. He had a trick of seeming to carry the weight of his barrel-bellied torso on his elbows.

"Hello, boys," said Nick. He pushed his hat back and dropped into a vacant chair.

They both said hello, and Hogan nodded at the glasses on the desk.

"We're drinking beer," he observed. "There's Scotch if you want it."

"Beer's good enough," said Nick pleasantly. And as Hogan reached down for a glass, Nick glanced at Schultz. "How's business, Jake?"

"So-so."

Hogan opened another quart and filled the glasses. Nick watched him, thinking what a queer duck he was. Tip Hogan was like a delayed-action bomb; he never did anything just when you expected it, but when he did go off, he was deadly. He didn't look deadly, though. He was a big man with a placid, ruddy face and red dewlaps. Slow-moving, and perhaps a trifle slow-witted; one couldn't be sure. He spoke very little, and never about his thoughts. Somewhere in his middle fifties, his hair was thin and grey, and his eyes were grey and veiled. Despite his mild appearance, he was brutal and so crooked as to be immoral, rather than just immoral. He had been

a harness bull for ten years, and had managed to buy two apartment houses and an office building in that period. Since taking over the vice squad, not even Nick Chastain could guess at his income.

"Well, let's talk business," Jake said aggressively. "I got work to do yet tonight. This get-together was your idee, Nick. What's your beef?"

Hogan watched Nick, and his eyes brightened with amusement. Nick set his glass down, and revolved it with his long fingers. He was in no hurry to terminate the meeting, nor had he any intention of letting Jake stam pede him. He appraised the man thoughtfully, enjoying the other's restlessness, feeling contempt for his lack of control.

Jake Schultz was out of his element, and perhaps he knew it. He was an organizer, not a gambler. He was a squat, powerful man, with a blow-torch personality, who was accustomed to getting his way through sheer bluster. Now his beef-squad, strong-arm methods put him at a disadvantage, but it was all he knew. He lowered forward in his chair, gnawing on a cold butt of a cigar.

"We might as well be realistic," Nick said, finally. "You're taking in too much territory, Jake."

Schultz swelled his chest. This was something he could understand; a threat, perhaps.

"It's a free country!" he growled.

"Interesting," Nick observed acidly. "I hadn't found it free. It's cost me plenty of sugar." He glanced sideways at Hogan, but the big cop had that same bland look.

"Okay," barked Schultz. "Let's get down to cases. You've been here ten years, Nick. In that time, you never made a dime out of the small fry. So what's it to you?"

"I was busy."

"You're still busy," snapped Jake. "You get the cream. What in hell you want to be—a dog in the manger?"

"Don't shout," Nick said.

"Who's shoutin'?" yelled Jake. "Cut out that high-an'-mighty stuff, Chastain! You ain't dealin' with no damn kid! If you want to make somethin' of it, all you gotta do—"

"Oh, for God's sake hold your wind," Nick drawled. "You're not organizing some Bronx truck-drivers."

Jake reared half out of his chair, but Hogan motioned him back.

"All right, Nick," he said with deceptive gentleness. "Wind up your argument."

Nick stalled. The setup was perfect, and he wanted to keep it like this. Jake was ready to blow his top, and Hogan—well—Hogan was still astride the fence as usual. Perhaps a trifle more needling. . . .

"The trouble is," Nick went on softly, "I'm paying plenty for the gambling concession. San

Carlos can't stand two of us from now on."

"Why in the hell can't it?" fumed Jake. "You got your swells, I got the rabble. Where's your squawk?"

Nick controlled himself. "Are you paying off, too?"

"Suppose you stick to your case, Nick," interposed Hogan.

"That's part of it. There's got to be a change—" He paused as the telephone jangled harshly.

Hogan scooped it up, said, "Detective Bureau, Hogan talkin' . . . oh, yeah, he's right here." He pushed the instrument towards Schultz. "It's for you, Jake."

Jake took the phone. "Well?"

Nick, watching him lazily, saw the color drain from Jake's florid face, then sweep back with a rush that brought the veins throbbing in his forehead. The man's eyes appeared to start out of his head.

"What! Who? *Who?*" Jake glared across the desk at Nick. "Why you crazy—he's sittin' right here with me! Sure I know what I'm talkin' about! By God, I'll—you dumb saps sit tight! I'll be right out!"

He slammed the receiver on its prong and stood up. He looked about ready for a stroke.

"What'n hell am I payin' you for?" he shouted at Hogan.

Hogan locked his hands across his paunch. "What's up?" he asked mildly.

Nick was delighted. He knew the truth now—Hogan *was* double-crossing him. And Sam Wire— Ah, the kid had made it!

"My joint was heisted!" raged Jake. "The boys said it was Nick—" He swung around and glared at Chastain.

"Go on—say it," Nick urged.

"I wouldn't put it past you!" Jake challenged him.

Nick grinned and looked at Hogan. The old cop was watching him with that same fish-cold flatness. Nick had trouble keeping the color out of his own features.

"Out of my line," he remarked. "Perhaps I better check my own joint." And he got up.

Jake crushed his hat on. "You comin' with me, Cap?"

Hogan shook his head. "Naw," he said indolently. "I'll play my own angles. Lemme know what you find, Jake."

Nick said, "I'm sorry, Jake."

"Yeah, I bet you are!" snarled Schultz, and stomped out of the office.

Hogan carefully rinsed the glasses in the wash-basin, and put them back in his desk drawer.

"Funny," he mused. "We ain't had a stick-up since"—he paused—"for about five years. Funny."

"I'll shove off," Nick said. "We'll settle this business some other time. 'Night, Tip."

Hogan looked at him. "'Night, Nick. Be careful."

AFTER leaving headquarters, Nick made Dumbo move over and took the wheel himself. With the big fellow watching out the rear window, Nick drove around the block several times to make sure they weren't being tailed. Hogan had disconcerted him more than he cared to admit, even to himself. He had the uncomfortable sensation that Tip Hogan had read his mind, and it came to him that sooner or later, he and the big cop were going to clash. It was not a pleasant prospect. Although he had maintained a business relationship with Hogan for years, he had no illusions. If and when Hogan wearied of the arrangement, it would be terminated in his own peculiar fashion. And Tip Hogan invariably left no strings to tangle his future.

When Nick was satisfied that no one followed him, he sent Dumbo to the apartment in a cab, and drove slowly along the Bayshore Road alone. There were few cars out, and because the fog had thickened, he straddled the white line. Driving slowly, his mind turned from Hogan to Sam Wire. He was surprised, in a way, that the kid had succeeded. Still, Nick wasn't sure he liked the deal. He had never toyed with strong-arm stuff, and he despised guns. Once or twice in his career, he had been forced to remove some particularly obnoxious character, but on those occasions, he had left the actual work to specialists. He smiled slightly, thinking about it. Perhaps Jake Schultz could be catalogued as an "obnoxious character." Sam versus Jake? The thing had possibilities.

He pulled into an all-night hash-house, and parked the car in a shadowed spot behind a group of trucks. Inside the restaurant, he found a group of truck drivers and a couple of sailors.

He drank a cup of coffee, and then stepped into the telephone booth and called Pat.

"Everything dropped into the slots, baby," he told her.

"Wonderful! You see—him yet, honey?" she asked breathlessly.

"Not yet. But we'll be home in half an hour."

She hesitated. "Dumbo with you, Nickie lamb?"

"I sent him home in a cab. He should be there in a minute. How about rustling up some chow, baby? We'll have a party of sorts."

"You know I'd like to, Nickie. I'll make rarebit, if you'll pick up some ale?"

"Okay. Get things ready. I'm on my way."

He bought a couple of bottles of beer, and went out to the machine. As he toolled it out of the drive, he turned his head.



Sam entered the dark canyon of the alley, fitted himself into a dirty slot between buildings. When he saw the cop his heart began to pound. . . .

"You there?"

Sam Wire straightened from his crouch behind the front seat and climbed in beside him.

"It went off like silk," Sam said.

"How much?"

Sam shrugged, and fished through his pockets for a smoke. "Couldn't count it," he admitted. "But the boys intimated it was close to eight thousand. Not bad pickings, Nick. Eh?"

Chastain grunted. "Hm'n! I didn't think those damned Okies made that kind of dough. No wonder this war's costing us so much."

"That's a laugh," Sam grinned. "Coming from you, Nick."

Nick drove slowly as they passed the city limits. He had a bad moment when a police

prowl car slowed alongside of him. But the cops recognized the car and went on by.

"It was a dumb trick for us both to ride like this," he grumbled.

"Hell," laughed Sam. "The dumb cops would think they were seeing double."

"Not Hogan."

Sam stopped smiling. "Perhaps you'd better tell me exactly what happened to you tonight," he suggested. "Can't tell you when I might need to know."

"Why?"

"Just a hunch. No harm in it, is there?"

"I guess not. But if you met up with Hogan, it wouldn't do you much good to know. You couldn't fool him, Sam. Don't try."

"Suit yourself. But you sound smug, so it must have gone off all right."

Nick chuckled. "It did . . . beautifully." He told Sam what had taken place. Then, "Sam, tell me—did you ever kill a man?"

"I was sent up for murder."

"That's not what I asked you."

"The answer is—no."

He waited, expecting Nick to enlarge on the subject, but the gambler said no more. They drove into Nick's private garage behind the apartment house, and Nick went up first. Sam waited about ten minutes, and followed with the bag of money.

While the girl was cooking the rarebit, Nick counted the money. Sam had left most of the silver because it was too heavy, but there was a nice pile of green stuff. It totaled a little over seventy-five hundred.

"Well, for— What's the idea?" growled Nick.

Sam shrugged. "Ah, the poor clown'll catch enough hell from Jake, an' probably lose his job."

"I'll be damned!"

"He's got a sick wife," Sam said grimly.

Dumbo said, "Gee!" but Nick was sore. "Look, Robin Hood, after this don't be so damn generous with my dough."

"How to win friends and influence people," Sam grinned. "If you don't like it, take it out of my cut."

"Your cut?"

"My cut. Who took that sugar?"

Nick smiled, but it lacked mirth. "Okay, okay." He peeled off a sheaf of greenbacks. "Here—this will hold you for now."

Sam rolled the money, without looking at it, and shoved it into his pocket.

From the kitchen, Pat called, "Hurry up, boys! Everything's set."

"Ain't it the truth!" chuckled Sam.

IT WAS nearly noon when Sam walked into the living room. Nobody was about. He opened the window to wash out the hangover stench of stale smoke and liquor,

and emptied the ash-trays. The dirty plates were still on the table, so Sam stacked them in the sink and made some coffee. By the time it had perked, Pat walked into the kitchen.

She looked like the wrath of God. Without benefit of make-up, she showed her age. She collapsed into a corner of the nook, moaning softly.

"Get me a drink, will you, lambie?"

"More of the dog, or black java?"

"Oh, Lord, I don't care!" She sat with her head propped on her hands. "Boy, oh, boy!" she moaned. "What a party we had after you turned in."

"Where's Nick—and hubby?"

"We drank Dumbo under the table, quick. He's still out. Sleeping. He can't take it. Nick stuck around—" She made a grimace. "That wife of his!"

Sam glanced at her. It was the first time she had mentioned Mrs. Chastain in his presence, and he was curious as to how she felt about Nick's wife.

"Rachel kicking up her heels?"

Pat gulped some of the coffee he placed before her. "Uh-huh! A clinging vine."

"She's just a kid," Sam commented. "I saw her. Nice, too."

"If you like the type," jeered the girl. "Hand me a cigarette, like a love."

Sam lit one for her off his own. "Is that like a love?"

Pat burst into laughter. "You're a card, Sam!" She tried to look coy, and looked silly instead. "Sit down here beside me an' tell me what happened last night. I'm all a-twitter."

Sam dropped into a seat with the table between them. She leaned back on her arms. "Sam, how much money was there in that bag?"

"I didn't count it." He didn't like the look in her eyes. Well, she was Nick's problem, not his. He talked, to forestall any more questions, telling her the humorous side of the heist. When he told of giving the five hundred to old Joe, she leaned forward and studied him intently.

"Nick didn't like that," she told him. "But I did. It was white, Sam. You're a soft-hearted sucker."

"I put the guy on a spot," Sam said. "It was the least I could do."

"And I said you were hard! My God! A sentimental kid! It'll get you in trouble, some day."

A knock on the door made her jump. She said, "Oh, damn!" and walked across the room. Sam heaved a sigh and lit another smoke. He was shaking out the match when she opened the door.

Captain Hogan walked into the apartment.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dead By Proxy

SAM was trapped in the breakfast nook. He put his hands on the table and stared as Captain Hogan sauntered across the living room towards him. The girl was petrified. She leaned against the door, bent over slightly, as though she had a cramp, and without make-up, the terror turned her face the color of stale dough.

But Hogan wasn't looking at her; he was watching Sam. He thumbed his hat back from his face, grinned, and said, "Hello, Nick!"

Four years in prison had taught Sam Wire to control his expression. He needed that control now. He managed a slow smile—like Nick's—and gestured to a seat at the other end of the table.

"Sit down, Tip. Drink?" He wondered if Hogan drank in the middle of the day—Lord, there was a hell of a lot of things a guy had to know to play double for somebody else.

"Coffee, if you have it ready," Hogan said, dropping into the chair.

Sam looked on past Hogan to where Pat was standing with bated breath. He gave her a reassuring grin.

"Come on, honey," he called. "Pour us a round." To Hogan, he added, "She hates to be caught without her face on."

"Yeah," Hogan said. "They're all the same."

There was a nasty pause. Sam had a hard time to keep from fidgeting, and he was grateful that the light from the window at his back fell full on Hogan's face, yet kept his own in shadow. Well, he needed all the breaks he could get.

Hogan might as well have been wearing a veil for all Sam could make of his expression. Pat was fumbling around trying to get the coffee going, and making heavy weather of it. Sam began to squirm.

"Well," he asked finally. "You find anything?"

Hogan shrugged. "I work slowly, as you know."

Sam chuckled. "Did I rough up Jake too much last night, Tip?"

"When?"

"What do you mean—when? That beer didn't go to your head, did it?"

"Oh! No, I just thought maybe you'd seen him after that."

Sam shook his head. Fortunately, Pat brought the warmed-over coffee along. Sam took out a cigarette, and stuck it in his mouth. Hogan watched him, then said, "How about one, Nick?"

The Lord must have had his arms around Sam just then, for as he was about to hand

over the pack, something made him glance up. Pat was standing behind Hogan, vigorously shaking her head. Sam took his cue.

"You going to start bad habits, Tip?"

Hogan smiled. "Just an impulse. I used to smoke them things when I was a kid." But he didn't take one.

When you was a kid! thought Sam. *Your mother should have bitten you to death and kept one of the other pups!*

Hogan drank his coffee, then pushed back the cup. "What I dropped in for, Nick," he told Sam, "was to warn you about Jake. I don't want no trouble here in San Carlos. There's a new Grand Jury going in that might cause a stink if they got something to bite into. They won't, if I can help it."

"You better tell that to Jake," Sam said. "He's the trouble-making kind, not me."

"Oh, yeah? Hmnnnn! I've talked to Jake. He'll behave."

"Then you got no worries, Tip. Except—" Sam grinned.

"Except?"

"We're paying you too much dough. You'll only have trouble with your income tax."

Hogan looked thoughtful. "I didn't realize you had such a sense of humor, Nick," he mused and Sam could have kicked himself. He'd overplayed his hand.

Hogan got up and started across the living room to the hall door. Sam followed, holding his breath. Pat sat in a deep chair, nursing a cup of coffee with both hands.

"Thanks for the drink, Mrs. Hammerstein," Hogan said.

Pat murmured, "'T's pleasure, m'sure!" The cup rattled against the saucer.

Hogan had almost reached the front door, when Dumbo Hammerstein came out of the bedroom. Sam's heart did a couple of backflips and then began to hop around in his chest like a fish on a pier. *Well, this is it!* he sighed, and wondered vaguely if anybody had ever dived out of a five story window and lived.

Dumbo stopped short at sight of the cop. "Hiya, Mister Hogan." He turned his neckless head towards Sam, and every eye in the room was on him. "'Mornin' Chief! Did I keep you waitin'?"

Sam's legs went weak with relief. "No hurry. Pat brewed up a pot of coffee. I'm ready when you are."

Hogan smiled thinly. "Well, be seein' you, Nick. Take care of yourself, Hammerstein."

"Okey-doke!" mumbled Dumbo, as Hogan went out.

WHEN the door closed and they heard the elevator go down, Sam fell backwards into a chair and lay limp.

"Boy, oh, boy!" he panted. "Another min-

ute of that, and I'd have thrown in the sponge."

"You would have?" snapped the girl. "I did!"

Sam stared at the hulking figure of the ex-wrestler. "Pal, I love you! How in hell did you carry it off so smooth?"

Dumbo stared down at him a long time with those small quizzical eyes.

"I'm not so stupid as I look," he growled, and walked into the kitchen.

Sam pursed his lips. *That's a point to remember, chum*, he told himself.

Pat was half-crying. "Do you think he knew you weren't Nick?"

"I only hope to hell he doesn't run into Nick before I do," Sam said.

"He acted awful funny!" she persisted. "That trick of askin' you for a cigarette. He doesn't smoke anything but cigars. It shows he was suspicious."

Sam scratched his neck. "He was suspicious, but—I dunno." He didn't want to tell her he had decided that Hogan must be killed, and soon. He'd play that single-handed. "Well, quit worrying about it," he growled. "Call Nick on the phone and tell him."

"Call him yourself!" she bit back. "I won't talk to that wife of his."

Sam got the number and called Nick Chastain's house. While he was waiting for the answer, Pat said sharply, "Don't give her this number whatever you do!"

Just then Rachel Chastain came on the other end of the line. Sam asked if Nick was there.

"No," she said, "Nick is out."

The sound of her voice brought to Sam's mind the vision of her as he had first seen her.

"It's important," Sam said. "Do you know where I can reach him?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "But I haven't any idea where he is. If you care to leave your number, he may call—"

Sam glanced at Pat. "Never mind," he told Rachel. "I'll try again."

He hung up, scowling. Dumbo came over. "That Mrs. Chastain's a real nice lady," he observed, heavily.

"A nose—" screamed Pat.

Before she could finish her epithet, Dumbo reached down and gripped her shoulder. Sam saw her wince with pain, and her face whitened in terror. He didn't know what to do.

"Mrs. Chastain is a nice lady," repeated the big man, slowly, like a child repeating a lesson.

"Oooo! Lemme go, you crazy ape!" whined the girl.

Dumbo took his hand off her and walked over to the door. He was shaking all over.

Pat was blubbing in her chair.

Sam pushed to his feet. "We got to find Nick, and quick! Anybody got an idea?"

Dumbo's battered face wrinkled in concentration. "He might be anywhere," he muttered.

"Well, it's a cinch I can't go looking for him," growled Sam. "You two'll have to." When Pat glared up at him, he stared her down. "You, too, Pat. We're in this together, whether we like it or not."

"In what?"

Dumbo answered that one. "I guess we'd get into trouble over an escaped con livin' here, huh?"

"That's part of it."

Pat jerked out of her chair. "I knew you'd cause trouble!" she spat at Sam. "A lousy con!" She flounced into the bedroom, and came out a little later dressed for the street. "Come on!" she flung at Dumbo.

He shook his head. "You try the clubs and cafes," Dumbo told her. "I'll hit the back joints. We can call in here."

"I'll squat over the telephone," Sam assured them. "But keep away from Hogan."

Pat gave him a look of contempt. "Oh, yeah?" she sneered, and stalked out. Dumbo hesitated, as though he wanted to say something to Sam, then he changed his slow-witted mind, and tagged after his wife.

SAM WIRE never spent such a day; the worst session in the dungeon at San Jacinto was a picnic to this. He paced around the tiny apartment like a caged tiger, which, in a sense, he was. He cursed himself, Nick, and Pat. He cursed San Carlos, and the impulse that had drawn him back. He knew now that he had been a chump to think he could carry on this masquerade.

And Hogan—it was inconceivable that Hogan had been fooled. But if Hogan had known he was a phoney, why hadn't he said so? It was ridiculous to assume that Hogan had been afraid; fear was not one of Tip Hogan's vices. Then why?

About five o'clock the phone rang. He scooped it off the hook, his hand shaking. It was Pat.

"You had any news, Sam?" she asked.

"No. And you?"

"Nick's been all over town, but I keep missing him by minutes. Has Dumbo phoned?"

"Not yet."

There was a pause. "Sam, I'm sorry about—about what I said. I was upset."

"Forget it, and find Nick or we'll all be upset."

"Why don't you lam, honey!"

"And leave Nick sawed out on a limb?"

"He'll come out of it okay. Sam, I'm

scared. Look—I've got some dough. I'll go away with you!"

"You're crazy in the head!" Sam told her, and hung up.

Dumbo called in at seven. No luck. But he'd heard that Jake Schultz was making threats against Nick over the heist. Jake smelled a rat. He couldn't know, of course, but to a guy of Jake's mentality, it wasn't necessary to know; he was like a rattlesnake—step on him, and he struck back blindly, viciously.

He was literally hovering over the phone when it rang again. He grabbed it so fast, sure that it was either Pat or Dumbo, that he almost trapped himself before he recognized Captain Hogan's voice.

"Nick?"

"Oh, it's you, Tip? I was expecting—"

"You must have been," grunted the police captain. "You sound jumpy."

Sam hesitated. Was this another trick? Was Hogan actually with Nick at the moment? Cold sweat stood out on Sam's face.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

"Plenty! I've been trying to reach you all day. Did you get my message?"

"What message?"

"Hell, I left word at your club for you to meet me out on the Bayshore tonight at ten. Sober up and get the hell out there on time."

"Just where?"

"Usual place."

"At ten," Sam said. "I'll be there."

Not to make too big a liar out of himself, Sam took a drink. Then he took another. He poured the rest of the bottle down the sink to keep from getting tight. The two drinks merely sobered him. When finally Pat phoned in, he could have kissed her. He stopped her nervous babbling at once.

"Look, babe—where does Nick meet Hogan on the Bayshore?" he demanded.

"Why—why, he's met him several times at the point beyond Stanley's boathouse," she stammered. "That's where Hogan in-

sists on being paid off. He doesn't trust the office."

"How can I get out there?"

"Why, Sam?"

"Don't argue! Hogan's been leaving word around town for Nick to meet him there tonight at ten. Nick may have got that message. If Hogan gets to Nick before I do—we're sunk!"

"A cab, I guess."

"Okay. You got a gun in the apartment?" He heard her suck in her breath. "Uh-huh! In the third drawer of my vanity, Sam. But God A'mighty, you goin'—"

"You come back here and sit by the phone," he ordered sharply. "And keep your mouth shut!"

Sam found the gun, but when he hit the street, he had a harder time finding a cab. It was nine-thirty-five then. The driver said it was a forty minute drive to the boathouse, but he changed his mind when Sam handed him a twenty dollar bill. He made the run in exactly twenty minutes, and when Sam got out, he gave the hackman another twenty to quiet his memory.

It was raining softly. Sam stood still until the cab vanished into the night, then he turned and padded past the abandoned boathouse and headed out to the point. He saw tire tracks leading along the dirt road; fresh tracks. He decided if Hogan was already there with Nick, he'd force a showdown. It might as well come now as later. He checked the chamber of the little revolver, and slipped it into the pocket of his coat.

There was only one car and, with a sigh of relief, he saw that it was Nick's. He ran forward. The dash-lights were on, and in the pale half-light, he could make out Nick behind the wheel. Nick was alone.

"Thank God!" growled Sam, opening the off-door. "I've been trying all over—"

He stopped abruptly. "Nick!" He put out his hand and touched the other man. But Nick Chastain was dead!

SEEING-BELIEVING

THIRST-RELIEVING

What happens when you look at the circles
and move your head from side to side?



ANSWER. The circles spin like a wheel.



CHAPTER SIX

Dead Man's Holiday

SAM couldn't believe it! He grabbed Nick's shoulder again and shook him. Nick's head bobbed loosely and he fell sideways on the seat. Sam stood back. He was taken completely by surprise. His only thought had been to reach Nick before Hogan got there. Now that Nick was dead, he was lost.

His watch told him it was four minutes past ten. The thought struck him that perhaps Hogan had already been there. Perhaps Hogan had done this thing? Sam felt sick. He had no affection for Nick Chastain, yet it came to him that perhaps he was responsible. It was just possible that Hogan had thought to lure, not Nick Chastain, but Sam Wire out here and murder him.

Sam explored that hypothesis. At first it made no sense; then a complicated picture began to form. It would be typical of a crooked mind like Tip Hogan's to figure out a deal like that. If Sam's body were found in Chastain's car, in Chastain's clothes, masquerading as Nick himself—Nick would be over the proverbial barrel. Hogan could lead him by a ring in his nose the rest of his career.

As in a dream, Sam heard a car drone along the Bayshore Road. It jerked him out of his trance. He opened the turtle-back of the coupe, then went back to the seat and hauled Nick's body out, getting his shoulder under Nick's middle. A long envelope fell to the ground. Sam dumped the corpse in the turtle-back and, as he stooped to retrieve the envelope, a car turned off the highway into the dirt road. Sam slammed down the back, and ducked into the seat as the headlights washed across the coupe.

There was blood on Sam's hand. He wiped it off, and glanced in the envelope. It was full of bills. He held them close to the dash-light and riffled them. At a quick guess, he's say there was between six and eight thousand in the pack. He shoved them into his pocket, and put his hand on his gun as a car drove up along side of the coupe.

Sam waited, and a moment later Hogan came up on the off-side.

Sam didn't move a muscle. Hogan stared at him a moment.

"What's wrong with you, Nick?"

Sam relaxed a little and took his hand off his gun. "I guess I fell asleep," he mumbled thickly. "What time is it?"

Hogan chuckled and climbed in beside him. "I'm a little late," he admitted. "Jake came storming in just as I was leaving. He's burned about that heist. Figures you had something to do with that, Nick."

Sam said, "Tip, we're going to have trouble with Jake."

"We?"

"That's right—we. You let him chisel into San Carlos. You can't expect him to take orders; not his kind."

"Well, I'll be humbly damned!" growled the old cop, thoughtfully. He was silent a long time, and Sam sensed that he had overplayed his hand. He began to wonder if Tip Hogan had killed Nick. At first he had been sure of it, but now—

"Perhaps I was wrong," Hogan brooded. "That's what I wanted to see you about. Nick, I got a tip that Jake's going gunnin' for you."

Sam started to say, *Let the punk come gunning*; then he remembered that Nick wasn't that kind; Nick would be scared as hell if somebody was out to iron him.

"By God, Tip!" Sam said, making his voice sound anxious. "What you going to do about it?"

"I won't have a killin'," Hogan said. Sam thought he sounded relieved. "We've had things our way in San Carlos a long time. This new Grand Jury will die of stagnation if we stick together. But a killin' of a guy of your position, Nick, would blow the lid off."

"You better remember that, Tip."

"I intend to. The same goes for Jake's position—so don't get any ideas on your own."

"I don't get that?"

"I think you do," Hogan said significantly.

"That heist, now—"

"You think I had anything to do with that?"

Hogan laughed. "Nick, we've known each other a long time. You're full of tricks, if you have nerve enough to pull 'em. I've noticed a change in you of late." He paused to lend weight to his words. "I'd hate like hell to start having trouble with you, chum."

"You won't," Sam said. "Unless—"

"Yeah?"

"Unless you marry Jake Schultz."

"Hmmmnn! You bring anything for me?"

Sam suddenly remembered the envelope full of dough. He took it out and handed it to Hogan. The cop looked inside, hefted the sheaf of bills and shoved them in his pocket without counting.

"Well, what about Jake?" Sam demanded.

Hogan had the car door open. He paused. "Leave him to me, Nick. If he bulls you, or makes trouble, call me. Don't try importing any outside talent. Get that?"

"I won't," Sam promised. "Either you'll handle it, or I will."

Hogan chuckled. "You?" and got out laughing to himself.

WHEN SAM reached the apartment, it was Pat who opened the door. She looked terrified out of all reason, and though he couldn't understand just why she should, it registered. Dumbo was seated on the couch, punching one big fist into the other palm. He looked up at Sam.

Sam said, "Nick's dead!"

He hadn't meant to break it like that; he hadn't been sure even that he would tell them, at all. He had no plan.

Pat started to scream. Before Dumbo could get out of his seat, Sam slapped her hard a couple of times, and she fell sobbing into a chair. Dumbo ambled over to her and stood staring down. Sam waited. Dumbo turned finally and dropped into a chair.

"Where's Nick?" he asked.

Sam told them what had happened, concluding, "He's in the turtle-back of the coupe, down in the alley. We got to get rid of him."

Pat got up and started for the bedroom. Sam didn't like the look on her face. He caught her arm.

"Lemme alone!" she flared. "I'm getting outa here!"

He slammed her back onto the couch. "The hell you say! You're part of the props in the masquerade; you're staying right here."

She stared at him in amazement. "Good God! You're not going on with this crazy act?"

"That's the general idea—yes."

"I won't! I won't!"

Dumbo started to heave himself erect, and she moved closer to Sam, blubbering hysterically. He pushed her into a chair and went out to the kitchen. He brought back a bottle and three glasses. The drinks—and they were stiff ones—steadied them all; Pat most of the three.

"Let's be sensible about this," Sam said. "We're caught in a squirrel cage; we don't know whether we're ahead or behind. Maybe Jake Schultz killed Nick. Maybe it was Hogan, and he thought it was me, or perhaps he killed Nick knowing what he was doing. We can't know—yet."

"We can get the hell out of here!" Pat cried.

"Uh-uh," Sam said quietly. "We can't. What with government regulations, ration books, registration cards and all that, we'd be hunted down in a few weeks. Then we would be holding the bag. The only chance we got is to bluff it through."

"Maybe," the girl said moodily.

Sam appraised her thoughtfully. He knew he couldn't trust her, but if she pulled out now, he'd be alone. It was a lead-pipe cinch that Dumbo would tag after her.

"Listen," he argued, "I'll make you a proposition. There's dough in this racket,

plenty of it. You know that. String along with me in this masquerade and I'll split the take three ways."

She licked her lips and Sam went on. "We can do it," he urged, "if we stick together. I've more nerve than Nick Chastain ever had. We'll clean up."

"If you get caught, though," Pat asked. "Where'll I be?"

Sam noticed she didn't say "we" to include her husband. He wondered if Dumbo noticed it. "Better off by a wad of dough than you are now," he answered her question.

"What about Nick's wife?" demanded Pat. "You can't fool her."

Sam had forgotten Rachel Chastain for the moment, and the question caught him flat-footed. "Well—" he began, but Dumbo interrupted him.

"I will fix it with Mrs. Chastain," the big fellow offered. "She is a very nice lady."

"You fix it?" screamed Pat, contemptuously. "You—" She ran into the bedroom and slammed the door. The two men heard her flop down on the bed, and then her hysterical laughter filled the apartment.

Dumbo stared at the closed door with that brooding sadness on his battered face. Sam managed a laugh. "Forget it, chum," he urged. "She's just scared."

Dumbo wagged his head. "She's no good," he mumbled, as if to himself, "she's no good, no good."

"We got Nick's body to worry about now," Sam said.

Dumbo came out of his trance. He got up. "I'll do it," he offered.

"I'll go along," Sam said, but the ex-wrestler shook his head.

"You better get ready to go to the club. It'll look funny if you ain't there."

Sam looked down at his sodden clothes. Dumbo caught the look. "I'll stop at Mrs. Chastain's and pick up some clothes for you. I often did that for Nick. She won't think nothin'."

"Maybe not tonight she won't," Sam mused. "But after a few days—"

"Maybe by then it won't matter," growled the other man, and walked out of the apartment.

Sam found some clean underclothing in the spare bedroom, so he laid them out and went into the shower. He lazed through it, trying to let the water purify his spirit as well as his body. He had always thought of San Jacinto prison as the acme of sordidness, but there was something dank and unhealthy about this present mess that sickened him. It wasn't the graft and corruption and murder; it was something deeper than that; something Sam Wire couldn't frame into words. But it was real and tangible.

The bath helped. He shaved, then he went back into the bedroom and dressed. When he came out of his room he heard Pat leave the apartment, and shortly afterwards Dumbo came in and sat down.

Dumbo said, "Where was she goin', Sam?"

"How do I know? She's your wife, mister."

Dumbo heaved himself erect. "Yeah, she's my wife. Well, we better get down to the club."

Those two hours at the Sphinx Club were the toughest Sam Wire had ever experienced. Meeting a half-hundred strangers whom he was supposed to know with varying shades of intimacy was bad enough; but not knowing what was on Dumbo's twisted mind was worse. Yet without the slug-nutty bodyguard, he would have been lost.

They didn't talk on the way down. Dumbo drove in a moody silence. When he parked the car, he said only, "I'll speak to anybody you oughta know."

It went like that: the pug-ugly inside the door said, "Evenin', Mister Chastain!"

Dumbo said, "Hiya, Tim."

Sam asked, "How's the crowd, Tim?"

They wandered among the games, Sam taking his cues from Dumbo. Once a croupier frowned, a little puzzled, so Sam said, "Got a hell of a toothache," and the man nodded sympathetically.

As they started up the stairs to where a serious poker game was operating in the room above, Sam whispered, "How'm I doing, Dumbo?"

The big fellow shrugged. "Don't talk too much."

The dealer got up to make room for Sam, but Sam shook his head and tapped his cheek. Dumbo said, "Chief's got one helluva toothache, Frank! He don't want to sit in."

A fat man with a bald place, laughed. "I came back to retrieve that fifteen hundred you lifted the other night, Nick!"

"Take it away from Frank," Sam said, holding his mouth stiff. And everybody laughed.

"Well, we made it," Dumbo commented, driving back to the apartment. "Guess the first time is the worst."

"I wonder." He also wondered about a lot of other things; about Pat, and Hogan, and Jake and Rachel. She'd have to be handled, sooner or later. Sam suffered a sinking sensation.

They visited the Sphinx the following night. It went off easier. Sam had a good memory, and he spoke now without prompting to the men he'd met the night before. Perhaps he could get away with it. He began to feel better.

Then, on the fourth day, he got the call from Hogan!

CHAPTER SEVEN

One Chance In a Million

FORTUNATELY, Sam was alone in the apartment when Hogan telephoned. Pat had been going out a lot during the last few days, and Dumbo had been equally mysterious. Sam was jumpy every time the phone rang, dreading it might be Rachel. She had called once, but Dumbo had taken the line and assured her that Nick was somewhere around town. He was—but only Dumbo knew where the body lay.

So Sam got the call—and the moment Hogan started to talk, Sam knew this was *it*. Not from anything Hogan said, not even from the way he said it. There's a sort of faint overtone to Death; men who have lived close to it recognize the thing. Maybe it's intuition, premonition, hunch—call it what you will. Sam knew it.

Hogan said, "Nick, there's been talk. I want you to meet me tonight."

"Where, Tip?"

"I don't want to get far from the station-house, but you can't come here. Make it Conover's back room. Have your gorilla drive you over and drop you. Don't tell him you're meeting me. I'll explain why when I see you. Come in by the alley. I'll be there by eleven."

"Trouble?"

"Plenty—" a pause—"but nothing we can't settle."

"I'm glad to hear that," Sam said. "At eleven, then."

Sam chain-smoked a pack of cigarettes before Dumbo came in. He explored the angles. Suppose Hogan knew? He might be trying to smoke Sam into lamming, and get him on the run; more likely he was walking him into a frame. If Hogan didn't know? Sam shook his head. Another heart-to-heart talk with the old cop would uncover him. This was it!

And yet he wasn't ready to quit! He'd risked his life to come back here to San Carlos to square a grudge. He wanted to send a lot of grafting, framing political corruptionists to the place where they'd sent him—San Jacinto penitentiary. No, there was only one thing to do—kill Hogan himself! Sam had no compunctions about shooting Hogan; he was a rat and a killer. But he had hoped for more time.

There was no more time.

When Dumbo came in, Sam asked him about Conover's. Dumbo told him it was a pawn-broker's shop where the crooked cops disposed of stolen property. If a citizen discovered his stuff in Conover's he had to buy it back anyhow. It was a good graft; small, but enough to keep cops like Hogan in good Scotch.

Sam told Dumbo Hammerstein about Hogan's call. Dumbo was only half-listening, and Sam suspected he was thinking about his wife. When he had concluded his story, Dumbo glanced up.

"You goin', Sam?"

"I've got to."

"You're goin' to kill Hogan, ain't you?"

Sam shrugged. "I don't know."

"Some people deserve killin'," reflected Dumbo. "They're no good." He got up and went into the bedroom.

At seven, Pat had not come home. Sam and Dumbo made a meal of eggs and Scotch; Sam ate the eggs; Dumbo drank the Scotch. It had no more effect on him than the eggs had on Sam.

"If you kill him," Dumbo ruminated, "we'll have to lam. You always gotta lam when you kill somebody."

"I wondered about that," Sam admitted. "Could you scare up a little of Nick's dough?"

Dumbo shook his head. "Not without a note from Nick. I use'ta go pick up dough, but I hadda have a note. Nick didn't trust nobody."

"You got any samples of Nick's handwriting?"

Dumbo got up without speaking and returned with a couple of letters. They were written to Pat; nothing so personal anyone could take exception to them, but there was an undercurrent. Sam studied them a moment, then went over to the table. He mentally blessed old Bobo Jenkins, the forger, who had given him lessons.

"Tell me what Nick used to say, Dumbo?"

He wrote what the big fellow dictated. On the third attempt, he was satisfied. He gave the note to Dumbo.

"How's the gas situation?"

"Nick had plenty of coupons."

"Get the coupe tanked to the gills," Sam suggested. "And be back here by ten-thirty, sharp."

Dumbo had barely got out of the building, when Rachel called. Sam tried to stall her, without much luck.

"I don't know who you are," Rachel Chastain said crisply, "but this is the third time I've called for my husband. If I do not hear from him by morning, I shall call the police." And she hung up.

Sam slowly pronged the receiver. "Nice goin', chump," he told himself. "Your card house is toppling around your ears, and you haven't enough sense to scramble from under."

HE REHEATED the coffee, and sat planning to kill a man. It wasn't easy. Sam had got his schooling in the toughest college in the world, and yet—somehow the old Sam, the boy who once had ideals,

kept cropping up. Hogan was no good; there was no argument about that. The lives he had broken on the rack of his graft were legion. And yet, when Sam thought of blasting the life out of him, he cringed.

Pat Hammerstein sauntered into the apartment about eight-fifteen. Sam studied her; her eyes had a tired but more contented look.

Sam grinned. "Want to go steppin' tonight, babe?"

She heaved a long sigh. "Be a love, and get me a nice stiff drink."

He did that. Watching her gulp the stuff, he saw with suddenly sharpened perception. The whole picture jumped complete into his consciousness. His heart started to pound! Was there time?

He said, "Well, baby, we're set!"

She peered over the rim of her glass. "Set?"

"Yeah! I'm takin' your advice—about Jake Schultz."

"Oh, Sam! Then you're going to lam?"

You're not very subtle. Aloud he said, "Uh-uh. I'm going to rub Jake out before he gets me."

Her hand started to shake. "Tell me," she whispered.

"Sure, and why not? We're in this together. You warned me he was tough; well, so am I. I figured to beat him to it. I've got a sweet setup to trap him tonight."

She put the glass down slowly. The weighted bottom beat a nervous tattoo on the table-top. "Go on, Sam!"

"Hogan and I are going to get Jake into the back room of Conover's pawn-shop. That'll take care of Jake."

"Tonight?"

"Yeah. About eleven. You stick here, so's I'll have an alibi."

She said, "Sure, Sam," but her face was pale beneath the paint.

He got up to make it easy for her to make a move. She sat staring into her empty glass a while, then slowly pulled to her feet.

"Where's Dumbo?"

"He's out on a job for me," Sam told her. "He won't be back for a while."

She strolled into the living room. "Well, I'll go down to the lobby and pick up the mail," she said casually. "Then I'll go to bed."

He said, "Okay," and went into his room. When he heard the hall door close, he came back out and listened for the elevator. The instant it started down again, he padded into the corridor and ran for the stairs. By the time he reached the lobby below, Pat was already in the phone booth.

He stood in the curve of the stairs, and watched her. He saw her fumble, trying to put the nickel in the slot. She laid her lips close to the mouthpiece, and spoke rapidly. . . .

He took the five flights, two steps at a time. From Nick's address book, he got Jake's number and called from the phone in the kitchen. The line was busy. *Not a bad guess, chump!* he told himself. He lighted a cigarette, and waited.

He heard Pat come in, but she avoided him and went directly into her bedroom, closing the door. He called Jake's number again, knowing only too damn well she was listening. Jake himself answered the phone.

"This is Nick," Sam said.

Jake's voice was unnaturally suave. "Yeah? What's on your mind, chum?"

"How'd you like to sell out to me, Jake?"

"You nuts?"

Sam hesitated. "Look—how about meeting me tonight, at eleven?"

"Why?"

"Self-protection. It's about Hogan. Important."

"Where?"

"Conover's backroom. There won't be anybody around. I fixed that."

There was a long, thoughtful pause. Jake's voice was harsh when he said, "I'll see you at eleven. If you're serious, bring some sugar." He hung up.

DUMBO HAMMERSTEIN drove with the peculiar preoccupied air of a man with too many drinks under his belt. Sam noticed the clock on the court house. It was a quarter to eleven. They stalled, smoking, not speaking. Dumbo had something on his twisted mind, something he couldn't bring himself to talk about. Sam, on his part, tried not to think too much. He was in the position of a matador baiting two bulls, trying to get them to crash head-on without crippling himself. It was risky business.

At five of eleven, he had Dumbo drop him at the mouth of the alley. He glimpsed a car parked in the shadows up the street, but he deliberately kept from looking at it directly.

"Want I should wait?" Dumbo asked anxiously.

Sam shook his head. "No. You go back to the apartment and wait for me." He hesitated, then reached in and slapped the big fellow on the shoulder. "Pal, look—if I don't come back, or telephone within half an hour, take this, and scram out of town. And don't tell your wife!"

"This" was a roll of bills, which Sam shoved into the man's hand.

Sam entered the dark canyon of the alley, his gun in his hand. He moved swiftly, lightly, keeping close against the building on his left. From the careful description Dumbo had given him, he had the pawnshop's position clearly etched on his mind. He saw it—a

dirty yellow globe burned palely over the door.

Instead of going directly to it, he crossed the alley to the airway of a restaurant on the opposite side. He fitted himself into the dirty slot between two dark buildings and waited.

Hogan came heavily, steadily, sure and flat on his feet. Sam flattened into his niche, peering into the darkness. As he expected, he saw the vague shadow of another cop hovering near the mouth of the alley. Sam's heart began to pound.

It happened almost too fast to follow. Hogan reaching the pawnshop, opening it with one hand and drawing his gun with the other. There was a pair of orange flashes from the interior; the double bark of a gun. As Hogan sagged on his side, the bulky figure of Jake Schultz ran past him. Before Jake had gone a dozen paces, the cop at the alley's mouth cut him down. Then people began flooding the alley from both ends, and Sam Wire merged with the first wave.

He heard the cop explaining loudly, "Me'n the Cap'n was cruisin! We saw this guy sneak in here like a burglar. The Cap'n followed, an' . . ."

Sam knew the story better than the cop did. He circled the ever-growing mob, and caught a cab.

He dropped the cab about four blocks from the apartment house and walked the rest of the way. He took out the gun, wiped it carefully, and dropped it down the first sewer opening; from now on there would be no need for guns.

The elation he had expected to feel was strangely missing. He had no sympathy for the two murdering scoundrels who had been killed, yet there was an ache in his middle that plagued him. There was no completeness; no satisfaction.

He opened the apartment door with a key Dumbo had given him. Pat was lying in the center of the floor. She wore a soiled kimono, and her neck was twisted grotesquely. She was dead. Dumbo Hammerstein sat on the edge of a chair staring at her. His long arms hung limply between his legs, and his hands opened and closed convulsively. He didn't even hear Sam come in. Tears coursed down the lines of his broken face, as he kept repeating over and over:

"She was no good, no good, no good. . . ."

SAM took the big fellow by the elbow and led him into the kitchen, where they couldn't see the dead girl. Dumbo let himself be shoved into the nook and faithfully drank the whiskey Sam poured for him. He came around slowly, and turned his dog-eyes on Sam.

"You're all right?" he asked plaintively.

"Sure, fella, I'm all right!" Sam said. "Why?"

Dumbo still acted like he didn't believe Sam was alive. "But she double-crossed us," he persisted. "She's been playin' with Jake Schultz. She tipped him off to where you was goin'. She bragged you was gonna be kilt!"

Sam nodded. "I knew that. Jake killed Tip Hogan, and Hogan's partner killed Jake."

"She was no good," Dumbo sobbed. "She was just no good!" He made a cradle of his arms for her head. "Oh, my God! I loved her, but she was no good!"

Watching the big man, Sam knew he was through. He was filled with an overpowering compassion for the poor devil. It must be hell to love a dame that much, any dame. But to worship someone like Pat Hammerstein. . .

"Dumbo," he said crisply, "you'd better blow. The cops will be wanting to talk with me, and you're in no condition to meet 'em. You take the coupe, and scram. I'll dispose—I'll get rid of Pat."

"Oh, no!" gasped Dumbo, lurching to his feet. "No, no! She'll go with me."

Sam winced. "But she's—" He stopped short at the look on the man's face. "Okay," he said.

They went into the living room. "She'll need her fur coat," Dumbo muttered. "It's cold out this time of night." He went into the bedroom and brought out a mink coat. Sam shuddered as he watched Hammerstein jockey the dead girl into the coat. He did it with incredible tenderness. When he finally lifted her into his arms, she might have been just sleeping. Sam walked with Dumbo to the door.

"Look, fella, are you sure—" Sam began.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Hammerstein said. "We'll go 'way together. There won't be no other guys botherin' us. I allus wanted it like that, Sam."

Sam shoved the rest of his roll in Dumbo's pocket.

"Good luck!" he said, and quickly closed the door. He knew he'd never see the Hammersteins again.

The strain was beginning to tell on him. He glanced in the mirror, and saw a face that startled him. It was not the face of Sam Wire; it was the bitter, worn and disillusioned face of Nick Chastain.

"My God!" Sam said aloud. "I *am* Nick now!"

Was he going crazy like Dumbo? Or was Dumbo sane, and life just a crazy masquerade? He'd have to stick around and find that out.

The morning papers were full of it. They ran two-column cuts of both Jake Schultz and Captain Hogan. Hogan was a hero, they said; a martyr. But the lid was off, and the Grand Jury wanted to question Nick Chastain. The reporters, the paper said, hadn't been able to locate Nick. His wife, when questioned, reported she had not seen him for several days. Nick's attorney, Gerry Vestal, announced that he would produce Nick when required.

Sam read that over twice, then he looked Vestal up in the phone book and made a note of the number. He lighted a cigarette and began to pace the living room. He walked to the window and stood staring out into the morning fog. The white mists acted as a screen for the pictures that moved before his eyes: Nick, Pat, Dumbo, Hogan—all the characters in this sordid drama. Then he thought of old Bobo Jenkins up in San Jacinto. They had Bobo in solitary now; making him pay for Sam's escape. They believed Sam was dead.

Sam is dead, Sam assured himself.

He stubbed out the cigarette, forcing himself to reach a decision. Sooner or later the cops would come. If they fingerprinted him, he was through. With Dumbo gone, he couldn't carry on the masquerade. He tried to remember why he had returned to San Carlos in the first place.

You wanted to pay off a debt, he reminded himself. You had big dreams about breaking up the rotten machine! Sap, sucker, dreamer!

He could lam even now. But for what? To be a fugitive the rest of his days? The thought made him sick with despair. He shook his head. He'd gamble on one more toss. One chance in a million! He scooped up the phone and called Vestal's number. He got the lawyer on the wire.

"This is Nick," he said crisply. "Meet me at the Grand Jury in half an hour!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, Nick!" pleaded the lawyer. "You can't do that!"

"Why in hell can't I?"

There was a pause. "Nick—are you all right?"

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"Certainly!"

"You don't sound right. Where are you—I'll come over?"

"I'll see you at the Grand Jury rooms," Sam insisted. "In half an hour." Vestal was still arguing when Sam hung up.

HE WALKED down a corridor of flashing photograph bulbs. There was a tall worried looking man waiting for him at the door marked GRAND JURY. The man reminded Sam of those grey-thatched figures in an *Esquire* clothing advertisement. A photographer shouted, "Hold it, Nick! I want one with you and Gerry!"

Vestal said, "Make it snappy, boys. I want a word with Nick."

They posed briefly, and Vestal led him into a small ante-room. "What in hell's happened to you?" the lawyer said.

Sam shrugged. "I've had a bellyful, Gerry. I'm through."

The lawyer was looking at him closely, a puzzled expression on his face. *He's suspicious*, Sam admitted. *I'm going to flop before I get my say.*

"You're either sick or crazy," Vestal said slowly. "Don't talk. Nobody has a thing on you, but if you talk, you'll upset the apple-cart."

"I'm not going to argue with you," Sam said bluntly. "I've had enough. I'm going to talk."

Vestal wiped his face with a handkerchief. "Very well. You've got enough to live on the rest of your life, I know. But you'll be through in San Carlos if you do."

"I'm already through."

"Wait here. I'll get you a guarantee of immunity." He hesitated. "You'll have to get another attorney after that, Nick, if you need one."

Sam nodded and sat down. Vestal was gone about twenty minutes. His face was pale when he returned.

"You can go in now, Nick," he said bitterly. "And good-by."

Sam walked into the Grand Jury room and took his seat. He stared down into the score of grim faces. These men despised him; they wanted to clean up San Carlos. They couldn't know that Sam wanted it as much as they did.

He talked for two hours. He told them things about San Carlos that even Nick Chastain never knew. He told them about Tip Hogan and his graft; where they could check on his holdings. He told them about Jake Schultz, about Judge Trask and Candell the Mayor. He talked quickly, expecting at any moment to have the door open and be denounced as an impostor. He gave them all the data he had garnered from a hundred sources in San Jacinto, and he knew they would act.

These were solid citizens; these men wanted a decent town.

They were silent, shocked, when he had concluded. The foreman said, "That will be all, Mr. Chastain. You have done a public service."

Sam smiled. He had accomplished his purpose, and now he'd take his medicine. He walked out of the Grand Jury room into a battery of cameras. Vestal was still there, grim and thoughtful. *He knows*, Sam thought. *This is it!*

He walked towards the lawyer, and then he saw Rachel standing beside him. The reporters crowded around. Sam walked straight towards her.

Vestal glanced down at her. "Well—" he prompted.

Her small oval face was very pale, and her sensitive nostrils quivered. Sam felt a little giddy.

"I'm terribly sorry," he began, but she moved swiftly forward and kissed him.

"Nick," she said huskily, "I'm so glad for what you have done!"

Sam couldn't speak. He heard the reporters jabbering, the flash bulbs popping, saw the look on Vestal's face. He felt Rachel take his arm and lead him away. They walked out to the street to a sedan parked at the curb.

"You drive, please," she said, and climbed into the front seat.

THE warm sunshine had melted the fog. It was a good world. There were children on the streets, and laughter in the air.

They stopped for a red light.

When it turned green, Rachel said, "Dumbo told me. He came over in the middle of the night and explained everything. It was a shock, I must admit, but . . ." Her voice trailed away.

He drove in silence until he reached the house. He wheeled the sedan into the driveway, and she started to get out.

"I can only say 'thanks', Mrs. Chastain," he managed. "There's just one thing I'd like you to believe. I didn't—hurt Nick."

"I know that. Dumbo shot him. Perhaps it was just as well; somebody else would have. I wanted to leave Nick, but he threatened to kill me." She met Sam's eyes. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know."

She studied her hands a long time. "You'll be needed at the trials coming up; Gerry Vestal said so. I—I don't know anything about Nick's affairs. Perhaps you could help. The future is so uncertain . . ."

Sam stared at her. "Maybe the future . . . will take care of itself."

WHERE THERE'S A KILL

By Charles Larson

COOPER took his cigarette out of his mouth and spread the map flat on his knee. "You and your detours," he said. "Where the hell are we?"

The girl didn't answer, and after a while Cooper looked up.

"What?" the girl asked. She turned her head quickly and Cooper saw tears in her eyes. They were good eyes, wide and gentle and inclined to laughter usually.

But not now.

Frowning, Cooper drew deeply on his cigarette, then pitched it through the open window by his left arm. He said, "Suppose we skip the weeping and wailing and sundry la-di-dah and concentrate on getting out of here. The man is dead. It's all over. I'd hate like the devil to have to get rough with you, sister, but I'd hate more for you to get real smart and vindictive and try to keep me in this God-forsaken hole." He smiled at her. "So will you tell me where we are?"

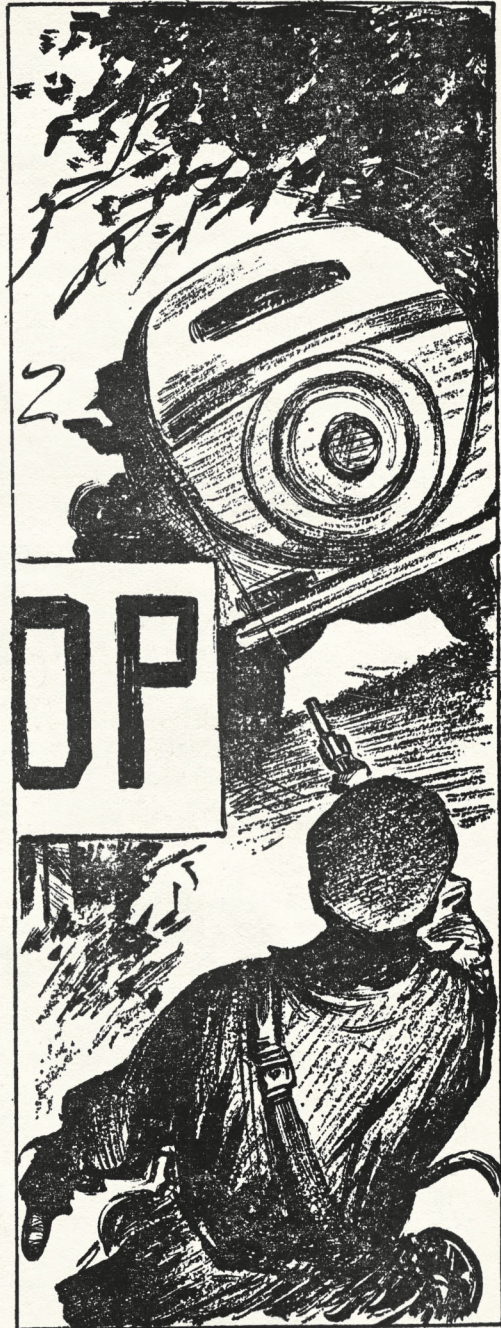
"I'm not vindictive."

"I know. When I was—up there, I used to read the junk they'd give us to read, and laugh until I couldn't laugh any more. My God, the goodness and the light!" He half turned in the seat, and bowed mock-gallantly. "But when I got out, and found you again, honey, I saw where laughter was all wrong. Such fools do exist."

"You don't have any heart at all, do you?"

Cooper laughed. "I have. As big as a

*The horns sounded like the blast
of Babel—Cooper fired without
aiming. . . .*



*A dead cop is a good cop, the killer thought—but a good cop picks
up a lot of friends. . . .*

barn. But it's full of me. There's no room for slobbering sentimentality. If there had been, I wouldn't be sitting here now, with you. I'd still be thinking of ways to get out of the lush oasis this state uses for a prison. In a way I'm sorry it had to be Jim—"

The girl turned her head away again.

Relentlessly Cooper went on, "... but Jim was a fool. No one is going to stop me. I'm out. I'll stay out."

"Why'd you have to bother us, and wreck our lives? Why couldn't you have gone on? You're always talking about how you don't need a soul to help you. You don't need friends—"

"And I don't. But I did need clothes. And money. Now I've got them. I said once I was sorry—"

"Sorry!"

The girl swung around, her eyes swimming. "Do you think repeating that like a parrot can help Jim? He was a cop. It was his job to bring you in. But because you—you were a boyhood friend he forgot for a second and was willing to turn around and not see you—"

"But he had seen me. After I'd left he would have run like a scared kid to tell where the big bad mans had gone."

"Of course he would! But at least he gave you a chance. That was more than you gave him. And he was worth a thousand of you! Jimmy was a man, not some rotten, mentally diseased—"

The slap sounded loud in the closed car.

One tear trembled on the edge of the girl's eye, and swelled slowly over the eyelid and fell across the red marks on her cheek.

"You're getting hysterical, baby," Cooper said softly. "Probably the conversation is making you nervous. Suppose you just tell me how to get out of these—these woods, and onto a main highway. Back-country like this always confuses me."

She didn't answer, only looked at him.

"Well?" Cooper murmured.

"You're going to kill me too," the girl said.

"Why—how you talk!"

"You know . . . I don't even care." She spoke softly, dully. "I'm sorry for you. Isn't that strange? You have nothing. Jimmy had a million friends, and you have to slap a girl to even get directions. It's rather pitiful."

Cooper snorted. "Friends! Lets hold up a closed fist and count off on the fingers we can see just how many things Jim's friends have done for him. It's been three days and the hicks you call friends haven't stirred."

"They have a description of this car. Maybe they don't know what you look like, but every one of them knows me."

Cooper waited a moment, looking at her.

Then, sweeping the map off his knee, he put the car in gear. "This passive resistance must be softening my brain," he said. "If I can't find my way out of here, I deserve to be caught."

Stolidly the girl watched him as he gunned the motor, slapped the gear shift into second, and drove quickly up the winding, unpaved country road. . . .

FIFTEEN minutes later, the woods stopped, and across the whole world the undulating curve of Oregon farm land seemed to stretch. Strips of it were laid out like black velvet, and next to the velvet lay strips of light tan, and green; and far off, spaced like light-houses on land, were thick, comfortable red barns. It was a lazy, fat, rich land, fertile, mature. You felt that you could put anything in this land, and the sun and rain would wheedle it out bigger, tighter with juices, than was possible anywhere else.

Cooper said, "I can't tell one part of this damned country from another any more than I can tell one Jap from another. I could swear we just came from here."

"We just did."

Cooper glanced quickly at the girl. She was leaning, head back, against the seat. Her eyes were closed, and her hands were lying open in her lap to catch the sunshine.

She said, "You've doubled back twice. You're closer to the village now than you were an hour ago."

Cooper felt the quick chill he used to feel when he was a kid—when he thought he'd outrun the cops and he'd turned to see them walking slowly and inexorably behind him. He said, "You're out of your mind. The sun's on our left. We're going north, away from the town."

"Now you are. Yes. But in the woods you went in circles. You've lost time."

"I don't give a damn for what I've lost. Just so that highway is in front of us. Once I get on that highway—"

"It's in front of us."

"All right." He coughed and bent closer to the wheel.

In ten minutes, he'd found it.

He'd driven through a little gully, and for a second, when he saw the red cliffs towering high on each side of him, shutting out the sun, he'd thought he was back in the woods, but then they'd burst upward and around a half-curve, and there it was. For a second his heart had beat with such relief he felt almost benevolent. The long white twist of pavement climbing and falling over the hills was the prettiest thing he'd ever seen. Even the Sunday stream of cars looked good.

He drew up, just resting, not even looking for an opening to slip through yet.

"The village," he said. "It's to the right, isn't it?"

"Yes. About half a mile down."

"I'm set. I know where I am."

"And now what?" the girl asked quietly.

"Now?"

"You can't keep me with you forever. You'll be meeting other cars, other people."

Without looking at her, Cooper said, "Yes. I will." He felt odd, talking to her about it. "Damn this traffic," he said. He inched out a little. "Some jackass is holding up the line."

The girl sighed, and moved a little in the seat. "But you'll never be free. As long as you live you'll be alone and hunted. No friends . . ."

Cooper turned savagely. "Will you shut up about friends? You harp about friends until I could kick your teeth in. What the hell good are they? Did they help Jim?"

He turned back. "And these Sunday drivers make me sick." He peered down the line, saw no break. It made him nervous and jumpy to wait. He wasn't built to wait. *Go—go—go*, his mind said.

Finally there came a space, and he meshed the gears, and shot forward, glad to be moving again.

The horns sounded like the blast of babel across the calm countryside.

Horns. Dozens of them. Blaring fantastically in his ears. Unnerved he tried to turn out of the lane into another, and he cut in much too short and the tip of his bumper caught under the front fender of the car he'd tried to cross.

In a second all hell broke loose.

Sirens began to scream, and far away breaks squealed, and the shouting of men and

women was loud and high. Cursing, Cooper reached into the leather flap on the door by his hand. By the time he'd clawed the gun loose from the tangle of cloth, the first motorcycle cop had raced up, and Cooper had pulled the trigger without aiming. The shot was the last he ever fired. The second cop had come from the front, and both his bullets smashed through the glass of the front window and into Cooper's head, and Cooper died instantly.

Less than a minute it had taken.

WHEN the police reached the car, most of the first shock was already leaving the girl, and the wonderful dullness that follows had begun to set in.

"Mrs. Harmon!"

"Hello, Timmy—John—"

"My God, Mrs. Harmon, we been looking all over God's green earth for you. You all right?"

"Yes. I'm fine."

"It's terrible to bust up the procession like this, but since we found you and the guy who killed Jim—"

The girl raised her head. "What procession?" she asked.

"Jim's funeral procession. Longest one I ever seen in my life. All his friends turned out. This guy must have been nuts to try to break through it."

"Funeral?" the girl said. "Jimmy's friends?"

"Yes. What is it, Mrs. Harmon?"

But the girl wasn't listening. She'd leaned her head back again on the seat and she was laughing and crying at the same time, very softly.



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DIE BY NIGHT



CHAPTER ONE

Dead Reckoning

THE man wore grey and white striped seersucker pants and a green sport shirt. He was tall and raw-boned, his features angular, his chin as long as his palm was wide. His hair was curly and coarse, in-

flammable looking, like excelsior. His glazed blue eyes were slightly crossed because somebody had leaned too heavily on the back of his skull with a blunt instrument.

The match burned to Hugh Bram's fingers and he dropped it to the brick pavement of the alley. William Veller, the fat, freckled man who stood beside him, stirred uneasily in the sudden dark.

By G. T. Fleming-Roberts

"It's Poley," Bram said. "He worked in a war plant. The Emory Company, I think."

Veller's breathing was audible. "You know him, Hugh?"

"Yeah. He's a vote, isn't he?"

"Well, he was."

Bram uttered a short laugh. "He still is." He reached out a hand toward Veller, touched the lazy fat of him. "Let's go. Somebody else can find him, he won't mind. Not now."

Veller said, "Okay. Only this is pretty close to home."

He meant that the alley ran directly behind the building where Bram had his apartment. Or maybe he meant something else which Hugh Bram preferred not to think about.

"It's none of our business," Bram argued with himself. "We're not cops any more." He took a wide detour around the spot where he knew the body was. Veller, usually slow-moving, kept hard on his heels all the way to the garage where Bram kept his jeep-size convertible.

Twenty minutes later, Veller parked the little car on Ferry Avenue. Reaching for the hand brake, the fat of him enveloped the steering wheel and the impudent horn beeped. Bram was perceptibly startled. He thought, *I've got to get over being so damned jumpy.*

Across the dark, narrow street stood a two-story building of whitewashed brick that blushed red from a neon sign over the basement entrance:

THE CRADLE—BEER & LIQUOR

Veller ran yellowish brown eyes over the sign. "I didn't think they were getting them that young. What's the liquor—milk?"

Bram paused with one hand on the latch of the car door. He said he guessed so, then after a moment added, "Dragon's milk."

He was thinking that two months ago, a sleazy little crook by the name of Joe Moss had dropped into the Cradle and had gone straight from there to the morgue with a bullet in his brain. It was like that on Ferry Avenue. Some of the worst people died there.

Bram extended long legs over the running board to set foot on the pavement. The asphalt had taken the heat of the day and now gave it back into the night. The air was dead. As he crossed the street he heard the little car groaning and straining to disgorge Veller. He waited on the curb. The neon fell on the scarred surface of a wood telephone pole, illuminating a likeness of grey-templed Hugh Bram on a campaign poster tacked high above everyone's head.

Hugh Bram for Sheriff
Indorsed By
The Peoples' Action Committee

He stared at his dark-complexioned, distinguished-looking self up there spraying personality around magnanimously in a narrow, stinking street. He thought sardonically, *You've gone up in the world, you have—with plugs in your ears, one eye closed, and a clothespin on your nose!* And all because once upon a time there had been a guy named Joe Moss.

He remembered the first time he had met Joe Moss. That was in Stella Madison's apartment. Bram had been an honest cop then, recently promoted into plainclothes, and working hard toward the dreams he'd dreamed. He'd just dropped in on Stella that evening, and Joe Moss was there—a small, dapper man with cold blue eyes set in a delicate-featured, almost pretty face. Stella had told him then, with cheeks glowing and stars in her eyes, that she and Joe were to be married the following week. Bram, his world crumbling like cake that has gone stale, had pumped Joe's hand. He hadn't known then that Joe's eyes had got that way—chill and hard—from killing for hire. Neither had Stella.

The second time he'd seen Joe Moss, ten months after the marriage, had been over gun sights. Joe Moss had resisted being pulled in on suspicion. Yet Bram had held his fire, because of what Joe was to Stella. Bram's kindness—if that was what it was—had been paid for with derisive laughter from Joe. Negligence in the performance of duty, Bram's superiors had called it.

Veller plodded across the street, wiping sweat from his broad, furrowed brow. His gold-toothed smile formed hesitantly.

"Sure you know what you're doing, Hugh?" he asked, concerned.

"No," Bram said flatly. He turned on his heel, entered the taproom. Veller sighed and waddled after him, just as he had sighed and followed the day Bram had quit the force to muscle into politics.

DOWN in the tavern, Joe Moss' widow played the electric organ. How she played it didn't matter because the patrons were either too drunk to care or, like Bram, they drank in Stella Moss with their eyes instead of their ears. She looked cool in her sheer green dress, like something whipped up with ice, mint, and a jigger of gin. Perhaps only Bram noticed the dash of bitters. While Veller looked for a place at the bar, Bram moved on back through the crowded tables toward the platform at the rear where the organ was. Stella had just concluded a bounce chorus of *Whispering* as he came up behind her. His dark-eyed glance lay hungrily upon her a moment, on her lovely shoulders, then on her bronze-red hair, softly

caught at the nape of her neck in a jade green Daché net.

She was improvising with her left hand, sorting music on the rack with her right, when Bram moved over beside her. A tall, lank man, always leaning on things, Bram leaned now on the organ. A smile twisted whimsically at one side of his slim, black mustache.

"Hello, lady," he said quietly.

She looked up, green eyes startled. "Hugh!" she said under her breath. Her gaze touched his face, moved off frantically into the crowd to wander there, haunted, as though the ghost of little Joe Moss had walked into the doorway. "You shouldn't have come."

He said, "I wanted to come."

He studied her face. She hadn't changed much. Maybe around the mouth she had changed. Heartbreak always showed first around the mouth.

"And I certainly shouldn't have written, asking you to come. Not here. It was foolish." Stella forced her laugh. "Silly. It—it might hurt you, Hugh." Her eyes went back to the music. "Politically, I mean. You'd better go."

"You ought to know me," he said. His voice was subdued, gentle—but his eyes had hardened. "You ought to know I'm not anything you can turn on and off like a water faucet."

Her breathing quickened. "But not here. Not now. Say, one-thirty. I'll be through here then—"

She twisted suddenly on the organ bench, slapped him hard across the right cheek. He reeled back, stared bewilderedly into Stella Moss' face. Her green eyes were like shards of glass that bit into his burning face. Above the ringing in his ears he heard her whispered words distinctly, "Sorry, Hugh."

He staggered a little getting off the platform. He burrowed into the laughing, jeering crowd on the booth side of the room. A gin-husky voice shouted, "It ain't air conditioning, it's the iceberg at the organ that keeps the place so damned cool!"

That slap—Stella had intended it to impress somebody out there in the crowd who was watching. Somebody she feared?

"Bram. Hey, Bram!" The voice, sharp and snagging, caught at him from one of the booths. Bram turned to the right.

He saw Al French, one of the drive-wheels of the Peoples' Action Committee. He was a big blond man, sufficiently concerned about his waistline to spend three nights a week bowling. He had close-cropped hair, a square, choppy face. Rimless glasses lent an edge to what would otherwise have been dull-looking blue eyes. On the bench beside him was a zippered fabric bag of the sort used to carry

bowling shoes. He looked tense, very tired. "Hello, Al," Bram said, stepping to the end of the table.

French merely inclined his head. He poured red Chianti wine from a black, balloon-shaped bottle, sipped it, smacked his lips. When he spoke, his voice was as dry as the wine itself.

"That's about the only way I know to lose an election." Al French jerked his head toward the back of the room, toward Stella Moss. "Edge Dickson and I work ourselves grey fixing things so that even a jackass can slide into office. But you're supposed to have enough intelligence to avoid making a spectacle of yourself with the widow of cheap little gunman who was burned down not two months ago."

Bram clung to the edge of the table and to his temper at the same time. When he spoke his voice was nasty-nice.

"For a moment there, I thought you said Joe Moss was burned down, as though it'd been intentional. Funny I'd get that notion, when everybody knows it was just one of those things. Some sort of a gun duel between a pair of hot shots, wasn't it, and pal Joey ran into one of the slugs?"

Al French took another sip of wine, his eyes on Bram's whitened knuckles. "That's right," he said. "It could happen to anyone."

AT THE bar, William Veller was taking up as much room as possible, which was quite a lot. He saw Bram's reflection in the mirror at the back, edged over to let Bram get to a stool. The beer he had been drinking stood out on his forehead in beads of sweat. His yellowish-brown eyes brooded.

"Let's get the hell out of here, Hugh." He spoke loudly because of Stella Bram's organ music.

"I like it here," Bram said sarcastically. "Such nice people." He caught the disinterested eye of the barkeep and told him to draw a beer. "What's wrong with the place?"

The fat, freckled man shook his head as though he weren't sure, but as though something were wrong. He stared into the mirror, into the crowd—uniforms and civvies and girls.

"Jail bait," he growled. "The town's full of San Quentin quail."

Bram said, "The war brings 'em out. What's it to you, at your age?"

"Notice the one in red," Veller said.

Bram put a dime on the counter in exchange for his beer. Over the foam he looked into the mirror. The kid in the skimpy red dress was easy to pick out. She wanted to be picked out. She didn't look twenty, a curva-

cious brunette, her sulky mouth painted an unnaturally dark shade to contrast with the powder pallor of her oval face.

The man seated at the table with her was twice her age. He was squat and muscular, with a broad mouth and nose. He wore a mousy grey toupee. Bram thought he'd seen the man somewhere in a police lineup.

A second man who was slight and sharp-featured, with black hair spread thriftily to hide his bald spot, stood beside the table, talking and laughing with the girl and her companion.

"That's Sam Packard," Bram said to Veller. "A gambler. He used to operate his own games from the back room of a cigar store until Prosecutor Moorhouse raided him out of business."

He thought it was entirely possible that Packard now worked one of the war plants here in Steelburg. He'd be a stockroom clerk, or something like that, so that he could contact hundreds of workers daily. He'd be selling baseball pool and lottery tickets within the factory itself, beyond the reach of city reformers.

Only Packard wouldn't be working for himself. Packard was still small fry.

Sam Packard moved away from the table. As he did so, Bram saw another man come out of the booth next to the one occupied by Al French. The man was young and swart. He had sad, hollow eyes and his center-parted hair fell down in greasy parentheses across his short brow.

Veller put his beer glass down hard on the counter. "This is it," he said to Bram. "I can smell cordite before it gets out of the cartridges. That greaseball. That's his girl, the one in red. He thinks she is, anyway. I've been watching that triangle. Come on, Hugh, let's amscray."

Bram's eyes narrowed. He turned on his stool to face the room. "Let's stick around," he said perversely.

The swart man was at the girl's side now. She was obviously ignoring him, and he didn't intend to be ignored. The girl's muscular companion caught the greaseball's eye, jerked his head to indicate that three was a crowd. But the other dropped a slim brown hand on the girl's shoulder, yanked her around in her chair. She batted at his hand, shrugged peevishly.

At the other side of the table, the squat, muscular man tipped over his chair, getting to his feet. He took a single sliding step, came up fast from a crouch to slam a left hook into the greaseball's face. The kid was a pushover, or maybe he'd just had one too many drinks. As he collapsed to the floor, the girl in red stood up. She put her palms on her hips, tilted her head at a derisive angle, and

laughed jeeringly into the sudden silence.

Beside Bram, Veller said, "That greaseball's got a gun! We don't want any part of this, Hugh."

Bram deliberately drank from his beer glass. Half the eyes in the room were on the girl in red. Al French was standing at the end of his booth, wine glass in one hand, the Chianti bottle in the other. Stella Moss was playing loudly, mechanically, but looking out across the room. The blood had gone out of her face, leaving the rouge stranded.

The swart young man got up. He turned unsteadily, eyes on the floor, started back toward the booth side of the room. Within a yard of the booth he had left, he suddenly whipped around, and Veller had been entirely right about the man packing a rod.

Stella Moss stopped playing in mid-bar, just as though her fingers had forgot what they were supposed to do. She screamed, and cutting through her cry came the sharp, vicious yap of the greaseball's gun. Against the soft illumination within the taproom, the gun flare stood out sharp and searing. The slug whined high over Bram's head and to the right. Glass shattered. The squat man with the girl in red upset his own table, yanked the girl down behind it. He had a gun in his hand and started talking back with it.

Patrons of the Cradle were on their feet, rushing toward the front door. Veller caught Bram's arm, tried to pull him into the crowd. Bram shouted, "Not that way!" though he couldn't have expected Veller to hear above gun-thunder.

He put a foot on a bar stool, jumped up and over to land crouching, to move toward the back of the room. Veller climbed hugely, rolled over the top of the bar to land on all fours. Ahead of him, a barkeep with the wrong idea about Bram's motives, snatched up a bottle and swung it up over Bram's head. Veller threw fat arms around the barkeep's legs, and while it wasn't Judo or anything fancy, he took the barkeep out of the picture and waddled on.

Bram reached the end of the bar, made a dash into the open, reached the organ platform. Stella Moss stood there with one hand clinging to the top of the organ. Her green eyes were wide and staring, her rouged lips parted. Bram looped an arm about her slim waist, pulled her away from the organ.

"It—it's just like the other!" she cried. "Just the same!"

Which didn't make sense until Bram looked back across the room. The gunplay had stopped. The crowd had pressed far to the entrance, trying to get through the door. There were panicky shouts, the sharp blast of a police whistle. Bram saw neither the girl in red nor her squat, muscular companion. But

the swart young man stood at one end of the booth, wavering slightly, his knees half bent and his smoking gun in his hand. About halfway between the crowd and the organ platform, lying near an overturned chair, was a man—Sam Packard, the gambler. He lay on his face, legs and arms sprawled out as though the bullet had caught him while he had been running.

CHAPTER TWO

Mark The X In Blood

VELLER braked the car in front of the Surrey, a three-story walk-up where Stella Moss had her flat. Bram got out and assisted Stella.

"Wait here," he said to Veller.

Stella's flat was on the top floor where the heat percolated down through the roof and the blare of radio jazz from the floor below was sucked in through the open window. Bram could see that she hadn't tried to make a home of it. It was just a place to stay.

Stella crossed to the window sill and turned on a small electric fan that didn't help much. She faced him, the artificial breeze stirring little wisps of bronze-red hair on her temples. Her smile trembled.

Bram put a finger under her chin, tilted her face.

"You can do better than that," he said.

Her smile warmed for him.

"All right, lady?"

"All right. Just shocked, Hugh."

He nodded. "Packard. What's he been doing? I can remember when he operated a cigar store as a front for his games. What's he been doing lately?"

"He worked in a defense plant, I think. Had charge of a tool room, or something like that, I've heard . . . Sit down, Hugh. We can talk a while, can't we?"

"All night," he agreed, "if you want." He sat down in one of the two chairs in the stuffy living room and she sat in the other. "You said it was just like this when Joe was killed?" He watched closely when he mentioned Joe's name. She hadn't mentioned it. She didn't wince.

"Just about the same. Different people, of course, and the fight wasn't over a girl. But Joe wasn't in the quarrel at all, and yet he was the only one hurt." She was silent a moment, her eyes watching her fingers toy with the glass of her small beaded purse. "Joe was murdered," she said tonelessly. "Do you know why he was murdered?"

He shook his head, though he had a pretty good idea. What he didn't know was how Stella knew about all this. She hadn't been in the Cradle the night Joe Moss had been shot.

And the police handout to the papers had been sketchy. The whole thing had been hushed up as quickly as possible. Nor could he understand what Stella was doing, working in the Cradle, the very place where Joe had been knocked off.

She asked, "Do you know what has happened to gambling in this town?"

"Uh-huh. The lid is on all the little back rooms. So the small-time pool operators simply got jobs in essential industry. They operate just the same, but Prosecutor Moorhouse can't get to them."

"Not quite the same, Hugh," she contradicted. "The whole racket is organized. There aren't any small-time operators, working their own pools. There's a single big lottery, with concessions in every war plant. That's what Joe was doing—helping organize the small-time operators. He was just a hired gun. I found that out, living with him."

"I see," Bram said, as though this were all news to him. "And Joe got too big for his trousers, gave somebody the double-cross, tried to organize a lottery of his own, after the somebody had showed him how it was done."

"That's right."

Bram took a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of his white summer jacket. He offered them to Stella who shook her head. He lighted a cigarette for himself, smoked thoughtfully for a moment.

"How did you find out about all this?" he asked.

Her green eyes gave him a quick, startled glance, veiled swiftly. "Just things that have been breezed around."

He didn't think so, but he nodded diplomatically. "You haven't anything to drink around here, have you, Stella?"

She stood up, laughing. "Just like old times, isn't it, Hugh? Remember, you'd always say that? And there'd always be a bottle of beer on the ice, and maybe some cheese and crackers. I'm sorry about the cheese. Rationing, you know. But there's some beer."

She went out of the room chattering. A sort of false gaiety, he thought, covering something else. As soon as the door closed behind her, he stood up, stepped to the chair in which she had been sitting. Her small evening purse was there. He picked it up, opened the clasp, thrust fingers inside it. Her hanky, a lipstick and compact, a few coins, a folded bit of note paper, and a card. He took out the card, turned it over. On it was printed: "Special Investigator, Office of County Prosecutor." On the dotted line at the bottom, John Moorhouse had scrawled his signature.

Bram stared moodily at the card. Then he thrust it into the purse, pulled out the piece of note paper and unfolded it. On it was penciled: "I'll see you during your intermission at the

Cradle." The curt note was initialed, "S.P."
Sam Packard? he wondered.

HE WAS holding the note in one hand and Stella's purse in the other when she came into the room with beer and glasses. She stopped just through the door. He turned, stared at her through wisps of smoke rising from his cigarette. Her beautiful eyes moved from his face to his hands. Then one of the cold wet bottles slipped from her fingers, *clunked* to the floor where the open mouth of it gave white foam out onto the rug.

He said, "I guess we'll skip the beer, lady. You've spilled my bottle of it, anyway." Then he doubled up the note, thrust it back into the purse, dropped the purse onto the chair. He strode to the door.

"Hugh!" she called after him. "Hugh, what's the matter?"

He stopped, turned to look at her. She'd gone white. Her moist lower lip was quivering. "Nothing's the matter," he said, "only you and I are miles apart, going in opposite directions." He watched her put the glasses and the second bottle of beer down on a little table. Her fingers were fluttering. Bram's smile came, slight, sardonic.

"Joe's a lucky stiff," he said, "to be loved by you even after he's dead. I guess I'd trade places with him."

She frowned slightly. Her eyes searched over his dark face. Then she ran across the room to him. Her slim, strong fingers caught the lapels of his jacket.

"Stop it, Hugh! Stop talking that way! Where's the copper in you?"

He uttered a short laugh. "He died one night when he had a little rat named Joe Moss beyond his gunsights and still couldn't pull the trigger. He just went soft, like an ice cream Santa Claus at a Christmas party."

"No, Hugh." Her eyes narrowed discerningly. "You were hard then. It's now that you're being soft—soft with selfishness."

He didn't have an answer for that one. "Doesn't killing mean anything to you, Hugh?"

He put his hands on her wrists and gently broke the hold she had on his coat. Then he moved across the room to the chair and sat down. He looked up at her and his grin was lopsided, a little bit sheepish.

He nodded. "Quite a bit. But not the sort of killings that rid the earth of rodents like Joe Moss and Sam Packard."

"They aren't the only ones," she said. "Maybe you've noticed the papers. There have been others—men who wouldn't play ball, wouldn't sell lottery tickets in the war plants. Oh, they're slugged on the head, and it's all dressed up to look like robbery, but

if you read a little deeper you'll find they were all stock or tool room clerks. And whenever one of them has died, the man who takes his place is one of the greasy little cogs in the gambling machine."

His mind went back into the immediate past, back to the corpse of George Poley which he and Veller had run across in the alley. Poley had been in charge of a stockroom at the Emory plant.

Bram leaned back slowly in the chair, looked up at her earnest, beautiful face. "I haven't thought too much about it. Tell me, why was Sam Packard knocked off tonight? Was he selling the syndicate short—selling information to you?"

She studied him a moment, then nodded. "Selling it to Moorhouse through me."

He drummed thoughtfully on the chair arm, gave his head a doubtful half-shake. "Lady, what chance do you think you've got of coming out of this alive?"

"A good chance, if you'll help me." She walked over to the other chair. He watched her, liking the way she moved. She sat down. "You've got friends and influence, Hugh."

He laughed. "I've got one friend—Bill Veller. When I was a rookie cop, they paired me with Veller. He's got a kind of father complex toward me, I guess. But Veller is all there is."

She said, "You could smash this thing if you wanted to."

He shook his head. "Not now, I couldn't. If I could, I'd be cutting the main gut of the People's Action Committee. After the election, maybe I can do something."

She stood up, pale and furious, walked swiftly to him. "That's three months off. How many more murders can take place between now and then?" Her mouth curled contemptuously. "You were right, Hugh, when you said we were miles apart and going different directions. Well, keep right on going. You'll get to be sheriff all right. You don't care if the X-marks on your ballots are written in blood! You don't give a damn how many corpses you have to step over, so long as you get into office!"

Her high heels tapped angrily as she crossed to the door and held it open for him. He got up, went over to her. "Not like that, lady," he said quietly. He put both arms around her, drew her to him. Her body was wooden against his, neither resisting nor yielding.

"So you want me to pull a double-cross, do you?"

She shook her head. "You've already done that, when you double-crossed yourself. I want you to square away, Hugh, and fight back like you used to do."

He said, "All right. Maybe there's a way back."

The woodenness went out of her. She buried her face against his chest and sobbed. He put his lips to her soft bronze-red hair, kept them there for a long moment. Then he released her, walked out of the apartment and didn't look back.

Downstairs and directly across the street from where Veller had parked the car, the lean dark figure of a man lounged against a telephone post, smoking a cigarette. Bram stared over the top of the jeep-size convertible at the watcher. Then he opened the car door and ducked inside.

He said to Veller, "I used to wonder how a man feels just before he commits suicide. But not any more."

CHAPTER THREE

Through the Heart

COUNTY PROSECUTOR John Moorhouse was a small, intense man of about forty. When Bram walked into his office that morning, Moorhouse was reading the *Daily Blade*, his sharp blue eyes pecking angrily along the columns. There was quite a bit in this edition of the papers to interest the prosecutor. His men had pulled a midnight raid on a small printing establishment, presumably with the object of confiscating lottery tickets. They'd drawn a blank and the press was jeering.

Then there was the matter of George Poley's murder. Armed robbery, it was called, attributed to a mob of teen-age thugs. There was a long harangue from Judge Harvey about juvenile delinquency and a suggestion that the old curfew law ought to be invoked. Bram, who had read the paper, didn't think a curfew law would help much. He felt pretty certain that Moorhouse didn't think so either.

The prosecutor wadded the paper into a ball and flung it into the wastebasket as Bram entered. He rocked back in his swivel chair, laced fingers at the back of his head, and needled Bram with his eyes.

"What the hell do you want?" he demanded.

Bram closed the door behind him, walked across the room, sat down uninvited in the chair beside Moorhouse's desk. He smiled bitterly. "You'd never guess, John."

"I'm too busy to play games. Say what you've got to say and get out."

Bram lighted a cigarette deliberately. "You don't care much for the way the local boys have organized the gambling setup, I take it."

Moorhouse didn't say anything.

"Maybe you've never thought so," Bram went on, "but I don't like it either."

Moorhouse laughed. "At the risk of sounding corny, I'm inclined to make that often repeated skeptical remark. Namely, 'Oh, yeah?'"

Bram smiled. "I happen to be serious. I'd like an appointment as special investigator working out of this office." He inhaled smoke, met Moorhouse's suspicious glance squarely. "That's on the level, John. You know and I know that it wasn't a gang of juvenile thugs that knocked off George Poley last night. Poley was a neighbor of mine. I liked him. Poley used to show me pictures of his kid who's in the Marines. My guess is that Poley felt that working a gambling pool in a defense plant wasted both time and money that might better be used to bring his kid back home a little sooner. So Poley wouldn't play ball when they wanted him to handle lottery tickets from his cage in the stockroom at the Emory Company."

Moorhouse nodded slowly. "That's about it." He sighed, shot a glance at Bram. "Who's the head of the racket, Bram?"

Bram shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I think you're tackling this thing from the wrong angle. You've got to find a lot more than just the place where the lottery tickets are printed. You'd have to catch somebody selling them. How are you going to do that, when you can't get past the gates of these war plants?"

"How would you go about it?"

"I'd get somebody for murder. If the big boy behind the scenes doesn't handle his own bloody work, his hired help would squeal if they see a murder rap staring them in the face."

Moorhouse flung out of his chair and took a quick turn about the room. He came back, faced Bram, his thin, nervous fingers tucked tight in his hip pockets.

"You've got eyes like slices of ripe olive," he said. "I can't see through you. You used to be a swell cop, but the crowd you run with now smells to high heaven. Some folks thinks it's the garbage reduction plant that stinks up this town, but it's the Peoples' Action Committee. However—" he took a deep breath, like a swimmer about to plunge into icy water—"however, I'm going to take a chance. Drop around to my place about seven this evening."

He thrust out a hand to Bram who took it, smiling. "In other words, you're going to try gambling yourself."

Moorhouse snorted. "That's nothing to what you're doing. You know that, don't you?"

Bram nodded, turned, and left the office.

He walked from the courthouse to the Altes Building on Washington Street. In the building lobby, William Veller waited.

He was leaning against the cigar counter with a coke bottle in his hand, perspiring freely.

"Where you been, Hugh?" he asked worriedly.

"Oh, burning a few bridges." Bram passed him, went on to the elevator shafts. Veller moved ponderously after him.

"The only thing is, Hugh, you don't want to burn a bridge when you're sitting right in the middle of it."

"You can always dive into the water and cool off."

Veller took another suck off his bottle. "If you can swim it's all right."

"I can swim," Bram insisted. He stepped into the elevator with Veller right behind him.

AL FRENCH'S office was on the eighth floor of the building. Black lettering on the outer door read:

THE OIL MERCHANTS' JOURNAL
Editorial Office

A bright-eyed blonde at the reception desk smiled at Bram. "You may go right in, Mr. Bram. Mr. French is expecting you . . . Why, hello, Mr. Veller!"

Veller lingered, grinning foolishly, and Bram walked across the front office toward French's sanctum. The little trade journal which French published, didn't require much of a staff. There were three girls at desks and an awkward, gangling young man, looking somewhat hopelessly through the drawers of a filing cabinet.

Mr. Edgerton Dickson, chairman of the Peoples' Action Committee and the most powerful political force in the county, was in Al French's office. He stood up as Bram entered, a practiced smile illuminating his hard, craggy face. He was a man of about sixty, tall and lean, with a lioness mane of snow white hair.

"Glad to see you, Sheriff," he greeted Bram. "Al and I have a little job for you, which I think you'll enjoy."

Bram said, "Anything short of murder." He pulled a chair away from the wall, sat down. "What's the job you had in mind?"

"Maybe you read in the papers," Dickson began, "about a defense worker named George Poley who was beaten to death last night. Right near your place, too. Some young toughs did it, they say. Al and I think it would be a pretty gesture if you'd give Poley's widow some money—say five or six hundred dollars. That would get nosed around, and you'd make a few more friends for yourself."

Bram smiled easily. "That's so. I could

sort of intimate that when I'm sheriff, such things won't go on around here."

"That's the idea," Al French put in. "I'll make out the check to you. You can cash it and take the money to Mrs. Foley in person."

French opened the top drawer of his desk. He took out a large checkbook. The corner of the stiff cover of the checkbook caught across the middle of a piece of string that was in the drawer. Something weighted both ends of the string so that it dangled a moment from the book before it slipped free and plopped to the floor.

Bram leaned forward in his chair. The string was fishline, about eight inches long, with a cork at one end and a pear-shaped lead sinker at the other. He picked it up, tossed it back onto the desk.

"What you take off your middle by bowling, you put right back onto your set-down fishing, don't you, Al?"

French scooped up the cork, line, and sinker, and dropped it back into the drawer. "Anyway, I'm not fat in the head." He took a pen out of the stand on the desk and began writing the check. His phone rang. He picked it up, said hello.

"I want to speak to Mr. Albert French."

The voice was audible to Bram—a woman's voice, Stella Moss'. Bram took a short breath, held it. Al French liked the voice, you could tell that by the way he said, "This is Mr. French. Who is it, please?"

There was no answer from the other end of the line, nothing except the pop of a breaking connection. French scowled at the phone a moment, put it down slowly on the cradle. He turned briefly toward Bram, and light from the window glared on the lenses of his glasses. He didn't say anything, but picked up his pen and rapidly filled in the check. He tore it out, handed it to Bram.

Bram blew on the check to dry the ink. He said, "Yes, a might pretty gesture, boys. We take money from murderers and give it back to the widows of their victims. It's sweet of us, isn't it?"

Edge Dickson looked blankly at Bram then at Al French. French's loose lips were open. He closed them with an audible pop, asked: "What the hell are you talking about?"

"The gambling syndicate," Bram said, "and the little sideshow of murder that is tossed in free with the purchase of lottery tickets. Let's not kid ourselves, boys. We know why George Poley was murdered. We know why some other men, good and bad, have been bumped off. It's just something we don't talk about."

"Stop talking riddles, Bram!" French rapped. "What are you up to, anyway?"

Bram grinned unpleasantly. "Oh, yes, let me be the first to lay my cards on the table.

I really ought to inform you that I've just been appointed special investigator by John Moorhouse. I knew you'd be interested."

"Hell's fire!" Edge Dickson gasped. "What did you go and do a fool thing like that for?"

Bram frowned. "I just don't know why. I just suddenly got the notion I didn't like the gambling system they've got in this town. And I don't like the way it mows down anybody that gets in its way. So I decided that as long as I was going to be sheriff anyway, I'd start right now and break the lottery racket. Just a notion, I guess."

Al French spread his white hands placatingly. "Oh, come now, Hugh, what's it to you? There's always been gambling. Everybody gambles. It's human nature. Sure, the racket has paid in to our campaign fund. We've got to get money from somewhere. If we didn't take it, somebody else would. Maybe the racket has stepped on some particular pet of yours. We'll see what can be done to square things."

"You will?" Bram laughed scornfully. "I never did see how paying for a funeral ever squared a murder." He stood up and folded the check. "When Mrs. Poley gets this dough, I hope to be able to name the man who killed her husband. I think she'd rather know the identity of the murderer and see justice done than have the money."

And as he sauntered out of the room, he felt two pairs of worried eyes stabbing him through the back.

Out in the reception desk, Veller was still talking to the blonde at the desk. Bram dropped a hand on the fat man's arm and drew him away. "I've just burned another bridge," he said.

The smile that showed Veller's gold teeth melted slowly. For the second time in the past fifteen hours, he asked, "You're sure you know what you're doing, Hugh?"

"Yes," Bram said. And as he left the office with Veller he decided that he was feeling pretty good for a man who was sitting on top of a volcano.

IN THE lobby, he stepped into a phone booth, found Stella Moss' phone number in the directory. He dialed, but nearly a minute of waiting brought no answer. He came out, and Veller read worry all over Bram's face.

"What's wrong, Hugh?"

He shook his head doubtfully. "I don't know. Do you have to be a woman to have intuition?" He walked out of the building, turned to the right, stopped, and stood squinting against the sun.

"It's that girl again," Veller speculated. "That Stella."

"Right. She called French's office while I

was there, asked for French. But she hung up as soon as he identified himself."

Veller pursed his lips and shook his head. "Why would she do that?"

"I don't know. Listen, fat-stuff, you go get the car and that old gun of yours. You find her. Try her apartment. She isn't there right now, but see if you can find her. And if you do, stick to her. Don't let anything happen to her."

Veller said, "Okay," and moved off slowly along the glaring street.

At fifteen minutes before seven P. M. a taxi pulled up in front of an eight-foot hedge of closely grown evergreen on Sheridan Drive near the edge of town. Hugh Bram got out, told the driver to wait. A small sign beside a white picket gate in the hedge designated the place as the home of John P. Moorhouse.

Bram opened the gate, walked up a curving path of crushed stone toward a prim white house with blue shutters. On the porch, he found the front door open, the screen closed. He pressed the button of the electric chime. After that there were brassy echoes and reverberations, but nothing else. It was very still, and the broad leaves of the maples on the lawn curled in the evening heat.

He tried the brass knob of the screen door. It was unlatched. He went into the cool, shadowy hall.

"John," he called. "Anybody home?" His eyes traveled to a small mahogany table placed beneath a mirror. A sheet of note paper lay there, weighted down by a blue pottery vase. On it was a hastily penciled message:

Darling—received telegram that Mother is seriously ill. Have gone to her. Will phone tonight. Love, Ruth.

Ruth Moorhouse, of course, the prosecutor's wife. Odd that she would leave the house standing open in this thinly populated neighborhood. Bram turned through the cased opening that lead into the living room. Half-way down the room, he paused, sniffing the unmistakable odor of cordite. His pulse quickened. He moved on back, opened the door of John Moorhouse's study.

The prosecutor was seated in a chair behind a large walnut desk. He'd fallen forward across the desk top, head resting on his right arm. Blood stained the white front of his shirt and congealed on the desk blotter.

Bram moved gingerly across the room to the desk, got behind the prosecutor, felt for pulse at the pressure spot in Moorhouse's throat. He was dead, shot through the heart.

Bram wrapped his handkerchief about his right hand, pulled open the top drawer of the desk. The first thing that met his eye was a

.32 caliber revolver. He picked it up, found it fully loaded. He closed the drawer and reached for the telephone. He dialed the telegraph office, asked if any message had been phoned or delivered at the Moorhouse residence within the past twelve hours. After a few minutes of waiting, he was told that no messages had been sent to that address. He hung up, nodding. The telegram had been faked, just to get Ruth Moorhouse away from the place.

He stood there a moment, eyes wandering about the room—to the books in the built-in shelves, to the two English hunting prints, to the small walnut liquor cabinet. On top of the cabinet was a cut glass decanter half filled with some golden liquor, and five fragile wine glasses. Bram frowned. Five glasses? Why just five?

He stepped to the cabinet, lifted the glass stopper of the decanter, sniffed at the contents. It was muscatel wine. He dropped an all fours, patting the rich pile of the carpet with his bare hands. He crawled toward the desk, always patting. About five inches from the polished toe of the dead man's shoe, he found a needle-sharp sliver of curved glass. He picked it up gingerly, held it to the light. The fragment was perfectly dry. Bram dropped the bit of glass where he had found it and straightened slowly.

Now he knew. Now he understood why the police had never pinned the "accidental" shooting of Joe Moss on anyone, and why they had never found the gun that did the job. Now he knew how the killing of Sam Packard had been engineered. Now he realized why John Moorhouse hadn't had a ghost of a chance to reach that gun in the top drawer of his desk in order to defend himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Exit Cue

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK, the elderly lady with the mop and mop-bucket employed her pass key on the outer door of Al French's office on the eighth floor of the Altes Building. She was having a little trouble getting the door open when Hugh Bram came striding down the hall.

"Can I give you a hand?" he offered, smiling down at her soiled, wrinkled face.

She chuckled. "Well, I guess so. Always do have trouble with that door." She stepped trustingly aside and Bram twisted the key in the lock, pulled it out, dropped it into his pocket, and opened the door.

"Go on in," he invited.

Her faded eyes crawled over his dark face. "I want my key," she said. "You put it in your pocket."

He nodded, still smiling. "I'm a friend of Mr. French. It's all right." He took her by the arm, hurried her into the office.

The old woman set her mop bucket down hard on Bram's toe. He stepped back. She nipped her lower lip in her teeth, took the mop handle in both hands, lammed him across the forehead with it.

"You're a crook!" she said shrilly. "A burglar! You gimme back my key!" She tried again with the mop handle. Bram warded off the blow with his forearm, looped his right arm around her thin, fragile body. She started to scream. His left hand went up to her mouth.

"Sorry," he whispered. "But I can't have any trouble with you." He jerked a heavy dust cloth from the pocket of her apron, brought it up to her mouth in place of his left hand, brought the two ends back, knotted it quickly. He picked her up bodily, lugged her across the outer office to a closet, opened the door, put her inside. He closed the door on her, locked it with the pass key. She was down on the floor, kicking the door panel with her heels.

He said, "Stop that racket!" He took out his billfold, extracted a twenty dollar bill, and slid it under the closet door. "Twenty bucks," he called to her. "That's better pay then you get scrubbing floors. Just relax."

Then he left the closet, crossed the deserted outer office to the door of Al French's sanctum. The woman's key worked that lock also. Once inside, he began a hurried but thorough search of the room—French's desk, a steel cabinet, the closet. There was a large safe in the closet, and Bram wished that he knew more about combination locks. He was kneeling there, fumbling hopelessly at the dial when a slight sound disturbed him. He turned in a crouch to face the closet door. Standing there, short, thick legs spread wide, was the squat, muscular man whom Brad had seen at the Cradle on the previous night in the company of the girl in red. The man wore a broad grin on his flat, ugly face. His chunky fist gripped the butt of an automatic.

"Come on out, Mr. Bram. We was watchin' you from the other side of the street—me and the boss."

Bram stood up, came out of the closet. Over the head of the short gunman, he could see Al French standing near the desk. French had that fabric satchel, with the zipper closed, in his right hand. He put it down gingerly on the floor, reached for cigarettes and a lighter.

Bram gave French a sardonic smile. "I notice you always put that bag down as though it contained eggs. Or maybe glass. Even last night, when you knew damned well what was going on, your first thought was to

handle the bag carefully. If it had just contained bowling shoes, you'd have dropped it when you knew there was going to be shooting trouble."

French snorted. "Once a cop always a cop. Just what did you expect to find up here, Bram?"

Bram nodded at the satchel. "That. Maybe also the book that holds the accounts of your gambling racket. But the satchel is the main thing. I'd like to tack a murder rap on you."

French said, "You've got a lot of quaint ideas."

"Such as what ought to be in that bag," Bram said. "Let me tell you about it. I've got X-ray eyes. The bag contains a Chianti wine bottle. That's about the only kind of a bottle in which you could conceal a revolver. The problem would be to get the bottle open in order to put the gun inside. That's not too hard. You simply girdle the balloon section of the bottle with a glass cutter. Then you take a cork that fits the mouth of the bottle, pierce it, run a length of string or fishline through the hole, knot it. The length of the line depends on how far down the mouth you make the scoring with the glass cutter. Tie a lead weight—say a fish-line sinker—to the end of the string, and then you can swing the weight back and forth to tap along the inside of the scoring. The bottle will break clean."

"You had the cork, line, and sinker in the drawer of your desk today, though I notice now you've disposed of it. Once the bottle is cut, it would be simple to wedge the barrel of a revolver into the neck of the bottle with some slivers of wood to hold it tight. You make a hole or slot to run a wire from the trigger to the outside of the bottle. Then you'd probably want to put some sort of padding in the bottom half of the bottle to take care of recoil. Cement the bottle back together, replace the labels and all the trimmings, and you've got a weapon nobody would recognize."

"That's fine," French said dryly. "Except that the barkeep at the Cradle will testify that I bought a bottle of Chianti at the bar last night. A lot of other people saw me pouring wine from it—you included."

BRAM laughed. "So you have two bottles—one containing the wine, and the other the gun. You perform a switch, which wouldn't be hard to do, since you were sitting alone in that booth. Junior, here—" Bram jerked a thumb to indicate the squat gunman—"and a pal of his start a gun squabble over some little chip of a girl. They shoot high, wide, and handsome, but especially wide, so that nobody gets hurt. In all the

sound and fury, nobody notices that you're over there in a booth tilting a Chianti bottle. Suppose they do notice. You expect to find bottles in bar rooms."

"That's how it was when Joe Moss got in the way. That's how it was last night when you rubbed out Sam Packard for selling information to John Moorhouse. You can kill and carry the murder weapon away with you. No one suspects you, and the police never find the gun that matches the bullet in the corpse."

Al French lighted his cigarette deliberately. "You're smart, in a dumb sort of way. Got any more?"

"Quite a bit," Bram said. He looked at the squat gunman in front of him. "Mind if I sit down, Junior?"

Junior said, "Ask the boss."

French nodded toward a chair. "Go ahead. Only I'd think you'd like to stand on your own legs as long as they'll hold you."

Bram stepped to the chair at the side of French's desk. He sat down, tilted back, hung his heels on the desk edge. He was feeling okay, neither afraid nor nervous. He felt as though he'd found himself in a maze of crooked streets and were leading himself back into the light.

"Killing Moorhouse this evening was simpler. No fake gun battle to cover up, because you'd removed the only possible witness when you sent that phony message to Mrs. Moorhouse. You called on John, lugging your little satchel. Maybe you'd told him you had some important information to reveal about the gambling syndicate. That would make John prick up his ears. But you knew Moorhouse likes his wine. You probably opened the satchel, told him you had a little gift for him. Then you took out the Chianti bottle and suggested that you pour a sample. You picked up a glass from that liquor cabinet, turned toward Moorhouse, so the mouth of the bottle was pointing straight at the prosecutor's heart. You pretended that you were going to pour some wine, triggered the concealed gun, and that was that."

"The wine glass got broken some way—maybe John knocked it off the desk when he collapsed. You cleaned up the broken glass, fearing somebody would associate the wine glass with your murder method. Somebody did. But just why did you have to get rid of Moorhouse? I thought you had the election sewed up so that your own candidate would slide into his shoes."

"You can blame that on your lady friend," French said. "Stella Moss. And maybe Chub, here, is to blame, too." He nodded at the squat gunman. "Chub was dumb enough to save a nickel when he phoned me from the Cradle early last night. He owns the Cradle,

and he used his office phone. There's an extension phone up above the taproom, and I guess Stella Moss was up there, snooping around. She listened in. I think she got enough to know that somebody was going to get burned down last night, though she couldn't have known who."

Bram nodded slowly. He had a cold, empty feeling in his stomach now. "So that's why she called you on the phone while I was here today. Last night she'd heard your voice face to face when you and I were having our little argument. But she wanted to make sure what you sounded like over the phone. You supposed she had recognized the voice and had taken the information to Moorhouse. You had to kill to cover."

Bram stood up, took a step toward French. The squat gunman came on the alert, looked to French for a cue. French cast dull eyes toward his wrist watch. He said to Bram, "Maybe you think this just happened—our intruding when you were snooping around. If you hadn't come here voluntarily, we'd have come for you. This is where you get off, Bram."

"That's incidental," Bram said, and looked as though it were. "What about Stella?"

"She's all right," French said. He took a little time stubbing out his cigarette in a bronze ash tray. "She's down in the street, right about now. She's with a man, not liking it much, probably, but still she's alive. What happens to her depends a lot on your outlook, Bram, and what you do. That right, Chub?"

The squat gunman grinned, rubbed a hand across his broad jaw. "Just so, Al."

French crossed to the window that looked

out onto Washington Street. He raised the wide sash, looked out and down into the lighted street. He beckoned to Bram.

"Look here a minute."

Bram crossed to the window and Chub was close behind him, pressing his gun into Bram's spine.

Bram said, "If you think I'm going to dive out of there, you're crazy."

"We're crazy then," French said.

Light from street lamps and show-windows illuminated the corner brightly. Standing at the curb as though waiting for a green light, were a man and a woman. Bram didn't know the man from Adam, but even this far up and from such a distance, he could recognize Stella Moss. The man was standing close to her. You couldn't tell whether he had his arm through hers or whether his hand was in his jacket pocket, ramming a hidden gun into her.

French turned his head and light glinted across his glasses.

"You get the picture, Bram? Either you take a dive out of this window or Eddie down there shoves the girl in front of the first car that comes ripping out of the intersection. You've heard of dirty work at the cross-roads? This is it. Don't think Eddie isn't up to the job. He'll enjoy it. He's the type. He's the lad who beat in George Poley's skull."

Bram sat down coolly on the window sill. "Why should I jump and make it convenient for you? You'll have to kill Stella anyway to hush things up."

"Well," French asked harshly, "do you want to sit here and watch her get run down



THROW TO THE KILL!

The upstairs room in that swank mid-town hot-spot was a frozen cave of silence as tense, baleful eyes focused on the little man crouched over the green table . . . Then, sweating and trembling, he rolled those red dice once more. "Double Six!" This was his pay-off—but was it to be in gold . . . or in cold deadly steel? Don't miss this novel of murder-laden intrigue, by Francis K. Allan—

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by a car? You've got thirty seconds to make up your mind."

BRAM'S eyes sharpened on the two figures on the corner. Stella and the man had stepped off the curb into the gutter. The man was urging her forward, but she wasn't moving. She couldn't. There was something wrong with her left foot. She couldn't lift her left foot.

Bram said, "You're scheme's a flop, Al. Stella has you out-smarted. She's got one of her high heels wedged into the grating of that manhole lid. A good-looking girl can collect quite a crowd, just by getting one of her high heels caught in a grating."

"Eddie will make her step out of her slipper," French said, not too sure of himself. "You'd better jump, Bram. Only ten seconds now."

Down in the street, Bram saw the killer named Eddie kick at Stella's left foot, as though maybe that would get her to step out of her shoe. Stella hit Eddie in the face with her right fist and Eddie backed half a step. Bram could see the flash of gun-metal as Eddie's gun cleared his pocket. And at precisely the same moment, a mountain of flesh came bouncing—big William Veller on the run.

That was when Al French slugged Bram in the chest and tried to knock him out the window. Bram heard the shot in the street, couldn't learn the score because he was acting instinctively to save himself. He caught the right hand side of the window frame with the tips of his fingers. His left leg lashed out in a kick that caught French on the knee cap. French melted back from him, hurt, and Bram yanked himself forward, into the room.

Then there was Chub and Chub's gun. He lunged at the squat man. Chub backed to make killing room, eyed the center of Bram's forehead over gunsight.

"Slug him!" French cried hoarsely. "Keep it clean!"

"Clean" as in "accident," Bram knew. The idea was to knock Bram out and dump him out of the window.

Chub closed in, hacking with his gun. Bram jerked his head to the right, felt the metal gash the flesh over his cheekbone. He got in a couple of lefts to Chub's face, and Chub backed.

Bram side-stepped and picked up a chair, turned in time to see Al French come for him with a heavy bronze ash tray lifted for a knockout. French got the legs of the chair somewhere in his middle as Bram drove him back to the wall. Bram swung around, still clinging to the chair, caught Chub's gun hand with a blow from the rounds. Either a round broke or it was Chub's thick wrist. The gun went skittering across the asphalt tile

floor, and Bram dropped the chair to dive headlong for the gun.

He reached the weapon inches ahead of Chub.

Chub came down with both his feet on the small of Bram's back. Bram flattened to the floor, but he had his hooks on the gun. He turned over on his back somehow just as Chub was trying to land a kick to the side of his head. He lifted the gun a little way and triggered.

Chub came reeling down on him, and Chub's face was a mess.

Bram heaved the squat gunman up and over with his knees, got up, turned the automatic on Al French.

He said into the sudden silence, "I don't give a damn how much noise I'm going to make."

Al French saw how it was. His face turned grey. His right hand came up, stabbed desperately under the right shoulder of his coat, pulled a gun. Bram fired once, and missed. French ducked behind the big desk and dropped. Bram, standing bolt upright, sent three slugs chewing through the desk panel. French showed his head, a shoulder, and his gun around the right side of the big desk, popped a couple at Bram—wild shots that went nowhere. Bram shot once more, saw French's supporting arm buckle under him. French came down on his face, one hand clutching at his shoulder.

And then he was out cold.

Bram turned, saw a uniformed cop lunging through the door. Bram pointed with the gun toward French's satchel. "A bottle in there, only it's not a bottle. The gun that killed Joe Moss, and Sam Packard, and John Moorhouse."

Behind the cop loomed fat, freckled William Veller, and back of Veller some people who were just people. Bram brushed by the cop, caught a white-knuckled hold of Veller's shirt front.

"Stella," he gasped. "Where's Stella? Did you find her?"

Veller said, "What you so hopped up about, Hugh? She's right here."

And she was right there, right behind big Veller. She came hobbling to Bram, one shoe off, both arms out. Her face was a scared white, but there were stars in her eyes, just as there had been the night she'd got the tragic notion that little Joe Moss was her man.

"Hugh, darling!" she sobbed. "You're all right? That—that on your face—that blood is—"

"I'm fine," he told her. "I'm fine." He held her close to him, said in her ear, "I got back, didn't I?"

She knew what he meant.



"Stella was dying—but two thousand dollars was your minimum fee. A month later Stella died. Now, you. . ."

SEALED

By
David Crewe

*The pirate's cross in blood
pledged a murder already paid
for with another corpse—and
a dead man's lips forever
sealed!*

THE first shadows of a bleak January twilight cast chill ribbons of battleship grey where the arch of Cottage Farm Bridge curved down to meet the Charles. Already on the opposite shore an occasional headlight flashed across the Parkway, and high above the austere skyline the faint crimson of the cheerless sun had begun to merge with the purple horizon.

Joe Swendo inhaled tensely. He was chilled, and his ears ached where his hat jammed against them. Unconsciously he ceased to fight

against the chattering of his teeth, let the tiny clicks synchronize with the song of hate which made him oblivious to the elements.

As the traffic lights changed to yellow on the avenue, he had to fight against the urge to run forward. Directly across the wide thoroughfare and jutting out above the sidewalk, a brass sign swung lazily. Joe Swendo cursed again the name which he knew the sign bore; then hurried to his tryst with the man who owned the name and the sign.

Joe held tightly in his hand a card for an

appointment with the world-famous bacteriologist and blood specialist, Dr. Emil Hoffer. If things went along the way Joe had planned, the doctor had an appointment also—with death. Joe, oblivious of the cold and the tired, grimy faces of his fellows, hurried to see that both appointments were kept.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Swendo, Dr. Hoffer is ready for you now. Come this way please."

Swendo followed an attendant down a long corridor, stepped aside while his conductor pushed open a noiseless door, saw for the first time in forty years the face of the man he hated.

Dr. Hoffer raised his eyes from a thin sheaf of correspondence as the latch clicked, donned instinctively the brusque professional manner which had lately grown upon him with his success.

The doctor was spare, ascetic, his countenance lined and weary. The eyes alone were youthful, a gleam with the crusader's fire. He nodded impersonally to Swendo, motioned him to a chair across the desk, fingers groping absently along the neat stack of indexed case cards.

Joe sat down, feasted his eyes on the doctor's profile. A thin white scar marred the lean regularity of that profile, ran from an indeterminate point under Hoffer's chin across the lower cheek, and disappeared under the grizzled iron grey beard below his left ear. Joe remembered that scar and, remembering, could keep silent no longer.

"I suppose the name on that appointment card registers blank to you, Doc," he said softly.

Hoffer smiled austerely. "I'm afraid so, sir. And yet—" He began his favorite little by-play of pretending to know the face, but not the circumstances—it had in the past pulled him out of several embarrassing situations.

Then he stopped, feeling rather foolish. It was as though he had pretended drunkenness, only to find himself intoxicated. He *did* know that face, and for the life of him he could not recall why or where.

Joe laughed mirthlessly. "Can't quite place me, Doc? S'funny, I'd know *you* anywhere, anytime."

A thin flush of impatience flecked Doctor Hoffer's face. He swung around in his chair. "Ah, yes, memory plays odd tricks. Now, as to your case, a blood test, was it not?" He looked up good naturedly, caught for the first time the passionate hatred which Swendo's eyes could no longer mask. He blinked, started to rise.

"Don't move," Joe hissed. In his hand an automatic glittered wildly. Hoffer stared blankly, while his cheeks faded to a pasty white.

JOE quickly lashed him to his seat, tied his legs to the swivel chair. Then he stepped swiftly to the door, clicked the inner lock. When he turned, his face had a hungry bloodlust that wiped out any semblance of humanity.

"Now, Hoffer, I'll tell you a story. It's an ugly story that don't match this swell office, and it's about three dirty Polack kids that played and stole and starved together in Hadley Falls, Massachusetts. "Ah—" for Hoffer had started incredulously—"shut your mouth or I'll shoot you apart. You know me now, I see. Yeah, still Joe Swendo. I didn't change my name an' I've never stopped starving."

Hoffer closed his eyes, remembering through the whirl of panic the horrible days before he had run away to fight his way to fame.

"The kid I played with," Swendo went on grimly, "wasn't called Hoffer. His name was Syd Rusko, an' I pulled him out of the river the day he took a skimmer and laid his face open. I see the scar's still there." He laughed.

"Well, Syd ran away, an' I lost track of him. Never thought of him for thirty years. Then one day I saw a movie flash of a big time medic who got appointed to a Carnegie post—the heading said, 'Dr. Emil Hoffer, the greatest scientist of our time.' But I saw the scar, an' I said, 'Hell, that's Syd Rusko, and his brother is King Rusko.' He had a rep, too. King of the rackets, the papers called him before that broad bumped him off last year!"

Hoffer smiled sadly. His glance was full of pity and a strange dignity. "All right, Joe. I'm Syd Rusko, and my brother was King Rusko. You don't need to say the rest. I may be—I am—the greatest scientist of our time, and I want that Carnegie post more than life. You know that, too, doubtless. And should you tell the papers who my brother was, they'll revile me like a pack of yelping dogs. Well—" he strained forward against the bonds—"you can, perhaps, kill me now, you fool, though in God's name I don't know why. First listen—"

He wet his lips. "When I ran away, Swendo, I ran from you and your kind. I've never gone back. I never stopped starving either, Joe. First, for years, I starved for food and education. I got them, and I paid for them with my health and my youth. Then I starved, still starved my mind and my very soul for more education—to help you and your fellow men to live longer and healthier. I dare say you've had the easier road."

He sighed. "As for my name, Emil Hoffer—it isn't mine by rights, but I guess even you will agree I've done it no discredit. I desire to keep it. How much money do you want?"

Joe stole forward, slapped the back of his hand with brutal force across Hoffer's lips, jammed a gag savagely between his jaws. "I've heard all I want to know, rat!" He

crouched forward tensely. "Now you listen to my story.

"I had a jane, Doc. She wasn't your type, an' she wasn't mine, but I'd have fried in Hell and smiled to have that girl back, loving me." His face twisted wryly. "She got sick. I spent all my dough to cure her. The doctors couldn't. I watched her get whiter and thinner daily. I was crazy. Then—" his eyes narrowed bitterly—"a guy told me, 'Only one man can save your wife. Dr. Emil Hoffer, the specialist.' Fat chance, I thought, of his seein' me! I didn't know you then.

"That night I took Stella to the movies. It was like a miracle. The newsreel came on. I saw you—recognized you by the scar. The only man living who could save Stella, and I had saved *your* life!"

He sighed, trembled with fury. "Next day I went to your office. That mealy mouthed attendant threw me out. I told him Stella was dying—he said you handled cases by appointment, that lots of others were dying, too. That—" he choked—"two thousand dollars was your minimum fee. I went away. Called you. Wrote you. Next week you sailed for Europe. A month later Stella died."

Hoffer's eyes were staring. *So that's the way this smug interne handles my clientele*, he thought savagely. The needless tragedy of the story cut him sorely. He wanted with all his soul to tell Joe Swendo what a ghastly mistake it all was, that he had never known of the situation in the slightest, that his correspondence, everything pertaining to outside contacts, he had trusted to his helper. But when he struggled to free himself, Joe laughed, and he suddenly knew he would never get the chance to explain.

Joe continued to laugh, softly, terribly. "You're scared, ain't you," he purred. "Well, I lost the one thing I wanted; damn you, you're going to lose the two things *you* want most. Your Carnegie post—your life. I'm going to leave you here now. Not before three days, maybe a week, maybe a year, I'm going to a yellow sheet and spill the story about your brother bein' King Rusko. I'm goin' to set there and give myself a perfect time alibi. I'm going to tell the paper that I just called you and told you I was on my way to expose you.

"On that moment, Doc, not before, you're going to die. I gotta pal who'll 'tend to that. Then the papers'll say, 'Emil Hoffer, threatened with exposure, commits suicide.' I'll read it and laugh, and maybe Stella'll know then and be happy too."

He paused with diabolic malice. "Remember, Doc, when you get loose, I want to visualize you running around like a crazy man, trying to find me, buy me off, beg me to forgive you." He spat. "You'll never find me, damn

you. I'll give you three days—at least—to try. *I* suffered a year!" He turned to the door.

"Wait." He wheeled about. "When we were kids, Doc, we used to seal promises by cutting our arms and marking a cross. Remember the pirate's oath?"

He reached to the wall, took a surgeon's scalpel from a rubber receptacle which hung behind the bound man.

Hoffer struggled furiously. His eyes were ghastly in the faint light. Joe sneered. "Yellow dog. I'm not going to touch you. Look." He bared his own forearm, slashed the skin lightly, traced a rough cross of blood on his handkerchief, draped it across the chair directly in front of Hoffer's bulging eyes.

"I want you to watch this, Doc, while you try to free yourself. It's my pledge to you that you're going to die. And for three days, while you hunt for me, you'll think maybe, 'Ah, he's just buffing.' Well—" Swendo patted the waving square of cloth—"if you start to kid yourself along that way, Doc, this bloody cloth'll make you remember that my lips will never be sealed on my story, and that you will die."

He closed the door softly and went out.

JUST twenty minutes after Dr. Emil Hoffer freed himself, the best detective talent in the city, headed by the commissioner in person, began to scour the streets for Joe. Hoffer himself was with them, a strangely changed man, curiously shaken.

Hoffer was tireless, as nervous as a cat. But they didn't find Joe. After twelve hours, Hoffer called off the search. "He'll find *me* now," he said sadly, and went home alone, his face oddly lined and old.

Hoffer got the 'phone call in the early morning hours. He didn't seem surprised. In fact he was not undressed. He went out into the night to meet death. He had met it before. This time it was terrible.

For Joe Swendo was in convulsions, and his jaws were clenched in a rigor that would never cease, while his dark eyes stabbed into the dingy light as he tossed in delirious agony upon his cot.

Hoffer leaned over the dying man. His face was working with a strong emotion. "My poor friend, I tried with all my soul to warn you. The pirate's cross in blood. A sign, you said, that your lips would never be sealed. I tried so hard to tell you—" his voice broke—"the septic scalpel! I had used it in vivisection work—it was awaiting sterilization in that rack where you seized it—"

Joe's eyes were rolling. Hoffer regarded him pityingly. "Lips will never be sealed," he murmured softly to the deaf ears. A pause, and then—"Serum tetanus—lockjaw!"



THE MUGGER

*"Oh my God," I thought, "don't let it happen
like that with June. . ."*

By
**Cyril
Plunkett**



"I heard the crooning killer whom none but his victims heard—but for me the melody was translated to the frantic strains of the Hot Seat Song!"

CHAPTER ONE

Death's Road

I WASN'T nervous—let's get that absolutely straight. Excited was the word, perhaps, for I was coming home, and I could see already, despite the darkness and the rain, things both familiar and friendly. The air strip below, naturally—the plane was pointed for the landing. And off to one side was the railroad, marked by moving, lighted coaches; and, farther on, the high arch of the bridge, ablaze now. I could see, very faintly in the distance, the thin memorial tower of

the university, the bright white eye which was its illuminated clock—and soon, of course, that clock would strike the hour. Soon I'd hear again the sweet carillon—and with the final note, my destiny?

But I wasn't nervous. The omens still were good. I'd got the breaks, a plane from Indianapolis, so instead of being late I was right on schedule. Then arrangements had been made through a friend, a corporal in my company, for the use of his car. What was it now the corporal told me? "The white cottage on the high bank of the river. Here's the key—the car's in the garage. The tires will need air, but the battery should be up, and the tank is full of gas, Jeff." What was it, then, the corporal said? He hoped there'd be a honeymoon.

Yea boy, I was home! For a week. Seven days. One hundred and sixty-eight hours. In the same town with June Barrow.

Softly the plane touched ground, and even at this point, so near the first discordant note, I had no psychic hint, no warning, no veiled doubt or presentiment. Look, I would say on the phone, this is Sergeant Jeff Mason. Remember? The guy who wants to marry you, honey—remember? I could visualize June at her phone—she was very slim and little—and then I wondered if her answer would be yes, and if there'd be a honeymoon; and I faced at last the stern picture as it might and could be—and suddenly I was tense and cold, and the bubbles seemed to burst beneath me as I walked up the ramp and to the phone.

The woman who answered wasn't June.

I got it almost instantly, almost with her first hello. Her voice was husky, strange—and she sounded scared as she said, "Sergeant? Who is this? Not the—the police?"

The wires sang a moment. It was a vicious sound, like bees about to sting. June had a small suite on University Road, near the university, and this woman was very likely her landlady, but—police? My picture of June's quiet street, the quiet house and people turned topsy-turvy.

"No, ma'm. Sergeant in Uncle Sam's Army," I said. "Now how about June? Will you please call her?"

The woman breathed again. I should say she panted. It sounded like that—too fast, too ragged. Then she said, "Miss Barrow isn't here."

Now what do you suppose? flashed through my mind. June had tried to meet me? But with schedules and connections so uncertain I'd warned against this.

"She should be back, though, soon, by ten o'clock," the woman went on quickly. "She went across the campus just a while ago, to see a Mr. Sadler—"

And I spoke of omens! Let's say you're young, twenty-six with freckles and red hair. Let's say you've come from the farmlands, with vitality if not graces, a swimming record and a coaching berth on the credit sheet, but—let's say your girl met a man named Vern Sadler. Nice, huh? This Sadler had everything. He was dark, he was handsome, he had money, it seemed. He had medals and war wounds, for he'd fought against the Fascists in Spain.

I'd wired, written, phoned June Barrow, *Don't decide until I get a furlough*, and tonight I'd counted on—sincerity, I guess, a desperate plea. June would withhold decision, that I knew; she'd promised me faithfully. But she hadn't sat beside her phone, to await my call.

She'd gone to see Vern Sadler. . . .

THERE goes my apple cart, I thought, and caught the bus to town. Then I walked up the street, with time to spare; and this was October and it was raining, a sorry night, thick with mist and drizzle. There was a drug store on the corner, a few blocks from June's address. I skidded in. I fell. The floor was slippery near the door and the druggist looked at me. You could see what he was thinking.

"A bromo, soldier?" he said. "Some black coffee?"

I changed a dime for nickels. I marched back to the phone booth. By now June surely would be home, and she'd say, "Hello, Jeff—Jeff, where are you?" She'd be kind at least. She always had been. But it was the woman who answered again.

"Sergeant, it's a quarter past ten," she said. Her voice had a new, high, queer ring. "She's like my own daughter," she said. "Oh dear, I *told* her not to walk across the campus."

June had walked across the campus—the woman puzzled me. I thanked her, hung up—but why wouldn't June take the campus short cut? We always had, in days gone by, the evenings we had spent with our good friend Hillary Clane.

I sat at the fountain a while and got to talking with the druggist. He knew Vern Sadler; he was at the bottom of a V—two streets met, V-like, at this store, this corner. Up one, University Road, lived June. Up the other, Fearing Drive, lived Sadler. So this druggist knew both Sadler and June, and he said abruptly, "She must have been crazy, though, to cut across the campus."

I frowned. Then I held up two fingers. "The top of the V, see? She's sensible."

"Well anyway," he said, "I hope nothing has happened to her."

I looked at him. What the devil did he mean?

"Live around here ten years ago, soldier?"

"No," I said, taut and cold inside suddenly.

"That time it was a kid, a killing. Why, I helped patrol the streets myself, night after night for two weeks. I had two children of my own, you know."

He produced a newspaper and pointed to a word splashed across its front page: "Mugger."

"Three times now in the last couple of weeks," he said. "Always happens in this neighborhood. Soldier, there's a screwball loose. He waylays people, he cracks 'em on the head. You mark my words, it's going to end in another murder."

I got off the counter stool. *Not June*, I thought. This druggist—his head was cocked to one side queerly as he frowned and regarded me. *Not June*, I thought.

I walked back to the phone—and this time the woman was sobbing.

"June promised," she said. "And she always keeps her word. Ten o'clock, she said—I'm sure of it." There was a clicking sound, the woman's teeth.

I replaced the receiver. Then I took a deep breath and paged the book and called Sadler. Curiously, Mr. Sadler was not at home.

I KNOW. You'll say this girl, June Barrow, was going to write me off her list anyway, so she breaks a date with me, to keep one with the man it's plain she's going to marry. You'll say she went somewhere with Vern Sadler. But you don't know June. She's a funny kid. I mean, swell. Say, you're going to meet her at a place downtown; you don't stand around a lobby or a corner. The clock strikes and she's there. Her word is like Greenwich, like money in the bank; so I knew this was serious and that something might well have happened to her.

I walked rapidly up the right side of the V, Sadler's side, up Fearing Drive. Sadler lived in an apartment building, rambling Briarhill sandstone set well back in a lawn full of trees. There was a circle drive; and this was high ground and by day you could look back and see far across the valley. You could see, first, just across the street, the fine old home of Professor Hillary Clane, red brick with white trim, and a high wall all around it; and then, off down the gentle slope, the University. Between Clane's home and the University buildings was the campus, the woods and a sparkle of blue, the lagoon.

I walked up Sadler's drive, and the entrance was very swanky; a canopy, soft lights, a blonde at the switchboard. She disapproved of my wet, wrinkled uniform. She frowned as I leaned on her desk.

"I'm sorry. Mr. Sadler is out," she said. "He left about an hour ago."

"That long?" How I frowned. Wasn't that approximately the time June would have been coming to call upon him? "You mean with the girl?"

"What girl?" the switchboard operator said.

It was warm in the tight little lobby. I shivered. "But a girl came in to see him this evening. Maybe you know her—little, blonde, a Miss Barrow?"

She just looked at me.

I wet my lips. "No girl?"

"Sorry, soldier."

"Okay," I said. "It's okay."

An hour lost. The tree-lined drive seemed strange now and foreboding; a car turned in and its lights revealed the dripping branches. Tears clinging to the crooked bare limbs, I thought. Then I crossed the street, passed

Clane's high wall, and here, once off the street and in the puddled lane, I ran.

"June?" I called, to empty darkness—but had I thought she'd answer? A hundred times we'd walked this lane together. From June's house to Clane's, where, until Vern Sadler came upon the scene, we would spend occasional evenings pleasantly. There was the time we'd paused here, on the high bald hill, the knob, just to stand in awe before the beauty of the valley; and sometimes we would veer off toward the woods, the spring, though never quite so far as the lagoon at night—

"June!" I called. Tonight the darkness taunted me.

Nine years ago, one day, I'd walked to the lagoon. I'd walked softly through the woods, alone that time—and come upon a boy, a queer, dumpy fellow with unruly hair and wearing a sweater much too small for him. He had a stick under one arm and a crust of bread in one hand—there were ducks in the lagoon—and he was unaware of my presence and crooning to the ducks. He was giggling and feeding crumbs to the ducks when they swam ashore and waddled up the bank to him.

Oh my God, I thought, don't let it happen like that with June!

The ducks had waddled ashore and the boy had rewarded their trust with sudden shrill yells, and when they ran, quacking their terror, he'd swung with his stick and he'd laughed and he'd hit them. . . .

The path made a sharp turn. I skidded and fell, full in the mud, in a puddle. And then I saw the glow of a light off ahead, a small yellow ray that wavered and went out again instantly. I heard footsteps and a figure was looming, a blot in the night. It slowed, stiffened, paused warily. "Who is there?" a voice, cold and precise, called. I rose as the light flashed upon me.

"Jeff Mason!" the man gasped. It was Professor Hillary Clane.

I knew his voice from the years of our friendship. I knew his habits; the lights often burned long at "Clane's madhouse", the lab in Hillary Clane's Department of Psychology. And strange cries came from the "madhouse" at night; and then, very late, the lights would go out, and Clane would emerge, tall, grey and lonely, to tramp to the red-walled red-brick house across the campus. He was an international figure, perhaps best known for his endocrine theory, the glands with relation to psychopathology, and for his radical experiments with apes.

So it was he, not I, who had more than a right to surprise. He hadn't known I was home. He surely had no expectation of coming upon me in the night like this, crouched and wet and covered with mud. Yet, curiously, he

seemed much more startled than surprised. "She's all right, boy," he said at once. "She's alive."

I echoed the word, grasped at it, grasped at his arm. "Clane," I cried, "what happened?"

"Coming home, I found her," he said. "She was lying near here, near the spring."

"Unconscious? From a blow?"

"Yes, Jeff."

The scene flashed through my mind, the earlier, horrible scene. June, slim and walking swiftly. June unaware that she was watched, and stalked. I could feel her first sharp fear, and see her as she whirled, and then as she, no doubt, stood paralyzed. She'd screamed—*The ducks quacked, and they ran, and he took his stick and hit them.*

Still I held to Clane's arm. "The mugger?" I said.

"Come along with me, Jeff." Clane's voice was quiet and kind. There was strength in it and reassurance, for Clane himself had known tragedy, and Clane knew the dangers rising out of fear.

"That's what it was, sir, the mugger?" I said.

We started up the path. I heard sirens and, far off below, I saw the slash of spotlights. Then other white eyes, cars bold with their number, raced crisscross on dark narrow streets, all with one goal, the campus. "But where is June now?"

"The hospital," Clane said gently. "I carried her, Jeff, and she came to promptly. She was conscious when we got there. Very likely they'll permit you to see her at the hospital first thing in the morning. So she's quite all right, Jeff, except—" He turned his flashlight off, here on the wider path, on firmer ground. "Except," he repeated after a deep breath, "the night and what happened is a blank to her."

CHAPTER TWO

Still Time

WE CAME to Clane's high wall, and Clane's man Barco was at the locked side gate to let us in. I shivered when I saw again this great dark figure. But then Barco had startled even so cosmopolitan a town as University City when Clane brought him back from Spain. That was years ago, my second year at the university; and Clane's return had been as abrupt and strange as when he'd resigned and gone away.

Tongues wagged both times, of course. Except for Franco and Spain's civil war, it was conceded he might well have remained in that country. He'd made many new friends over there. Vern Sadler, who came to University City much later, was one of them. But one

day Clane returned abruptly to us; his son, who had been ailing when he left, was dead he said. A widower, he was a very lonely man from this time on.

He built a wall around himself, as indeed he built the high red wall around his home; he lived with only Barco, the Moor, the giant of a man, the deaf mute with a pocked face who looked like one of Ali Baba's Forty Thieves; and save for his classes and the work he resumed at his "madhouse," save for the very few of us who were welcome at his home, no one really knew him.

Now, Barco held a small dim lantern. And Barco's white teeth and a nod were his greeting to me. We walked a sheltered path, past dripping shrubbery, to a side door, to a small room, the library; but I could see the great baronial hall, the fireplace so large an ox could have been roasted in it. I could see the high hot flame, and a poker lying off alongside, a giant's tool, worthy of that mass of stone, and of men like Clane—and Barco.

Clane tossed his hat and raincoat aside. "Will you be in town long?"

"A week, sir."

"Where are you staying, Jeff?"

I mentioned a hotel, though as yet I hadn't registered.

"Nonsense. I've plenty of room. It's quiet here. The walls have all been—" he hesitated, then added—"soundproofed."

I thanked him, but of course I couldn't stay with Clane.

"At any rate, you'll want to wash up a bit," he said. He led me across the hall, to a lavatory, and from there, its door ajar, I heard him run up the steps, and Barco ran up the stairs also. It was at least twenty minutes before they returned.

Clane walked as with a great weight; he was grey, as I've said, and his face was lined and thin tonight and tired. But he came on to the library, smiling at me.

"You're still a mess, Jeff," he said.

He referred to the mud on my uniform. I grinned at him. He saw that I was searching my pockets.

"Lose anything?" he said.

I admitted, "My pen. Apparently just before we met, when I fell. But it's of no consequence, sir. I'm really worried about June, this loss of memory. Is it serious?"

Clane was making himself comfortable. "No, I hardly think so. X-rays were taken and I had a quick look, and happily the parietal bone was not fractured, Jeff. She may experience headaches, dizziness, irritability—some of the minor symptoms, but amnesia itself is certainly not unexpected following a blow like that. But quite frankly, Jeff, I'm not convinced the amnesia results from trauma. I'm inclined to call June's loss of memory psychic

hysteric, the result of some terrible shock."

I sat down. A moment passed. "Difficult to relieve, sir?" I said.

"No." There was a bottle and glasses before him, and Clane was pouring wine now. "I think she'll be all right. The treatment will be essentially psycho-analytic, and I intend to begin treatment as quickly as she is released from the hospital. Tomorrow, very likely. No, you've nothing to worry about, Jeff. She'll be all right."

I considered this, sighed and said then, "I wonder what happened to Sadler?"

Clane stiffened. A drop of wine spilled on the rug as he turned to me sharply. "Vern?"

"Yes, I take it he knew June was coming to see him—"

Clane interrupted, and his voice surprised me, its harshness. "What are you talking about, Jeff?"

"Why, she was coming to see him tonight," I said. "So wouldn't you say she had phoned him first, to be sure he was home? Or perhaps, he'd called and invited her over? Anyway, she never got to his place. I checked. And that makes it appear rather strange, don't you think, that he left—"

Again Clane interrupted. "To look for her?"

"Well, that's the obvious interpretation, isn't it?"

Clane was muttering under his breath. He indicated the wine, that I was to serve myself, and crossed to his desk and picked up the phone. The number he called was Sadler's, and it was a man who answered, but not Sadler. I would have known Sadler's smooth voice anywhere. This voice was deep and anything but smooth and Clane finally called the man "Dome".

THEY had a one-sided conversation, with Clane saying "Yes," tensely, several times. Then he put down the phone and I noticed that his face was white, that his hands were shaking. I noticed that now he looked at me queerly. He turned back to his chair and his silence persisted until I couldn't help but say, "Well, sir? Sadler isn't home?"

Clane opened a small teak casket. He took a cigarette, lit it. "Jeff, we've been friends a good many years—"

Something had happened to him. I could hear it in his voice, in every word; see it in every small gesture and in every taut line of his body.

He continued, "I've known no love has been lost between you and Sadler—but Jeff, did you hate him?"

"Hate?" I sipped of the wine, frowning and cautious. "No, that's not the word. Aren't you putting me in a bit of a spot? He's your friend."

"I know." Clane made a nervous motion, raised his wrist to look at his watch. "Please be honest with me."

"Well—I know I never trusted him. I think I feared him, sir, really. And of course you know why. I didn't want to lose June."

"Were you about to lose her, Jeff? Is that why you came home?"

Still I sipped, and I could feel a tick-tock within me, my heart quickening, beginning to pound. "Yes," I said. "Frankly I'm afraid that was going to be her answer tonight."

"Sadler's dead, Cliff," Clane said.

I just looked at him. And at last he glanced down, at his glass, and lifted it and set it aside again. "The police are there now, at his suite. Dome is homicide inspector, Jeff."

"Murdered?" I whispered the word.

"The mugger got Vern Sadler—Dome said that to me, Jeff, on the phone—and it happened, presumably, as you guessed, when Sadler went to search for June. Dome said, 'And this time we've got the mugger—'"

Clane paused. I wanted to shout, "Hurry, man, what is the rest of it?" For I knew there was more. And I knew by his tautness, his whiteness and this delay, that it concerned me. *Hurry man, what is the rest of it?* But perversely I said, "Yes, I was afraid something had happened to him. His disability handicapped him, of course. He could scarcely have escaped by running—" I couldn't go on. My lips were dry, my throat dry and aching.

Clane sighed. "And Dome said, Jeff, 'We found a fountain pen near the spring, not ten feet from the body.'"

My breath caught. "A—a pen?"

"With J. Mason imprinted on it, Jeff."

"But I—"

A gong began ringing. Loudly. Wildly, it seemed. The gong reverberated in my mind. There was a quick soft pit-pat of slipped feet in the hall, and Barco flashed past the open library door. "But I can't possibly be the mugger!" I cried. "Anyone can see that, sir. Until tonight I've been on the Coast, in the Army."

Clane shook his head. "You're confused. You're not thinking clearly. It's wholly obvious you had opportunity—they've discovered what would seem to be strong circumstantial evidence of that. So what more is needed to get a murder conviction? Motive—and that's already established. You certainly had reason to hate and therefore to eliminate Sadler."

"But surely you don't believe this?"

"I?"

"That I killed him? That it was my intention to make the murder look like the—*the mugger's work?*"

"I?" Clane said again, queerly. The cords were tight in his neck. *His neck?* Now I saw myself as others had seen me tonight.

The druggist, the switchboard operator, yes even Hillary Clane. The evening spun through my mind, each little incident like threads in a shroud. And the front door was opening—I heard it squealing on its hinges. The same deep voice I'd heard talking to Clane over the phone began speaking to Barco.

Then Clane picked up his glass again. His hand clamped hard on it; the slender, fragile thing broke. He looked at his hand, the red wine like blood on it.

"Get out, Jeff," he said harshly. "The side door, while there is still time!"

OUTSIDE in the darkness, in the deep shadows of shrubbery and Clane's wall, the phrase clung to my mind, bothered me. *Still time . . . For what? "Well, boys,"* I could say to Dome's men, *"I'm the man you're looking for. I'm Jeff Mason. But murder? That's all a mistake. I was searching for June and for Sadler when—"*

How about it, Jeff Mason, I thought.

I walked slowly toward the street, my blood pounding. Sure, I'd be pushed around. For a few days I would live in hell, perhaps, but the police would surely turn up real clues and clear me by that time. Well, wouldn't they? Wouldn't they? *Read about the guy who served twenty-six years in the pen, in Michigan. He was innocent, too. He believed, too, that justice would prevail—and it did, after twenty-six years.*

"Break it up, boys," I heard a voice say—and then I saw the cars, the people. Kids, at this ungodly hour. Women who'd come running with their babies. Men calling loudly.

Still time. . . . I turned around, walked toward the knob. Two silhouettes appeared, coming from the campus. I swerved, ran toward the spring, but there were lights by the spring—of course, the men of Dome's technical squad. I slipped aside, into the woods and, after running miles it seemed, threw myself flat on the ground.

Well, Jeff, this is it, isn't it? June's landlady, the druggist, the switchboard operator—they'll all testify. Even Clane—and how will their testimony sound? You're going to take a whipping, kid—if you don't hide out—

Later, I found the corporal's cottage, the white one on the high bank of the river. It was a quiet place. Yet here the darkness taunted me, bred fancies and ideas. Cars were turning off the highway? There was someone outside, walking in the wet grass? Whatever my exhaustion I couldn't sleep. I began to wonder about June. Suppose Clane had been wrong? Suppose June would become worse through the night? I knew I couldn't help, or call her.

With dawn, a plan formed in my mind. Perhaps it was the gun, the .45 I found with the

light of morning. The corporal's gun. Somehow the gun gave me new strength. When it was night again I dressed in the corporal's civvies and drove his car to town.

The plan was, simply, to contact the mugger's earlier victims. The names of the first two were Jones, a man of middle age, and a girl, a Miss Calkins; I got the names and addresses from the newspapers.

Jones had lost only a wrist watch, despite that he'd carried considerable cash; and from Miss Calkins only a gold compact had been taken. Max Hemminger, the third victim, was made of different stuff, however. He was cagey. He didn't answer the door, so I had contacted him by phone.

"I can't talk," he said. His voice cracked and rasped at me. "I should run off my lip and get in a jam?"

I said, "Look, Mr. Hemminger—"

"Who are you anyway?"

"Look," I said, "all I want to know is what was taken from you."

He grumbled. His throat sounded froggy; he cleared it. "A lodge button."

"A lodge button?" My mind spun. "From your coat lapel?"

"Say, who the devil are you?"

"Look," I said. "According to the papers, you were walking home and you'd turned off Fearing Drive—"

"Yeah, on the cross street, on whatchermacallit."

"And the mugger stepped from behind a tree. Are you sure he didn't drop out of the tree, in front of you?"

There was a short period of silence. I said, "Mr. Hemminger?"

And his voice came at last. "I ran. I got konked and that's all there is to it." The receiver clicked in my ear.

Then I called Clane, but Clane didn't answer the phone himself.

Instead: "Jeff," I heard, almost a whisper, "this is June."

SHE'D been discharged from the hospital at noon, and now we rode north on the Drive, June and I, and the pickup had been easy. We'd set the time, and June walked the block from Clane's to a dark corner. She wore fur tonight, and she was blonde and beautiful and pale—I turned on the light to look at her.

"Keep going, Jeff," she said. "Way out."

"You're all right?"

"Yes, Jeff."

I breathed again. "But there's another question, darling. Do you believe in me?"

She said simply, "Isn't it clear, Jeff? I'm here."

The car swayed half across the road. One other night we'd driven like this, under strain

and tension. And that night— "Jeff," she'd said, "Vern Sadler's going to stay in town. He's going to live here."

"With Clane?" I'd said, trying to sound casual. Sadler had been Clane's house guest at the time; Sadler had but arrived in University City. And from that night on June had—well, she'd seemed doubtful. From that night on Vern Sadler had become a threat to me.

June stirred now. "Jeff, part of it's clear. I called Vern last night. I phoned him a little before nine and asked him to come over—"

"Oh, a party for me? Company when I got there?"

She ignored it. "But he couldn't come," she said. "He'd had the doctor just last evening, for his leg again, the old wounds. Jeff, you know how hard walking was with him, so I tried to get a cab, but it was raining and I'd have had to wait—"

"Was seeing Sadler so important?" I broke in.

Her voice, when it came, was low. "I'd decided," she said. "I felt I had to see him before you got home. I wasn't going to marry him, Jeff."

I caught my breath. But we'd come to a bridge, a curve; a truck was passing several cars and coming toward us.

By the time the road was clear again, June was saying, "So I started across the campus—and it ends there, Jeff. It ends there." Suddenly she was trembling and close to me, her face pressed against my shoulder. "I don't know what happened, Jeff, none of it."

I found her hand, held it. I tried to think of all I'd meant to say last night. But last night was gone. I pressed her hand and said, "What does Clane say?" She'd gone to Clane tonight, of course, that he might help her with her memory.

She didn't answer.

"Hon?"

She said at last, in a small frightened voice, "Jeff, he wants to believe as I do—"

"He thinks that you witnessed the murder, and that this psychic block prevails now because you can't, due to your love, face the situation?"

She didn't answer.

"Did you see me?" I said.

"Jeff, darling, I don't know!"

"You do know. Being alone with me tonight proves you do, subconsciously. Clane must see that."

She whispered, "Jeff, I love you, and nothing else matters."

We drove a while, and I was humble now. I talked—nothing important, but each word chosen carefully, with purpose. "Hon, lean back," I said when new miles were behind

us. "Put your head on the back of the seat. Does your head hurt?"

"A little, a dull throb."

"Then close your eyes. Relax. It's calm now, and we're safe now. Are you sleepy?"

"I—I could be."

"Motor. Sounds good. Like it?"

"It's smooth."

"It sounds like rain."

"Rain?"

"The rhythm. The smoothness. Hear the breaks in the pavement, darling? Like—footsteps in the rain?"

"No," she said.

I tightened my grip on the wheel. "But you're walking in the rain, in the night like this, swiftly—"

"Swiftly?" she said.

"Yes, toward the knob—remember the knob?"

"Where we stood to look out across the valley?"

"Yes, the knob. Once there was moonlight shining, but last night it rained. The rain became excited and whispered, and then—then he came over the knob—"

I paused, not daring to breathe. Her answer, long in coming, exploded. "No! No, he came from the spring!"

"The spring?" My heart skipped a beat. "The trees?"

"Yes—dark like a tree and—and—"

"Big?"

"Jeff!" she said.

I looked straight ahead, at the white ribbon of road. "The rain, the night was afraid as he spoke to you—"

"No! No, he made s-sounds—"

"Chattering?"

"No!"

"Snarling?"

"No!"

"Like a dog might make, a whimper?"

"Yes—"

"And you stood frozen—"

"Jeff!" she said. She was panting, and she'd clutched at my arm, but I continued inexorably.

"Then the seconds ticked off and away, like the raindrops ticking away, until suddenly—"

"He took a step!"

"Toward you?"

"Yes?"

"Did you see him, his face?"

"Face? It—face? It was night, it was dark."

"Hairy?"

"I—I whirled—"

"Did you run?"

She breathed, "Oh my God—"

I stopped the car. I took her in my arms. I kissed her, and time passed and still we sat like that, close, until I'd stilled her trembling.

Then I said, "There's something more."

"Don't bring it back, Jeff," she pleaded.

"Something's still missing," I said.

"How?"

"Something you had last night and haven't got now."

Ten seconds. Twenty. She gasped. Her hand flew to her throat. "My pin? I wondered today where I'd lost it—"

"You wore it last night? You're sure?"

"Yes, Jeff, I'm sure!"

"Then listen. One more question. Judging from the size of the man and the sounds—"

"You mean could it have been Barco?" she whispered.

I started the car. I turned on the radio. "*And the mugger,*" came suddenly over the radio, the tail end of a newscast, "*struck again tonight, but in a different section, far across town. The latest victim, strangely enough, was again a man named Maxie Hemminger...*"

CHAPTER THREE

The Crooning Killer

SO LIGHTNING never strikes twice. And yet this seemed too pat and too much. Max Hemminger again, twice, in this city of thousands. I drove June back to town, and my conviction grew that the pattern was no longer insanely rational, as it had been. This second attack on Hemminger was wrong.

But I couldn't get to Hemminger tonight to test Hemminger tonight and, depending upon how badly he was injured this time, perhaps not for several nights. However would he be badly injured this time? I returned, finally, to the corporal's cottage, and with every hour now I knew I had to see Maxie Hemminger, the kind of man he was. Little dark eyes? Shifty? Yes, I had to meet Max Hemminger.

But the police were parked a block from his house when, in the darkness of the next evening, I drove up. I drove on. I rode around a while and then tried again. Dome was no fool. Dome had seen Hemminger, and apparently the squad car was parked there to stay and watch him. So I cut across town and got on a drug store phone.

Mr. Hemminger said, "Hello."

Mr. Hemminger, recognizing my voice, was anything but surly tonight. "You take it one time in Frisco," he said, high, running words together, talking very swiftly. "All I did was walk under a sign. The damn thing just went and fell down on me. Or you take it once I lit a cigarette. Now, pal, you light a cigarette and nothing ever happens to you, but with me—some damn fool went and turned the gas on in the house. I got no sense of smell,

you see? Up she went, the whole kaboodle.

"Mister," Max Hemminger said, with scarcely a pause, "things always happen to me. Three years ago I was mugged in St. Louie. Yessir, lost eight hunnerd bucks—"

Mr. Hemminger was talking too much.

"Did you lose anything last night?" I interrupted.

"Last night?" It seemed he turned aside. I could hear him breathing. "Last night I was lucky, pal."

"You weren't even injured badly?"

"Nope, I was pretty lucky, pal."

"And nothing was taken?"

"That's right, pal, not last night."

I could hear him breathing. . . .

"You see, I got me a girl," he was saying. "She's young. She's just a kid. She lives on the south side—you see? Well, I always meet her down the street, by the alley, on account I was married once and ain't got a divorce, and her pappy gets tough when you mention—"

I could hear the breathing even while he talked. So it wasn't Hemminger's breathing. He wasn't alone.

"Hemminger, listen—you stood by the alley, waiting? You faced the street, and the mugger came up behind you?"

"Sure, he—"

"Did you hear him? See him?"

"Now, you know," he said, "it's a funny thing. I never—"

"So this time you didn't run?"

"What's the matter?" he said. "Here I am, telling you, ain't I, that I'm just standing by the alley—"

I slammed up the receiver. The booth door stuck. I heard a siren when finally I got it open. By the time I'd crossed the floor and reached the street door a second siren wailed. One from the north, one from the south—two police cars converging and both near. I ran for my car. The traffic light was red; I cut it and turned east, down the side street. Split seconds later the squad cars climbed the curb at the drug store.

By the skin of my teeth. My teeth were chattering. Now Dome's men were near, very near, and sure soon to find and corner me. This race was run—but won? The radio was on, played on. I heard only the sad notes.

FOR a little while I rode the dark streets aimlessly. By now June had gone back to Clane's house, to wait again for me as we had arranged. By now she would be worried, wondering what had happened; I could see her in my mind, her restlessness; and I could almost feel the tension there, beneath the snug warmth of Clane's library. I could see Clane in this visualized scene, his tired face, his tired eyes—then the slipped

feet of Barco walked into my thoughts and stayed.

I rode aimlessly, and yet I knew these streets. I knew each turn I made now brought the issue nearer. The .45 automatic lay heavy in my pocket, and I touched it, but with a queer aversion; and presently I came to Fearing Drive, and the evening had grown thin. These were dark areas that I passed, houses locked, asleep.

All but Clane's. His lights burned bravely as I drove past, tense, attuned to danger. It was a glint in the shadows of a driveway that warned me. My headlights had found, however briefly, grillwork, chrome, a hidden car—and that meant Dome again.

Whatchermacallit, Hemminger's name for the side street. It dipped and bridged the shallow stream, it twisted near the woods and narrowed to a lane. I parked the car and cut, on foot, into the darkness. Clane's wall, the back gate, was my goal now. And here the trees stood high and the wind moaned through naked branches. And here the woods began to thin to meet the campus. A rustic footbridge spanned the small lagoon; I crossed it, and now I could hear the bubble of the spring, its fuss and urgency.

The night listened briefly with me, empty, inky. The farther slope, the crooked path, led past the spot where Sadler's body had been found. I paused and shivered, and I could see the shadows of the University buildings, far down. I could see the lonely outline of Clane's "madhouse," silent at this distance, brooding in the night. Still I paused, disturbed. I felt a tingling at my spine, a vague awareness.

It was a small scratching sound that came first. A rabbit? A small scampering creature? I waited, and then the sound came again and this time I knew it. Padded feet on gravel. I pulled the gun from my pocket. The scratching was still off and up and away, from the knob that stood bold in the wan moonlight. But the knob, queerly, was barren? Of course I looked for the tall frame, the figure enormous—and drew in a quick breath when finally I saw approaching me something crawling on all fours.

The sound was fingers scratching at loose stone. Fingers hunting for something, long lost. A gold pin, perhaps, from June's blouse . . . I listened and watched as the

thing crawled ever closer, and audible now was its breathing, ragged as with rage and frustration. Suddenly, deliberately, I moved. The blot stiffened, shot up to both knees. The moon behind it revealed hanging arms and strong sloping shoulders. The moonlight revealed a figure as from other ages, long removed. Then its breathing stopped as it saw me.

It rose.

Seconds passed as it swayed on the path, and it was truly enormous; then the cries came, the cries Jones had heard, and Miss Calkins and June, the whimpering sounds they had described to me—but with one sharp difference.

The weird voice was gleeful, and it crooned.

A few yards only separated us now; it took a step toward me, one arm upraised, a stone clutched in pronged fingers. I didn't shout or spin or run or press the trigger of the gun. The wordless yells came and rose and wavered.

"Drop that stone," I said.

Drop that stick, I'd said that day at the lagoon. Years ago. And the boy with the unruly hair, the thick arms and the sweater too small for him, the curious creature who had crooned invitation to the ducks only to hit them, sobbed that day; he'd dropped his stick that day, to stand before me bewildered and trembling—

"Drop that stone!" I said—and he trembled and the stone fell at last, and he sobbed.

WE MET Clane at the rear gate. He took the docile hand from mine and led the way through the garden. We came in by the side door, and June stood in the library doorway. She was staring at us.

"Jeff!" she said. I went to her, held her in my arms.

But Clane stayed on in the great hall, by the fire. He moved a chair, for warmth. Then he took the giant's poker and raised a giant flame; and his voice came to us softly. A soothing, a kind, a sad voice. He spoke as to a small child.

"Jeff, he told me," June began faintly. "His son escaped tonight again, and he told me. He knew it was criminal to keep silent longer."

I didn't speak, and she continued, "Barco is still out, searching. The police, their guns—that was Clane's deadly fear, Jeff, that the

Look out of the window. Is it raining? If it isn't, remember that some day it will—INVEST IN YOUR OWN AND YOUR COUNTRY'S FUTURE BY BUYING MORE WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!

police would have to shoot. But now it's all over, Jeff," she said. Her hand tightened on my arm as Clane came in.

"I suppose the day of reckoning had to come, sometime," he said. His face was utterly white. "I've tried in every way to postpone it since—since the boy was a child."

I'd planned to say, "It was common knowledge there was something wrong with your son, and once you said he had died in Spain. Yet when you returned, you soundproofed the house. You built a wall around it, and you brought with you Barco, only too obviously a guard. The truth, Clane, was there, had anyone cared to see and read it—"

But I didn't speak, for Clane seemed to have aged and lost his strength, and his anguish was naked and terrible as he stood nodding, dumb before this tragedy and seeing scenes far off. A man of fame, and proud—the pain of such a child; a man who'd fought with science for a cure and failed; now he saw back through the years and found them desolate and empty.

He sighed at length and said, "A child was murdered, years ago, a murder the police never solved. But one day a long time after that killing I discovered my son playing with a trinket, a ring. It was the ring—the murdered child had worn, so then I knew. I knew my—my boy must never be free again. But I knew, too, I could not let the world know of this crack in my armor."

Crack in his armor? I frowned, puzzled that he should speak thus of something so beyond him. Crack in *his* armor? His pride, he meant, his failure to himself and science?

But though he'd paused to take a deep breath, he continued, "So I went abroad. Escape, Jeff, that's what I'd wanted—"

I didn't speak. I couldn't. And still—from outside the library—the hall, we heard small giggling sounds, and I caught a flash view of the monster, Clane's son, over Clane's shoulder. I saw him with the poker in his meaty hand, and he was chopping at the fireplace, at charred logs, at the wink and leap of flame.

"Trinkets fascinated him." Clane's voice came now as from a deep preoccupation. "These recent attacks—that's all he wanted, Jeff, trinkets. At first I refused to read of the—the muggings. I refused to believe he'd broken out, or see how that was possible. Then—tonight, shortly after June arrived, we found his empty room, and we found his pitiful hoard, a compact, a wrist watch, a lodge button—"

Not June's pin? He'd returned tonight to the spring, to paw the ground and hunt for June's pin? This was a thought aside. My conscious mind still failed to find solutions quite so easily. Yet, I had to speak—my voice

sounded cold and brutal to me. I felt ill.

"What about Sadler?" I said.

Clane looked at me.

"And the mugging last night, on the south side of town?" I reached for a cigarette, my fingers trembling. The pack dropped; I picked it up. "That's a loose end too, Clane?"

Still he looked at me.

I struck a match and the flame danced as I inhaled. "For one thing, your son couldn't possibly have crossed the city. So we must assume that attack wasn't made by the mugger, as we know him. Well, what then? Was it front, camouflage, designed to draw attention away from this, the vital area?"

There was a pocket lighter lying on the desk. Clane picked it up, snapped it, tossed it down again. "Don't forget the long arm of coincidence," Clane said.

"I'm not forgetting coincidence. That Hemminger was twice victim was very likely coincidental. I admit that, and explain it away as one of life's imponderables. But is Hemminger, the *victim*, important? Clane, I'm concerned with motive now—and method. Robbery wasn't the motive, not in the second mugging of Hemminger, for nothing was taken. Thus the pattern varied, and so too, curiously, did the method of attack, and that is where you *twice* made a terrible mistake, Clane—"

June gasped and tugged at my arm, her plea, I think. Yes, Hillary Clane was dear to her, as he'd always been to me. But the bridges were burned; I couldn't turn back, or stop.

"Sadler couldn't run," I said.

The crackle of flame came suddenly, loudly, from the great fireplace. Clane's gaze was locked with mine; his eyes first turned away.

"What do you mean, Jeff?" he asked then in a flat, tired voice.

"That Sadler's murder and the second attack on Hemminger were planned to cover the first four assaults. That your son was admittedly, morbidly, attracted by light, glitter, trinkets—and one other thing, Clane, you didn't mention. Movement. He never struck until the victim ran. Hemminger didn't run, the second time. Sadler couldn't run; his leg, the old wounds, precluded it. Therefore your son didn't mug Hemminger the second time. And your son didn't kill Vern Sadler.

"Isn't it significant, Clane, that Sadler was with you in Spain? And conceivable he knew why you went to Spain? Certainly he knew your son had not died over there. So Sadler came to visit you in University City—and he stayed, a leech, I suspect, only too aware of your fear that the world would learn of your son and what he had done. Sadler, with no visible means of support, lived in luxury. Well, what was it, Clane, blackmail?"

"I say he knew what had happened two nights ago, when June failed to arrive at his suite. I say he crossed the street that night and came to you. He was less concerned with June than with opportunity. He wanted to marry June and he wanted more money, and the two of you went out to search for the mugger, and June. And there, Clane, was your opportunity.

"Finally, you were determined your son would never again escape. You believed the pressure could be cleverly removed from this area if you attacked someone far off, across town. You knew no one would question your alibi of having been at work the night of Sadler's death, or last night at the hour of the Hemminger attack. Clane, you killed Vern Sadler—"

THE gongs began ringing, the great clashing sounds so peculiar to Clane's house. When he said, "That's Barco. Please wait. I must let him in," I was certain Clane would go quietly only to the side gate—

I blame myself for what happened. True, Clane was a brilliant man. It is fantastic to believe he could have missed the smallest psychological clue . . . although tension and fear can blind the mind of anyone. Yet, I should have mentioned the ducks, the stories Jones, Hemminger, Miss Calkins told. I should have recalled all these things to Clane's mind and thus made the thing plain. And so I blame myself, and still—but there is even yet another and a happy explanation. His utter failure might have brought this brief disorganization. And then the ringing gongs, the mad reverberation—

I cannot believe he planned it. For Clane turned from us. *He ran.*

"Clane—" I cried.

It was already too late to stop him. We heard the bellow, the savage roar, the glee. And now June was clinging to me, screaming, and I pushed her back. I tried to shut the door, to shut her in. There was no time, you understand. There were split seconds only if Clane were to be saved, for already that giant's tool, the poker, was swinging in the giant's hand—

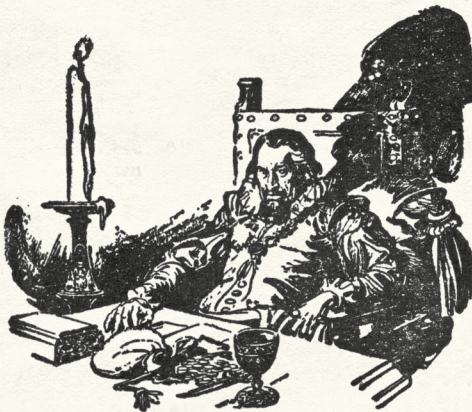
I don't remember pulling my gun—but I had to pull the trigger. What else could I do? The gun kicked hard there in my hand, and Clane stumbled. He fell, and for a breathless moment I thought the bullet had not saved him. Then I saw him reach up to his shoulder. The poker had missed his head.

One bullet. There was no sound from Clane's son, no movement. He lay on the floor, and the giggle was gone now, forever. I called to Clane. He stared at the body. He didn't hear me. And suddenly I became aware that the ringing of the gongs had long since ceased, and somehow Barco had got in. He passed Clane softly, and tears ran down his pocked cheeks unchecked. Gently he picked up the body.

I touched Clane's arm. I led Clane back into the library, to his desk. Remember words that he'd used? "A crack in his armor?"

The gold cigarette lighter lay there on his desk, and his hand began at once to inch toward it, furtively. It was very strange. He hugged the lighter. He turned the lighter over, feeling of it. He began to giggle, nervously. . . .

Paper Fights for Victory!



Paper was only a curiosity to the men who signed the Magna Charta—but in 1944, it is a vital weapon. It is used for cartridge cases, to wrap iron rations, for hundreds of other military purposes.

The supply is limited, and *you* can help conserve it. Do these things:

1. Cooperate with the paper drives in your city.
2. Accept purchases unwrapped whenever possible.
3. Don't *waste* paper!

... To Win the War in '44!

ILLUSTRATED

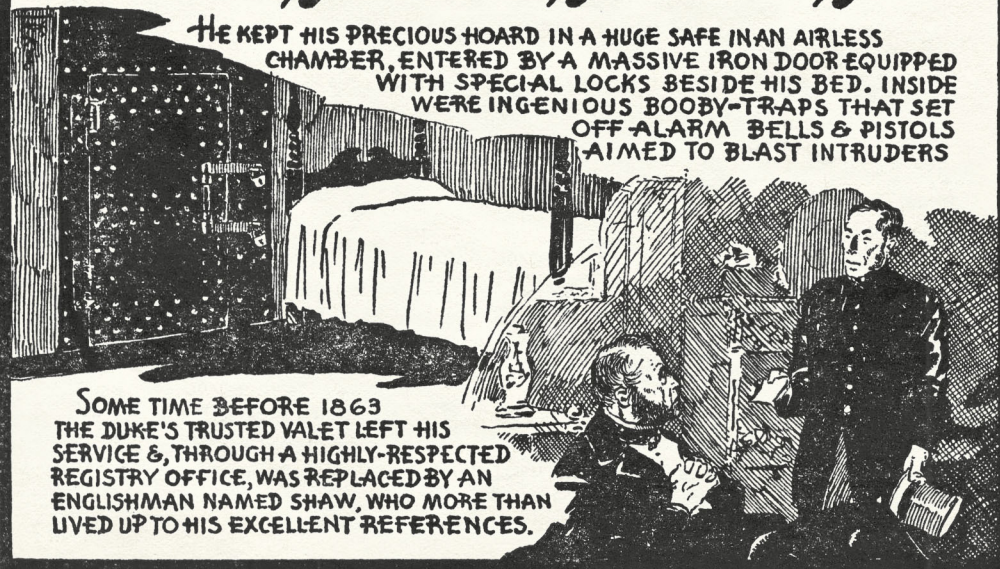


The Case of the Ducal DIAMONDS

DURING THE MIDDLE 19TH CENTURY THE LAST DUKE OF BRUNSWICK FLED HIS PRINCIPALITY & TOOK UP RESIDENCE IN THE BEAUJON QUARTER OF PARIS.

KNOWING HIS FABULOUS \$3,000,000 COLLECTION OF DIAMONDS WOULD LURE THE WORLD'S CLEVEREST JEWEL THIEVES, THE ECCENTRIC OLD FOP SPARED NO EXPENSE IN TURNING HIS MANSION INTO A ROBBERY-PROOF CITADEL, DOUBLE-BOLTED, BARRED & UNDER 24-HOUR SURVEILLANCE BY TWO POLICEMEN.

HE KEPT HIS PRECIOUS HOARD IN A HUGE SAFE IN AN AIRLESS CHAMBER, ENTERED BY A MASSIVE IRON DOOR EQUIPPED WITH SPECIAL LOCKS BESIDE HIS BED. INSIDE WERE INGENUOUS BOOBY-TRAPS THAT SET OFF ALARM BELLS & PISTOLS AIMED TO BLAST INTRUDERS



SOME TIME BEFORE 1863 THE DUKE'S TRUSTED VALET LEFT HIS SERVICE &, THROUGH A HIGHLY-RESPECTED REGISTRY OFFICE, WAS REPLACED BY AN ENGLISHMAN NAMED SHAW, WHO MORE THAN LIVED UP TO HIS EXCELLENT REFERENCES.

CRIMES *by* LEE



ON DEC. 17, 1863, THE DUKE OPENED THE SAFE, PENDING THE ARRIVAL OF HIS JEWELER, SUMMONED FOR MINOR REPAIRS ON A SETTING. WHEN HE FAILED TO APPEAR, THE DUKE SLAMMED THE OUTER IRON DOOR & STORMED OUT TO LOOK FOR HIM.

SHAW, AWARE BY THIS TIME THAT THE ALARM & DEFENSE MECHANISM DID NOT WORK WITH THE SAFE OPEN, QUICKLY & SUCCESSFULLY APPLIED A PICKLOCK TO THE IRON DOOR, FILLED A VALISE WITH THE CREAM OF THE GEMS, INFORMED ANOTHER SERVANT THAT HE WAS FEELING UNWELL AND DEPARTED.

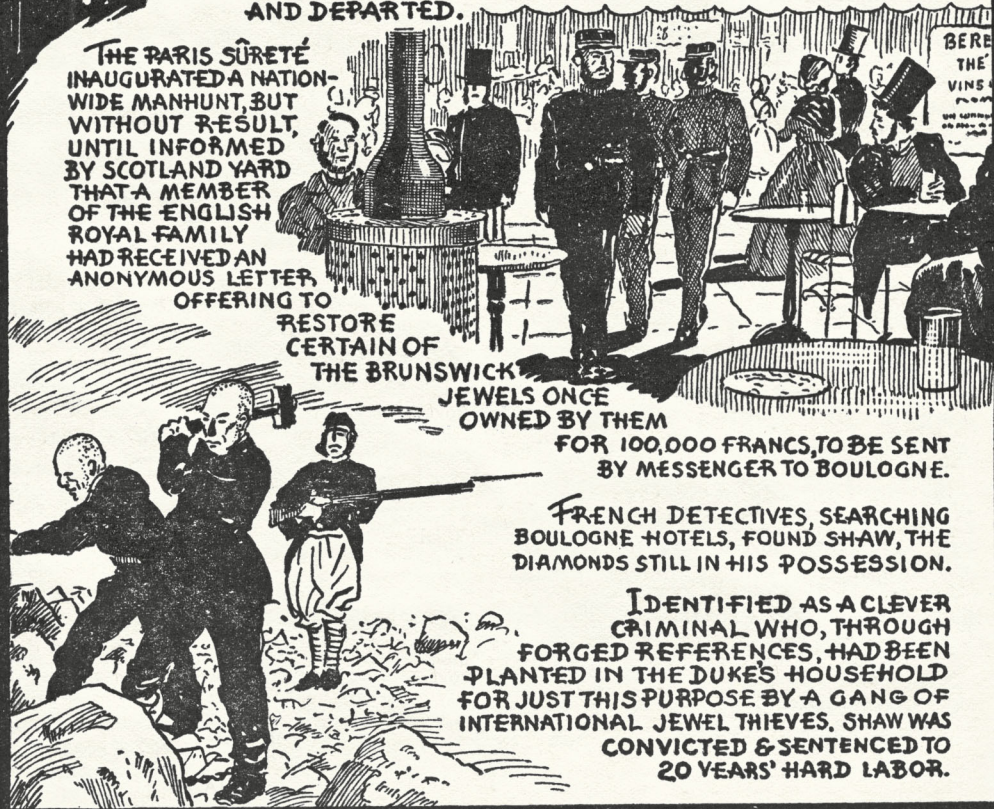
THE PARIS SÛRETÉ INAUGURATED A NATION-WIDE MANHUNT, BUT WITHOUT RESULT, UNTIL INFORMED BY SCOTLAND YARD THAT A MEMBER OF THE ENGLISH ROYAL FAMILY HAD RECEIVED AN ANONYMOUS LETTER, OFFERING TO

RESTORE CERTAIN OF THE BRUNSWICK JEWELS ONCE OWNED BY THEM

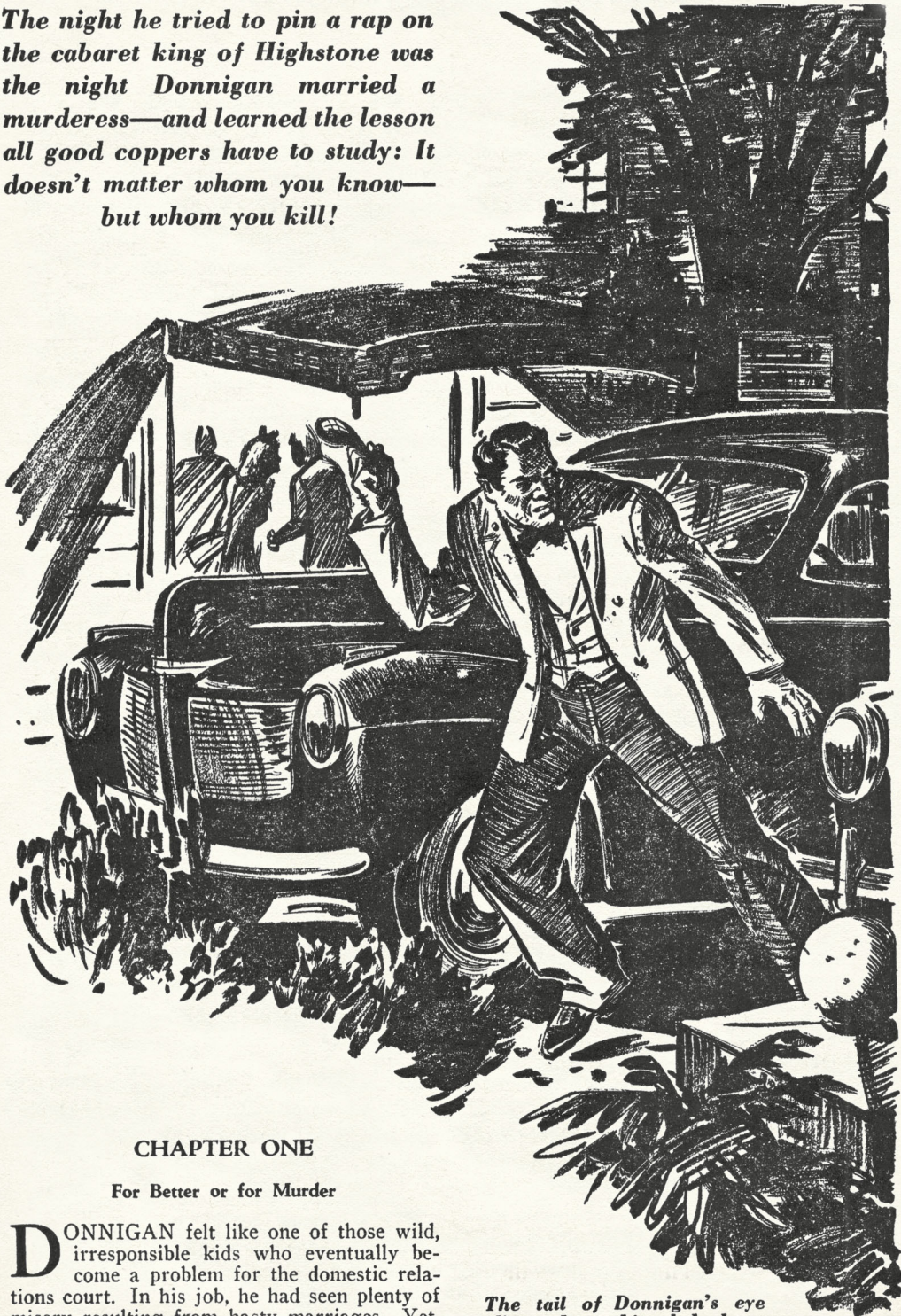
FOR 100,000 FRANCS, TO BE SENT BY MESSENGER TO BOULOGNE.

FRENCH DETECTIVES, SEARCHING BOULOGNE HOTELS, FOUND SHAW, THE DIAMONDS STILL IN HIS POSSESSION.

IDENTIFIED AS A CLEVER CRIMINAL WHO, THROUGH FORGED REFERENCES, HAD BEEN PLANTED IN THE DUKE'S HOUSEHOLD FOR JUST THIS PURPOSE BY A GANG OF INTERNATIONAL JEWEL THIEVES, SHAW WAS CONVICTED & SENTENCED TO 20 YEARS' HARD LABOR.



*The night he tried to pin a rap on
the cabaret king of Highstone was
the night Donnigan married a
murderess—and learned the lesson
all good coppers have to study: It
doesn't matter whom you know—
but whom you kill!*



CHAPTER ONE

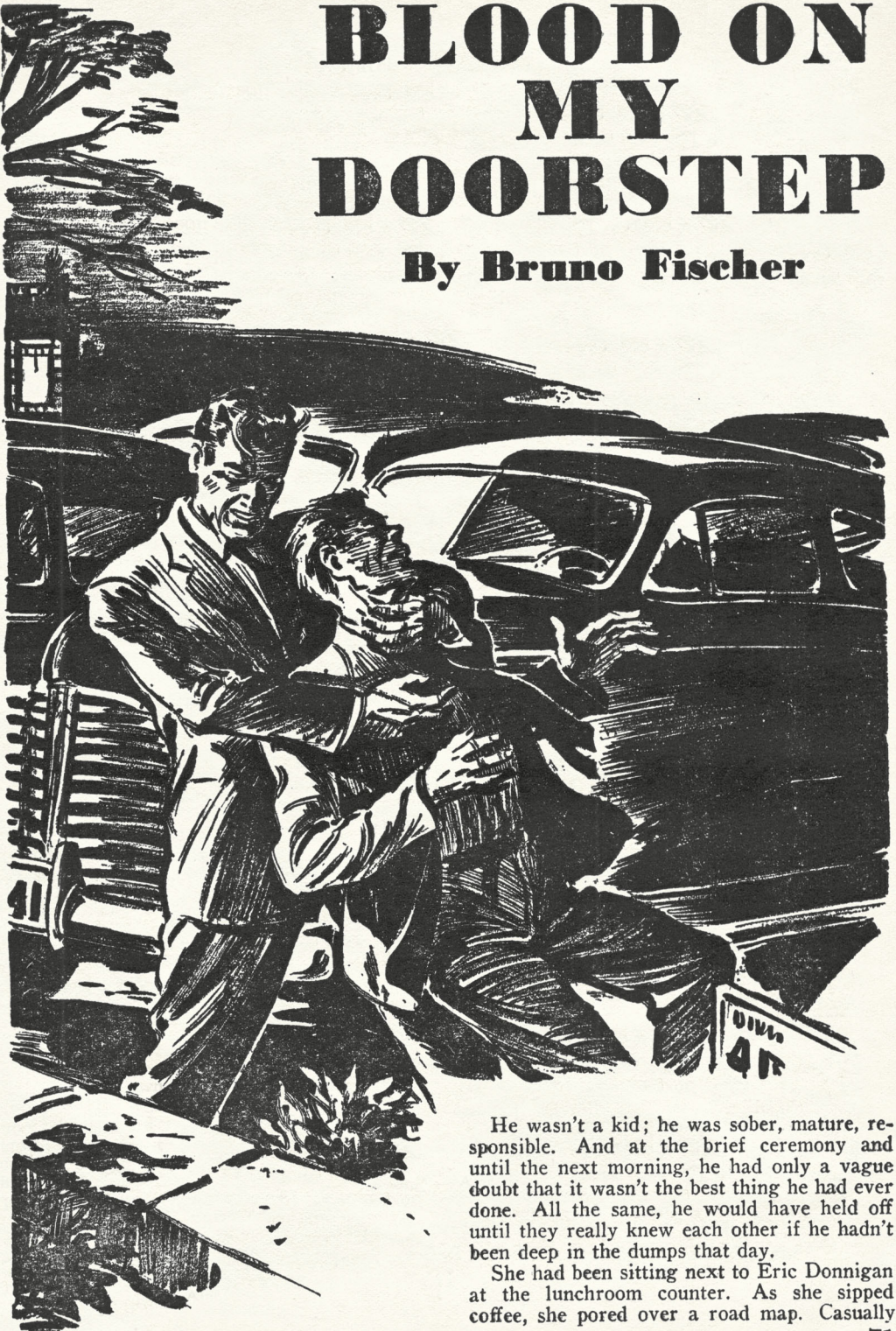
For Better or for Murder

DONNIGAN felt like one of those wild, irresponsible kids who eventually become a problem for the domestic relations court. In his job, he had seen plenty of misery resulting from hasty marriages. Yet, six hours after he had met the girl, he married her.

*The tail of Donnigan's eye
glimpsed a white-clad shape
rear up in the dimness be-
hind him. . . .*

BLOOD ON MY DOORSTEP

By Bruno Fischer



He wasn't a kid; he was sober, mature, responsible. And at the brief ceremony and until the next morning, he had only a vague doubt that it wasn't the best thing he had ever done. All the same, he would have held off until they really knew each other if he hadn't been deep in the dumps that day.

She had been sitting next to Eric Donnigan at the lunchroom counter. As she sipped coffee, she pored over a road map. Casually

Donnigan observed that she was pretty, but pretty girls didn't interest him at the moment. He was too busy hating Fagan.

"Pardon me," he heard her say. "Do you know the shortest way to Shore City by car?"

She was speaking to him. He turned to look into the brightest black eyes he had ever seen.

"Sure." He spread the map between them. "Here's a short cut that's not so hot, but if you want to save gas—"

"That's the point," she said. "I've just about enough gas coupons to get there."

Donnigan started to trace the route with a finger and then lifted his head to look at her. Her eyes were fixed on him instead of the map. She smiled. He was not a particularly handsome guy and he was big to the point of awkwardness, but he was not unaccustomed to having strange girls smile at him. Her smile was different. It wasn't brazen or inviting. It was friendly and it made him feel good for the first time since yesterday.

"You know," he said, "I'm on my way to Shore City. If you don't mind—"

Those words came out by themselves. He hadn't thought about saying them, but now that they were said he found himself waiting anxiously for her answer. He had ten solid days with not a thing to do, and he couldn't think of a better way to spend the first of them than by driving with her.

"I'll be delighted to give you a lift," she told him.

That was how it started. Donnigan had no idea then, as he got into her coupe with her, that by nightfall he would be married, and certainly not that by next morning he would be in the worst mess of his life.

HER name was Lucy Coleman. That was about all she told him about herself, maybe because he was too busy doing the talking. He told her about Fagan.

"You're a cop?" She made it sound as if being a cop was a great thing.

"Plainclothes. Though I guess I'll never make much of a success." Bitterness tightened his mouth. "No sense of discipline, Fagan said. That's Arthur Fagan, Highstone's chief of police. What he meant was that I couldn't stand the stench of dirty politics. I made the mistake of arresting Les Bell for bootlegging."

"I thought bootlegging went out with Repeal," Lucy Coleman said. "Les owns legitimate roadhouses."

"Les?" Donnigan glanced sideways at her. "You know him well enough to call him by his first name?"

She bit her lip. "I was once introduced to him in one of his roadhouses."

"If you drank Scotch there, it was bootleg,"

Donnigan said. "It's hard to get these days, but Les Bell sells you all you want. It almost tastes like Scotch when you're not very sober and the labels look genuine and his profit isn't much more than a couple of thousand per cent. I got the goods on him and arrested him." His eyes went bleak. "I had the perverted idea that was what the city paid me for. I learned I have a higher duty—knuckling under when my superiors tell me to. Les Bell is big in local politics; he has plenty of protection. I was dumb enough to argue with Fagan. A first-grade detective doesn't talk back to his chief; I had a ten-day suspension without pay slapped on me. So here I am, on the way to broil myself on the sands of Shore City."

"I'm glad," Lucy said.

"That I'm suspended?"

"Uh-huh. Otherwise you wouldn't be here now."

She was that kind of girl, making you feel warm all over without throwing herself at you. It was plain that she liked him. That was fine with Donnigan. He had fallen head over heels for her.

At dusk they went through Wilfield, only twenty miles from Shore City. They passed a big sign off the road, bearing the information that Horace Smith, Justice of the Peace, would provide a license and a marriage ceremony within thirty minutes for five dollars.

Donnigan waved at the sign. "Those quickie marriages are another headache for us Highstone cops. Kids drive down here on impulse and get hitched and then come home and are sorry and get into all sorts of messes trying to get rid of each other." He grinned at her. "Though I can see now why people rush marriage."

"Is that a proposal?" Lucy Coleman said slowly.

"If you want it to be," he threw off lightly.

She stopped the car and regarded him gravely. "Are you serious, Eric?"

He looked at her in wonder. Her loveliness made him choke up. He took a deep breath and said, "Yes."

"This is so sudden," she said with a merry laugh and kissed him.

When he released her, Lucy turned the car and drove back to the white house behind the sign. Donnigan didn't believe her until they were actually there.

"Listen," he said when she stopped the car. "A detective's salary isn't much. You look like a lot of money. I mean, this swanky coupe and your clothes—"

"They're all I have to my name," she told him. "I'm a rotten cook, but I love you. You haven't said that you love me."

"Lord, yes!" Donnigan breathed.

A little man with wispy grey hair came out

on the porch. He beamed at them as they approached, hand in hand like a couple of gay children. . . .

It was good, Eric Donnigan told himself next morning. A man needed a wife, and Lucy was like a girl you dream of without much hope of achieving.

He turned from the window of their hotel room. In a flowered dressing gown, Lucy stood at the dresser brushing her black curls. He felt wonderful as he watched her. He even had a kindly thought for Fagan, for if the police chief hadn't suspended him he would never have met her. Now his suspension amounted to a ten-day honeymoon.

Her expensive airplane luggage was parked beside the dresser. That reminded him.

"I'll have to take the train back to Highstone to get some clothes," he said. "All I have with me is what I'm wearing. Do you want to wait here or go with me to break the news to your family?"

Her brush paused in her hair. "I have no family."

"None at all? Well, I have enough family for two."

Lucy dropped the brush and swung toward him. "Darling, there's something you ought to know. It's nothing much, but you'll hear about it when we return to Highstone and you might misunderstand. Yesterday you told me you had arrested Les Bell."

"You mean I tried to." He felt something tighten inside him. "What about Bell?"

"I know him very well. I went out with him a number of times. He's quite an attractive man."

"So they say." Intently he watched her face. "All the women go for him."

"Oh, it's nothing like that," Lucy said quickly. "He never even kissed me, and I didn't want him to. The last time he took me out was the night before last. In case you hear gossip, I don't want you to get the wrong idea."

Donnigan laughed. He put his hands on her shoulders. She was tall for a woman, and that was another thing he liked about her. A man as big as he was should have a tall wife.

"I don't care whom you knew before yesterday," he said. "Now let's have our breakfast, Mrs. Donnigan."

A FEW minutes ago a waiter had brought up breakfast. That was the way honeymoon breakfast should be, in the intimacy of a swell hotel room overlooking the ocean. There was a morning paper beside his plate.

"Do you mind?" he said, opening the paper. "I only want to glance at the headlines. I didn't see a paper all day yesterday."

"Any news?" Lucy's spoon hovered over

her grapefruit. He smiled at her interest.

"Nothing much. There was a murder in Highstone night before last."

"As a detective, murder is your business."

"I'm not homicide," he said. "Murder is their headache. A lawyer named Adolph Vernon was shot dead in his house and they're looking for his niece." He frowned at the paper. "Funny thing. The niece's name is the same as yours—I mean was before you married me. Lucy Coleman. I guess it's not such an usual name. Take even my name. I once picked up a dope fiend named Eric Donn—"

His head snapped up. Lucy was on her feet, moving around to his chair with stiff steps. Her face was strangely set.

"Lucy!" He glanced at the paper and then back at her. "My God, you're not—"

She put an arm over his wide shoulders and stared down at the paper spread over his plate.

"Yes," she said hoarsely. "I'm the Lucy Coleman they mean."

Donnigan sat very still. Her fingers were digging into his shoulder, but he did not feel them.

"Eric, darling, I didn't kill him."

He said nothing. Slowly he read the story again from the beginning, taking in all the details. Standing beside his chair, she read it also.

When he finished, he rose to his feet, shedding her arm with the movement. His face was wooden.

"All right," he said. "I should have known a beautiful, ritzy girl like you wouldn't marry a mug like me a few hours after we met, if at all. So I'm a prize sucker."

He stepped back, away from her. "I'd told you I was a detective. You figured a cop would be able to cover you, would know all the inside ways of how to beat the rap. It wasn't smart, but you were running away and desperate, so you grabbed at any straw."

She moved across the room and dropped limply on the bed. "Will you at least listen to me?"

"I have to—Mrs. Donnigan." The name came out harshly. "You're my wife. According to the story books, a man has to shield his wife no matter what she does."

"I swear this is the truth, Eric," she said. "The night before last I went to a show with Les Bell. When we returned home, I invited him in for a drink. Uncle Adolph was home. He has supported me most of my life. He's rich. He gave me almost anything I wanted except kindness and understanding."

"That checks so far," Donnigan agreed. "The paper says you and your uncle never got along. Always fighting."

"Uncle was a pompous corporation lawyer

and very strait-laced. He didn't let me go out with boys till I was twenty and then he objected to every man I saw. When I invited Les into the house night before last, Uncle was very nasty to him. He called him a crook to his face."

"Your uncle knew what he was talking about."

"But I didn't know then," Lucy said. "As far as I knew, Les was a charming man who owned a string of roadhouses. He left, of course, when Uncle insulted him. Then Uncle and I had one of our quarrels. I said I was over twenty-one and would not be treated like a child. He said that nobody was compelling me to be supported by him. So I went upstairs and packed a bag. When I came down, he was standing at the foot of the stairs. He shouted at me that he was changing his will tomorrow. I said I didn't want his money and went out to the garage and drove away in the coupe which was in my name. I spent the night in Highstone and the next day started for Shore City. That was when I met you."

"And thought that a detective could help you out."

"No!" she said sharply.

Donnigan shook his head. "It's no good. Part of your story checks; the rest doesn't. Your housekeeper—" he glanced down at the paper—"Miss Sarah Harlow, was going to bed when she heard your uncle kick Les Bell out of the house. Through her bedroom window she saw Bell drive away in his car. Then she heard you and your uncle battle, and when you came down she heard your uncle shout he was cutting you out of his will. That's all the motive in the world: murder him before he can change his will."

"But I didn't—"

"Miss Harlow heard you go out and then she heard the shot," he went on remorselessly. "She ran down and found your uncle in the library—dead. It was a warm night; the windows were open, and the police believe that he was shot through one of them. Why didn't you return to the house when you heard the shot?"

"Perhaps the sound of my racing motor drowned it out."

"Miss Harlow heard you start the car before she heard the shot. Then from her room, which faces the street, she saw a car that looked like yours turn out of the driveway. When you went down the driveway in your car, you passed within three feet of two open library windows. The police say that, while sitting in the car, you shot your uncle."

Lucy, perched on the edge of the bed, clasped her hands between her knees. Donnigan's heart turned within him. He wanted to take her in his arms, but he didn't move.

He'd been enough of a sucker for a pretty face and figure.

He turned away from her, his insides empty. "I'm taking you back to Highstone."

CHAPTER TWO

Rendezvous

LUCY went into the bathroom to dress and slammed the door behind her. To Donnigan that closed door was a symbol of marriage ended almost before it had begun. As he stood before the dresser knotting his necktie, he wondered why he didn't hate her more.

Knuckles rapped urgently on the room door.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Police!"

Dully Donnigan nodded to himself. They were due to catch up with Lucy, especially after the public record of a marriage. It was odd that her car hadn't been picked up on the highway yesterday. It would have been better if he had brought her in himself; now Fagan would believe that he had been shielding a murderess. He didn't much care. He was beyond caring about anything.

He turned the snap-lock. The door flew inward, and Les Bell put his shoulder against Donnigan's chest and shoved past him.

"Take it easy, copper," a soft voice said.

Hank Gillespie was right behind Bell. He stepped over the threshold and kicked the door shut with his heel. His right hand was deep in his topcoat pocket. Donnigan looked at the bulge and gun and let his arms drop. Gillespie was a wizened runt who was supposed to be Bell's chauffeur; he was known to be deadly with any kind of weapon.

"Where is she?" Bell demanded.

It was the first time Donnigan had ever seen those pink cheeks unshaven or those pale eyes worried. Les Bell's clothes looked as if they had been slept in.

"You mean my wife?" Donnigan asked quietly.

Bell appraised Donnigan's big bulk with cold contempt. "I thought you were smart—for a cop. Do you think she could get away with such a clumsy killing or that legally she could inherit the dough now? And if you wanted to hide her out, why did you—"

Donnigan hit him. He struck with his open hand and not hard, but Bell staggered against the table and knocked over a couple of breakfast dishes.

"You trying to make me plug you, copper?" Hank Gillespie drawled. His hand was still in his pocket, but now the muzzle of the gun punched the material.

Muscles slid nervously under Donnigan's

(Continued on page 86)



No. 16—Autumnal Mood. By †Sara. Try for the phrase USK FRY, noting USK used elsewhere between longer words, also UR and SLF. And thus to FLAYFRYD and OYUFRYD.

“ELDDLO USK FRY ETUDGYF GYUH, EUK FRLVARFE USK EVSSP OYUFRYD, UR XY, FRZE AGLDP USK FRZE ADZYH UADYY SLF OYGG FLAYFRYD.”—*BUDELSE.

No. 17—Pendulous Peril. By °Don Ricardo. Letters in short words SA and LAS occur in ending -SHAL. Substitute next in the last word, noting also two-letter word HY.

KUVUSVAAKY YUP DVTUSTYS VHYC HY LAS NUHERVT AN KUVUBZRST SA AKTL, XRS AYBHEEUSHAL US SHOT AN EULGHLD. UVOP VTBTLSEP KRVBZUYTG ULG HY LAF STYSHLD KUVUBZRSTY ZUJHLD VTGRBTG AYBHEEUSHAL.

No. 18—Historic Moment. By †Prof. Xenon. Guess two-letter word UX, used three times altogether, twice before proper names, as indicated by the asterisks. Then try for EXNIP and EPIE.

EXNIP BILNOPAID OLFIP XUPIAML POTI, DNPENIMAB *LUPNR *ENTELNAB ADTELF, *ABITELF, GUGOTENAU UX *WELDED *BANK, *WELDED, EPIE UX *WILNOBWK, RED EFUGNIF PIGOVTABLE XUPS UX MUZIPLSILN.

No. 19—They Sound the Same. By †A. W. High-frequency symbol S, occurring 19 times altogether, will provide entry to pattern word SIKSPRSAS, with EK and EASE next in line.

CEUOWS PFADSAK, ROAST ML *EYSAONECK OC *ZENOVON EASE, EIPELK YSU EU BXEL OCKUSET FV SIKSPRSAS, EK ASBXSKUST. *VASCNR OCUSAZASUSA RET URFXQRU *LECD’K VOCEI “*F. *D.” YSECU “EX BXEO”!

No. 20—Beach Scene. By °Sue de Nymme. High-frequency symbols T (used 11 times) and L (10), may be identified by endings -T, -L, and -TL. BOLLTKVTZL will then follow.

KOBFDFO YOHKSF, SOZZXAKV PART KTG OZZAROYL, VYANTL JHATDYX BOLD XOSFD SYHE RTZOKNO DUGOZNL LFUZZT. ZTOSFTL GFOZP. BOLLTKVTZL NALTCEOZM.

No. 21—Out of the Air. By °Chemystic. Spot your own clues, fans, in this final cryptogram! Answers to all of the current puzzles will appear in the next issue.

DEATH-MOULZ, IHNYSF, USSULPUH SENPAYPEAM TIRHYRF AOER CILPUNYIT LATPANU. KNEAFJP JIGEL IFIYRMP OIPJEFURYL ENFIRYMDM. NUMATP: *HELPER *STUDYRF HYMLEGUNUH OURYLYTTYR.

A MODERN adaption of a variety of numerical cipher which was in official use in the seventeenth century, is neatly illustrated in No. X-1, the current special problem by °Floyd E. Coss. In the early type of cipher here referred to, each letter of the alphabet could be represented by any one of several numbers, the numbers for a given letter usually being in sequence. For instance, in the cipher used by the Duke of Buckingham in 1627 for communicating with France, letter "a" could be signified by 9, 10, 11, or 12; "b" by 13 or 14; "c" by 15 or 16; and so on. In this way the word "cab," for example, could be enciphered as 16-9-14, or 15-12-13, or by any other of the many possible combinations of the numbers for these particular letters.

No. X-1. Numerical Cipher. By °Floyd E. Coss.

90-78-23-1-14-41-24-79-69-94-85 *52-2-76-86
10-70-62-11-25-20 *77-26-3-80-56 *42-4-81-12-71-82

98-43-48-57-27 72-37-38-28-83-49-63-40 73-58-50-97-29

13-84-5-64-15-44. 45-30-6-91-46-31-65-87 88-92-95-16-53

74-96-93 66-32-17-54. 99-51-59-60 61-75-89-33
67-34-18-55, 47-35-7-21, 8-68-22 39-9-19-36†

The purpose of the multiple substitution principle utilized in these early ciphers, of course, was to frustrate unauthorized solution by letter frequencies, evident in systems where each letter had but a single cipher substitute. But other serious defects were inherent in the scheme. Thus, letters could be tentatively identified by approximating their positions in the numerical key series. Cipher sequences of numbers differing respectively by only a few units, could be assumed to signify the same plain-text sequences of letters. And the contemporary cryptographer will discover other ways and means of effecting entry.

However, the key used in the °Coss cipher, though readily adaptable to any other message, has been built especially for this particular cryptogram, and the encipherment has been accomplished after a certain precise plan. There are just 99 letters in the plain-text message, and exactly 99 numbers in the key, each appearing once, and once only, in the cryptogram. Solution through ordinary frequency methods is thus effectively checkmated. But other pertinent clues will present themselves to the perspicacious cryptofan. Note, for instance, the close numerical relationship in the groups 66-32-17-54 and 67-34-18-55. Again, observe how the numbers 23 to 36, inclusive, like a labyrinthian thread, run through the message from start to finish. Solution and full explanation of this cipher will appear in the next issue. Meantime, fans, pit your wits against the skill of °Floyd E. Coss, and see who emerges victorious!

Now a few words for new fans! All answers sent in are scored to your individual credit in our Cipher Solvers' Club. A total score of 100 is indicated by a dagger prefixed to your name. Other information about solvers' credits will appear in subsequent issues. The regular cryptograms are solved, by guessing words, letters, etc., as given in the published clues. Thus, in No. 12, the final -O of the 11th word suggests the letter "s." Sub-

stituting, the phrase MO DS DO (-s--s) will yield "as it is." With symbol S thus known, SL STG (t- t--) then follows as "to the." OT-LUSGOS (sho-test), with but one letter missing, is then obviously "shortest"; and so on. Answers to all current puzzles will be published in the next issue!

No. 22—Cryptic Division. By °Judson H. Clark. The key consists of three words, numbered thus: 012 345 6789.

T B O) O O R E B T (T D G W

R W A
T A E E

T A G W

N B T

N G E
B E

ANSWERS FOR LAST ISSUE

1—Is this the first cryptogram that you ever tried to solve? The sixth word, of four letters, first and last alike, will start you!

2—Halloween: candle-lit pumpkins gleaming through the night; witches riding broomsticks across the sky; goblins and ghosts haunting houses nearby.

3—According to latest reports, for our sons, husbands, brothers, and sweethearts in the armed service of our country, "morale" is spelled "mail"!—How about it folks?

4—Britisher, on first American trip some years ago, reported "extraordinary paucity of tropical fruit, about which the natives were all singing!"

5—Rabid souvenir-hunters, besetting well-known cinema star upon arrival at railway station, purloin suspenders. Result: pin-up boy!

6—Valuable scientific records, reproduced in facsimile miniature upon thin platinum sheets, are reputedly preserved in Soviet Russia for future generations.

7—Luminescent plastic, new development, becomes subaqueously phosphorescent after exposure before bright light-source, provides dizzy lure just invented for hard-worked anglers.

8—Single Hindustan storm slays quarter thousand persons. Mammoth-sized hailstones caused excessive casualties. Lamentable catastrophe!

9—Reckless maestro yclept Schwartz, amidst napping opera crowd, flung rhythmic rhumba skyward, held strident tune would drown eerie snores. Idea flopped. Highbrows still snoozed.

10—Prehistoric Nan-Tauach ruins reveal massive platforms, tortuous alleyways, huge tetragonal stonework enclosures, verdant screens, shallow labyrinthian canals, Cyclopean barricades.

11—Key:

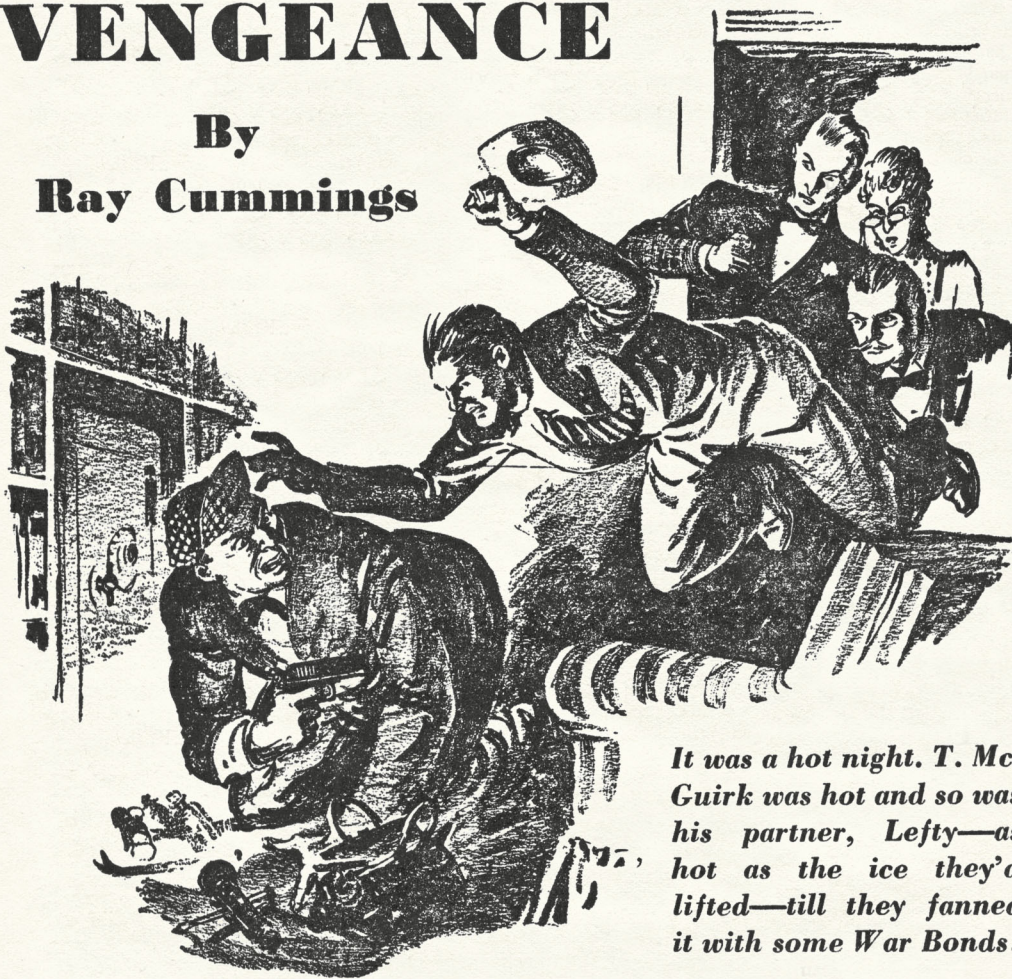
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
F I L M Y G H O S T

All answers to current ciphers will be duly credited in our *Cipher Solvers' Club*. Address: M. E. Ohaver, *New Detective*, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 E. 42nd St., New York, 17, N. Y.

V IS FOR VENGEANCE

By
Ray Cummings

Like a snarling, under-sized puma T. McGuirk launched himself through the air.



It was a hot night. T. McGuirk was hot and so was his partner, Lefty—as hot as the ice they'd lifted—till they fanned it with some War Bonds!

FROM the alley entrance where he was loitering beside a garbage barrel, T. McGuirk gazed with idle interest at the girl descending from the bus. She was plainly but neatly dressed, quite young and somewhat pretty. But what intrigued T. McGuirk most about her was that obviously she had been crying, and she was not far from it now. As she stood on the corner, looking around hesitantly in the sodden, mid-afternoon drizzle, with her battered suitcase beside her, she was a very woebegone little object indeed.

T. McGuirk shambled forward. "Hello, sister."

The girl's startled gaze swept T. McGuirk's weazened, shabby form. At his full height of five feet three he was hardly taller than the girl herself.

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His thin face bore an ingratiating smile. "You look all shot to pieces," T. McGuirk observed sympathetically.

She smiled wanly at last. "Yes—I guess I am. I was wonderin' how to get to Blake's Hotel—"

"The crosstown bus." T. McGuirk jerked his thumb toward the bus stop across the street. Blake's was a hotel for women only, specializing in cheapness and respectability. "That bus won't be comin' fer twenty minutes. How's about some coffee an' sinkers—" He waved a grimy hand toward the Busy Bee Lunch Room ten feet away.

The girl hesitated, but T. McGuirk already was struggling manfully with her big suitcase, panting as he led the way into the Busy Bee.

"It's human nature ter feel better," he said when the coffee and doughnuts had arrived, "tellin' somebody what's sympathetic yer troubles."

Quite evidently the girl thought so too. "I just got fired," she explained. "The missus caught me takin' one of her pair of nylons. You see, I've got a boy friend—anyways, I took her nylons an' she caught me an' now I'm fired—with no notice an' no references an' I got no money saved up—I ain't even got the nylons."

Cataloguing her troubles brought tears welling into her eyes.

"A thief," T. McGuirk said thoughtfully. The thought struck a welling chord inside him; nevertheless he felt impelled to put reproach in his tone. "The straight an' narrow always pays best, sister. As I says to me girl Katie—"

"I guess I'd have washed them an' put them back," the girl defended. "Anyways, I didn't expect to get fired. An' with no references. She's an old sourpuss an' I worked good for her for nearly three months—I never took a thing."

It was plain that the girl—whose name was Sadie Rourke—had been treated most unfairly and, as he heard the full details, T. McGuirk waxed more and more indignant. Sadie had been maid in the household of the Huyler Van Stuyvesants, in their home out near the end of the bus line. And now, because of the regrettable incident of the nylons, she had lost quite a high-paying job—with no notice, when even a week's notice would have given her nearly an extra twenty-five dollars. It was even more unfair because she had had to take the nylons only because she had been investing—not just ten per cent, but almost all her wages in war bonds.

"Wonderful," T. McGuirk approved. "That sure is patriotic."

"Better than old man Stuyvesant ever did, for all his money," Sadie declared. "He spent plenty on jewels for his wife, her last birthday. But he didn't buy any war bonds."

T. McGuirk shook his head regretfully. "Times like these, patriotic Americans should be buyin' war bonds, not luxuries—did you say he bought his wife a lotta jools?"

"He's no patriotic American," the girl retorted. "He bought thousands of dollars in war bonds—sure. He got 'em at a rally where it gave him a lot of publicity. An' last week I heard him say he was cashin' most of 'em in on account he could now buy some stocks he figured would pay better. Maybe I coulda bought nylons on the black market by cashin' in a bond. But I didn't."

"That man Van Stuyvesant, an' his wife too, should get punished," T. McGuirk stated. He leaned forward, his eyes aglow with right-

eous anger. He said, "You lived in that house quite a while—now jus' as a matter of interes' I got a few questions I wanta ast yer—"

AT TEN-THIRTY that night it was solidly dark. There was no moon, not even a star, and the dank, foggy drizzle was still in the air. It was so dark that T. McGuirk could hardly see the burly form of his pal Lefty Lannigan ahead of him. Lefty was walking fast, so fast that T. McGuirk had to trot sometimes to keep up.

"Hey, take it easy, Lefty," he gasped at last. "You got me puffin'. We ain't in that much hurry—besides, we're almost there."

Lefty slowed up, shifting his little black bag of burglar's tools to his other arm. T. McGuirk regarded the bag with distaste.

"I'm tellin' ya again, we don't need them tools," he mumbled indignantly. "Nor the soup, nor yer gat. You always do things the hard way, Lefty. A man wid ideas o' violence."

"We got a box to crack," Lefty growled.

T. McGuirk explained patiently, "ya always strain yer mind on details, Lefty, an' ya ain't equal to 'em. It's only a small library safe. I kin listen to the tumblers fallin', an' me sensitive fingers—"

"An' if you can't," Lefty observed practically, "in two minutes I can drill it, an' blow the lock with the soup. Besides, we got to hurry—it's ten-thirty already."

T. McGuirk didn't bother to answer because they had now reached the dark and lonely Van Stuyvesant country home, and the immediate problem of getting into it quickly and quietly engaged his full attention. It was a big, rambling, ornate house set among trees in a garden back from the road. The front entrance was on the road level. But the back of it was at the brink of a cliff, with a hundred foot drop down from the library windows. T. McGuirk knew the whole layout; he had been here this afternoon looking it over after he left Sadie.

The house was solidly dark now. It was unoccupied, because Mr. and Mrs. Van Stuyvesant and their nephew had gone to the opera; and Sadie had been the only servant who slept in.

"There's a little lower hall winder that's almost never locked," T. McGuirk whispered as they crept under the trees.

"An' if it is, I can cut out any one of 'em," Lefty whispered back. He shifted his bag again, and the tools clanked, startlingly loud in the black stillness.

"Shut up!" T. McGuirk hissed.

"I thought you said everybody was out."

"They are. But just in case—"

The possibility made Lefty's gat leap from his underarm holster into his hand. Despite

the darkness, T. McGuirk's sharp eyes saw it. Wrathfully he jumped in front of his big pal and seized him by both elbows.

"Now listen, Lefty—fer the las' time I'm warnin' ya—put that gat away. You'll be headin' fer the chair, Lefty. They'll shave yer head fer the electrodes, split yer pants leg an'—"

Lefty growled out a shuddering oath, but he stowed away the automatic.

"That's better," T. McGuirk sighed. "Remember, we're peaceable men, Lefty. Come on, there's the little winder."

The small hall window was about six feet above ground. It proved to be unlocked. From Lefty's shoulders T. McGuirk went through it and dropped silently as a cat to the floor inside. Lefty squeezed through with quite a bit of grunting and there was a nasty thump and rattling of the tools when he landed. But quite evidently no harm was done. The big interior of the house remained heavily silent.

"Okay—c'mon," McGuirk whispered, after they had crouched for a moment listening.

There was a dim night light burning at the front of the hall near at hand. That, and the small, swaying beam of Lefty's hand torch guided them past the stairs to where, at the back of the house, the library opened from the hall, just as Sadie had said it would.

"There's the safe!" Lefty whispered when they had entered the dark, luxurious library.

"Yeah, I see it," T. McGuirk agreed. He took a quick look out the three heavily portiered windows—nothing but an abyss and wooded, rolling country below the cliff. No chance for anyone to pass and notice Lefty's searchlight.

"All is well," T. McGuirk murmured as he joined Lefty at the safe. It was a smallish, not very modern affair standing on the floor in a wall recess. Already Lefty was kneeling eagerly before it, with his lighted flashlight lying on the rug and his tools spread out.

"Lemme crack it now," the big gunman pleaded in his hoarse whisper. "It's a cinch, Timothy."

"No," T. McGuirk husked. "Listen, I gotta go upstairs fer a minute. Stay put—ya kin try practicin' my way. Put yer ear to the lock an' turn the knob slow. Maybe ya'll learn something."

McGuirk darted soundlessly away and padded nimbly up the cushioned front staircase. He was only gone a minute or two, but it was enough for the catastrophe to happen.

THERE must have been the slight crunch of the arriving car outside, perhaps the sound of footsteps and the click of the front door as it opened. T. McGuirk, in a distant part of the house upstairs, heard

none of that. Nor did Lefty, as he knelt by the safe in the library trying to follow T. McGuirk's scientific directions. Lefty heard nothing at all; but T. McGuirk, just as he came back downstairs, heard plenty.

"And you two ought to be ashamed of yourselves." It was an elderly female's strident, haranguing voice. "Just sitting drinking at the bar while that beautiful opera was going on, and then dragging me home before it's even finished—"

"Aw nuts, Aunt Maria, we just couldn't take it, that's all. Could we, Uncle?"

The retort came in a young masculine voice, a voice slightly thick from imbibing, and rather happy about it all.

T. McGuirk winced at its tone. Standing there at the foot of the stairs, he found himself about halfway between the voices and Lefty in the library. For a split second he stood frozen. He could see the three people in the hall now—a tall, hatchet-faced female, laying aside her evening cloak; a thick-set, rotund gentleman, and a tall, sallow youth. Both the men wore evening clothes—both seemed somewhat unsteady and pleased with each other. The woman was pausing in the hall, but the men were coming forward, seemingly heading for the library, where perhaps additional liquid refreshment could be had.

T. McGuirk saw all these details in one horrified glance. Then like a little darting shadow, he turned and raced for Lefty. But he had paused too long. A new catastrophe was piled on top of the other. The older man had spotted him.

"Harold, look! Wha's that? Look—somebody's in the house here!"

Harold evidently stood for a moment startled, looking. But obviously he was no coward, because in another instant T. McGuirk heard him advancing, with his Uncle behind him.

It was all a matter of split-seconds. For a brief instant T. McGuirk paused at a little table by the library doorway, and then he burst upon Lefty. The big gunman was still kneeling in front of the safe. His lighted flashlight was on the rug beside him where the burglars' tools were spread out. But Lefty had his gat in his hand now, and on his face was the dawning realization that something was going terribly wrong.

Behind McGuirk an excited voice called out, "He ran into the library—what the devil! Come on, Uncle—we'll nab him!"

Then Lefty saw his partner. The big gunman's gat waved as he tried to scramble to his feet. "Get behind me," he mumbled hoarsely. "We're trapped! These damn winders are on a cliff! But I'll shoot us out o' this, Timothy—I'll—"

He got no further, for like a snarling, un-

dersized puma T. McGuirk had launched himself through the air. He landed, clawing and squealing with triumphant anger, on Lefty's broad back. Lefty toppled, with T. McGuirk sprawling on him, pummeling his neck and face with small, grimy fists.

"Gotcha!" T. McGuirk squealed.

"Timothy—Timothy—what the—"

There was no fake about T. McGuirk's punches. They were landing solidly with thuds that mingled with his squeals.

"Gotcha—ya sneaky—"

"Timothy—my gawd—" Lefty was only able to mumble it, and T. McGuirk's fist hitting his teeth, stopped it completely.

"Shut up, ya fool!" T. McGuirk hissed. "I know what I'm doin'."

So did Lefty and he didn't like it. Then the room lights flashed on.

"It's a burglar trying to open your safe, Uncle!" Harold gasped. "Well, I'll be damned!"

The gat was now in T. McGurk's hand. With a last punch into the face of the dazed Lefty, T. McGurk waved the big black automatic and grinned.

"I got him—caught him in the act. You came just in time, Mr. Van Stuyvesant."

"Well, I'll be damned," was all the elder Van Stuyvesant could manage.

"I'm J. Hawks McGuiness o' the Central Office—plainclothesman," T. McGuirk put in promptly. "I been tailing this yegg. I seen him climb in yer hall winder an now I've caught him red-handed, the big bum."

Pantingly T. McGuirk pulled the big gunman erect. His thumb jabbed Lefty warningly in the ribs and Lefty stood docile, cowering, staring at the floor which was obviously all he could think of to do.

The contents of the safe proved to be completely intact. The elder Van Stuyvesant opened it and took out everything in it. Harold held the automatic unsteadily leveled at the cringing Lefty while T. McGuirk took the items one by one from Van Stuyvesant and stowed them back into the safe, meanwhile scribbling an itemized list of them on the back of an old envelope—stock certificates, various private papers, a small chamois jewel bag and a twenty-five dollar war bond.

"Official report," he explained.

The Stuyvesants were grateful.

"This is for you, my good man." The elder Stuyvesant pressed a ten dollar bill into T. McGuirk's receptive hand. "Did your work well."

"Sure did," Harold agreed. He was still holding the gun on Lefty. He proffered it to T. McGuirk, but T. McGuirk waved it away.

"Jes' a minute—keep on holdin' him. I think I better 'phone headquarters."

Ignoring the glance of anguish that Lefty

bestowed on him, T. McGuirk ambled to the telephone which stood on a little table by the door. Then he squealed with wrath as he displayed the instrument's cut wires.

"I'll add that to the charges against him." He took the gat from Harold, and waved Lefty toward the door. "I'll put the bracelets on him when we get outside. Keep goin', ya big bum."

Harold grinned. He extended a glass. "Have a little nip, officer?"

T. McGuirk declined with a gracious smile. "I ain't a drinkin' man." And with his smile embracing all three of the Van Stuyvesants impartially, T. McGuirk prodded Lefty viciously with the gat, and in another moment they were gone.

BACK in their lodging house room, T. McGuirk was sympathetically bathing Lefty's swollen eyes and battered face with a hot towel.

"Ouch!" Lefty protested.

"It had to be done—you kin see that," T. McGuirk apologized.

"But you didn't have to hit me so damn hard—"

"That's where yer wrong. Ya gotta be realistic. An' did ya notice—he only had one little twenty-five buck war bond in that safe with all them securities?" T. McGuirk's nimble fingers suddenly were dangling Mrs. Van Stuyvesant's little chamois jewel bag before Lefty's astonished eyes.

"Ya see, Lefty, what with him bein' somewhat lit up, so to speak, an' me fumblin' in me pocket with that hocus pocus of writin' down me official report—easy enough fer me to palm this little bag."

Lefty was speechless. "I already took a look at the jools," T. McGuirk went on. "I figure Ike'll give us maybe a grand fer them. Or even say nine hun'erd would be okay. An' I'm gonna buy us war bonds with every penny of it."

He paused to let Lefty have the full patriotic effect, but Lefty only snorted.

"An' one third o' the bonds goes ter Sadie," T. McGuirk added firmly. "She don't know it, but she earned her share, same as we, makin' Van Stuyvesant help preserve his Liberty an' the American way of life—"

T. McGuirk's enthusiasm would have carried him much further, but Lefty interrupted.

"Say," Lefty put in, "I been wonderin'—what in the hell did you go upstairs for? That's what caused—"

"I was thinkin' of poor little Sadie what got treated so rough an' unjust by that old sourpuss," T. McGuirk said. His hand reached into his voluminous jacket pocket again. When it came out it was dangling a long and sleek and gorgeous pair of nylons.

Murder Made to Measure

By Robert W. Sneddon



Funny how death came to some folk, making fuss and trouble . . . and here was some young gent coming along, whistling, like he hadn't a care in the world. . . .

***Men who walked side by side with Death—and did
not know it until they sat in Condemned Row!***

APPEARANCES are deceptive. You can not always trust the evidence of what you see, or what you hear. Especially is this the case in the appearance of a crime. A murderer may masquerade as a model of innocence, while an innocent man is overwhelmed by what appears to be the fullest evidence of guilt. It is no wonder then that, in spite of the most careful consideration of every circumstance, mistakes do occur. Sometimes they cannot be mended, but other times they are caught just in time to save the supposed culprit from his date with the executioner, or to send the real criminal to his last rendezvous with justice.

The heavy fog of a February night, such a fog as only London can produce, swirled about Police Constable Baldock as he paced his lonely beat. It crept into his lungs and made his eyes smart. Each minute it became denser, an opaque curtain all about him. He felt caught in its folds. He stopped uncertainly. What was happening in the rest of the city?

Now and then an object passed him, glimpsed only as a coughing groping pedestrian, seen partially, then hidden by the fog. Baldock kept on, straining eye and ear. The fog laid a heavy blanket on all sound. All at once he leapt to one side as a lumbering object loomed up in front of him, and a cold nozzle all but touched his face.

He caught the horse by the bridle and thrust his bulls-eye lantern towards the driver's face.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Hilton. Nice time to be delivering bread. What a fog. Never seen worse in my life."

"Blimey, I shan't be half glad to get home to the missus, Baldock. Wot a night."

"Pretty near run me down. I felt the nag's nose, and did I move fast. Good thing I did, they might have had you up for manslaughter."

"Blimey, that reminds me, Baldock. Delivering near Haverstock Terrace, and all at once I hears like someone cry 'Murder!' Came from the vacant lots near Belsize Manor. Cry kept on, five or six times it might be. So I says, Hilton, me lad, better see what the trouble is. I hitches the nag to a railing and goes forward calling out. But no answer. Thick as pea soup it was, couldn't hardly see my own hand before my face. So I says, first constable I see, I'll notify, and so I runs into you."

"Near Belsize Manor, eh? Might have been in the Lane. I'll try and have a look. Drive careful, Hilton."

"That I will."

The policeman made his way slowly to the place indicated, but though by this time the fog was beginning to lift he saw nothing suspicious. He was retracing his steps when he met his sergeant and told him of the baker's report.

"Hum. Best take another look. Hilton's a dependable man," said the sergeant. "I'll go with you."

The two men went back and just as they turned into the lane the sergeant stopped short. In front of them on the sidewalk was the body of a man lying on his back, overcoat and jacket open, blood on his shirt front and face. The constable kept his lantern focused as the sergeant bent over.

"Still warm . . . he bled badly . . . look at his throat. No money, no watch, letter in the overcoat pocket, addressed to James Cooper, Hampstead Road, no number. Ah, here's the knife by his hand. All right, you stay here while I get the stretcher."

As the sergeant moved away through the thinning fog Baldock stared at the corpse. Funny how death came to some folk, making fuss and trouble for relatives, for police, coroners, jurymen. Sadness and trouble for all concerned. And here was some young gent coming along now, whistling like he hadn't a care in the world.

The whistler came near, a young man in a neat overcoat, collar up, swinging a cane jauntily. He stopped short as he came up to Baldock.

"Hello. Anything wrong? Someone hurt?"

"You might call it that," said Baldock grimly. "Dead." The young man bent over and whistled.

"Good lord! Made a good job of it. Suicide or murder?"

"Looks like suicide to me."

"No, more like murder. Are you sure he's dead?"

The young man bent over and felt the pulse.

"He's dead, dead as a doornail. You just found him, eh?"

"Yes. Me and the sergeant. Sergeant's gone for the stretcher."

"I'll wait with you till he comes. I wonder who the fellow is. Well, whoever he was, he's rid of his worries. That's life. Here today, gone tomorrow."

Baldock gazed at him sourly. Lighthearted as they made them. And a corpse lying at their feet. Now the young man was pulling out a flask and offering him a drink.

"Much obliged, sir, but I'm on duty."

"Quite right. Mind if I have a drop my-

self. It's a cold night. How about after hours? Have a drink on me then."

Baldock hesitated as the young man held out a shilling, then he took the coin.

"Thanks. Here comes the sergeant."

Sergeant Fletcher, as he came up with two men and the wheeled stretcher, glanced sharply at the young man. Baldock explained:

"Been keeping me company till you came, Sergeant."

The sergeant supervised the job while the young man chatted with another member of the party. He drew out a cigar and asked if he could have a light from the lantern. The light fell for a moment on his sharp nose, full lips. He went with the procession to the station house, saw the stretcher wheeled in and then sauntered off.

Inside the station house the death was declared one by violence. The victim had been killed with blows from a club or cane, then his throat wounded. The only clue to the killer was a button torn from his coat in the struggle.

Later the sergeant asked of Baldock: "The young man who was with you, did you get his name as a witness?"

"Bless my soul and boots," said Baldock, "I did not, but I'd know him anywhere. I'll find him. Never saw his like. Cool as a cucumber with a murdered man at his feet."

The case was placed in the hands of Inspector Grey. He traced the identity of the victim. His real name was James Delarue, his occupation, teacher of music. The name Cooper found on a letter in his pocket was one he sometimes used. The letter, from a woman signing herself Caroline, said she was desperate and must see him. Grey procured a list of Delarue's friends and pupils, and himself went on a round of questioning. He was about halfway through the list when he came to the home of Thomas Hocker. Hocker said he did not know a thing and was greatly shocked by the news. Grey was just about to leave when Constable Baldock, with a message from headquarters, was ushered into the room. Baldock took one look at the other occupant of the room.

"Bless my soul and boots, the young gent as kept me company with the corpse! I could swear to him by the book."

Grey turned savagely on Hocker and volleyed questions at him. Hocker admitted he had seen the body but had not recognized it on account of the blood on the face.

"Don't tell me that," said Grey. "Why did you conceal your knowledge? I can't conceive any reason, unless you killed him yourself, and that sounds absurd. Why should you go back to him? Anyway, I will search the house."

The search spelled the answer to the prob-

lem. There was a button gone from Hocker's overcoat, blood on the lapel. Blood and mud on the knees of a pair of pants found under a mattress. A torn shirt with bloodstained cuff. Delarue's watch. The letter making the appointment was in Hocker's handwriting. The motive came to light. Hocker had envied Delarue his money, his fine clothes, his success with women, and he had killed him out of jealousy, vanity and greed.

A bartender testified to Hocker's coming into his bar, at a time immediately after the killing, whistling and ordering a drink. Hocker was full of jokes and banter and they had fifteen minutes of good time together before he went out into the fog and back to the man he had murdered.

One of the most deceptive cold-blooded killers to walk this earth Thomas Hocker tried to keep up his masquerade to the end. When they came to take him to the gallows he was whistling.

"I'm ready," he said with a sneer.

All at once the great bell of St. Paul's cathedral began to strike, solemnly, as if pronouncing doom with its hammer strokes. Hocker crumpled to the floor, and it was in a chair, seated, that he was launched into eternity.

THE day of June 22, 1920, had been a trying one for Chicago, but now towards midnight coolness had come and citizens were still up, seated on porches and at windows.

North Campbell Street was quiet at this hour, so quiet that the steps of a couple walking slowly homeward were audible. More than one seated at an open window or on a porch commented on the pair strolling home arm in arm like lovers. They were the Wanderers, Carl and Ruth, married for a year. Carl was connected with his father's butcher business. He had come out of the Army after the Armistice, a lieutenant, and gone in with his father.

The couple reached their little home. They went into the vestibule. Abruptly the silence was broken by two revolver shots, and the scream of a woman. Neighbors jumped in their seats, startled, uncertain as to whether or not it was only backfire. But they were not long left in doubt. Three more shots came in rapid succession, this time followed by a man's cry of agony.

Now the street was alive with running feet. Men and women clasp bathrobes about them, calling to each other, reached the Wanderer home where the street door stood open and halted aghast. Lying within the vestibule was Ruth Wanderer, her filmy dress bedraggled with blood from wounds in her chest. Almost within reach of her outstretched

hand was the figure of a man, ragged, shabby, his worn shoes tied with string. He lay motionless, but froth on his lips still bubbled and he moaned faintly. There was a gun near his hand.

And then the awed spectators' eyes went to Wanderer himself, standing, gun in hand, frozen into an attitude of horror.

Voices called out, "What happened?" but he paid no heed, only stared down at the dying pair on the floor. It was not until someone caught him by the arm that he spoke:

"Dirty rat, he shot Ruth. I shot him. . . Help me take her in . . . let him lie there."

Someone had called a doctor, and he followed inside. Ruth Wanderer was still breathing. The doctor told the husband to leave the room. Ruth died almost immediately without a word, a whisper. When the doctor informed Carl he broke down completely.

"We were going to get us a little house of our own. . . And now—God help me."

The wounded man had been rushed to a hospital. He died there in a few minutes, a nameless vagrant, who carried the secret of what had happened to the grave.

The police had now arrived at the Wanderer home, and as sympathetically as was possible, questioned him. Wanderer's story was that he and Ruth had taken in a movie. They were just returning home, in fact, had just gone inside, when the door which they had left unlatched till they put up the light was pushed open and a man stepped in. He had a gun in his hands and he snarled, "This is a stick-up. Hand over your cash."

Ruth reached her hand to turn up the gas light, and the rat lost his nerve and shot twice at her. Wanderer reached behind him on a table for his old Army gun and fired—he did not know how many shots and the man dropped. Then neighbors came running.

Detective Sergeant Grady now arrived and took over. He heard the stories of neighbors, and once more Wanderer repeated his story. Next day Detective Sergeant Carroll of the Homicide Squad joined Grady in the investigation.

There was no identification of the vagrant by anyone. He was just a drifter who had dropped into Chicago. But the gun found by his side had a manufacturer's number. A query was sent to the manufacturer and it was learned this weapon had been sold to a Chicago dealer seven years earlier. A record of sale was found, the buyer traced. He said he had sold it a year ago to a young man Fred Wanderer, a mail carrier, who strangely enough was a cousin of Carl Wanderer.

The two detectives hastened to question this man. He said Carl Wanderer had borrowed the gun from him. The two detectives looked at each other in strange surmise. They could

hardly get to Wanderer's apartment fast enough. Once there, they shut their minds to his mournful appearance and charged him with having had in his possession the gun he had said was the vagrant's. Wanderer tried to make out that they had mistaken what he said. He claimed that they had mixed up the two guns. The one he had used was the one borrowed from his cousin.

But in spite of the widower's mourning clothes and sad, dejected face, the two detectives came to the conclusion that if there was one flaw in this tragic story there might be others. They invited Wanderer to accompany them to the police station and locked him up.

He was questioned by detectives, by state officials. It took thirty odd hours before the mask was torn from his face and he was revealed as a callous and contemptible murderer.

He had become sick of his butcher trade, of his humdrum life. He saw only one way of escape, to kill his wife, but in such a way that justice would not suspect him. The idea of how to work this came to him one day and he set about its accomplishment. He borrowed the gun from his cousin. He went looking for a bum and found one. He told the man he wanted to play a joke on his wife, make her think he was a real he-man. The bum was to wait outside the house, follow them in, then say, "This is a stick-up. Hand over the cash." Wanderer said he would give him a punch, nothing to hurt, and the bum was to take to his heels and run. That was all. Surely it was an easy way to make a couple of dollars. The bum agreed, and the date was set.

Wanderer admitted that he had feigned great affection the next day, and talked his wife in to withdrawing the savings she had in the bank, \$1500, to put down on a house they had looked at. Then they went to the movies. Without his wife's knowledge he had placed the two guns on a table by the door. They came home chatting, went inside; and, as arranged, the vagrant followed and read his lines. Wanderer reached in, seized the weapons, shot his wife, then the wretched, unwitting accomplice of his plot.

Months later, Wanderer alleged his confession had been forced from him. A jury believed him guilty, however, of the double murder, and sentence of death was pronounced.

When they came to take him to his punishment he admitted it was just. He had killed his wife and the stranger. He began to whistle as they took him from the death cell, then to sing, and he was still singing when the trap doors of the gallows dropped from under his feet.

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New Detective Magazine

(Continued from page 74)

shirt. Gillespie hadn't shot then and there was a good chance that he wouldn't, but you couldn't take a chance with a man who had probably killed before and got away with it.

"Les!" he heard Lucy exclaim. "What are you doing here?"

She stood fully dressed in the doorway. "Your boy friend came to the rescue," Donnigan said dryly. "He thinks I didn't hide you out well enough."

Gillespie cackled, but Bell gave him a quick look and then tossed a smile to Lucy. "You call this hiding out?" Bell said. "Your car was spotted in the hotel garage. You registered as Mrs. Donnigan, but they know you were married last night. The local cops are all over the place, but they're waiting for the Highstone cops to arrive before making the arrest. The only reason your car wasn't picked up on the road yesterday was that I managed to stall Fagan. I made him think I was hiding you out, so he wasted time trying to break me down."

Wearily Lucy said, "My husband has already arrested me."

"He's got no jurisdiction in Shore City. You come with me. Hank will see he doesn't try to stop you."

Lucy's eyes were on Donnigan, question-
ing him without words. Then she said,
"Thanks, Les, but I'll stay."

"Like hell you will!" The violence of Bell's tone was like an explosion in that room. "You think I care what happens to you? It's my own neck I'm worried about. I couldn't let the cops get hold of you before I did. That's why I put a fast one over on Fagan. Soon as he heard you were spotted in Shore City, he let me go."

"Talk sense!" Donnigan snapped.

Les Bell turned angry pale eyes to him. "Don't you know? Or is Lucy working you for a sap the way she did me? She plugged her uncle after he kicked me out of the house and she's set to frame me for it."

"I didn't kill Uncle Adolph," Lucy protested. "I believe you did."

"That's what I mean," Bell told Donnigan. "She's clever." He rubbed his inflamed cheek. "Or maybe it's you who is clever, Donnigan. It shows a cop's touch. You told her how to kill her uncle and put the rap on me. Maybe you handled the gun yourself. Your price was that she marry you and share the dough she'd inherit."

Donnigan shook his head. "You still don't make sense. She couldn't hope to pin the murder on you just because her uncle didn't like you. There must be something else."

"There is. There's—"

Blood on My Doorstep

"Take it easy, boss," Gillespie warned. "The copper's pumping you. If he knows, he knows. If he don't, why tell him?"

"Right." Bell straightened his narrow shoulders. "Here's the way I'm doing it, Donnigan. Shore City cops are in the hotel, but I can get Lucy out. Will you behave?"

"What are you going to do with her?"

"That's my business. Hank will stay here with you till we're out."

Bell took her arm. She hesitated, but when Donnigan made no move to interfere, she went to the door. Her head was high, her gaze straight ahead. She said nothing to Donnigan as she passed him. Then she was gone and he was alone with Gillespie.

Donnigan went to a window and looked down at the front of the hotel and the beach and ocean beyond. They wouldn't come out the front entrance, of course, or any other door the Shore City police would be guarding. Les Bell knew whom to bribe to let him slip out unseen.

Gillespie glanced at his watch. "They've had time." He crossed to the phone and ripped it out. "Stay in this room ten minutes, copper, if you want to live."

"I'm not interested in you," Donnigan said heavily. "I want your boss."

Gillespie showed his teeth in a grin. "And the dame, eh?"

"Yes," Donnigan said. "Especially her."

THIRTY seconds after Gillespie had left, Donnigan slipped out into the hall. There was nobody in sight, but down the hall an elevator had arrived. He hurried in the opposite direction, toward the fire stairs. As he swung around the angle of the hall, he heard the thump of many feet. He tossed a quick look around the corner. The police were advancing toward the room he had occupied.

It was like a parade. Chief of Police Fagan was in the lead, and strung out behind him came an assortment of Highstone and Shore City plainclothesmen. Reporters and cameramen brought up the rear. Fagan had a passion for seeing his name in headlines. He had enough power in the neighboring counties to have persuaded the local police from making the arrest until he could arrive and hog the limelight.

Well, Fagan would find an empty bridal suite, and then Donnigan would share with Lucy being the object of the manhunt. For a moment Donnigan hesitated. If he came forward now, Fagan would be sure he had hidden Lucy out, but he wouldn't be able to prove it. The most Fagan could do was to clamp him into jail for a couple of days. If



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New Detective Magazine

Donnigan fled now, he would be considered an accessory after the fact.

Fagan had reached the room door. He slipped a passkey into the lock, and Donnigan was on the way down the fire stairs.

His mind was made up. He needed his freedom of movement now, today, tomorrow. He had to find out why Lucy had married him and why Les Bell had come for her.

He took the stairs all the way down to the basement and found a service entrance to the street. If there had been a policeman on guard there, he had gone upstairs to be in on the kill. Unobserved, Donnigan walked out to the street.

He did not dare go by train. It was slow traveling, thumbing his way along minor roads, so that it was twilight before he reached the outskirts of Highstone. His last lift dropped him off in front of Les Bell's Elm Drive roadhouse.

This was Bell's biggest place, his headquarters, and there was as good a chance of his being here as anywhere else. He wouldn't bring Lucy out in the open, of course, but Donnigan's plan was direct and simple. If he could get his hands on Bell, he could make him reveal where Lucy was.

AS DONNIGAN weaved between cars parked at the side of the building, Bell's swanky convertible pulled in from the road. Donnigan crouched in the shadows of other cars. Ten feet away the convertible stopped; lights from the roadhouse window revealed Hank Gillespie getting out. He was alone, which probably meant that Bell was still with Lucy.

Donnigan didn't care whom he beat the truth out of. He lunged at Gillespie's back and hooked a powerful hand around the scrawny neck and pulled him hard against his chest. His other hand frisked the writhing body expertly; at the moment Gillespie wasn't armed.

"Where is she?" Donnigan rapped.

Gillespie ceased struggling. His head tilted back; his eyes glazed, rolling upward. He pointed at his throat and Donnigan eased the pressure a little.

"The boss didn't tell me," Gillespie gasped. "You're lying!" Donnigan's arm tightened.

The smaller man thrashed convulsively now. His tongue appeared.

The tail of Donnigan's eye glimpsed a white-clad shape rear up in the dimness behind him. Holding onto Gillespie, he started to turn. A rubber sap struck the base of his skull. His arm fell from Gillespie's neck. His legs buckled.

Donnigan stopped falling when his knees

Blood on My Doorstep

hit the ground. As through a dark curtain, he saw that Gillespie had stepped back and was rubbing his throat.

"Hit him again!" Gillespie ordered huskily. "He's got a head like a rock."

Donnigan spun on his knees. A burly bartender in a white coat was closing in on him. Donnigan lunged, sinking his fist into the oncoming midriff. The bartender howled and did a jackknife, and Donnigan raced wildly toward the line of trees beyond the parking space.

He wasn't afraid of his ability to handle them both, but a fight would cause a rumpus and bring the drinkers spilling out of the roadhouse. A man hunted by the police couldn't afford anything like that.

They did not follow him. Probably the bartender hadn't any weapon on his person any more deadly than the sap, and they were afraid of his strength. Donnigan's head ached from the blow, but he moved on, not taking the time to rest. Rough-house tactics hadn't worked. Now he had to try being a cop without a badge.

An hour later he stood before the house that had been Lucy's home. It was a big colonial structure off by itself, though not much of the ground could have belonged to Adolph Vernon because the driveway ran close to one side of the house.

Donnigan studied that driveway. There was no sort of cover; if there had been a murderer standing on the grounds when she drove out, the headlights would surely have impaled him.

He went up on the open porch and rang the bell. The door opened at once, as if the woman had been watching him.

She was plumpish, in her middle thirties. Her small-featured face was rather pretty, even when it scowled, as now.

"Another policeman?" she said testily. "You people have been tracking through the house for two days. I'd imagine you've seen everything there is to see."

"You're Mrs. Harlow?" he asked.

"Why not?" She was obviously annoyed. "I suppose you expect a housekeeper to be gaunt and washed-out. You haven't told me your business."

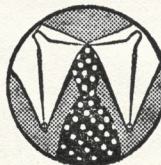
"I'm Eric Donnigan."

Her mouth tightened, but she didn't look as if she would yell for the police. "I've read about you in the afternoon papers. I suppose you think that now that Mr. Vernon is dead this house is yours, because you married Lucy. Well, you're wrong. Mr. Jarrett, who was Mr. Vernon's law partner, told me that one can't inherit money from a man one has murdered."

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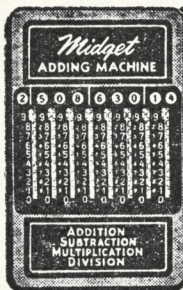
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New Detective Magazine

"Who will inherit if Lucy is found guilty?"

"Mrs. Vernon had two brothers and a sister living. There was another sister, Lucy's mother who died when Lucy was a child. I practically brought Lucy up and made a home for Mr. Vernon. I gave them both the best years of my life. And now Mr. Vernon is dead and Lucy is a murderess and I'll be out in the street."

Donnigan asked, "Are you absolutely sure that Lucy fired the shot?"

"I never told the police I was sure," Miss Harlow said severely. "But come in."

He followed the housekeeper into a spacious living room and seated himself opposite her. She clasped her hands on her knees and leaned forward.

"I simply told the police what I heard and saw," she declared.

"HOW did you happen to be looking out of the window when Lucy and Les Bell came home?"

"I heard the car. I was curious to see if he would kiss her. This Mr. Bell is trash, of course. I cannot understand how Lucy would go with such a man after the way I brought her up." Miss Harlow sniffed. "And then she married a policeman!"

Donnigan let that ride. He asked quietly, "Did they kiss?"

"So you don't trust Lucy?" She seemed faintly amused. "No, I didn't see them kiss, though they might have under the porch. They came into the house and then I heard Mr. Vernon order Mr. Bell out. Then Lucy and her uncle had a terrible argument. I heard her go up to her room and then come down in a few minutes and I heard Mr. Vernon say that he was changing his will. Then she left, slamming the door, and it seemed only a few seconds later that I heard the shot."

"Did you go downstairs at once?"

"No. You see, I didn't know it was a shot. I thought it was Lucy's car backfiring because just before that I had heard her start it in the garage behind the house."

"Are you sure it was her car?"

Reluctantly Miss Harlow said, "I would give everything I possess to be able to say that I was doubtful, but you'll notice a street-light right at the driveway. I could not have been mistaken. Then I started to worry. I was thinking of their terrible fight and in what rage she had left and that I had never heard her car backfire before. So I went downstairs and found poor Mr. Vernon dead in the library." She clasped and unclasped her hands. "Lucy has a temper like her uncle had, and she's impulsive."

Blood on My Doorstep

Impulsive, yes, Donnigan thought, standing up.

"What about the gun?" he asked. "Was there one in the house?"

Miss Harlow shook her head. "The police kept asking me that. There has never been a gun of any kind in this house."

"Then it could hardly have been impulsive," Donnigan pointed out.

Her head came up sharply. "You mean Lucy had planned the murder in advance? I can't believe it."

Donnigan rolled the brim of his hat. "I'll be going," he said.

Miss Harlow went with him to the door. She touched his arm. "Take good care of Lucy."

"I don't know where she is."

She smiled knowingly. "Good night, Mr. Donnigan."

As Donnigan went down the porch steps, a dumpy, shadowy figure came rapidly toward him from the street. The man stopped, peering up into his face in the half-light.

"Eric Donnigan?" the man asked. "Your picture was in this afternoon paper." He added hastily, as Donnigan stiffened, "Don't fear me. I am George Jarett, Vernon's law partner. I assure you I have Lucy's interest at heart. I trust you haven't been so foolish as to bring her to this house."

"No," Donnigan muttered, knowing that a denial that he knew where she was would be a waste of breath.

"All right," Jarett said. "I have reason to believe that Lucy is innocent, but keep her in hiding until we can prove it. Naturally, I am taking charge of Vernon's affairs—this house and other matters. That was why I had occasion this evening to look through Vernon's private papers in our office."

"His will?"

"No, the will only strengthens Lucy's motive. The bulk of the money is left to her. I refer to personal letters. They give a strong motive to somebody else, but they are not absolute evidence. Not yet, anyway. That is why I hesitate to take the letters to the police."

The dumpy lawyer paused to wipe his brow with a handkerchief.

"Well?" Donnigan urged.

"I hesitate telling even you, Donnigan. But further investigation is necessary, and you are a trained investigator. The letters—"

The shot was not very loud. In the dazed second that Donnigan watched Jarett fall, a part of his mind told him that a .32 would sound like that.

Jarett's hands clawed at his chest as he crumpled, and Donnigan spun in the direc-

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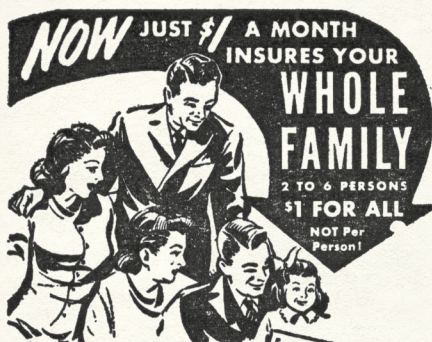
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New Detective Magazine

tion the shot had come. He faced the farther corner of the house. Nobody was there now. In reckless rage, he hurled himself forward. When he turned the corner, he found himself looking up the empty driveway. Pursuit was useless; the killer had got too much start.

Donnigan raced back to the motionless shape lying on the walk between the porch and the street. George Jarrett was dead. Hastily Donnigan searched the clothes. The lawyer hadn't brought the letters with him.

Light suddenly spread out to cover Donnigan. Looking up, he saw that the house door had been opened. Miss Harlow stood on the threshold with the light behind her.

"I heard a shot," she said shrilly. A trembling finger pointed accusingly at him. "You killed him!"

He rose. "It's possible the killer followed me. When he heard Jarrett say—"

Her scream cut him off. The door slammed, and he knew that Miss Harlow had bolted it against him and that she would phone the police. She would say she had heard a shot and then had looked out to see him crouching over the murdered man. He wouldn't have a chance to prove otherwise.

Donnigan slipped along a row of hedges into the street and walked with forced nonchalance to the apartment house where he lived. That was risky, if it occurred to Fagan or any of his subordinates that a fleeing killer might go straight home, but he had to have a gun.

HIS phone was ringing as he unlocked the door. He hesitated, though it was certain that the police, if they suspected that he had gone home, would not call him. He picked up the handset and said, "Yes?"

"Eric Donnigan?" a woman whose voice he did not recognize asked. She plunged on without waiting for an answer. "I've been trying to reach you since this afternoon. I know where Les Bell took your wife."

"Who's this?"

"Never mind names. I'm a girl to whom Les Bell means a lot. I thought I meant a lot to him until Lucy Coleman came along. Now he's got her at my place. At least, that's the way I figure it. Last night, while Les was being questioned at police headquarters, Hank Gillespie asked me for the key."

"What place?" Donnigan said.

"I've been staying with a friend in Highstone, but I have a bungalow I don't use much near town. I refuse to sit around doing nothing while Les uses my place for that girl. I'd tell the police, but I don't want to get Les into trouble. You go for her. You'll get your

Blood on My Doorstep

wife and I'll get her out of my place. See what I mean?"

"Where is your bungalow?" he asked.

"Will you promise not to bring the police in on Les? This is just between us."

Evidently she didn't know that the police were looking for him. He said, "It's a promise," and she described her bungalow and told him how to reach it.

Donnigan checked his .38 automatic and slipped it into his belt without taking time to get into a holster. He got his car out of the garage around the corner. That was another risk, but there would be worse risks before the night was over.

The rutted dirt road was a dozen miles north of Highstone, and the grey asbestos shingles of the bungalow were clearly distinguishable in the moonlight. As far as he could see, there were no other houses in the area. It was a good place to kill a man.

He drove a short distance farther and, gun in hand, groped his way to the bungalow through dark woods. They might assume that it was his car that had passed. At any rate, they would be ready, expecting him to come sneaking up. He had to spot them before they spotted him.

Abruptly the woods stopped at the edge of a clearing. A hundred feet away the grey bungalow sat under the moon. All the lights were on, a come-on to lure him into the open.

Donnigan stood motionless, his big body merging with the shadow of a fat elm. His eyes tried to pierce the darkness on either side of him, and his ears strained to pick sounds of movement out of that breathless silence.

In the house a girl screamed in pain.

Black rage swept over Donnigan. He took a single step forward, and his mind cleared, and he checked himself. The girl screamed again. He forced himself to stand without movement, almost without breathing.

The light lashed out abruptly from the woods behind him.

"Drop your gat, copper."

Donnigan looked over his shoulder. The glare of the flashlight hung between two trees, and Gillespie was a shadow behind it. Donnigan knew that his gun was useless. The other man was too close. The trap had snapped shut the way they had planned it.

"Drop it!" Gillespie repeated.

Donnigan had no choice. If Gillespie had wanted to kill him at once, he had had a chance before this. The gun fell from his fingers.

Gillespie raised his voice. "I got him, boss!"

In the bungalow Les Bell laughed. And



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through that triumphant laughter, Donnigan heard Lucy weep.

CHAPTER THREE

A Dish of Death

GILLESPIE said, "Okay, copper, walk to the house. I'm right behind you."

The light pushed on either side of Donnigan as he moved forward.

Halfway to the bungalow, Donnigan tripped.

The light whipped sideways, but at the outer edge of it Donnigan glimpsed the gun-barrel slashing down on him. His life was riding on the fact that they wanted him alive so badly that Gillespie would not shoot if he thought he could handle the situation in any other way. Expecting Gillespie to use his gun as a club, Donnigan was set and rolled under the drive of it.

At the last instant, Gillespie saw that he would miss and tried to check the blow. Donnigan reached up for his wrist and yanked Gillespie down on him. His other arm hooked around Gillespie's skinny neck. Something in Gillespie's wrist broke. His body writhed against Donnigan, but the crook of the arm constricting his throat kept the pain locked inside him. His gun slipped out of his limp fingers.

The brief struggle had been silent. Donnigan padded to the nearest window.

In front of a dead fireplace, Lucy sat with her arms tied around the back of a wooden chair. Her head drooped; soft sobs shook her. Les Bell stood over her.

"Where is my gun?"

Donnigan waited at the window as Lucy's head came up slowly. Her eyes were blood-shot; moist black curls strangled over her brow. She said brokenly: "I told you I—I don't know."

Bell turned, frowning now. "Where the devil are they?"

Donnigan stuck the gun into his belt and pushed in the door. "I'm here," he said.

Bell's hand streaked inside his jacket. Donnigan caught him before he could get it out and wrenched the gun from his hand and tossed it across the room.



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Minutes later Les Bell was a senseless pulp on the floor. Sucking his split knuckles, Donnigan went behind Lucy's chair and started to untie her. Her eyes were wide and solemn.

"Did he hurt you much?" he said heavily.

"He only slapped me twice. That was to make me scream because you were coming so that you would lose your head and rush in recklessly. I didn't know—"

She was free. She stood up rubbing her wrists and swayed toward him. He remained as motionless as something hacked out of marble, and his face might have been marble, too.

"What did Bell want from you?" he asked.

"His gun. He said it had been in the glove compartment of his car when he took me home and that it had been gone after he left my house. He said I shot Uncle with his gun and that it was registered—I never saw that gun." Her gaze was gravely intent on his face. "You don't believe me."

"What I believe isn't important," he told her. "You wait here."

HE WENT outside and carried Gillespie into the bungalow and dumped him on the floor next to Bell. With the rope he had removed from Lucy's wrist and another

piece he found in the kitchen, he tied the two unconscious men. Then he used the phone.

They walked up the road to where he had left the car. An invisible wall was between them. Donnigan yearned to take her in his arms, but there was still too much he wasn't sure of.

"Weren't you afraid I'd run away while you were on the phone?" she said bitterly.

"No."

Donnigan let the car roll through quiet streets at no more than fifteen miles an hour, as if he were trying to delay as long as possible reaching their destination. Lucy didn't notice. Her head drooped below the level of the window at her side, and lifted only when at last he stopped the car. Then her eyes widened in surprise.

"Why, you brought me home," she said.

He got out and walked around the car and opened the door at her side. "I want to check up a couple of things."

George Jarett's body had been removed; the police had departed; the house was dark. Lucy unlocked the door with her key and switched on the hall light.

"I guess Miss Harlow is asleep upstairs," Donnigan said. "No need to disturb her. Where's the library?"

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POEMS WANTED FOR MUSICAL SETTING. Five Star Music Masters, 620 Beacon Building, Boston.

SONGWRITERS: Interesting Proposition. Write: PARMOUNT SONG-RECORDING STUDIO, L-72, Box 190, Hollywood, Calif.

SONGWRITERS: Royalty Contract Free. Write for details. Puritan Publishing Co., 343 S. Dearborn St., Chicago 4, Ill.

New Detective Magazine

She led him through the house, putting on lights on the way. When she entered the library, she stopped and shivered.

Donnigan went to one of the two windows which faced the driveway and looked out. "You can't get around the fact that if you were pulling out of the garage, you'd have seen the killer in your headlights."

"I've been thinking about it," Lucy said. "Les Bell, or more likely Hank Gillespie, could have slipped into the house and shot Uncle."

"I'm pretty sure that the person who murdered your uncle also murdered George Jarett."

She stared at him. "George was killed?"

"Right in front of the house a couple of hours ago while he was talking to me. He said he'd found some incriminating letters among your uncle's papers in their law office. The murderer was listening in the darkness and shot Jarett to silence him. When I spoke to Fagan on the phone a little while ago, I learned that the bullet had come from the same gun that killed your uncle."

Lucy said excitedly, "If the same person shot Uncle and George, don't you see I'm innocent? I was in the bungalow when George was killed."

"That's right," Donnigan said. "So were Les Bell and Hank Gillespie. Besides, neither of them would use a gun registered in Bell's name. There's no doubt Bell's gun was stolen from his car to do the job and put the rap on him. That was why he was so frantic to get it back. He figured you were the only one who could have taken it."

"I didn't."

"That's what I'm trying to say," he told her gently. "And about the sound of the shot—a car as good as yours doesn't make enough racket in starting to drown out a gun. But Miss Harlow could hear it, so why not you? The answer is that the shot was fired after you drove away."

Classified Advertising

(Continued)

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Send coupon—wear the Commander **TEN DAYS AT OUR EXPENSE**—If you do not get all the results you expect, return it and **YOUR MONEY WILL BE REFUNDED.**

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Address

If \$2.98 is enclosed with order, we pay postage charges. ☐ Check here.

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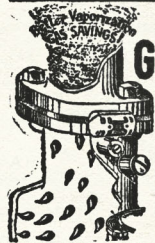
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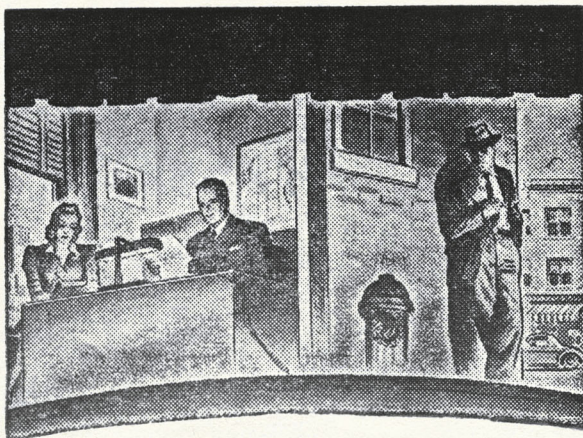
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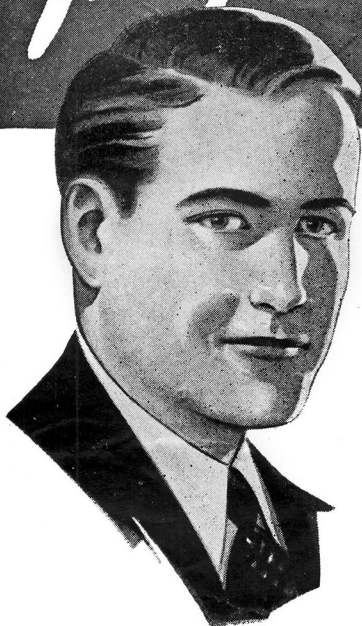
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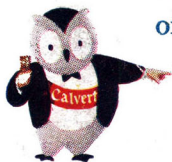
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