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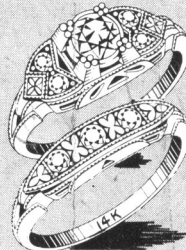
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Vol. 13

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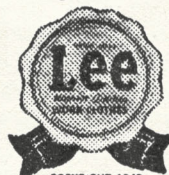
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THE WITNESS CHAIR

STEP over in this corner, people, for a few minutes while we make our pitch for this issue. Make yourself comfortable—pull up a hot seat. Or has MacDonald's *Half Past Mayhem* got you looking over your shoulder every few minutes? We hope so. We'd like to get your slant on it, and we'd also like to hear what you think of the Day Keene caper, *Two Can Die*. Let us know, will you?

Some time ago this department sent out a WANTED flyer. What we wanted was to open these columns to an exchange of stories and anecdotes on the crime business. Judging from the mail we got, it looks as though crime is the only business that's not having a recession right now. As a matter of fact, things are looking up in the mayhem market—up the river. We've gotten a flood of criminal correspondence, and it's still coming in. Keep it coming, and, just so you won't run out of blood, here's the lineup for this issue:

Dear Editor:

It's fine to have an opportunity to express

an opinion on *New Detective*. I thought the September issue was first rate. Congratulations are due to MacDonald for *Dead—As In Darling* and to Donald King for *The Kid I Killed Last Night*. They were both excellent.

I thought your readers might be interested in this item I picked up about crime detection.

The real beginning of scientific crime detection in America was made not by police officers but by a newspaper reporter!

On December 4, 1894, the office of a famous New York financier was entered by a holdup man. He demanded \$1,200,000 in cash, and when the clerk attempted resistance dropped a satchel filled with dynamite. The terrific explosion that followed killed or injured several clerks.

The only clue found in the debris was a metal button, picked up by a newspaper man. Tracing the button, he eventually discovered the identity of the holdup man. It was the first time anything as innocuous as an anonymous button had been successfully traced through the original manufacturer to the ultimate wearer, though such things are commonplace today.

Carl Keller
Chicago, Illinois

Thank you, Carl, for your opinions and for your contribution on the history of crime. Things getting too dull out your

(Continued on page 8)

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*D. E. G., Wausau, Wis.



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I am finding a new joy that I never experienced before, for I have always wanted to play, but had given up hope until I heard of your course.

*C. S. Lucien, Okla.



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(Continued from page 6)

way? Here's a cute caper that came in the mail which will give you a million laughs if you try it—and a jail sentence:

Dear Editor:

I liked Day Keene's *Three Graves Have I* and Donald King's *The Kid I Killed Last Night* in your September issue.

Among the most bizarre criminal cases of this century was a highly publicized murder in Kansas some twenty-five years ago. On an upper floor of an abandoned mill, authorities discovered a pool of blood, strands of hair, and a heavy club. The floor was scarred as from a terrific struggle, but a statewide search failed to reveal the corpse, or the killer.

Only when detectives admitted themselves to be baffled was the case solved. Assigned to write an account of an imaginary man-hunt, a junior journalism student at the University of Kansas had secured the blood of a chicken and hair combings from his sister. Planting the clues, he later mingled with the curious and even wrote accounts of the crime for prominent newspapers of Kansas City and St. Louis.

Victor Menninger
Topeka, Kansas

Ah, murderous college days! Wonder if that enterprising young student graduated cum giblets? If any of you know a tough character who's out of a job, you might tip him off about this item:

Dear Sir:

Many primitive African tribes include among their officials a professional murderer. Known as the "Killer of the Elephant," it is his duty to choke the chief to death when he shows signs of losing his health. Before the official throttling, the chieftain is permitted to get drunk on guinea-corn beer.

John Farrell
San Francisco, California

Sounds like a good deal. Anyway, the working hours are short. And here's one on the way "Yellow Kid" Weil worked himself out of the frying pan and into the fire:

Dear Editor:

Joseph R. Weil, one of the most successful of American swindlers, seldom took in less than one hundred thousand dollars a year. But he escaped arrest for many years due to the fact that he had some knowledge

of law and was careful never to commit a Federal offense.

On one occasion, however, he was implicated with the loot of a mail robbery. It appeared certain that he would be convicted on the Federal count, which carried a sentence of fifteen to forty years.

Weil, trapped, offered an alibi unique in the annals of crime—he showed that he could not have been among the mail robbers because at the time of the crime he was engaged in selling bogus stock to an Indiana banker! His confession brought a five-year sentence, but cleared him of the Federal charge.

Barry Carson
Detroit, Michigan

So much for desperate measures, and now here's one from our Handy Hints department on how to save postage:

Dear Editor:

Counterfeiting is not limited to currency. At various times, bogus postage stamps have been printed—not for use on mail, but for sale to collectors. N. P. Seebeck carried the racket to its greatest extreme by securing the plates from which some South American countries printed their stamps. He flooded the philatelic market with literally millions of phony stamps. Since the original plates were used, a "Seebeck" can be detected only by examination of the paper and printing ink.

Everett Desmond
New London, Connecticut

As Barnum said, there's one born every minute and two to take him in:

Dear Editor:

Until very recent years, fake art treasures sold like hot cakes. In a single year, five American millionaires bought bogus versions of a single painting, Leonardo da Vinci's famous "Mona Lisa." Though the painting itself was hanging in a European gallery all the time, they paid an average of \$300,000 each for the counterfeits. Thinking that they were getting a great bargain, not one of the five bothered to check with French authorities.


Daniel Gerrity
Philadelphia, Pa.

On this counterfeit note we wind up the department for this issue. Please let us know what you think of the stories and features which appear in *New Detective*.

—THE EDITORS

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CHAPTER ONE

Rough Job

WE WERE supposed to meet in the lobby of the Whitmark, and I saw her before I noticed him. Her dress was unrelieved black, slim and simple until the eye arrived at some interesting hip drapery. But with her kind of figure, if she'd modeled a feed sack she'd have put Ralston Purina into competition with Schiaparelli and made checkers the national pastime. Then I realized she had only one head. Blond hair with a rosy glint. Whiskey gold skin with a twist of orange. Short firm chin, rather broad, the full mouth that went with it. A soft button nose and widely spaced eyes that, unless I'd had a touch of amnesia, were aqua with a wisp of smoke.

She was poised apart from a conversational group of furnishings about one of the marble pillars, a beautiful animal alert-





*He was lying dead on the carpet,
a bullet hole through his
chest. . . .*

ness about her. Looking for somebody. Not just anybody—the tilt of her shining head, her slight, bemused frown made that evident—but that didn't stop the anybodies from hoping. Her eyes went on a slow, careful tour of the Whitmark lobby and stopped. The male population sighed

It was a gamble all the way, with the hot squat running a close second to the kill of a thousand numbers—and both of them converging on Detective Abjarian's magic carpet in a giant fix that covered everything but—murder!

By G. T. Fleming-Roberts

collectively. Faces retired behind newspapers. Lighters sparked flame for cold cigars.

She'd found the one she was looking for. Me.

Lucky guy, that Abjarian? Wait. . . .

My heels established a beachhead on a quiet island of carpet. She was smiling a little smile that involved the left side of her mouth and her left eyebrow, as though she and I had a secret. Maybe we did, but I'd lost sleep in the past speculating as to how many others were in on it. My few remaining illusions did not include monogamy for Nita.

"Hello," she said. The shape of the last syllable hung around her mouth for a long time, and her voice suggested warm, scented dark.

I took off my hat. "Mrs. Lombard, wasn't it?"

"Wasn't?" She appeared surprised.

I looked away from her and across the Whitmark lobby, where I discovered the block-shouldered figure of Mike Lombard near the cigar counter. He wasn't looking at us, but I had a notion he had been the moment before. I watched him go off somewhere, and then my eyes took the path of least resistance back to Nita.

"You're in a rut, Nita."

I wasn't sure that her shrug meant anything. She stepped back a pace to the sofa her fur stole had reserved, sank down, and cozily patted the mohair beside her. I sat on the edge of the cushion, turned to look at her and wonder. Maybe I was wrong about her. If I was, I didn't know whether that was good or bad.

We'd first met when her sister had hewed to the line of convention by marrying Texas oil. That was some years before her old man's electrotypes business became a war casualty, and I'd been hired to keep an eye on the display of wedding gifts at their Williams Creek manor. An eye, the old man had said, which left me one over for the other daughter, Nita,

home from Paris for the occasion. We'd seemed in a mutual hurry to get acquainted, and after it was over I was left with the bitter notion that Nita was like that—in a hurry and not too discriminating. It's like that sometimes, no matter how much of an egotist you are.

She went back to the Montmartre. Then, after the opening of the war, I heard it was Greenwich Village, along the Minettas. Always out of sight, she was not always out of mind. Later, when I was crawling across what some humorist called the soft underbelly of the Axis, a newspaper clipping from home announced the marriage of Nita Gambriel Harding to Michael Lombard. Of Mike Lombard, the best that could be said that he was a practical politician of a small and often obscure variety.

Right now, Mike was politically an in. That means that if you've bought a policy ticket in Indianapolis recently a large portion of your buck found its way into Mike's pocket. Or put it this way, if it's any consolation; your dollar bought some shred of stuff that clung for a while to some infinitesimal portion of Nita's golden skin. That's about as close as you'll ever get to the lady.

So I looked into her lovely face and wondered and fumbled out my cigarette case.

"You and your characters," I said.

"Me and my characters," she added a bit wistfully. "You were my starving Armenian."

"Now I have been called everything," I muttered. There was a long pause. She glanced down to take a cigarette. Her eyelids were blue and satiny. "What does Mike want?" she asked me.

"Can you want anything when you've got everything?" I said gallantly, which seemed to annoy her.

"You always were the damndest evasive man, Mr. Abjarian."

"Not always," I reminded her.

She gave me a slow, soft look, remembering. Once, a long while ago, I would have floundered in those wonderful eyes of hers. Even now I splashed a little. The aquamarine was pleasantly tepid. She put the cigarette to her lips, leaned toward the flame of my lighter.

"Where did Mike go?" I asked, not caring.

I snapped my lighter shut. Through and beyond the rising plume of our smoke I saw Mike Lombard coming up from the basement, which is not where I'd go if I wanted to have anybody paged. He approached at a leisurely bounce, a big, good-looking man, his hair wavy and prematurely silver, his face heavy but with a firm heaviness, his eyes tawny and dominant.

I STOOD, and Mike Lombard's smile was expansive, if not genuine, as his hand engulfed mine.

"Glad to see you again, Mr. er—ah—" and having the same trouble with my name that everyone has, he turned to Nita, who was still on the sofa giving us her from-down-under look. "What is it you call him, honey?"

"Jarey," she said.

And I said, "She used to call me her starving Armenian."

Don't ask me why I felt like needling him. That I'd succeeded was indicated by his excessive laughter. He must have kidded himself into thinking he'd invented her and had an exclusive patent. He turned off the laugh abruptly, as you can when it isn't real.

"I want to talk business."

"How is the stock market anyway?" I asked. Meaning, of course, his policy game, where the payoff is determined from the number of stock quotations which have advanced, declined, or remained unchanged in the final tally as printed in the financial columns of a local newspaper.

Mike Lombard pursed his lips and

pushed them around over set teeth. "I'm losing money," he said gravely.

"Not in my direction, you're not."

"Maybe you need a new dream book."

"Maybe I need a new dream." I let him catch my eyes off base as I said that, but after the first bright clash of glances, Nita's hurried off somewhere. And then I knew. She was afraid. Maybe, in the beginning, she'd thought Mike was a new experience, another character for her collection. But Mike was playing for keeps. She was afraid of him, and that was why she was still Mrs. Lombard. She hadn't changed. I hadn't been wrong about her. But I still didn't know whether that was good or bad. A little of both. The bitter and the sweet.

"Nita, suppose you go into the bar for a cocktail," Mike Lombard suggested, "while we talk business. We'll join you in a minute or so."

She pouted. "It's too early for cocktails."

"Never say that," I said, smiling. I wanted her to go so that Mike could get off whatever was on his chest. Then I'd be able to go somewhere to think and maybe find out how I felt about Nita. She stood, a bit piqued, I thought, and walked across the lobby, poetry in motion. Mike and I watched her go, and my guess was that our thoughts were multigraphed copies, mine closer to the original stencil than his. After all, I'd seen her first.

Mike Lombard sighed, sat down wearily on the sofa where I joined him. I stared at his big, firm face, at eyes that were tigerish yellow in lighter flame, and waited for him to talk.

He said finally, "I'm being fixed."

That called for lifted eyebrows. "Big?" I asked.

He shrugged shoulders that, in gray gabardine, were like sacks full of cement. "Big enough to hurt a little."

He took a clipping from his wallet and explained that it came from Saturday's

financial column in the *Telegram*. I took it from his big, tanned fingers and looked at the portion which he had encircled in pencil:

Advances— 65
Declines—843
Unchanged—169

"I just dropped a remorseful tear," I said.

"I dropped a hell of a lot more than that." Mike's mouth was grim as his forefinger indicated the clipping. "That's all fouled up. I was taken. It isn't the first time, either. When Nita and I were in Florida—"

He broke off, sidled closer to me on the sofa so that his weight threw me slightly off balance, and waited until a porter had swept up some cigar ashes into a brass dust pan and moved beyond the range of Mike's rumbling, confidential voice.

"Here's the deal: Can you find out who's doing it and why?"

I took a drag on my cigarette and let it go slowly, with my breathing. I leaned over, closed one eye and drew a bead on an eyelet in my right Oxford with the crease of my right trouser leg.

"Bang?" I said tentatively and looked at him out of the ends of my eyes. His silvery brows were tight in a scowl, his lips loose in a smile, and his big head rocked back and forth.

"No, no. You know me better than that. You know the town better."

I knew him no better than I wanted to. But he had a point in the town. It is gangling, awkward, and lusty—a young farm-hand on a binge. But it's old too, complacently yawning. It protests outward disturbance. Consequently, its substratum conflicts are quiet throttlings, the factional differences resolved in cutthroat caucus. Men like Mike Lombard are institutional, and most of them die in bed.

"I know better than to try and hire you

to finger anybody," Mike said, still trying to sell me.

I pitched my cigarette into the ash receiver. "Let's just say I'm interested and stop building ourselves up as sterling characters."

"Fine!" His frown dissolved and his affable smile widened. "What'll it cost me?"

I had him over a barrel, since nobody but a free lance operative would have touched anything like this, but I didn't care to take advantage of his position. I didn't want to be under any obligation to him because I couldn't make up my mind how I felt about Nita. Or, let's be frank; I knew how I felt, but I didn't know whether or not I was going to do anything about it. So I quoted the standard rate and turned down his offer of an advance for expense money. I wanted to stay clear on this one.

"I'm not exactly a pauper," I said as I stood. "You'll get a bill later, after I've delivered what you want." He stood up. I got up after him.

We shook hands again. I declined to join him and Nita in the bar, and went into a thin wash of mid-afternoon sunlight on the Washington Street side of the Whitmark. The brisk April breeze was damp, not quite warm, and laden with the smell of the packing houses. The sidewalk was jammed with shoppers, and before I could work my way to the curb sufficient time elapsed for me to decide whether I'd go straight to the *Telegram* or out to Sixteenth Street to see Henri Banta. Banta won the toss. Lucky guy, that Banta. It took me five minutes to get a cab. I did some thinking.

A few hundred votes on the other side of the ballot in the last city election would have put Henri Banta where Mike Lombard was today. As my cab rolled cross-town on Sixteenth I counted, without half trying, four hole-in-the-wall lottery stalls that were closed and deserted. The lid was on, and for Banta it was on tight.

CHAPTER TWO

Murder With a Kick

REMEMBER right after repeal, when the framing of the new liquor law was influenced by the slogan, "The Saloon Must Go?" Banta's place hadn't gone very far. There remained the old mahogany bar, the brackets where the brass rail had been, the Irish barkeep with his heavy gold watch chain and a mustache that was walrus by inclination—nostalgic touches that included, currently, an absence of women. I put my shoulder between a couple of customers who were old enough to resent having to take their suds sitting down and asked the owner of the mustache if Banta was around. The barkeep's nod was emphatic on the uptake, indicating, without lost motion, that Banta was in his office at the back. I went to a door opening on a hallway that was dark as a treasurer's pocket, and when I thought I'd found the office, I knocked. Banta's voice called for me to come in.

As far as I know, the "i" at the end of Banta's first name was his only affectation. He was short and paunchy, with not much hair of no particular color over a small round face that held a studied ugliness which was, oddly, not unpleasant. He wore gray, unpressed pants well up toward his armpits, where a short stretch of yellow sports shirt began. He didn't move from the lopsided swivel chair behind the littered desk, but he took a stump of cigar out of his mouth and called me "Abby" for the same reason that Mike Lombard hadn't called me anything.

"How's gumshoeing, Abby?"

I said, "I'm not chewing gum." After which pleasantries I launched a topic I thought might lead to an interesting discussion. "Suppose I want to hire the services of the Fix Syndicate—how do I go about it and what will it cost?"

Banta was already shaking his head morosely. "You wouldn't. They wouldn't. You couldn't even find their office."

"Isn't it in Pittsburgh?"

"Sure. Also New York. Also representatives in the principal cities like H. J. Heinz, they got. But they wouldn't. They don't know you." Banta's small face laughed soundlessly. "Ethics, they got."

"Suppose they knew me, and nobody had any ethics, what would it cost to fix a banker like—" I looked up at the fly-blown ceiling light, "say, Mike Lombard."

Henri Banta's small blue eyes reflected a spark of interest. "Who's got that kind of money? Maybe twenty grand."

"Suppose I had that kind of money, and they knew me, and nobody had any ethics, how would the fix operate?"

Banta shrugged with his hands. "The Syndicate plants a man in the composing room of the paper. You send your boys around to Lombard's regular outlets, and they bet the limit on a certain number they know will hit. It hits, Lombard pays off five hundred to one, and he's fixed. Only," he added, "You can't do it."

"Yeah, I know. Ethics." I tidied a corner of Banta's desk to sit on. I watched him warm over his cigar with match flame. I said, "Somebody fixed Lombard. I don't know for how much."

Banta took the butt out of his mouth. His silent laugh revealed gold-capped molars.

"Hell that's funny."

"Maybe twenty grand worth of funny?"

He sobered. Chin on chest, horizontal furrows across his short brow, he dug into me with his eyes. "Suppose I got enough money to buy a big enough fix to really hurt Lombard, and he has to close. Do I open?" He shook his head. "Not the way I vote." He scraped another match for his cigar. "Nuh-uh. I'll wait. Next election it maybe rains."

"It maybe does." I slid off the desk, thanked Henri Banta—for what, I didn't know—and went out through the tap-room.

Ten minutes later, I left a hack to enter the *Telegram* Building, where I followed green arrows to the editorial rooms on the second floor. The plump, middle-aged woman who operated the switchboard also doubled in information. I asked where I would find whoever handled the financial page. She pulled a plug from the board, craned back in her chair to search the wide corridor that approached the city room and had glass partitioned cubicles on either side.

"That's our Mr. Gilbey. First door on your left."

I went into the wide corridor and found our Mr. Gilbey without any trouble, for he was alone in one of the fish tanks along the side. He was taller than I, younger, possibly thinner, and a whole lot prettier. His skin had the translucency of fine china. His blue eyes were so coldly insolent that I wondered how he'd maintained his perfect features this long. His handshake was soft, dry and limp, and I thought for a moment I had hold of the sleeve end of his grey corduroy jacket.

I sat down. Gilbey remained standing, the tips of his manicured fingers just touching the surface of his desk blotter. He seemed annoyed. I took out the clipping which Mike Lombard had given me and placed it on the blotter.

"Are those encircled figures accurate, Mr. Gilbey?"

He frowned at the clipping and then at me. "I presume so."

I nodded. "That's what I thought. Is that any way to run a newspaper? Accuracy isn't a thing you presume."

He dropped the clipping onto the desk, shoved his left hand into his trouser pocket, and jingled some keys. He sucked a molar in a quiet, refined way, his jaw outthrust. His eyes rested on my face,

thoughtful, disapproving, professional.

"What did you say your name was?" Letting me know he hadn't considered it worth remembering from thirty seconds ago.

"Abjarian," I repeated.

He picked up the clipping again. "What makes you think these figures aren't right?"

"I counted," I said brightly. "The advances, the declines, and unchanged for that day. All that fine print."

"You counted." He was not amazed. His tone implied that it takes all kinds, and while my kind was not usual, praise be, he'd suspected its existence. Clipping in hand, he took brisk steps around the desk to a filing cabinet. He opened the top drawer, flipped back some separators, his back toward me. I stood quietly, peeked around his left shoulder and into the drawer. What he was pretending to study was a sheet of copy headed: STEEL SHORTAGE CURTAILS CAR PRODUCTION.

Gilbey became aware of me. He closed the drawer hastily and turned. There was a whiteness about his mouth. He put his left hand down into his trouser pocket. His keys were nervous.

"That's right, we're wrong," he admitted.

I said, "That makes me most happy, but what are you going to do about it?"

"Do?" a

"Yes. If you let a thing like that get by, how do I know anything in your paper is accurate?"

He smiled thinly. "Typographical errors are apt to show up in any newspaper. I will of course speak to the person responsible. Right away. And—" he nodded curtly, "thanks."

"Don't mention it," I said and stood. "Just don't let it happen again. Or—" I paused on the way to the door, "I'll cancel my subscription." I figured that was such an absurd threat that he'd worry some other meaning into it.

Down on the street again, I went around the corner to a tavern, where I spaced three Manhattans with a couple of phone calls. The first, to Mike Lombard's swank restaurant, was a dud. The second, to his Riverside Drive residence, got me Nita, who said Mike wasn't in. But she recognized my voice and hung on.

"How're things, Jarey?"

"So-so," I said.

"Finding out anything?"

"Only that you are the most beautiful woman in Indianapolis."

A pause, then, "Damn you, Jarey," as soft as a sigh. I laughed, and she said, "He's already beginning to wonder."

"What about?"

"You and me. The way you talked in the Whitmark lobby."

I said, "Don't tell me he's so stupid he doesn't know that where there's a bridge there's apt to be some water somewhere that has passed under it."

She called me a something Armenian and used Mr. Bell's gadget to slap me in the ear. You can never tell about talking to Nita. It can be good or bad. This, I decided, was bad.

I returned to the bar for something to take the taste out of my mouth, after which I rode the trackless out North Pennsylvania to the ten-hundred block. I entered the hush foyer of the Bellevue Apartments and, after a suspenseful jog up in the automatic elevator, came to my diggings on the fourth floor. There the steam heating plant was displaying an enthusiasm this April afternoon which had been notably lacking all winter, and I opened a window here and there on my way to the bath. I shaved for the second time that day, showered, came out of the bath wrapped in a towel to lie across the bed for a while. I mentally pasted six different women I knew on my ceiling. Pretty soon I had six poses of Nita instead. I closed my eyes. . . .

THE fall of darkness couldn't have done it, so it must been either the phone or the slapping of the blind in a high west wind that awoke me. The breeze smelled of rain and there was a puddle under the sill, which I found without any difficulty when I sat up on the edge of the bed to reach for the phone.

Mike Lombard sounded cheerfully expectant. I asked him if he knew a John Gilbey. He said no, slowly, thinking it over, and then no again, positively.

"The financial columns of the *Telegram*," I said. "He's your boy. Your trouble begins and ends there, and I don't think you've got anything to worry about."

"You talked to him?" Mike asked.

"I did. He didn't know the gun was loaded, and he'll never, never do it again."

Mike Lombard was silent for a moment. I knew what was troubling him: the thing was too simple. Dread of the Big Fix was so deeply ingrained in him that he never would have suspected a private individual like Gilbey of taking advantage of his position to beat the game.

"But why would he?" Mike asked helplessly.

"Maybe he likes money. I've heard of such people."

Mike said, "The dirty—"

"Of course we could be doing him an injustice. He could have a dear old father who needs an operation—"

But Mike had hung up. I sat on the edge of the bed for a bit, listening to my ear ring. Then I got up, closed the window against the rain, and dressed.

It was crowding 9:00 P.M. when I entered the Chelsea Inn across the street. There, a couple of Manhattans convinced me I was hungry enough to tackle a sirloin tip to be well larded with butter and roquefort before broiling. It was brain food, as it turned out, for while I was concluding my meal with B & B, I began

to think—always a dangerous thing for a private detective to do. Would Gilbey jeopardize whatever future he had in the newspaper business for a quick kill? It depended on the size of the kill, of course, and how far he'd dared spread himself around under numerous aliases without exciting the suspicions of Lombard's agents. Not too far, I thought. Not far enough to take a big enough bite to set himself up for life. And while Mike Lombard had virtually pledged that I wasn't being asked to finger anybody for him, Gilbey had no reason to believe he wasn't playing with dynamite.

I had the waiter bring me the phone directory, which I flipped to the G's for Gilbey, John R. He was on the Irvington exchange, and the address suggested the upper half of a duplex. I got into hat and raincoat and walked to the corner cabstand. The hackie knew me and remarked that it was a nice night for murder. I settled back against the cushions, lighted a cigarette, and listened to the hiss of tires on wet asphalt. I was full and drowsy, and I wondered why I was throwing myself into my work this way.

The taxi pulled up in one of Irvington's narrow, twisted cowpath streets. I peered out through the rain at a duplex that was topheavy with light, blacked-out at the bottom, with a couple of huge trees overhanging its squarish, low-pitched roof. As I paid the hackie, he asked me if this was where the body was, and I said yes—down in the basement with a mouth full of wet concrete.

There were two doors opening from the lower front porch, and Gilbey's was the one on the left. Upstairs, where the lights were, a radio was playing loudly. As I rang the bell, a bus came rumbling and rattling along and hit a manhole cover that clanked twice for the front wheels and twice for the back. If I'd been thinking, I couldn't have heard myself for the noise I tried the bell again and was

about to turn back to the street, when the light from a passing car showed me a narrow line of shiny bronze weather-strip between the door-edge and the jamb. The car hit the same manhole lid with the same sound effects, then left me with my hand on a knob that wouldn't turn, that didn't have to be turned if I wanted to go in.

I pushed the door open, closed it behind me, went up the lighted stairs to open the door at the top. I paused on the threshold.

The radio was playing *Some Enchanted Evening* as I looked across the uncrowded room and saw John Gilbey. He was on the floor in the middle of a nice piece of beige broadloom carpet, and he wasn't doing anything. He was on his right side, one leg twisted up under him, one arm flung out toward the door. There was some drying blood on the visible hand, much more of the same on the front of his shirt. A second bullet hole blackened his left cheekbone, and I see no reason to dwell upon the displeased expression on his face.

I came all the way into the room, cursing Mike Lombard for putting me on a spot like this. Because if you think any private detective can walk out on a murder and expect to renew his license at any time, either in Indianapolis or elsewhere, you've been seeing the wrong kind of movies. I went to the bleached mahogany desk where the phone was, picked up the handset, and dialed police headquarters. After I'd talked to the dispatcher, I sat on the desk to wait. The room was modern in decor and furnishings, so cold and stiff it was odd the corpse didn't fit better into the scheme of things, but Gilbey hadn't bled in pastels, and he clashed.

A car door slammed out in the street. There were footsteps, male and female, and the door of the lower apartment opened and closed. I lighted a cigarette and listened to the radio play *Laura*. It

sounded like Laura was a girl I'd always wanted to meet but never quite expected to.

Cops from the radio patrol car preceded Lieutenant McQuinn and the homicide boys by about ten minutes. McQuinn was about fifty, with a touch of frost at his temples. He was tall and thin and looked collapsible. He had a Hapsburg jaw and consequently his smile showed mostly lowers, but it was a smile and it made me feel better.

"Sit down somewhere, Abjarian," he told me, pleased with his pronunciation of my name. "Touch anything, did you?"

"The knobs of two doors, the phone, and my left ear lobe," I replied as I sank into an armless chair that put my knees up under my chin.

McQuinn nodded and left me, as he said, to my own devices for a moment. My own devices picked up a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*. It was not diverting. The room was too full of life and death and a coroner's assistant who whistled while he worked. There was a thin clatter when one of the photographers dropped a reflector. There were police feet, heavy and quick, slow and heavy. Somebody turned off the radio. Nobody turned off the coroner.

I started to put the *Journal* back on the glass-topped side table, noticed a blue-jacketed book titled *The Villager*, published by some house I'd never heard of, and carrying the by-line of John R. Gilbey.

I opened the volume at random, which turned out to be a pretty good place—a chapter headed "Artists and Models," but just then a flash bulb went off at the edge of my vision and brought my head up with a jerk to find McQuinn in front of me, showing his lowers.

"Tell us about it, Abjarian," McQuinn said with a gentleness that must have endeared him to our better class murderers.

I put down John Gilbey's claim to immortality and looked up at McQuinn. "Mike Lombard thought somebody had put the fix on his policy game and hired me to find out who. I got as far as Gilbey. When I came here tonight, he was just as he is now except there was no doctor serenading him with *A, You're Adorable*." The coroner looked up. He was annoyed. He switched to *Tiger Rag*, with riffs yet.

"Yah, he gets on my nerves too," McQuinn said of the coroner. Then he turned and went to the phone. Before I could locate that section on artists and models again in Gilbey's book, McQuinn was back.

"These damn nuisance rackets," he said with feeling.

I said, "Ha-ha."

"What do you mean ha-ha?"

"When anybody refers to the numbers game as a nuisance racket I always say ha-ha."

McQuinn snorted, turned to a short, phlegmatic appearing man in a rumpled grey suit who looked as though he had something to report if anybody was interested.

"Well?" McQuinn prodded the man.

The detective consulted the back of an old envelope. "Party downstairs name of Allan. About nine p.m. stepped out to his car. Had to meet his wife at the station. Says there was a guy ringing Gilbey's doorbell. Party wore a grey hat and a grey tan raincoat, and Gilbey let him in." The envelope went into his pocket and grey suit faded into the wall.

McQuinn said, "All right. I'll talk to Allan." He started toward the door, paused, and spoke to me. "Anything else?"

"No," I replied.

I went. Not too far. Home. I sat in my apartment and watched it rain. The man across the street made the rain blood red.

CHAPTER THREE

Noble Death

THE rain had slackened to a Scotch mist, which reminded me I had a bottle of Peter Dawson I'd tucked away for a night like this. The Dawson and I were in the living room, and I had reached the stage where soda and ice were not important, when there was a tap at my door.

Nita Lombard. She had on a grey, hooded raincoat. Her aqua eyes were wide and childlike and scarey. Her full red mouth shaped her name for me, softly whispered. Don't ask me how she got by the lock on the entryway door. I didn't ask myself. She was there, in my arms. Her head tipped back, the hood fell away from her glowing hair, and my kiss made an unsatisfactory connection with her damp cheek. She was like that for an instant, softness over strong steel. Then the steel tempered to suppleness. Her head turned so that my mouth smeared across her cheek and found her mouth. Her kiss was warm and searching. I didn't know whether it was good or bad, maybe good and bad—but I'd stopped being analytical.

"I'm afraid, Jarey," she said when she could say anything. "The police—they came looking for Mike. They asked questions."

"You can expect that of police." I closed the door.

"I'm afraid and cold and I need you," she said, shivering.

"You need a drink."

"Yes, and I need you. Awfully."

"First things first," I said and went into the kitchen for another glass.

She'd removed the raincoat by the time I got back and was sitting on the Lawson, hugging herself. Her dress was clinging and soft grey, good for her, for the wraith and reality about her. When

I handed her the glass, she dug the snubby toe of a scarlet pump into the deep pile of my Sarouk.

I stood in front of her, glass in hand. My head kept telling me it was boss. "What's this all about?" I wanted to know.

She drank thirstily, lowered the glass with a soft, wet-lipped sound. Her shoulders twisted. "Somebody named Gilbey. He's dead, and they think Mike killed him. Mike hasn't been home all day. He came in about nine-thirty this evening, just long enough to tell me that if anybody asked where he was I was to say I didn't know."

"What did you tell the cops?"

"That I didn't know."

"Where is he?"

"At a tavern in Westfield. *The Blue Hawk*. He owns it, I think."

"All right." I polished off my Scotch, put the glass down on the coffee table, went into the bedroom for my raincoat and hat. When I came back, Nita was standing in front of the Chippendale mirror re-doing her mouth. She gave me an off-the-shoulder glance, lipstick poised.

"Mike did kill this Gilbey, didn't he?" she asked casually.

I shook my head. Nita faced me squarely, her lips ajar, her eyes shiny with alarm.

"Henri Banta killed Gilbey," I said.

Her expression didn't change. "No, because why would Mike run away?"

"Because he knows he's suspected. I found out Gilbey fixed the numbers game. Mike knew I'd have to tell the police I was working for him. But Mike didn't kill Gilbey."

She looked small and helpless when afraid. She wasn't small and helpless, and I wished she'd stop looking that way.

"How do you know, Jarey?"

I didn't know anything, but I'd struck pay-dirt and couldn't stop digging. "It adds. The game was fixed, which in itself

points to Banta. I questioned Banta. He must have known I'd get to Gilbey. If Gilbey cracked and said Banta was behind him, Mike would get to Banta." I shook my head. "Banta wouldn't like that."

Nita followed me to the door.

"You—you carry a gun, don't you, Jarey?"

I laughed. "Not east of Hollywood. Why?"

"Because Mike does."

I opened the door. "There's Scotch, and I imagine you can find the ice."

"Jarey—"

I took one last look, but not for long. It couldn't be a long look, I knew, if I was going anywhere that night. She was smiling as though we two had a secret, and this one we weren't sharing with anybody.

"Jarey, do the police have to know Banta killed Gilbey?"

I said, "No. I'm not going to tell them." I put the door between me and her smile. Between her and my shudder.

The Blue Hawk in Westfield had atmosphere composed of stale beer stench suspended on thick, undulant layers of tobacco smoke. I felt as though the juke box bass notes emanated from my stomach as I sat at the bar and toyed with something that had answered to the name of Scotch. The time was approaching our virtuous Hoosier liquor curfew and trade was brisk. I tried to look as though I loved my poison and was making it last, and at the same time I glanced about to get a blueprint of the place. Beside the entrance off Highway 31, there were four other doors—kitchen, rest rooms, and one designated by EMPLOYEES ONLY. I slipped off my stool.

It was the room where they kept the beer cases, and there was a steep flight of stairs angled across the rear wall. I was

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halfway toward the stairs when the barkeep batted through the door, a blur of white apron out of the tail of my eye. He lunged, caught me by the shoulder, and spun me around. He was not quite as tall as I, much heavier, not much black hair, and a whole lot of face. His eyes were narrow and, I presumed, threatening. He hooked a thumb at the door.

"Can't you read that sign, buddy?"

I said, "I'm not smoking."

"Funny," he said. "Very. Now get out of here, and when I want to laugh I'll tune in Howdy Doody on the video." He let go of my shoulder, apparently satisfied that I was intimidated.

I said, "I'm going up."

The barkeep thought not. He dipped into a wood case for a beer bottle. His left hand wasn't doing anything at the time, so I grabbed it with both hands for a reverse wristlock, got my right foot off the floor and into the soft flesh of his left side just above the belt. It was slow for a kick—you might call it a shove. He went over into a stack of beer cases, and I went up the stairs.

Mike Lombard's nerves must have been edgy, for he was at the top of the stairs with a .38 caliber gun in his hand. Right behind me was the barkeep. Mike's tawny eyes went past me, and he shook his head.

"It's okay, Neddy," he said wearily. "Thanks anyway." He stepped aside to let me enter the room, and I heard the barkeep's heavy tread retreading down the stairs.

THE room was papered in faded blue, unrelieved except for stains of one sort or another and some calendar art. There was an iron bed, a mission oak rocker with Mike's grey suitcoat over the back, and a pink enameled bureau. Mike's double-breasted tan raincoat hung on a nail, and there was a rust-colored stain on the right flap at the front. I could see John Gilbey staggering for-

ward with his right hand over a belly wound, then grasping at his killer with the same hand, leaving a smear on the coat. The second shot, through the face, probably hadn't been necessary.

Mike Lombard sat on the edge of the bed which, considerably, left me the chair if I wanted it. I stood and looked at him. His silvery hair was rumpled, his mouth slack. He put the gun down on the bed and fingered a cigarette out of the crushed pack in the breast pocket of his shirt. He put the cigarette into his mouth then forgot to light it. His tawny eyes stared at the rotten straw matting under our feet.

"Numbers King, Slayer Cornered In Westfield Dive." I quoted some headlines that would never be written. His huge shoulders slumped. Then it occurred to him to wonder how I'd known where to find him. It occurred all over his big face.

I said, "I told Nita that Henri Banta killed Gilbey, and she told me where to find you." I'd altered the chronology slightly for reasons having to do with his having a gun. I couldn't give it to him in a lump; I wasn't that tired of living.

"Banta?" He frowned. "You damned liar."

I nodded. "Her reaction was interesting. She was scared."

"Scared?" he repeated dully.

"Scared. Did you know she knew Gilbey?" I wasn't telling him anything—I was asking. All I had to go on was a book Gilbey had written—*The Villager*, about artists and models. The Greenwich Villager, maybe. There was an off chance that Nita and Gilbey had met in New York. Her collection of characters wouldn't have been complete without one author, even if it happened to be one who patronized a vanity publisher.

I knew." Mike Lombard admitted slowly. "She told me tonight when I came home."

I turned, went to the chair, picked up

his suitcoat, and came back to the bed. I was as close to the gun as he was, and I thought I could move faster than he if I had to. I gave him the coat.

"Put it on. We're going back to the city."

His slight frown smoothed out and a ghost of a smile took its place. He stood and put on the coat. Then he went over to the south wall and got his raincoat off the nail. When he had the raincoat on and buttoned, the bloodstain didn't show. He put on his hat with habitual care. I picked up his gun from the bed and dropped it into my pocket. We went out and down, through the taproom and into the light rain. His sedate Lincoln coupe was in the parking lot. He got in under the wheel, and I sat beside him. The only comments made on the fifteen mile drive back to town had to do with the weather. I asked him if he'd thought that morning that it would rain in the evening. He said he hadn't thought that it would. That was all. We weren't in a conversational mood.

We came in on Meridian Street, and when we got as far south as Seventeenth, I had Mike make a left turn, then a right onto Sixteenth which we crossed to get to North Pennsylvania. He probably thought we were angling toward Alabama Street, which would take us to Police Headquarters.

"Park here somewhere," I ordered when we'd passed Eleventh. Instrument lights caught a glint of surprise in Mike's eyes. "My place," I explained. "There's no hurry. The police are always open for business."

He found a spot and backed the coupe into it.

I asked, "How did you know Gilbey was dead?"

His hand was arrested inches from the ignition key. He looked at me out of the ends of yellowish eyes. "Oh, sure—how?" This accompanied by laughter.

He turned the key.

I made no move to get from the car. "Look, if you want to act noble, that's your business. I'm only showing you the holes in your story before you tell it where it counts. You said that this morning you didn't know it would rain. Nita told me you didn't come home until after nine this evening."

"I was busy," he inserted. "All day."

"So the only time you could have picked up the raincoat was *after* Gilbey was dead."

"I had the coat at the office. I wore it when I went to kill Gilbey."

"Then you also wore a pair of lace panties," I said.

He squirmed around in the seat. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"About the sartorial fact that persons who button double-breasted coats with the right flap over the left are women. Notice that the bloodstain on your coat doesn't show now that you're wearing it. But when Nita wore it, the right flap was on top where Gilbey grabbed at it with blood on his hand."

MIKE LOMBARD said something unintelligible and clutched at my shoulder. He shook me. "Shut up! Don't—you won't tell the cops?"

I knew what I was going to do, but I didn't know whether it would be good or bad. I never knew where Nita was concerned. Always the bitter and the sweet.

"She knew Gilbey in New York—I told you that. There were some dirty photographs of her he'd got hold of—faked of course . . ."

"Tonight I wasn't coming home for dinner. She ate downtown. Gilbey ran into her, pressured her into going to his place. He tried to assault her, and she shot him."

"In your raincoat," I said.

"Yes. She couldn't find her own when she left the house."

"In a pair of slacks," I said.

"Slacks?" Deep in his throat, then a notch higher "Slacks?"

"The guy in the lower half of the duplex said a man in a raincoat rang Gilbey's bell. Your raincoat. Your wife, in slacks and your raincoat and maybe one of your hats—the head-size is big enough."

He kept shaking me.

"It's a damned lie, d'yah hear?"

"She killed Gilbey," I said evenly. "She told you she did, knowing you'd do the noble thing. Maybe she hated him. Maybe there were photographs. I don't know, but she went there solely for the purpose of killing him." I worked the latch pushbutton and the coupe door swung open. I got a leg out. "I won't stop you, but let's go up to my place for a drink. You'll need a drink to be noble on."

He slid across the cushion and got out. I don't know how he felt, but I was trembling—an inner sort of trembling that I couldn't get hold of. We crossed mid-block against the heavy traffic along Pennsylvania Street and approached the lighted entry of the apartment building. We went in slowly.

I said, "To me this makes the whole thing more convincing, especially in respect to Gilbey's angle. Nita put Gilbey up to fixing your game to provide you with motive for killing Gilbey. Gilbey didn't know that was what she was doing, of course. All he could see was a bite out of your bankroll. But what she wanted was to provide you with the motive to do the job if not with the guts. When it became increasingly clear that you wouldn't go as far as murdering Gilbey, she did it. A new experience for her—she'd try anything once. If there were photographs, she got them, but that wasn't the main event. Now, how does that sound?"

He stopped in the entryway. His eyes

were tigerish in the subdued light. There were shiny pin-points of sweat all over his heavy face. He told me how it sounded with one short obscenity that seemed to cover the matter to his satisfaction, then added, to bolster his conviction, "Hell, if she's meant to frame me, she'd have told the police where I was hiding."

"Oh, no," I argued. "That would have looked phony, and McQuinn would have latched onto it at once."

He used the same obscenity, but what I had said—all that I had said—was worming under his skin. We had crossed the foyer, had entered the elevator, and I'd pressed the button for the fourth floor when Mike Lombard blurted:

"Why?"

"So she could get rid of something she didn't want and hang onto something she already had." We were alone in the slowly rising elevator, and I was glad I was the one who had the gun—that look his eyes had. "That's part of it. The other part was so she could get something she didn't have and wanted. This was the only way she could accomplish all that and keep her skirts clean. She may have hated Gilbey, but he was her tool. Dead, Gilbey could rid Nita of you, for the frame is constructed to fit you perfectly. It'll be a first degree rap, if you decide to be noble. That you hired me to finger Gilbey indicates premeditation. You'll get the chair, and she'll have her unsoiled fingers on your dough."

He opened his mouth and closed it again. Then he stammered, "What—what didn't she have that she wanted?"

I said, "Me."

Mike Lombard hit me like a gentleman, across the mouth with the back of his hand. I reeled back against the elevator door which happened to be opening at the time. I was all the way out into the quiet corridor before I'd completely regained my balance. Mike Lombard followed, striding. I turned and moved up the hall

to my door. Mike stalked me. My trembling had worked its way to the outside; my keys talked when I unlocked the door. I swung the door back, all the way to the rubber-tipped bumper. I stepped into the hall with Mike Lombard breathing on my neck. . . .

"Jarey? Is that you, Jarey?"

It was the way that she said it. It was the way that she called from the other room. It was that, and it was what she was and what Mike Lombard had kidded himself into thinking she was. His in-drawn breath was a kind of sob. He took a couple of slow-motion steps toward the living room.

I said with blood in my mouth, "Well? She's all yours."

He brought his right foot up abreast of the left. His huge hands were clenched. I couldn't see his face. I didn't want to.

I said, "A smart guy knows when he's had enough."

His fists blossomed slowly into great limp hands. His shoulders settled. His eyes groped to the phone and fastened

there tenaciously. He took plunging steps, fumbled up the handset, hauled the dial all the way around with one finger and then let it go.

"Get me the police." It wasn't his voice. It wasn't his face—mouth slack, eyes haggard.

I took my handkerchief and daubed at my mouth.

"Hello," the new voice was saying. "It's Mike Lombard. I'm at—" he paused, picked up an envelope from my desk and started to spell out my name.

Then I remembered something. I headed for the living room. What I had remembered was the fire escape. I saw it now through the open window.

I moved listlessly to the window and stared out into wet darkness. Now I knew. Now I could define it. It was bad—all bad. The sweet was gone. I was left only the bitterness.

That was last night—or call it early this morning. They'll catch her of course, but when they do, I don't intend to be sober.



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TWO CAN DIE

Marty had a dream and a gal, both out of this world—and all he needed to join them there was one last job—a smooth little caper that turned, strangely, into a dance of death!

By Day Keene

BY THE end of the third week he was home, Marty Blake was ready to blow his top. He had known it would be bad. But not this bad. None of the decent element of Palm Key, including May, would even talk to him on the street. He didn't want to talk to Pete, or to his brothers for that matter. He was finished with easy money. From now on he would make his the hard way or not at all. That was why he had sunk every penny he had saved and every dollar he could borrow into the eight-unit tourist court on Tarpon Bay. Last year he had broken almost even. Next year he might make a little money. But now, when he should be working, painting, renovating, landscaping the grounds and building a pier to make the place more attractive to northern tourists, the old man had to die.

It was, he thought, an unfilial way to feel, but he didn't feel he owed the old man a thing except perhaps a swift poke in the jaw for raising him as he had. Still, the old hellion was his father.

The end when it came, came swiftly. The trouble began in the funeral car returning from the sun-scorched burial plot in the weed covered cemetery that served Palm Key. There had been no other mourners but the immediate family and the old man's current woman, a drab slattern who dabbed at her eyes from time to time more out of respect for convention than from grief.

There were seven of them in the big

limousine, the woman, his two older brothers and their wives, himself and the driver. *And even the driver despises us. He knows us for what we are. Scum. The Blake boys. You know, that tribe of hellions who live in that old place down on the Fish Bayou,* he thought bitterly.

Palm Key had a right to despise them. All of them, including the dead old man, had been in and out of the local pokey on such a variety of charges so many times that Sheriff White had once seriously considered having special keys made for them. And out of all the pretty girls in Florida he would have to fall in love with May.

Molly, Tad's wife, a little blonde who reeked of cheap perfume, was crowded into the car next to him. "Why so serious, Marty?" she asked, "So the old man is dead. We all gotta go some day."

Tad, three-fourths drunk, murmured, "When you gotta go, you gotta go." He tried to press his bottle on Marty. "Here. Take a big slug and cheer up."

Marty refused the bottle. "No thank you."

A big grin on his ugly face, unshaven even for the funeral, Lait turned around on the front seat and took the bottle from Tad's hand. "Don't mind if I do have a little nip—hell, Tad," he reproved his brother, "you ought to know better than to offer Marty corn liquor. Since he's got so high and mighty, all he drinks is champagne."

Ella, Lait's wife, giggled shrilly, but her observation was sound. "He ain't grievin'



"You've got your girl friend into a hell of a mess," Gainer said.

none about the old man dying. He's as glad as the rest of us to be shed of him. All Marty feels bad about is that May White still won't have nothin' to do with him."

Marty sat staring out the open window of the car as it passed through the main business section of Palm Key into the better residential section. *I won't open my mouth*, he thought. *I won't let them goad me into fighting. In five minutes we'll be at the house. I'll climb into my car and never see any of them again.*

The speeding car passed the big white frame house where the sheriff lived. May, wearing shorts and a halter, was watering the lawn. Seeing Marty she lifted one

hand as if to wave, thought better of the gesture and smoothed her hair instead.

"See?" Molly gloated. "She don't care nothin' 'bout you." The blond girl sniffed. "She don't even care enough to wave. And you just back from buryin' your pa."

Marty bit his lip. Even thinking of May hurt. Wild or not, he'd loved her from the time he'd been a shirt-tail boy, and the only one of the Blakes who had ever wanted to go to school in an attempt to better himself. He had hoped to have a long talk with her, explain he had settled down and was in a decent business now, ask her to wait a little longer. Her father had seen to it he hadn't.

"Get off my porch, Marty," Sheriff White had told him that night. "For a time, you having such a good war record and all, I was hoping for May's sake there was one decent Blake among you. But I see now I was wrong. Get off my porch. And don't ever set foot on it again."

Go. Never darken my door. Me and Little Nell, Marty thought wryly. If May hadn't meant so much to him he could have howled. As it was, he had almost bawled.

The funeral car turned down the rutted lane leading to Fish Bayou. The palm trees were thicker here. They met over the lane in a ceiling of rustling fronds that in turn gave away to moss-hung, dead cypress as they neared the water. The one-story, old frame house was built up on short stilts almost on the edge of the bayou. It hadn't been painted in forty years. Both the porch and the ridge pole sagged. The screens had rusted out of most of the windows. The yard was littered with rotting seines, stove-in boats, and rusted marine engines.

The driver stopped the car in front of the porch but remained behind the wheel.

Tad, nasty drunk now, said, "Well git out an' open the door. That's part of what you're paid for."

The driver got out and opened the door. The back of his neck red, Marty stalked into the house to pack his bag.

HE STUDIED his deeply tanned face in the cracked mirror over the wash stand. A serious-eyed youth of twenty-six stared back at him. His hair was as black as Tad's. His beard was as heavy as Lait's. He weighed as much as the old man, and the old man had bettered two hundred pounds in his prime. He looked like a Blake; that was his name, but he was damned if he was one. Both Tad and Lait were older than he was. As long as he could remember, both men had been content to raise hell and swill liquor

and turn their hands to whatever quick money they could. But he had always been different. Even if he had gone along with them at first, at the old man's insistence, deep down inside him somewhere he'd always had a burning desire for something better, an almost overwhelming urge to get out of the sordid trap into which he had been born. He had tried to. Except for that one mess that had cost him a year in Raiford just after he had gotten out of the Army, and the dead man and Pete Gainer had talked him into that against his will, he hadn't broken the law by as much as one red light. He had hoped to be able to tell May that.

Lait loomed large in the doorway of the bedroom. "If you're figuring on leaving," he said, "Pete wants to see you before you go."

Marty shook his head. "That's just too bad. I don't want to see him."

He finished packing his bag and carried it out into the big combination kitchen and living room. His father's woman, still sniveling, was trying to prepare a meal. Tad and the blonde were on the couch with a fresh bottle of liquor open on the floor beside them. Lait's wife was reading a movie magazine. The inside of the house was as filthy and as littered as the yard. The old man dying hadn't changed a thing.

Tad saw the bag and wanted to know where he was going.

"Home," Marty told him shortly. He spoke his mind for the first time. "And if I never see this place or any of you again, it will be perfectly all right with me."

Ella looked up from her magazine. "Just listen to the little rooster. Kinda big for your britches, ain't you?"

"That can be," Marty admitted. He looked first at Tad, then at Lait. "But get this, and get it straight. You folks may like to live this way. I don't. I don't intend to. I'm in a different business now."

The little blonde jeered. "Yeah. Bein' a chambermaid to a lot of damnyankee

tourists. 'Boy, fetch me two more towels, a fan, and a pitcher of ice water.' "

Lait slapped his knee and guffawed.

His ears reddening, Marty said, "At least you don't go to jail for it. And that's more than you can say for bootlegging, or 'shining, or running dope or Chinks, or any of a dozen things the old man and Pete Gainer have been mixed up in. And what have you got to show for it? A jug of whiskey, a couple of broken down fishing boats, and a shack on the edge of Fish Bayou, and not a decent soul in town will speak to you."

Ella said, "That girl's still eatin' on him."

"To hell with the punk," Tad growled. "Let him go. We know where to find him if we need him."

Marty turned in the doorway of the shack. "I wouldn't try it if I were you, Tad. Brothers, or not, if you fellows ever show up at Tarpon Bay I'll run you off with a shot gun."

He started across the sagging porch only to find his way blocked by an enormously fat, pig-eyed man in a wrinkled white linen suit.

Gainer said, "Hello, Marty. Sorry I couldn't make the funeral."

Marty looked over the fat man's shoul-

der at the two wooden-faced men behind him. Both men were new to Palm Key. He didn't know them. He didn't want to. "Hello and goodbye," he told Gainer. "It just so happens, I'm leaving."

"Oh," the fat man said. "So soon?"

He spoke in a husky rasp, rumor had it because of the damage a police bullet had done to his larynx in Chicago. He had shown up in Palm Key about that time, and from the first he and old man Blake had hit it off like brothers. What one man couldn't think of the other could. Those had been the lush, rum-running days. Money had flowed like water and both men had gotten their share. When that easy fountain had dried, the natives of Palm Key had expected Gainer to move on. He hadn't. He liked Florida, he said. The climate was good for his health.

Marty attempted to brush by him and the fat man pushed him back into the shack. He was surprisingly strong for so old and so fat a man. His voice still husky, he said, "Don't give me that stuff, punk. Just because your old man is dead isn't any sign you can run out on us."

"I ran out the day I got out of Raiford," Marty told him. "I mean to stay out. Pete. Now get out of my way or there's going to be trouble."

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The fat man nodded. "That's right. There is going to be trouble. But you aren't going to like it, Marty, unless you smart up. How much do you still owe on that run-down tourist court you bought up on Tarpon Bay?"

Surprised into answering, Marty said, "Almost eighteen thousand dollars."

"On a mortgage?"

"That's right."

The fat man showed his teeth. "I own it, Marty. I bought it almost two months ago, thinking it might come in handy. And it would seem it has." Advancing on Marty, he butted him into a chair with his belly. "Now sit down, punk, and listen to what I have to say or I'll have your brothers work you over."

MARTY didn't say anything. There wasn't any use. The heat in the thin-roofed shack was suddenly overpowering. Almost as overpowering as the feeling of futility that was beginning to nip at his heels. He had hoped to make the break clean, cut off the past from the present. Now he wondered if the past three years of sweat and labor and worry had been worth while. May thought so little of him she wouldn't even lift her hand in a friendly gesture. Pete owned the mortgage on his place. If he missed even one payment, Pete could foreclose—and the past three years of hard work would go for nothing.

Pete introduced the two men with him to Tad and Lait. "Boys, meet Charlie and Sam. They just finished a five to fifteen and being unable to buy any yachts or blondes on the five bucks apiece the State of Illinois gave them, they looked me up." He grinned at Marty. "And that's what gave me the idea for this little caper that I have in mind. In fact I've had it in mind for some time."

"Pleased to meetcha," both men said.

Marty studied their faces. Both were or had been city men before they had gone

to prison. He wondered what their specialty was. He hadn't long to wonder.

"The two best box men in the business," Gainer said. "They ought to be able to cut through that cheese box in Palm Key like it was made out of tin."

A sudden, uneasy silence filled the shack. There was no sound but the drone of the insects in the clearing and the lazy lap of the tide on the shore. The local bank had often been the subject of discussions. Palm Key was a strategically located banking point. What with the commercial fishing money, the truck money from the 'glades, and the inland sugar and cattle money, there was seldom less and often more than a hundred thousand dollars in the antiquated vault. It was ripe and ready for picking. The only thing that had saved it so far was Gainer's and the dead man's reluctance to stir up a hornet's nest so close to the base of their operations. That and Palm Key's location. It was bounded on the west by the Gulf of Mexico, on the south by the saw grass and watery wilderness of the Everglades, and on the east and north by treacherous swamps, alive with sudden death for the unwary. A secondary road connected it with the Tamiami Trail, the only route an escape car could take. And once an alarm was flashed, the State Patrol could block the Tamiami Trail in a matter of minutes.

Lait was the first to speak. "It must be the heat, Pete. You'd best sit down and let Molly fix you a cold drink."

"No. I'm serious," the fat man said. "What with the coast guard patrolling the Gulf in those damn planes of theirs and the law tightening up on all the easy money we used to pick up for the taking, it's about time we made a cleanup and quit." He stressed his words. "And it just so happens I know there is going to be better than one hundred and eighty grand in the Palm Key bank when they close this afternoon."

Slightly sobered, Tad whistled. "That's a hell of a lot of money."

Lait was still dubious. "You can't spend it in a cell. No. Count me out. I don't mind bucking the tiger when I know I got a chance, but they'd nab us before we got ten miles down the trail."

The fat man shook his head. "That's where you're wrong, Lait. We ain't going anywhere." He nodded at Charlie and Sam. "The boys and Marty are going to take a little trip up to his place on Tarpon Bay in that Ercoupe I bought from that busted tourist. I got mechanics working on it now. The rest of us are going to sit right here and let old man White and the State Patrol boys chase their tails like dogs after a tick."

Tad shook his head in an attempt to clear it. "Maybe I'm still drunk. I don't get it."

The fat man accepted a frosted beer mug from Molly. "It's really very simple," he explained. "We all go down to the bank tonight, say sometime after midnight. Sheriff White will have been in bed two hours by then. Charlie and Sam here will get us inside and crack the vault. Then they and Marty will take off in the plane for Tarpon Bay. We go back home and just sit. If the looted vault is discovered in time, and we'll see to it that it is, the sheriff will wire or phone ahead for the Tarpon Bay law to arrest Marty and Charlie and Sam and search the plane when it lands."

He laughed until his fat belly bobbed. "But the Tarpon Bay law won't find a thing. The boys will have dropped their tools and the bottle of soup somewhere over Big Cypress Swamp, and there won't be a penny of the bank loot in the place." He continued to laugh. "In fact they won't know a thing about the robbery. They just wanted to go to Tarpon Bay to do a little fishing. And Marty owning a tourist court there, and having been a flier in the war, they had him hire the plane from me."

Gainer licked the frost from his beer mug. "Next, or maybe at the same time, the local law hotfoots it here and over to my place. They tear both places to pieces. But again they don't find one penny of the loot. We don't even know what they're talking about." He snapped his fingers. "Presto. The one hundred and eighty grand has disappeared into thin air. And while White may be suspicious as hell, unless they find the money, they can't prove a thing on us." He sipped his beer. "But *we* know where it is. And we can pick it up any time we've a mind to."

Still dubious, Tad shook his head, "It sounds like a good trick if you can do it."

His throat tight, Marty asked, "And just what happens to me if I refuse to fly Charlie and Sam over the swamp to drop their tools and the soup can?"

The other man's small, fat-encased eyes bored into him like twin augers. "It won't be pleasant, Marty. I might just let your brothers beat some sense into you." He inclined his head at the two ex-convicts. "Or I might let Charlie and Sam take you down into the 'glades for a few miles and beat their cut of the money they could have had out of your hide. In either case, I'd foreclose on your mortgage and you'd be out of your tourist court. Look, why not snap out of it, Marty, and act your age? You aren't a chump. You know that once a man has a record, and you have one, the only way out of the rackets is the way that your old man took."

MARTY sat staring at the floor a moment, then, looking up, he shook his head. "No. That I won't buy, Gainer. I got out of the rackets three years ago."

The fat man chuckled. "That's what you think, son. You ever noticed how often the State Patrol stops in at your place?"

"So what?" Marty demanded.

"So," the other man said, "I saw to it that they were tipped that you are using

the court as a blind, that in reality you are acting as the middleman for half of the dope that comes into the Keys. The only reason you haven't been pinched is because the fools are still hoping to catch you with the goods." His eyes turned ugly. "And if you force me to be tough about it, while your body may never be found, I'll make certain enough cocaine and heroin is found in your place to explain your disappearance."

Marty got to his feet. A lot had been explained. He knew now why Sheriff White had acted as he had. He knew why May had refused to speak or even wave to him. "Why you flat slob," he exploded. "I'm going to kill you right now if it's the last—"

The blow caught him behind the ear and he spun into the wall off balance. Before he could raise his hands to defend himself his brother Tad hit him again.

"I've been wanting to do that for three weeks," the older man said coldly. Marty slid down the wall to the floor and Tad kicked him in the stomach. "That's for being so damn superior and so biggety." He looked at the fat man. "Now, let's have the rest of it, Pete. I get the business about the plane. That's to give Charlie and Sam a chance to ditch the evidence and to create a diversion. But where is the money all this time that the law is doing its searching?"

Marty rolled over on his side to ease his pain. Pete Gainer's husky rasp was faint and seemed to come from a great distance. "In the one place," the fat man said, "the law won't ever think to look for it."

Lait Blake ran his fingers through the thick black stubble on his chin. "And just where in hell is that?"

Pete Gainer chuckled. "Not quite in hell, but almost. Under your old man's coffin. The ground is loose, and it will be easy to handle. Catch on? We'll dig him up, ditch the dough in the grave and re-

plant him while Marty and the boys are creating a diversion by taking off in the Ercoupe."

The little blonde said, "I'll be damned. I will be. Now that's what I call clever." Crossing the room she snuggled up to her husband. "We're going to be rich, hear that, honey?" She looked at the man on the floor with distaste. "Go ahead, Tad. Kick him again. Kick some sense into Marty. . . ."

The plane, as far as Marty could tell by moonlight and without turning the engine over, seemed to be in good condition. Pete Gainer's husky rasp followed him as he made his inspection.

"Don't be a fool, Marty. There's nothing wrong with the plane. I'm not trying to pull a fast one on you. Your old man was my partner for twenty years. I liked him."

Marty doubted very much if the fat man had ever liked anyone but himself.

"I like you," Gainer continued. "And I'm sorry as hell about that beating you took this afternoon. You and I could have been good friends. We still can be."

Marty looked at his watch. It was fifteen minutes of twelve, almost time they joined the others in the shadows back of the bank. He wished Gainer would come to the point.

The fat man continued. "Your brothers are a pair of clowns, but your old man had brains. So have you. We could go a long ways together, Marty, if we had a good-sized stake to start on."

Finished with his inspection, Marty walked back to the car. He was finished with trying to go straight. Gainer had seen to that with the lying story he'd spread. The more he tried to explain, the more the law and May would think that he was trying to lie his way out of a spot. To hell with it. To hell with everything. A sixth of one hundred and eighty thousand dollars was thirty thousand dollars. That, plus the fifteen or sixteen thousand he

could probably sell the court for, would make enough for him to have himself one hell of a time. He would head for Havana the first thing, and from there on to Rio. Once the money was gone, he'd get some more somehow. Money was easy to get if a man wasn't too particular how he got it.

"Just what the hell are you driving at?" he asked the fat man.

Gainer pressed a gun into his hand. "One hundred and eighty divided by six is thirty. One hundred and eighty divided by two is ninety. And ninety thousand bucks is a lot of money. If it should happen, Marty, that Charlie and Sam should follow their tools into the swamp and when you got back here, Tad and Lait were—missing, this little caper we're going to cut would be really worth our while."

His stomach turning over, Marty got into the car without comment, and the fat man eased in the clutch.

Gainer continued talking as he drove, "What's more, all the blame would be pinned on them. The fool of a sheriff would think they had looted the bank and skipped and you and I would be sitting pretty."

The more he thought of the suggestion, the less it revolted Marty. He didn't owe Tad or Lait a thing. Both men had knocked him around ever since he had been a kid. Along with the old man, they were responsible for his having a record. And if a man was going to wallow in the

mud, he might as well make it worth his while. Still, this was murder.

"I'll think it over," he told the fat man.

Gainer's husky rasp was dry. "Fine. Just don't take too long, son. Remember, I'll have to know before you take off in the plane."

The airport wasn't far from town. Reaching the outskirts of Palm Harbor, the fat man took the beach road to come up on the bank from the rear. Tad and Lait and the two ex-cons were waiting in the shadow of a group of palms.

Charlie wanted to know if the plane was in good condition.

"As far as I can tell," Marty said.

Tad had been sober and drunk again. He was weaving slightly now. "And you can take the kid's word," he hiccuped. "He was a regular hero . . . an officer an' a gentlemun. He sat on the fron' porch of a B-29 an' flew it all over the place."

"Shut up," Gainer said curtly. "You're drunk. If you foul this up now, Tad—"

He left the threat unspoken, but it sobered the other man slightly. "I won't foul it up," Tad protested.

Lait looked at his watch. It was exactly midnight. If the roundsman was on time, he would pass the bank in five minutes. Lait drew his blackjack from his pocket and spit on it for luck. "He won't even know what hit him. When you hear a whippoorwill, that's it. Good luck."

He disappeared into the night.

Message from Garcia

Texas Artist Tells Why It's
Smart to Switch to Calvert

SAN ANTONIO, Texas—Tony R. Garcia, San Antonio artist and illustrator, knows that it's *taste* that counts in a whiskey. "Tell everybody," he says, "that I switched to Calvert because of its *mild, and smooth taste*."



CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N.Y.C.

CHARLIE and Sam picked up their heavy bags of tools and moved closer to the back door of the bank. Ignoring Pete Gainer's inquiring cough, Marty walked slowly toward his station in the dark areaway between the Bon Ton Sweet Shop and the Bijou. The long, single Main Street of Palm Key was bathed in moonlight and deserted.

He tried to put Tad's words out of his mind. "*A regular hero, an officer an' a gentlemun.*" He wondered what the boys in the day room would think if they could see him now, skulking in a dark areaway, one of a gang of bank robbers with even worse on his mind. He alone of the Fish Bayou Blakes had pulled himself out of the mire high enough to wear wings, only to allow himself to be grounded again, to sink even deeper in the mire.

He passed his palm over his forehead and found it beaded with sweat. So no one believed his story. So he was stamped as a two time loser and sent back to Raiford again. He still couldn't go through with this. He couldn't allow it to happen, let alone murder two men in cold blood. He must have been out of his mind to even consider it. The beating that Tad had given him must have jarred something loose.

A faint scuff of feet up the walk whirled him in that direction. The thing to do was warn the roundsman, send him for Sheriff White. The beads of sweat on his forehead turned cold as the call of a whip-poorwill sounded in front of the bank.

The roundsman had come from the opposite direction and Lait had slugged him on schedule. Charlie and Sam and Tad would be cutting the burglar alarm and forcing the back door of the bank. Both of the cracksmen had boasted that blowing the antique vault would only take a matter of minutes. Whatever was done, he would have to do. Perhaps he could send the approaching late pedestrian to sound the alarm.

The approaching feet had almost reached him now. Stepping out on the walk, he started to say, "Look, mister—" The words died in his mouth. It wasn't a man. It was May.

They stood a long moment, just looking at each other. The girl was the first to break the silence. "I—couldn't sleep," she said simply. There was no self pity in her voice. She was merely asking a question. "Why did such a thing have to happen to us, Marty? I know the pressure you were under from your father and your brothers. But after the wonderful start you'd made, why couldn't you go straight? Didn't you love me that much, Marty?"

She knows, Marty thought. *May knows*. Then he realized she was speaking of his alleged handling of dope. Both she and her father had been willing to forgive his past until Pete Gainer had spread the ugly rumor he was merely using his court as a 'drop.'

In a few seconds, all hell would pop loose.

"Look, May," he said gruffly. "Don't ask me why I'm doing this. I'm not quite certain myself. But get your father—fast. Tell him to round up a posse and bring them to the bank. Tell him the roundsman has been slugged unconscious and my brothers, Pete Gainer, two outside hoods and myself, are cracking open the vault."

Her eyes round in the moonlight, May gasped, "Marty! Are you crazy?"

A husky rasp answered from the dark areaway before Marty could. "Yeah. Sure. That's right, Miss. He's crazy." Pete Gainer's bulk followed the gun in his hand out on to the walk. "Now look what you've done," he reproved Marty. "You've got your girl friend into a mess. A bad one. Now we'll have to knock her on the head to shut her mouth." The fat man started toward Marty and May.

His lips tight, Marty said, "The hell you will." Ignoring the gun in the fat man's hand, he drew his own gun, leveled it on

Gainer's belly and pulled the trigger three times. He heard three clicks.

"See what I mean?" Gainer purred. "Don't ever trust anyone, son. Hell. You wouldn't have lasted five seconds in Chicago in the old days."

Marty pulled the trigger again. There was a fourth metallic click.

Gainer raised the gun in his hand. Its muzzle was pointing at Marty, but the fat man looked at May. "My gun is loaded," he warned her, "and if you open your mouth to as much as peep, I'm afraid I'll have to splatter your boy friend's brains all over the sidewalk."

She swallowed, hard. "No. Please. I won't scream."

The fat man smiled. "That's better." He motioned them into the dark areaway from which he had just emerged. "Now if you both will be so kind as to walk ahead of me."

Halfway to the bank, Marty heard a dull boom. Charlie and Sam had been as good as their word. The actual cracking of the vault had only taken them a few minutes. May's hand found her way into his.

"I'm sorry, Marty," she whispered. "That other—that was a lie, wasn't it?"

His eyes dull, Marty nodded. He should have had sense enough to know that Gainer wouldn't have trusted him with a loaded gun. He could see the whole thing now. The fat man had hoped that somewhere over Big Cypress Swamp he would pull the unloaded gun on the two box men and that in the ensuing struggle that was bound to follow both the plane and its three passengers would crash. Gainer also, undoubtedly, had plans for Tad and Lait.

This bank job was his clean-up. With one hundred and eighty thousand dollars, and no one left alive to point an accusing finger, the fat man would be set for life.

Now he might have to change his plans slightly. Marty's fingers tightened on the butt of his unloaded gun. At least he could use it as a club.

The whippoorwill sounded again as they neared the back door of the bank. This time it came from Tad, who was staggering out of the bank with two heavily loaded feed sacks slung across his broad shoulders.

Carrying their canvas bags of tools, Charlie and Sam followed on his heels. "Like cutting a cheese," Sam said.

Lait rounded the back corner of the bank. "All set?" He opened his mouth to say more and saw May and Marty. "What the hell?" he demanded.

The fat man talked fast. "We'll have to change our plans a little. The airplane is out. I caught Marty tipping off the dame. We'll bury the money, as planned. Then we'll have to take one of the boats and drop the tools and Marty and the dame in about twenty fathoms." He added as an afterthought, "We can use the tools to weigh them down."

Charlie set down his tools and drew a gun. "So he sneezed to the sheriff's daughter, eh? Well, there's only one thing to do with a rat like him."

Gainer caught his wrist. "Stop it, you stir-crazy fool! You can shoot him on the boat, but not here. What do you want to do, wake up the whole town?"

An uneasy silence followed the question. An awakened squirrel began to chatter

(Continued on next page)

ANTONIO SAN JUAN, noted Philippine bandit, was so slippery that after he was dead and buried, Judge de la Rosa gave him a six-month sentence, "Just to be sure he doesn't start anything."

—George Carson

(Continued from preceding page)

angrily in the top of a tall pine tree.

Breathing hard, Tad said, "Come on. Let's get out of here and plant the dough under the old man. It's life for me this time if I'm caught."

Still gripping his gun, Marty said, "That's better than saying hello to the old man, Tad."

SHIFTING the currency-filled feed sacks on his shoulders, Tad demanded, "What are you talking about?"

The fat man wheezed, "Don't listen to him, Tad. He's just trying to save his own two-timing hide."

Marty held up the gun in his hand. "Yeah. Sure. That's why Pete gave me this gun. I was to use it on Charlie and Sam while he took care of you boys. Only it isn't loaded. He wanted the plane to crash, then when you boys had 'disappeared,' the blame would be pinned on you.

Sam set down his bag of tools. A faint glimmering of light was beginning to filter through the scar tissue the ex-con used for brains. "We was to be patsys, huh? Pete meant to glam the whole take."

There was terror in the fat man's voice. "Don't you believe that, Sam. Look, we've got to get out of here. We'll talk it all over on the boat."

"Sure," Marty needed. "And a lot of talking you'll do, Sam, with a forty-five slug in your back."

The box man shook his head. "To hell with that. No one two-times me and Charlie."

Sensing the hell about to pop, Marty swept May off her feet and into a clump of bushes with a backward sweep of his arm. Sam fired through his pocket—too late.

With the cat-like grace of some fat men, Gainer had stepped to one side, firing as he moved. A round spot appeared on

Sam's forehead. In the moonlight it looked brown.

"You killed him," Charlie gasped. His own gun swept up belching fire just as Gainer shot again. The fat man grunted in pain but stayed on his feet. The ex-con opened his mouth. It worked in silent anger. Then a gush of blood drowned the words that he was trying to say and he pitched forward on his face.

Now lights were coming on in isolated windows. Gainer's voice was a bleat of terror. "Shoot the dame and Marty," he ordered, "then let's get out of here!"

He flipped a shot at Marty as he spoke. The big youth felt it burn through his side and attempted to close with the fat man. A grunt from his brother stopped him.

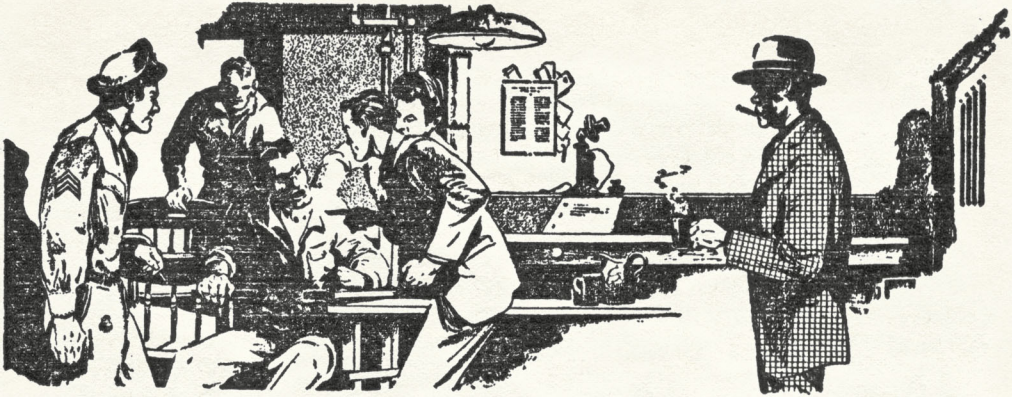
"Sure," Tad agreed. "And swing for murder, eh, while you go free with the dough? No dice, Pete. Me and Lait may just be dumb crackers, but no one, not even you, is going to double cross us." Let him have it, Lait, and *we'll* skip with the money." Both he and Lait emptied their guns at Gainer.

The fat man's body jerked with the impact of the heavy slugs, but he stayed on his feet long enough to pull the trigger of his gun. Lait lifted a hand in protest, lowered it to his abdomen and fell across Charlie's knees. Gainer backed to the bole of a royal palm, leaned his back against it and slid down the tree to the ground.

Breathing in great gasps now, ignoring both Marty and the girl in his mounting fear of the growing lights in the windows of the houses on the street back of the bank, Tad Blake picked up the heavy sacks again and staggered swiftly toward the parked car. Pitching the sacks in the back seat, he yanked open the front door only to freeze in terror as Gainer called from the bole of the palm tree.

"Give my regards to your old man, Tad." The fat man's voice was thick with blood.

(Continued on page 129)



THE THIRD DEGREE

By Hallack McCord

(Answers on page 113)

WHAT kind of a "private eye" would you make? Or, put differently, if called in to work on any number of different kinds of crimes, do you think you'd have the know-how about crimes and criminals to get the job done? Test yourself on the following twenty questions, and see how you rate as a sleuth. Answer 17 or more of them and you're excellent. Answer fifteen or sixteen and you're good. But slide much below fourteen, and you're in a class with the average boys. Good luck!

1. Generally speaking, if you were called in to solve a jewelry store robbery, would you look for an experienced or inexperienced crook?

2. True or false. Small payroll holdups are generally conducted by older men who operate in pairs.

3. True or false. Revenge is seldom a motive where arson is concerned.

4. If a crook acquaintance of yours told you they were thinking of sending him to the "fit house," what would you think he was talking about?

5. In the language of the underworld, what is the meaning of the term, "Em?"

6. If a man you knew had recently been in prison told you over the phone that he had just "hit the bricks," what would you think he meant?

7. According to convict slang, what is a "herder?"

8. True or false? When a criminal is said to have a long "pedigree," this means that he has a long criminal record.

9. If, as a private eye, you heard that a man you were looking for was "on the loop," which of the following things would you do? Lock your office door and arm yourself? Get in your car and hit the road?

10. If called in to investigate a poison murder, would you think it possible that bichloride of mercury had been used to kill

the victim if he didn't die for six days after being poisoned?

11. If rigor mortis set in rapidly in the body of a man who had been poisoned, would you suspect that he had been poisoned with strychnine?

12. What are some of the reasons why a desert is not a very good place to try and conceal a murder victim?

13. True or false? Dope addicts virtually never drink liquor.

14. If, during an investigation, the chief of detectives asked you to hand him some "readers," which of the following would you hand him?

A pair of dark glasses? Some marked playing cards? A pair of glass eyes?

15. In the language of the crook, what is the difference between a "reef" and a "reefer?"

16. When a bunch of crooks are conducting a robbery, what are the duties of the man known as a "soldier?"

17. True or false? A "speed ball" is an injection of dope.

18. True or false? "Lands" are the raised spiral surfaces within a rifle barrel.

19. True or false? A "whisky cutter" is a crook who runs cheap whisky across the United States border, duty free.

20. True or false? A "wing waiter" is a prison mail carrier.

I.O.U.—ONE GRAVE

Mr. Spelt's story about the I.O.U.'s was full of holes—but then, so was Mr. Spelt—and neither of them was worth the juice it would take to fry a good cop!

"Where's them I.O.U.'s, smart guy?" the one in the cap snarled. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Bullet Caper

H EAVEN was crying over Reno, and Reno was wishing it would cut it out. As for myself, I agreed with Reno.

This particular day, I was swinging my leg over the arm of the chair and peering out the window, grinning my sympathy at a knot of people who were waiting all nice and wet for a bus which was late. It sure was raining, and business sure was bad. Even the mailman was late.

The phone had just started to ring and I had just started to drag it over. In my hand it snarled tinnily at me.

"Edward Gates," I said, not very peppy. On the other end came back a small,

agitated voice which said, "Mr. Gates, this is the law office of Emerson Spelt. Mr. Spelt speaking. Mr. Gates, your name was given to me by another attorney—recommended to me, I mean to say."

"Mr. Spelt?" I said. I listened to myself saying it. It sounded like an egg falling on linoleum.

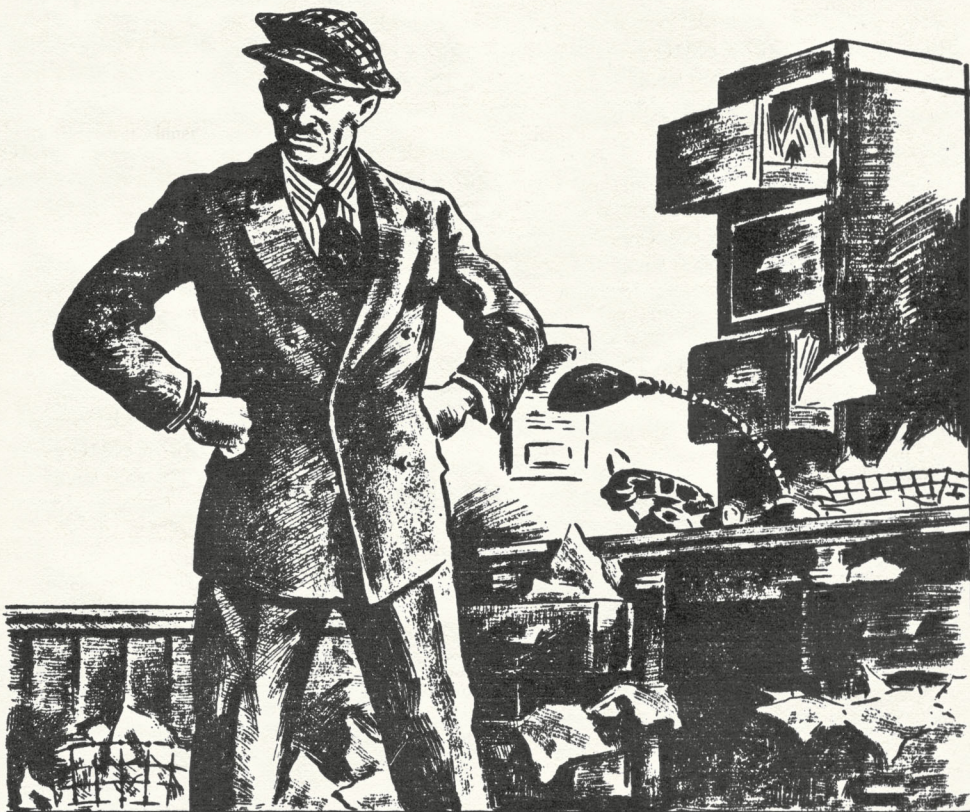
"Mr. Gates, I have a rush job—confidential and most important. I want to see you."

"You mean now, Mr. Spelt—in this rain?"

The voice came back again, still small and a little worried. "It is *very* important, Mr. Gates."

I sighed. "Okay. Shortly, then. Thanks for the call." I pronged out, swung around and studied the rain again. It was really

By Dean Evans



coming down now. Heaven was going a little overboard on the deal.

Uh-uhh. Not right now I wouldn't go out. The rain would have to let up some first. Nobody would go out in a storm like this. I watched a guy in a hotrod go by like an egg beater in a bowl of cream. Well, I thought, hardly anybody.

It let up a little after lunch. Spelt had an office over in the Legal Block, which is a huge, squat building right in the middle of downtown Reno that houses a bank on the ground floor and lawyers offices above. Nice. Refined.

I got out of the elevator on the sixth floor and went down a cork-lined corridor, my feet making a noise like an ant pulling a dead fly. No noise came from the sound-proofed offices on either side.

I turned the knob of a mahogany door that said 615 on it in gold leaf. I went into a waiting room. The furniture—spindly stuff—was quietly grouped about a circular table that held a few expensive magazines. There was a big floor lamp behind one of the chairs, and over against one wall was a steno's desk with a typewriter on top. Nobody sat at the desk. The doll was probably still out to lunch.

In the right wall was a door. In the left wall was also a door, I took the one on the right. Wrong. You'd think they'd have had a little sign or something on it to let you know. I tried the one on the left, and entered a silent room.

In the exact center of a wash-grey rug was a mahogany desk. There were three objects on the desk. One, a pie-plate-looking thing which I recognized as a prospector's pan—only a souvenir, for it was gold plated—served for a correspondence basket. In this prospector's pan was a check made out to me for one hundred simoleons. The third and last object was a scrap of paper, and on it were written these three names:

Hale Tucker
Emily
Anthonv Marlo

The last—the Anthony Marlo name—was going down hill as though the person who had written it were awfully tired.

The small man who had done this particular writing had a bud rose in his lapel and was seated behind the mahogany desk. His eyes were staring into mine and he held a pencil in his right hand.

I went around behind the desk. He had grey hair. He wore glasses. I opened his suit coat, avoiding the dark red spot on the left side, reached into his breast pocket, got out his wallet and looked in it, and then swallowed a couple of times, very hard.

Mr. Spelt was dead.

The check had been made out on a check-writing machine. I began to sweat. Even if I tore the thing up, the steno would remember, and I'd be dragged in anyhow, so I picked up Mr. Spelt's telephone and dialed Homicide and worried about the way my luck was beginning to run.

DETECTIVE Lieutenant Avila had eyes that looked like dishes of Spanish rice still hot from the oven. He said a few things at me, like "the embalmer's friend." He looked at the body of Spelt. He looked at the check made out to me. He looked at the scrap of paper with the three names on it.

I said distinctly, "I could have just gone away and forgot the whole thing. Instead, I played it square and called you and waited."

He smiled at me for that, letting his eyes flick over at the hundred dollar check. Then he took my .38 from me, examined it carefully, handed it back.

"Tell it," he said softly.

"He called me on the phone. Said he was Emerson Spelt, a lawyer. Had a rush job for me. I waited till the rain let up and then came over. I found everything just like this."

"Period?"

"Period." I wiped my forehead and waited.

Avila picked up the scrap of paper on the desk and read the three names aloud. "How well do you know this Hale Tucker?" he asked.

"Not at all."

"Miss Tucker is the owner and operator of a gaming club downtown known as the Golden Bubble," Avila explained.

"I have never heard of Miss Tucker before."

"How about the others? This Emily? Anthony Marlo?"

"I have never heard of them before either," I said.

I sat down and waited and listened after that, while Avila phoned Homicide. I heard a scraping noise outside in the reception room. I figured it was the steno back from lunch. *What a surprise she'd get*, I thought.

Avila looked up from the phone. "You can go," he said abruptly. "Be in my office at four to sign a statement."

"Okay," I said, and headed for the door.

"And Gates?"

I turned around. "Yeah?"

"Keep the license clean."

"Yeah," I said. I went out. The steno raised eyes at me. I raised eyes at her and left the office.

Avila had let me go on my face value and it was good of him, I wasn't forgetting that. Eventually, Spelt's hundred dollar check would be turned over to me and I could either spend it or tear it up, since I hadn't earned it. I was lucky, and it was no further any of my business.

I went over to the *Golden Bubble* on Virginia Street. It was a quiet little place with an amber neon you could hardly see more than eight miles away, and it had a quiet little doorman six foot three in quiet black and tan.

Inside, the walls were tan and black.

One wall—the rear—was a huge mural of a champagne glass out of which were effervescing golden bubbles, and seemingly borne on the popping of same was a scantily-clad blonde.

There was a hush in the place broken only by the muted clicks of one roulette wheel, and the gentle cough of a handsome gent known to the suckers as a croupier. Over in a horseshoe alcove a few dollar machines were louder, but that could be excused, for they were paying the rent.

Nowhere did I see anyone I thought might be Miss Hale Tucker.

Let into the right wall and leading dimly onward was an opening. Barroom. I went to the other end. The bartender, a beefy man in a dark brown woolen shirt and a starched white apron, waddled down my way.

"Whatcha like, doc?"

"Miss Hale Tucker," I said.

"You would, huh? And after that, what, doc?"

"Just that. I lost my wrist watch in here the other night. Thought maybe it was turned in at the office." I showed a bare right wrist where I never wear a watch.

"Oh?" He scratched his head, brought the fingers down in front of his eyes. "What kind of a watch, doc?"

"I'll identify it to Miss Tucker," I told him.

He shrugged. "First door to the left, behind them drapes."

The office was done in tan and black. Tan thick carpet. Tan leather chairs and sofa with two ebony ash trays big enough for cemetery urns. In one corner was a tan and black desk and seated behind it was a good-looking woman dressed in a tan wool suit. She had wonderful blonde hair done short, a tiny nose, and jet black eyes.

"Miss Tucker?"

She said yes.

"Miss Tucker, a man named Spelt was

shot dead in his office today. I wondered if you might know why."

She didn't move her eyes from mine. Her left hand reached for a cigarette, tucked it between soft, red lips. She lit the cigarette, took a deep puff—and blew smoke straight into my face. It bothered her that much.

"In his office," I said again. "I found him. A few minutes ago."

"Oh? Who are you?"

"Edward Gates. Soft shoe for hire. Spelt had called me on the phone a few minutes before he died."

She blew more smoke and smiled faintly. "That's quite a name, isn't it? Spelt, I mean."

I tried again. "He had written your name on a scrap of paper before he died."

The walls didn't cave in. A little ash fell from her cigarette but you couldn't count that—it might have been due to fall anyhow.

She only said, "I see."

"Detective Lieutenant Avila from Homicide has the paper now. He wanted to know how well I knew you. Next he'll be wanting to know how well you knew Spelt."

Her eyes batted once. Then she carefully crushed the cigarette in an ash tray and stood up behind the desk. She let her eyes look into mine, and she whispered,

"I'm a nice girl. I've always been a nice girl. I always will be a nice girl."

It was a litany. You wait until the silence goes away before you wisecrack at a time like that. As a matter of fact, it was she who spoke again.

"Why have you come to me, Mr. Gates?"

"I don't exactly know, Miss Tucker. Maybe a hunch. Maybe just a desire to learn something that I can give to Lieutenant Avila so he can chew on it and leave me alone to go back to my office and worry peacefully about where the rent's coming from, like I used to do back

in the gay, happy, carefree days before this morning."

She thought about that for a long time. "You have a client now?" Her eyes were troubled.

I said, "No."

She sat down again, got a checkbook out of a desk drawer, wrote in it. She handed me the check. It was made out to me in the amount of five hundred dollars and it looked real, just as though I could cash it and clutch the money in my two tight fists. The only thing wrong with it was that my clients don't generally do it that way.

She came around from behind the desk, all business.

"I didn't know Emerson Spelt personally, Mr. Gates. One of his clients—a middle-aged woman who was also a patron of this club—gave me some I.O.U.'s for a gambling debt. I thought they were worthless. Recently, Mr. Spelt came in, introduced himself, and paid them off." She stopped, but her eyes didn't stop staring straight into mine. "This five hundred dollar check I've given you is to find out who killed him."

"I see. Thanks. But it's a little puzzling. Spelt wasn't a friend of yours, I take it. I take it, also, neither was the gambling patron. If I'm a little thick today, forgive it."

Her dark eyes almost smiled at that, not quite, but almost.

"Let's just say my interest is somewhat like your own," she said. "I just want Detective Lieutenant Avila to have something to chew on so I can go back to worrying peacefully about where the rent's coming from, like I used to do back in the gay, happy, carefree days before this morning."

Well, she had me, but five hundred bucks—to somebody who's worrying over rent—seemed a little steep. Until, that is, I remembered the deluxe set-up outside in the gaming room, with the high class rou-

lette wheels, the college-bred croupiers, the informal mural on the back wall, and the tan and black doorman outside.

"You're a great little kiddier." I said. She didn't answer that one, so I backed out of the tan and black office.

The first thing I did was deposit the check in the bank. Then I had lunch. I dawdled over the third cup of coffee, wondering just how much trouble I was buying for five hundreds dollars. There wasn't any way of telling, so I gave it up, and went back through the rain to my office.

CHAPTER TWO

Hard Blonde

I NEVER keep the office door locked. There isn't any need for it. And that's why it happened like it did when I opened the door and went in.

They came at me from out of nowhere—the tall one and the short one. The tall one had a gun, and it wasn't a gun I'd be forgetting. It was a Luger with a long barrel and a big sight on the front end.

The short one was ratty-eyed and had a cap pulled over his eyes such as nobody wears anymore except maybe the few people who still do wear them.

The short guy said, "Heist, smallpox!" He didn't have any gun. A joker. I heisted like he requested.

The thin guy turned me, backed me into the room. The short one went around me and locked the door on the inside.

"Hold it!" the short one said. I stopped. The thin one didn't say anything.

The short one pawed me, got my .38 from under my arm. "Look," he said, chuckling. "The mug carries himself a rod." He scattered the shells around the room, threw the open .38 into the waste basket.

The thin one took a tighter grip on the Luger and raised it and set the muzzle on the very tip of my nose. He held it there carefully. It felt as cold as a dead Eskimo.

The one with the cap went through my billfold. "Where's them I.O.U.'s?" he grunted.

"I.O.U.'s?" I said. "Look. If you jokers don't get the hell out of here in one second flat you're going to think the roof fell in."

It was a brave speech, a stout speech. It scared them silly. The one with the cap said, "Listen to that." He went over to the filing cabinet, looked at it. "Didn't have time to sniff around," he said. "You interrupted us just as we got here."

That was his apology before he tore the cabinet apart. Letters, folders, everything. He threw them all on the floor. The place was more of a mess than usual.

"Wonder about the desk?" he mused. "Should of thought about that first." He

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went through that too, scattering everything on top of what had come out of the filing cabinets. It didn't take him long and it didn't make him happy.

"Where the hell you got 'em?" he demanded. There wasn't any fun in his voice now. The skinny one coughed gently. I looked at him. And just then I looked at something else, something more important. The way he was holding the Luger—pulled slightly to his left—I could see the grip by almost crossing my eyes. And above the grip of a Luger is the safety.

It was on.

I raised my right leg off the floor and smashed my knee into him. He didn't bother with a chair when he sat down; he wasn't that particular. The floor suited him fine.

I grabbed for the Luger, got it and swooped around in a turn that should have put me on a line with where the short one was standing. It didn't. And then, like I'd told them it would, the roof caved in. Trouble with that was, it caved on me.

Somebody was saying, over and over, "C'mon, Gates, your head's harder than that."

Gradually I got used to the idea I'd been sapped. I recognized the voice, of course. It was Avila from Homicide. I opened up my eyes and looked at him.

"Who sapped you?" he asked.

"A short joker with a cap pulled down over his eyes."

"Why?"

"He wanted some I.O.U.'s," I said. "He had a partner. A guy with a Luger, Skinny. The guy was, I mean."

"What I.O.U.'s?"

"He wasn't good enough to tell me."

Avila rubbed his chin and said, "H'mm." He looked thoughtful. Once he turned to me and asked if I was feeling okay, and then he went back to looking thoughtful. I got up on my feet and sat on the corner of the desk and looked at the mess of papers on the floor. I was

doing a little thinking on my own. Ten to one those hard boys were after the I. O. U.'s Hale Tucker had told me about. And that was where I'd made my first big mistake, it looked like, for I'd told Avila I didn't know what I. O. U.'s.

Suddenly Avila smiled. "I'm glad you saw Miss Tucker over at the Golden Bubble. It wasn't any of your business and considering the mess you're in, you were a fool, but I'm glad, Gates. This way, you can keep on with the case just as though you were on the force. I want you to report every single thing you learn, to me. As fast as you learn it." He stopped, studied me. "I'm being rather decent, you know. I could jug you on a murder rap. You're the logical one."

"I won't do it, Avila," I said. "I'm nobody's little errand boy."

He just smiled. "I think perhaps you will. Find out if you can who those two were—why they wanted the I. O. U.'s. What I. O. U.'s too, incidentally. Report back to me." His smile became broader as he turned and started for the office door. "This is just as though you were on the force, isn't it?" he said pleasantly.

The rain was still coming down, and I should have stood in bed and everything. The mailman hadn't come—now how the hell would I be knowing that, with the office the mess it was? I was worried.

If Miss Hale Tucker were a nice girl, had always been a nice girl, and would always be a nice girl, like she had said, how come she hadn't told Avila about those I. O. U.'s I didn't like it. I didn't like it one damned bit.

I went home to my apartment and lay down and fell asleep.

IT WAS six o'clock and I was home in the kitchen cooking up a little mess of baked beans out of a can when the knock came. I pushed the beans off the burner and went to the door. You

should have seen what I saw. I laughed.

He looked about twenty-nine. He was wearing an undernourished-looking grey fedora, a green gabardine topcoat with dark spots on it from the rain and grey gabardine pants. Under the topcoat I could see the blaze of a sport jacket that wasn't any yellower than butter. Puffed up under his chin was a beautiful silk muffler delicately tinted orchid. The muffler meant he wasn't wearing any shirt. And that completed him except for an ebony cane with a pearl handle.

He said, "Ah," and came on in. He doffed the fedora.

I said, "Ah," back at him.

He took the cane from his left wrist, laid it against my easy chair. Then he removed the green topcoat, folded it with the silk lining out, and draped it across the back of the same chair. "Afraid I wouldn't find you home," he said, showing me white teeth along with a smile. "Anthony Marlo, you know."

"Sorry all to hell," I said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm not Anthony Marlo."

He looked slightly annoyed. "I am Anthony Marlo." He gave me a hand that looked as though it hadn't once been to the manicurist's all day long. I took the hand. I put it back again.

He shook his head, said sadly, "I've just learned about poor old Spelt. Too bad."

I said, "Somebody put a bullet in him."

"Ah, yes. The police said. Who, I wonder?"

I lit a cigarette. So this was Anthony Marlo.

"Emily is simply distraught," he said, working at his face a little, trying to get the right register.

I waited.

"He was her lawyer, you know. In fact—" he cleared his throat carefully—"they were once man and wife."

He had me. I said, "Who is Emily?"

"Emily Ackerman. Didn't you know?"

"No," I said truthfully. "I didn't know. She and Spelt were once married?"

"He was her husband. Divorced. And we—that is, Emily and I—were wondering if you'd be the one who had the I. O. U.'s?"

The cigarette almost fell out of my lips. First it was two jokers—and now this. I said, "I. O. U.'s?" Keeping my voice casual.

Long eyelashes batted twice. "Gambling I. O. U.'s, as you know, Gates."

"Just why should I have them? She didn't give them to me, I don't suppose."

"Well hardly. She gave them to Miss Tucker at the Golden Bubble. However, it seems poor old Spelt redeemed them recently. The only thing is. . . ."

"You'd like to know who has them now."

"Ah!"

"Maybe the police," I offered. He didn't say anything to that. He waited, knowing that sooner or later I'd figure it out for myself. Which I did.

"You think I got to Spelt, knocked him off and took the I. O. U.'s?" I asked.

He smiled a lovely smile. "A thousand dollars, shall we say, Gates? Quite generous, considering they're no good to anybody. It would be such a load off Emily's mind. . . ."

"How old is Emily?" I asked abruptly.

"Forty-eight, I believe. Not old, Gates."

I nodded. "Uh-huh. And now, how old are you?"

"Are we getting snide, Gates?" His lips curled. On anybody else it would have been a sneer. But it didn't last long. He batted his eyes and suddenly the glare faded. He reached for the topcoat, got it on. He adjusted the fedora, picked up the ebony cane.

"Isn't that a lovely cane," I said nastily. "Tell me, where ever did you get it?"

He fooled me. He said pleasantly, "So many people ride me about that, Gates. But I have to wear it. War wound, you know. Europe. Battle of the Bulge."

Me and my big mouth again. Sometimes the war seems so far away you're inclined to forget a little. You're inclined to forget the guys who never will be able to forget.

"I'm sorry, guy. Forgive the flip."

"No offense, Gates. No offense." He opened the door, started to go out and then he stopped.

"About the I. O. U.'s . . . no rush, old man. Think it over. Ins and outs in all businesses. I understand. Just remember the easy grand that can be yours. 'Night!'"

And then he went out, and the door closed behind him and left me standing by the easy chair, trying to get a grip on something that didn't have any handles. I didn't think the two jokers who'd jumped me in my office could have been from him. I didn't know why, but it didn't seem to fit him. His ticket had a G for gigolo on it and he belonged currently to Emily Ackerman—or else I wasn't wearing my head again this season.

I went out to the kitchen and made a pot of coffee and drank half of it and waited for the glow from it. The glow didn't come, and that was bad, for what I had made up my mind to do needed a glow bad.

I got the scotch bottle down from the shelf and held it to my mouth and let it burn a hole down to the soles of my shoes. I let it burn a hole a half pint wide.

Without any supper preceding it, the scotch worked fine. The glow came almost at once. I got on my coat and left home.

THE Golden Bubble was busy now. I floated past the big doorman, floated inside. Roulette wheels were madly busy. They looked fine. Crap tables were busy too, the dealers even

looking a little alive. The dollar machines were still paying the rent. I drifted around the tables. Ducked under the eight-foot arch to the barroom. I gave the barman a smile off the right side of my face and padded over to the office door.

She was still in tan and black, but she'd changed to an evening dress. She was still behind the desk.

"Rain's good for the sagebrush," I said distinctly.

"Good evening, Mr. Gates."

Sounded to me she was sober as hell. I disapproved of her. I disapproved of her dark eyes, her tiny nose, her wonderful blonde hair, money and all.

I got out my fountain pen and check book and started to write a decent signature on a five-hundred dollar-check. Whilst doing this I talked to her to keep up my end of the conversation.

"The two jokers you sent, Miss Tucker? Remember? Short one with a cap; skinny one with a Luger? H'mm? Sorry I had to knee the skinny one. Tell the short one for me that's a dandy sap he biffed me with." It was hard—even with all my glow—to sign away five hundred dollars.

"They didn't get the I. O. U.'s," I said, mainly because I didn't have 'em. Sorry all to hell."

I handed her the check.

"You're drunk, Gates."

"Correkit," I answered. "But you see, I don't like clients who don't trust me. I don't like the hard boys you send to keep tabs on me."

"I did not send any hard boys, Mister Gates. I don't know what you're talking about."

She lied in her teeth. And to think how loyal I'd been to her when Avila asked me 'what I. O. U.'s' in my office and I'd said I didn't know.

"Shame on you!" I said. I leaned over the desk. I could get the scent from the perfume in her hair now. It was lovely

and I hated it. So I jabbed the check in her face and said,

"You Judas, you."

I was suddenly down on my stomach with a mouthful of the heavy nap from the rug. I had a vague idea how I'd gotten there. I shook my head and looked up.

"Dammit. If you were a man, I'd punch you in the nose."

"That was to sober you up, Mr. Gates," she said. "Now listen to me." There wasn't any fun in her voice. Not a bit. I got up off the rug and began to listen.

"First, I didn't send any hard boys, as you call them. I don't employ any hard boys. Second, if I hadn't trusted you and needed you, you'd be in jail right now."

I gawked. "Huh?"

"When Lieutenant Avila came to see me, I told him you had been here. When I established my alibi for the probable time of the lawyer's death, he suddenly wanted to pin the murder on you."

"Jeepers!" I complained.

"It seems he had also gotten alibis from both Emily Ackerman and Anthony Marlo. That left only you—holding a large empty sack."

"So why didn't he jug me?"

"Because my family has a small amount of influence in Reno, Mr. Gates. We very seldom use it, but it's there all the same. I thought it justifiable this once."

I was stone sober now. "It isn't because of my good looks," I said coldly.

"No, Mr. Gates."

"Nor my money."

"No, Mr. Gates." There was a long silence before her next words came. And when they did they were directed at the desk blotter in front of her.

"Do you remember my saying this morning I was a nice girl, I always had been a nice girl, and that I always would be a nice girl?"

I nodded.

"That wasn't quite true. I've done something wrong and I'm not proud of it. What I didn't tell you this morning was that a man named Anthony Marlo came to me not long ago and told me Miss Ackerman had some property in Davidson City. He said it was so located that it would make an excellent spot for a tourist motel and gaming club combined. I checked into it and found he was right. I offered Miss Ackerman ten thousand dollars for the property. She refused."

I waited.

"I happen to know she's penniless—and yet she refused, Mr. Gates."

"Pretty odd," I said brightly.

"Exactly. I wanted the property very badly. I couldn't understand why she wouldn't sell."

"And then what?"

"Then this Marlo man suggested I use the I. O. U.'s as sort of blackmail."

"Oh-oh!"

"I offered to tear them up if she'd sell."



"Elementary!" says Watson

CAIRO, ILL.—Calvin Watson, Cairo businessman, says it's easy to pick today's best whisky buy. "Judge taste, lightness, mildness, flavor—and you'll switch to Calvert. I did. Elementary!"

She refused. Then I threatened her with scandal over them. Then I just threatened." She stopped, looked me straight in the eyes and said, "I even went so far as to have her car smashed up."

"And then Spelt redeemed the I. O. U.'s and there you were."

"Yes. I was glad in a way. I was thoroughly ashamed of myself by that time. It was a relief to get rid of them."

"And yet now you want 'em back again. Isn't that just a little odd?"

"Not necessarily. If Marlo killed Spelt—mind you, I don't say he did—and took those I. O. U.'s, he could pull the whole thing over again on Miss Ackerman with someone else, don't you see? And perhaps something worse. That's why I want those bits of paper. I want them destroyed, Mr. Gates."

"I see," I said. "And your penance is five hundred dollars."

Her face turned red. I watched warily for that uppercut and said quickly, "I wonder why she won't sell?"

"I wonder myself. Perhaps sentiment. The land was part of the settlement when she was divorced, you know."

"Oh? No, I didn't. And there's the ex-husband, Spelt. Why him in the picture? I suppose he must have paid for the I. O. U.'s out of his own pocket?"

"Yes, I suppose. But is that really strange? Couldn't it be perhaps that somewhere inside of him he still loved the woman? I can understand that, Mr. Gates."

This—coming from a woman who'd just slapped me in the face. And then I thought of something funny. I said, "Marlo just offered me a thousand dollars for the I. O. U.'s. That means he didn't kill Spelt, or if he did, he didn't get 'em."

Her eyes widened. She gasped, "No! And are you . . . are you still working for . . . me? After that?"

I let her suffer. Served her right for

slugging me. I grinned, turned around and started for the door. Not saying anything. I got the doorknob in my fist. I turned it. I slowly pulled the door open and started to go on through.

"Mr. Gates!"

I turned around and looked at her eyes.

"You ain't so damned tough after all, lady. A lot of money in the bank, a swank gambling club and a hard front. But underneath, not tough at all."

She said quickly, softly, "Edward?" She didn't mind me now. She was only a kid after all, and she was a frightened kid at that. It was splashed all over her face.

I finally said, "I didn't take his offer."

I closed the office door behind me. She'd called me Edward. I could think of that as I went to sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Rigged Murder

I WOULD have thought that on a rainy night they'd not have bothered. Or if they had, they'd have been more careful. I noticed the rain spots and the wet footprints on the hall runner as soon as I got out of the elevator at my floor. From the elevator, the spots and prints made a nice straight line to my door. Two sets of spots, and two sets of footprints. And they stopped at my door, they didn't go away again. That meant they were inside, waiting to welcome me.

I went down the hall, passed my door, went to the fire escape stairway. On a small platform adjoining the stairway I keep my garbage pail. I looked down at the floor near the pail. No spots here. No footprints either. I lifted the pail away from the service door to my apartment and ever so silently keyed the lock and went in.

The kitchen was dark. They were in the living room. Through the open doorway I could see them both, and they didn't look

any more appealing than they had in my office. The short one still had on his cap; the skinny one wore the same old Luger in his skinny hand. Where they were sitting they had a swell view—and coverage—of my front door.

I didn't have my gun. It was still at the office. The next best thing was a saucer off the kitchen shelf. I got one, and holding it above my head, I let it smash to the floor.

They would have liked to pretend they hadn't heard it. I could see the short one stiffen. The skinny one didn't move, but the Luger he held trembled perceptibly. They whispered something. Then the skinny one got up and took a step or two toward the kitchen. He stopped.

"All right, Gates," the short one said, "you can come out now. We've got you dead flat."

I held my breath. The skinny one shrugged a little and took a few more steps toward the kitchen. If I were him, I wouldn't have done that.

When he came through the kitchen doorway he felt around for a light switch. He didn't find it. He came on in, turned right to go around the stove. I let him have it with the scotch bottle, and he went to sleep with broken glass in his hair and expensive whiskey running down off his forehead.

The short one in the living room must have died four times. He croaked, "Alf?"

in a shaking voice. I heard him get up.

So this was Alf, huh? I gave Alf a boot in the gut. Alf didn't seem to mind. I reached down to get his Luger. I heard my front door bang open. By the time I got into the living room, Alf's pal must have been a block away, for the room was empty.

I sat down and called Homicide and waited until Lieutenant Avila knocked on my door a few minutes later.

They had to take Alf away in an ambulance, he was out so cold. Avila frowned over that. Me, I frowned at the appalling waste of my good scotch on the skinny guy's head.

After that Avila examined the Luger.

"I shouldn't be telling you this, Gates," he frowned, "but it was a Luger that killed Spelt. The Lab boys made it late this afternoon."

"You think it was him?" I asked, wondering. The skinny one, somehow, hadn't seemed a killer. He hadn't seemed anything at all, though, come to think of it. He hadn't said one word to me.

"I wouldn't know. Now that we have this guy's Luger, we'll soon know. They were the same two who came to your office earlier?"

"Yeah."

"You wouldn't like to tell me anything you've learned about this business, Gates? Ease your mind a little?"

I grinned. "I sure would, Avila. Only

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thing is I don't know a single thing."

"You don't, eh?"

"Not a thing."

He sighed. He carefully wrapped the Luger in his handkerchief and put it in his pocket. "I come to wonder more and more why you aren't in jail, Gates," he said. "If we can't crack this mug when he comes to, it's not going to be any nicer for you, believe me. You find out about those I. O. U.'s?"

I grinned again, crossed my fingers behind my back and said no.

"It's easy to lose a private detective license, Gates."

"I'll remember that, thanks. It's quite easy to fall off a tight-wire, too—especially when somebody's taking pot shots at you from below." I opened the door for him.

"All right, Gates. I'm trying to be fair. I'm trying not to remember the influence you can buy with two million dollars."

"If you weren't a cop, I'd slug you for that," I said.

He let me have a wry grin and then went out the door I was holding open for him.

THE next morning the rain was gone. I had breakfast and went to the office and thought about Miss Hale Tucker until nine, when the mailman came in.

"Where were you yesterday?" I demanded.

"Around, lover. Nobody wrote you is all." He threw over an envelope on the desk.

I never heard him leave, for I was staring transfixed at the envelope. It was white, and up in the left hand corner in dignified black it said:

Emerson Spelt—Attorney-at-law
Legal Block, Reno

Inside were two I. O. U.'s made out to Miss Hale Tucker in the amount of two thousand five hundred dollars each, signed

in the not-too-neat hand of Emily S. Ackerman.

I took a slow breath. For some reason, this dead man had trusted me—a stranger—more than anybody else in this whole wide world, and had mailed these things a scant minute or two before he had sat down to die. And I, least of anyone, knew why he'd done it.

I tucked the I. O. U.'s in my wallet, went down to the liquor store in the lobby, bought a quart of scotch and took the bottle up to my office.

I got my penknife and slowly, carefully, removed the big, opaque label that covered a wide half of the bottle's circumference. It wasn't too difficult, for it had been glued at the very ends only.

I remoistened the label ends with my office mucilage bottle. Then, pressing the small I. O. U.'s around the quart, I glued the label back on over them. I squeezed it tight in my hands and held it that way for five minutes.

They didn't show. Even from the other side of the bottle they didn't show. The glass was dark brown. There wasn't a chance. I broke the seal on the top, pulled out the cork and took a swig that would hold me till the cows came home.

They say a private eye has the answers all ready up his sleeve like Houdini nailed in a rain barrel. I would like to point out that this is not quite a fact. Take me. I knew somebody had killed Spelt. I suspected somebody wanted some I.O.U.'s. I suspected moreover that a thin joker with a Luger had done it. Whose joker? I suspected Anthony Marlo. I suspected Marlo wanted them to squeeze Emily Ackerman into selling a worthless piece of land.

I might point out these suspicions weren't worth a damn. The answers I wanted and didn't have were the ones that mattered. So I sighed and left the office and headed for Davidson City.

Davidson City—in case you're not ac-

quainted with the territory—is a ghost town about fifty miles south of Reno as the SF-80 flies. Built on the side of the mountain that gives it the name, it dozes in the sun. At one time, this had been the great magnet of the itchy. This had been the Klondike and Sutter's Mill all in one. This had been the home of an unbelievable silver lode, the biggest in the history of the world.

This had been.

Davidson City these days is a forgotten ruin, time-washed on the sallow cheeks of its narrow streets and crumbling buildings. People still call this home, though, a few of them. A few stores still do business and a few old timers still work the petered-out mines, still hoping, but for the most part Davidson City is just false-fronted, empty places that slope crazily on the hillside, something for the tourists to gape at now and a hundred years from now.

I pulled over to the curb. Across the street, sitting under a bleached wooden sign, his back braced against an old fashioned hand-power gas pump, was a watery-eyed old man. His hands rested motionless in a thin lap formed by his crossed legs. He looked to be a hundred and eight years old.

I said, "Hi, Dad. Looking for information. Mind if I chin a while?"

His lips opened in a cracking smile that almost didn't make it. "Hell no, young feller. Wouldn't have the makin's on you now, would you?"

I gradually caught on and held out a pack of cigarettes.

He spit. "For sissies, them is. Never use 'em. Information, eh? You another of them Reno slickers snoopin' the Ackerman land?"

I suddenly felt cold. I gulped down an ache in my throat and croaked at the ol man. "Don't go away, Dad. I'll be right back. Don't go away." I went down the street till I came to a store that looked

likely. I went in, bought a couple of sacks of Bull Durham and took them back and put them in his lap, and sat down on my heels and waited.

He opened one of the sacks. Then with a wrinkled claw of a finger he slipped out a paper and proceeded to roll before my eyes the neatest one-handed cigarette I have ever seen. He gave it to me.

"Try that, young feller. That's a real smoke."

He rolled another, stuck it between his fragile lips. I lit both. I took a deep drag on mine, inhaled it. One thing I'll say for those home-made smokes, you get your money's worth.

When I could get my breath again I said, "I'm a dick from Reno, Dad. You said something about the Ackerman land?"

"Nope. Said you another of them Reno slickers snoopin' the Ackerman land? Dick, eh? Shouldn't wonder. Shouldn't wonder at all."

"Is that so, Dad? Uh, what makes the Ackerman land so interesting? I had heard it was worthless."

"You heard right. What's the matter, don't like the cigareet?"

"I'm a sissy, Dad."

"Are, eh? Wouldn't of guessed it from your size. You heard right, young feller. That land ain't worth the ground it's lyin' on. And I oughta know. I growed up here. Ninety-nine next July. Believe that?"

"I believe it, Dad. Look. Is there any reason why anybody'd want to pay good money for it? Say ten grand?"

He didn't answer that for a long time. Puffing slowly on his "cigareet," he contented himself in making me itch for his answer. Finally he tossed the butt away and looked down at his gnarled hands.

"That land ain't even the tailin's of a garbage dump. But—" his right eye closed—"if a man who knowed what he was about should salt it a little, mebbe nobody'd be the wiser."

I sat back and stared at him, fascinated.

"Easy as rollin' a cigaret. And nobody'd know till it come time to work it. Would call for a little gunfightin' after that, though. Sort of dis-legal, saltin' a mine."

"You wouldn't kid me, would you, Dad?" I whispered.

"Might try it. Ain't never give it a thought. But about the saltin' business, no. That's straight goods. I could do it in my sleep. Not, mind you, that I ever did or ever would." He looked at me defiantly, his jaw thrust forward.

I had it. It was as big as a pillow between my hands and just as easy to squeeze, and only a guy like me could have had it for so very long and not have recognized it for what it was. Only one minor thing mattered now.

"Dad, did you ever know a man named Emerson Spelt?"

"I did. Knew the whole Spelt family once upon a time."

I was remembering the gold-plated souvenir prospector's pan I'd seen on Spelt's desk yesterday. I nodded and said, "And could this Spelt have known how to salt a mine?"

The old boy chuckled. "Sonny, he sure could. Whole family grew up here. Grandad worked the mines when the old Lode was runnin' strong. Emerson could—but he wouldn't."

"He wouldn't, huh, Dad?"

"Nossir. Young Spelt is a good boy. Be a famous lawyer someday, he will."

I didn't tell the old man. I didn't have the heart. I said, "Thanks, Dad. Thanks a lot. And happy birthday come next July."

I went back to my heap across the road, made a U-turn and waved goodbye at him. I could see him in the rear-view mirror, still sitting in the hard-backed chair by the gas pump, as I made the first of the winding curves back down the mountain-side toward Reno.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death in the Afternoon

I WENT back to the office for my gun, which the short joker had thrown in my wastebasket. I found most of the shells and stuck them back in the cylinder. I didn't know whether I'd need many, but I wanted to be prepared.

As I was leaving, the phone rang. Avila. Wouldn't you know.

"That Luger wasn't the right one, Gates," he said to me gravely. "Try again."

"Wasn't, eh? That's funny. How many people carry Lugers, Avila?"

"I wouldn't know. Any more ideas this morning?"

"None."

"I see. What did you say you'd found out about those mysterious I. O. U.'s?"

I smiled at the phone. "Didn't. You mean to say you haven't cracked the skinny guy yet?"

He didn't like that. When his voice came back it was a serious voice, a voice that had stopped liking pleasantries.

"We don't give the third-degree anymore, Gates. Or haven't you heard? This is a civilized world these days."

"Yeah," I said. "Okay, Avila."

"Private licenses are very very easy to lose this season I hear."

"I'll remember, Lieutenant. Thank you Lieutenant." I hung up on him and wiped my forehead.

The phone book listed the Ackerman address. Arletta street. That's over on the west side near the city limits. I found the house after driving by it twice. It was a small bungalow with a painted roof and a big silver oil drum snuggling on one side. A trellis with some dead vines clinging to it hid part of the front windows, and the whole thing could have used a coat of paint back in the Hoover administration.

I went up four wooden steps and rang the bell. Nothing happened. I rang it again, harder this time, leaning on it. That did it. Footsteps padded inside and the door opened a little and standing before me in a scarlet dressing gown with a yellow cord around the middle was young manhood himself. He was leaning hard on his pearl-handled cane.

"Ah, Gates," he lisped. "Forgive me for taking so long. The old knee is acting up from yesterday's weather."

"Yeah? What are you doing here, Marlo? I thought this was where Miss Ackerman lived."

His cheeks flushed. His full lips started to curl in the beginning of a sneer that would have done credit to a wire-haired terrier. I didn't give him a chance to use it.

"The police have the skinny one," I said easily. "The one with the Luger. I sapped him in my kitchen last night. Persistent aren't you? The short one got away."

His eyes clicked, but for a guy who's just had a rude shock he stood it well. His eyebrows twitched a little, and that was all. He even managed to say, "Ah?"

"Let's go in," I said. "Where's the Ackerman woman?"

His eyes clicked again. "She's not in," he said quickly.

He got the lie straight back. A woman's voice—sloppy, complaining, and full of

the rough burrs of age and alcohol—cried out, "Tony, lover? Who's at the door?"

"So she isn't home?" I said.

"She's not well, Gates. She's lying down. Can't be disturbed. What do you want, anyway?"

"Why won't she sell the property in Davidson City?"

"Oh, that!" His eyes lit up and his full red lips opened in a smile. "I was going to call you. Slipped my mind. As a matter of fact, she is selling. We had a nice offer from a party last night and the deal is practically closed."

I gulped. "Not Miss Tucker?"

"Heavens no! She wanted it for peanuts, Gates. Peanuts."

I moved closer to him. "I'm coming in," I said. "There's something you two have to be told. Either you turn around nice and walk in front of me, or else you suddenly fall on your face and I walk over you and get in that way. Take your choice, Marlo."

"You've got a hell of a nerve you—"

Right out on the steps, in front of the whole big world, I let him have one in the gut. He sucked in his teeth, collapsed a little in the middle and groaned. I pushed by him and went in.

The furniture was cheap and old. The only new thing I could see was a bourbon bottle sitting on one end of a red brick fireplace. The other end supported the

3 good reasons why men prefer
WILDROOT
CREAM-OIL
HAIR TONIC



elbow of a yellow-haired, oldish woman whose left hand held a half-filled glass and whose face bore the unbecoming lines of dissipation. She looked blank-eyed at me.

"Lover?" she said uncertainly.

Marlo was glaring at me. "The man I told you about, Sweets," he said softly.

"The property won't be sold," I said. I waited. He had to ask it. I knew he had to. It was just a question of time before he did.

"Why?" He said it at last.

"Because they're going to hear the truth about that land. I happen to know the truth."

He looked a little rough. His tongue came out and licked twice over his full lips and his eyes got to be anxious.

"Tony, lover?" the woman said again.

"Let the character talk, Sweets. I want to find out what the crum's got to say."

"Yeah," I said. "Let him talk. It's good stuff. So good, somebody's going to the gas chamber over it. There was an old trick they used to play—it probably hasn't been done in years—of falsifying the appearance of certain worthless property. It was known as salting. That way, even when a buyer had it assayed, it looked good. It stayed looking good up to the day the new buyer started working the land. And then the fun began." I stopped, looked over at the woman.

She took a gulp out of the glass and put the glass up on the mantle next to her elbow. Her mouth began to work strangely, getting stuck on her lower teeth.

"Lover!" she said plaintively.

Marlo held up a restraining hand. "Just a minute, Sweets. Go on, Gates. Spill it."

"Today I went up to Davidson City and talked to an old, old man who had a rather excellent memory. He told me about the Ackerman property up there. About how it wasn't worth a wooden nickel. He also told me how it could be salted to fool a prospective buyer. Now there were two

kinds of buyers who might be interested in the land. One was Miss Hale Tucker, who saw a good chance to put up a gaming club for the tourists who come to look over the old town. Her interest was legitimate and she was willing to pay a generous price for the land."

"What was the other kind?" Marlo asked quietly.

"The other kind was somebody who might have been foolish enough to think there was gold or silver on the property. Only, as we all know, there isn't any gold or silver on the property."

Marlo's tongue did the wiping job on his lips again. He turned from me and stared at the woman.

"It was salted," I said. "Guess who salted it."

The woman said, "Lover!"

I didn't stop. "A man whose family were prospectors up there; a man who knew his law business—an honorable man, Marlo. But sadly, a man who was never able to quite erase a bridal picture from his heart. He risked his professional reputation for the memory of a woman he couldn't forget."

A HORRIBLE look was growing on Marlo's face. His lips began to open slowly, but I beat him to it.

"There's more. The way it seems to me, Spelt must have regretted what he'd done when he heard about the I.O.U.'s. Miss Tucker was using as a threat to get the land. Maybe he got scared. Who knows? At any rate, he redeemed them out of his own pocket. And that's where you came in. You wanted the I. O. U.'s. They would have been dandy, wouldn't they?"

"I didn't know the property was salted."

"Maybe not. All you wanted was for the Ackerman woman to sell—so you could get your hands on the money and trot off to something a little closer to your own age. Tell me I'm lying, Marlo."

"I—I didn't know . . ." he repeated.

But suddenly I wasn't even willing to give him that much.

"The hell you didn't!" I yelled. "Your precious Emily told you why she wouldn't sell. There was gold on the land, she said. Spelt had salted it for her. It looked like a fine deal, didn't it? You two could pick out a bigger sucker than Hale Tucker—make twice, three times as much as she offered. There was only one thing wrong with it."

Nether of them said a word.

"Spelt was getting frightened. He probably warned you he was going to shoot off his mouth about the land being salted, and that wouldn't do at all. You went up to his office and shot him dead—undoubtedly right after he had finished talking to me on the phone. And that," I sighed, "is what happened. Afterwards, you had to hire a couple of thugs to work me over and get the I.O.U.'s, so you wouldn't be implicated."

He swung around. His hands were stretched out helplessly from his sides and there was an incredulous look on his face.

"Not me, Gates! My God, not that! I never killed anybody. I don't even own a gun!"

I sighed again. If that was the way he wanted it, then that's the way it had to be. "You're forgetting, Marlo. You were in Germany. That's where you got your wounded knee, you said. How about a

souvenir gun—bring back any with you?" I had him. I had him cold. All he had to do now was fall flat on his face.

"Gates, listen! I admit I did bring a gun back with me, but I've never used it. Why, it's only an old Luger!"

"A Luger is what killed Spelt," I said slowly.

It couldn't have hit him any harder if it was a brick. He was done and he could smell the gas coming up at him from under the chair in the small chamber which would be his last private room on earth. And then, suddenly, he wasn't done at all. He turned to the woman.

"It was you!" he screamed. "You took my gun yourself and killed Spelt. that's what happened!" He jerked toward the woman, his hands clawing out in front of him wildly.

The woman acted as though she didn't mind. She calmly took her arm down off the fire place and what she had in her hand made me grab for my 38.

She had a wicked looking Luger and she dug it into Anthony Marlo's side and she pulled the trigger. And after that there wasn't anything I could do but wait until he fell to his knees and go over and take it away from her.

The day was done but I hadn't been fed. I had a headache and no aspirin, and I felt like all the years of the Ancient Ones were on my shoulders. I sat at a

(Continued on next page)

A SANTA BARBARA, California, yegg recently succeeded in opening a big safe, from which he took \$100. But he absent-mindedly left behind a set of burglar tools worth more than \$300.

INVESTIGATING a recent burglary in Pittsburgh, detectives found at the scene of the crime: (1) a picture of the thief's wife, (2) his fingerprints, and (3) his social security card.

—Harry Hanley

(Continued from previous page)

long table in Avila's office, and the chair was hard. I'd been sitting like that for hours.

Avila was saying, for the tenth time, "Police business is Police business, Gates. Had you come to me in the first place, perhaps there wouldn't have been another death. You deceived me, gave me the runaround."

"I know," I said. "I've told you I'm sorry, Avila. I'll take what's coming to me. I make a mistake. I'm sorry. I'm damned sorry. Now how about getting me some supper and tossing me in the can and just forgetting the whole deal for a couple of years? My head's killing me."

He cursed quietly under his breath. "Gates, get the hell out. Maybe you still have a license and maybe you haven't. Only time and the Commissioner can tell that."

"What?"

"Get the hell out, get the hell out, *get the hell out!* Damn me, are you deaf?"

I couldn't believe it.

I got off the hard chair. I blinked at him, turned and went to the door. I walked out in a daze, as free as the air.

I couldn't believe it. Not until I saw the Cadillac at the curb could I believe it. It had all the class of two continents built into its sleek lines, and its rear fenders stuck up in back like the tail of a B-29, and it was panted tan and black and there was only one person in the world who would be owning a thing like that. I went over and got in.

"Money talks," I said. "Yours must have a very, very strong voice, Miss Tucker. I thank you."

Her voice came back at me quietly: "Not money, Edward. Not that."

I was too tired to argue. "Will you take me to my office?"

The Cadillac must have started up. I didn't feel it but it must have. The next thing I knew we were in front of my office

building and I was getting out. I motioned to the girl. "You'd better come up."

In the office, I got out the scotch bottle and took a sip to ease the ache in my head. I put it down again and looked over at the girl.

"This Marlo," I said. "this pretty boy. He wanted the I. O. U.'s for self-preservation. He didn't want to be implicated in a blackmail, I suppose. He was fussy about the cleanliness of his hands. It wasn't him. It was the woman. She got Marlo's gun and put the quietus on Spelt when he threatened to spill. The jokers I accused you of were Marlo's, incidentally. Sorry about that.

"Marlo probably thought you killed the lawyer, I don't really know for sure, and there's no asking him any more, ever."

She didn't answer.

I sighed. "Emily Ackerman shot him dead in front of me this afternoon. It seems she was good at that. The one I'm sorry for is Spelt. From what I hear, he was a nice little guy once upon a time. Great future ahead of him. A friend of the family told me."

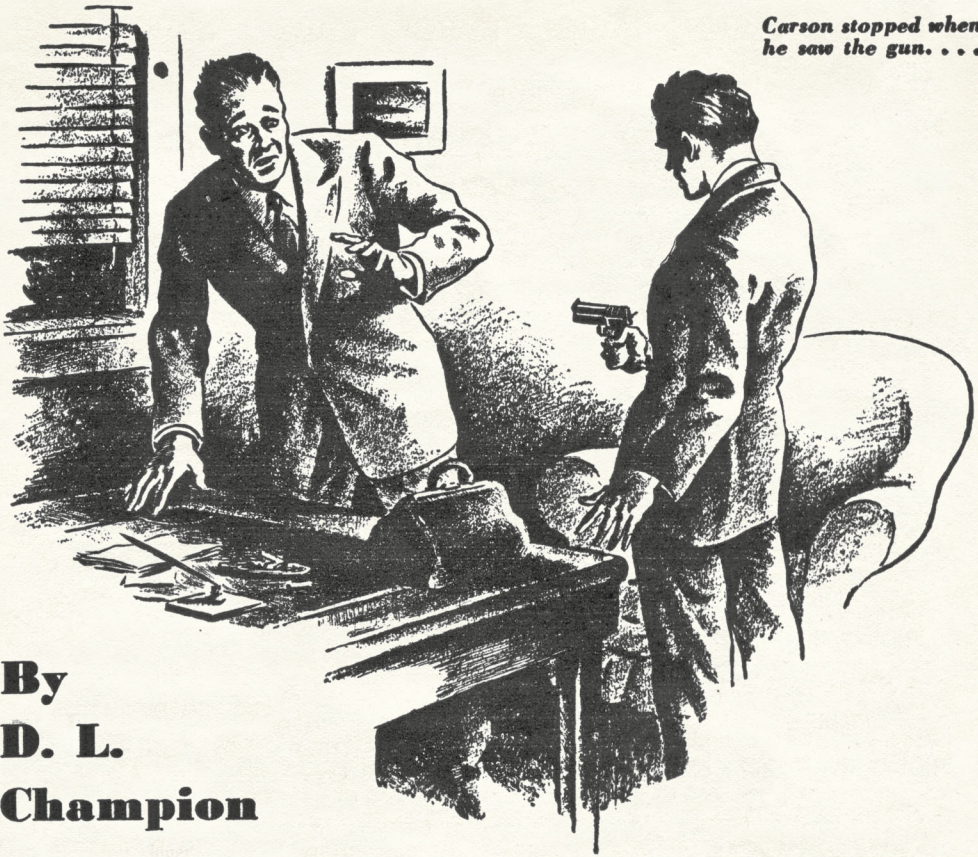
She was standing it well. Her eyes were suffering but there was still a dignity in the lovely face with the tiny nose and the wonderful blonde hair. For the umpteenth time that day I sighed. I snicked off the label from the scotch bottle with my fingernail and got out the I. O. U.'s and handed them to her.

"I didn't mention these to Avila. I figured anybody who was a nice girl, who'd always been a nice girl, who always would be a nice girl, deserved that much of a break." She seemed to come out of a daze.

She took them. She tore them to shreds and let the pieces fall amid the general mess on my office floor. By the time she looked up at me her eyes were misting over and by the time she whispered "Thank you, Edward," she was crying.

That was right before she kissed me.

*Carson stopped when
he saw the gun. . . .*



**By
D. L.
Champion**

DYING ROOM ONLY

*. . . read the sign on that little green door that
marked the end of a killer's last mile—a mile
Bayer walked, strangely, to atone for his
victims' crime!*

THE screw was a middle aged man with an unpressed uniform and a round, blank face. I didn't like him. I gathered he didn't like me, either. At five o'clock he came shuffling down the concrete corridor of the cell block, opened the grilled door and handed me a tin mug of coffee and a tin plate of something wet and greasy, which may have been stew.

I began to eat without enthusiasm. He did not go away. His presence annoyed

me. I lifted my head and said, "Is there any law in this state that says you've got to watch a prisoner eat his supper?"

A grin split his blank face. "A wise guy," he said to no one in particular. "Another wise guy who thinks he knows more than the coppers."

That annoyed me even more. I said sharply, "In this case I *do* know more than the coppers."

"Sure," said the screw. "Sure. That's why you're here."

I got sore. I put my tin plate on the concrete floor. I said, "The dumb cops believe that I killed Larry Allcott and they admit they don't have any idea who killed Bull Carson. I know who killed them both. And I didn't kill Allcott."

The screw shrugged. "If that's true, why don't you tell your story to the D.A.? After all, your life's at stake."

I glared at him, returned to my stew and shut up. That was the hell of it. I couldn't tell my story to the D.A. I couldn't tell it to anyone.

The first time I saw Bull Carson, he was sitting behind a battered desk in the Army surplus Quonset hut. Beyond the windows at the rear, the orange grove stretched as far as the eye could see. On the other side of the hut was the machinery that crushed out the golden juice, and the cannery.

Carson was a man of about thirty. His face was round and red, colored by the sun. He wasn't tall, but his shoulders were wide and his muscles bulged beneath the loud yellow sports shirt.

I stood in the doorway of the hut and said, "Are you the guy I see about a job?"

He looked up quickly with shrewd and narrow eyes. He said, "I'm the guy you see about everything in this place. Jobs, payrolls, busted machinery and smudge pots. I never get a minute to myself. What do you want?"

"Work."

He held his gaze on me for some twenty seconds. He said, "Okay," picked up a pencil. "Name?"

"Bayer. Harry Bayer."

He wrote that down, asked a number of routine questions to which I gave ready answers, then opened the desk drawer and took out an inkpad.

"Got to take your fingerprints," he said. "Company rule."

His shrewd eyes noted my instant's hesitation. "If you're on the lam—" he began.

"I'm not on the lam," I said shortly, and gave him my hand. As he took my prints I reflected that it would probably take a week or so to check on me, to find out that I'd been out of the pen for less than five days. The chances were that Carson's company didn't like ex-cons, that they'd fire me immediately. But I didn't care much about that. I certainly wasn't going to work for this kind of money for the rest of my life.

But at the moment I was flat broke. I didn't have the price of a meal in my shabby pants. All I wanted was a few days' work, a few days' pay to give me a stake. Then I'd travel on where money was not only easier to get but came in bigger chunks than it did here.

Carson put my prints in a drawer and looked at his wrist watch.

"Too late for you to start today," he said. "You can begin in the morning. At six." He lifted his voice and yelled, "Pedro!" and a smooth-faced, barefooted Mexican youth shuffled into the room.

"Show this guy where to flop," said Carson, dismissing me with a wave of his hand which implied that I was less than a germ in the life of Bull Carson.

Not that it worried me. I was used to that treatment. Wardens and screws are masters of it. I followed the Mex into the lowering afternoon sun, through a long line of broken-down shanties and finally through the door of one of them.

I was left alone to unpack my modest belongings. That took all of five minutes. Then I lit a cigarette and sat on the doorstep watching the weary working stiff come in from the grove.

I was lucky getting a flop to myself. Most of the pickers had families. What few bachelors there were bunked two and three in a shanty. Well, I wasn't going to be here long enough to get lonely.

I got some canned stuff from the commissary and ate my supper cold. After the night came down, I heard the sound of an

accordion nearby. I went out of the shack and stood on the edge of a crowd.

It was then I saw Louise. Rather, I smelled her first. A sensual perfume came to my nostrils. I lifted my head to see a slim brunette walking from the hill on which stood the more elaborate houses of the brass, toward the offices on the far side of the shanties. There was a carnation in her hair and her ebony eyes glinted in the first light of the moon. Involuntarily, I caught my breath. I hadn't seen an attractive woman for four years.

I stared at her hungrily as she swept past, utterly unaware of my existence. I heard a chuckle at my elbow and young Pedro's voice said, "*Muy linda, hey?*"

I nodded. "She's pretty, all right. Who is she?"

"Louise Carson. The boss's wife."

"If she was my wife, I'd keep her home at night."

Pedro chuckled again. "That is what senor Carson should do. She is going to see Allcott."

"Allcott? Who's he?"

"The night watchman."

I blinked at that. Carson didn't strike me as the sort of guy who'd stand for his wife two-timing him. I said, "Does Carson know about this?"

Pedro shrugged his thin shoulders. "Everybody else does," he said. He lighted a brown cigarette and disappeared into the crowd.

I went to bed envying Allcott, then cheering myself up with the thought that as soon as I accumulated a stake, I'd be in a city where women as good-looking as Louise Carson came a dime a dozen. Finally I went to sleep.

IT WAS five days later, about eight o'clock in the evening, when Pedro arrived with a summons for me to see Bull Carson immediately in his office. Well, that wasn't hard to figure. The re-

port on my prints had come in by now and this was the old heave-ho.

I walked over to the Quonset hut quite prepared to be fired, quite resolved to take no insults along with it. Carson was neither a warden nor a cop. He could fire me, period. If he delivered a lecture along with it, he'd get as good as he got. Maybe better.

I set my shoulders and my jaw and walked into his bare office. He sat behind his bare desk. Behind him stood the company safe and, at the side of the desk, two chairs. He nodded to me, affably enough. He waved me into one of the chairs. Watching him warily, I sat down.

His first words were not what I'd expected. "Bayer," he said, "I need some dough."

I blinked at him. He went on, "If I had a good stake I could go into business for myself, instead of working for a lousy salary."

I didn't think his salary was so lousy and I said so. I added grimly, "If you figure on borrowing money from me, you're crazy."

"In a way I do figure on borrowing money from you. Say, about twenty-five grand."

There was only one word in my vocabulary for this kind of talk. It wasn't a polite word but I said it.

He ignored that. He said, "Next Wednesday, right after lunch, I'm going up to Ballston, the county seat, sixty miles from here. I'm going for two reasons. First, to arrange for a piece of machinery to be brought to the cannery here. Second, to draw the monthly payroll, around fifty grand. I'm staying overnight and returning the next morning."

His eyes met mine and something tightened inside me. I sat silent and alert, waiting. Carson drew a deep breath. He shifted in his chair.

"Suppose," he went on, "that on Wednesday night, in my hotel room, I was

stuck up. Suppose you stuck me up. Suppose we split fifty G's."

I'm not completely dumb. I figured what happened, but I wanted to hear him say it, so I said, "Aren't you sticking your fat neck out? You don't know me. Suppose I reported this conversation?"

"No," he said slowly, "I don't know you." He opened the desk drawer and took out a typewritten slip of paper. "But I know that you've served time. Twice. Felonious assault and robbery. If you turn me down, Bayer, it's your word against mine and you're an ex-con. That's simple enough, isn't it?"

I turned it over in my mind. "It's simple enough. As you say, I've got a record. Therefore, when you're stuck up in Ballston and I've been missing from the camp all night, I'm the first guy they pick up."

He smiled faintly and shook his head. "Do you think I'm a fool? You won't be picked up. You won't be suspected because it'll never occur to anyone that you ever left here. I've got it all figured out. Are you interested, Bayer?"

I lit a cigarette and tried to conceal how intensely interested I was. I said, "Maybe. Go ahead."

"All right. I'm leaving at noon Wednesday in order to reach Ballston before the bank closes. Now, at exactly eleven-forty-five, you will have a toothache, a terrible, agonizing toothache."

"A toothache?"

"Listen, Bayer, listen. The reason you've served two jail sentences is that you never worked with brains."

He leaned forward, talked rapidly and quietly. When he had finished, I was willing to grant he had brains. It was good. It was foolproof. It was even better than Carson himself knew.

"All right," he said finally. "See me at this time tomorrow. I'll give you the fake pills. I'll give you the key. Now go to bed and dream about twenty-five thousand dollars."

I went out into the soft, moonlit night, feeling as if I was walking on helium. But I wasn't dreaming of a mere twenty-five thousand dollars. I was dreaming of the whole fifty.

On Wednesday at twenty minutes to twelve, I quit the grove, assumed an expression of pain and headed for the office, which, incidentally, was next door to the drug room.

It so happened that there was neither doctor nor dentist on the property, the nearest medicos being some twenty miles away. The company drug room was operated by an ex-pharmacist's mate who was a good first-aid man. He attended to minor injuries, iodine and cathartics. In an emergency, no important drug could be administered without Carson's okay.

Carson was at the telephone when I entered his room. He winked at me. He said into the mouthpiece, "There's no sense in tying up the truck. Send it to Ballston tonight. About eleven. I'll send it back with the machinery in the morning. That way it can work here all day." He hung up and addressed himself to me. "Well, what's wrong?"

I told a plaintive tale of my aching tooth.

"All right," he said. "Come along."

I followed him out of his office into the drug room. Behind a makeshift counter stood a tall man in navy fatigues.

"Johnny," said Carson, "this lad has a toothache. Can't get him to the dentist until tomorrow. No transportation available. Give him three seconal tablets. Let him sleep this afternoon."

He walked to the door, then paused. "Oh, and I'm leaving for Ballston now. If he's no better he can come back here around eight tonight. Give him three or four more."

"Three or four?" said Johnny. "He'll sleep for twenty-four hours."

"So what?" said Carson. "It's better than having a toothache, isn't it?"

He left the room. Johnny shrugged and reached for a bottle containing some red tablets.

He handed me three of them. He went to the sink at the rear of the room and filled a glass with water. "Go ahead," he said. "Drink 'em down."

At this point I took the first step which was to lead me to fifty thousand dollars. In my left hand I held three red pills which Carson had previously given me. The capsules were filled with sugar. I palmed the genuine seconal, substituted the phonies and swallowed them under the eye of the pharmacist. Then I went over to my quarters and crawled into bed.

I REMAINED there impatiently until eight o'clock that night. Then I went back to the drugroom. Johnny looked up from the magazine he was reading. "How's the tooth?"

I groaned and said, "Lousy. Give me a mess of those pills. I got to sleep tonight or I'll go nuts."

He gave me three capsules and I squawked until he let me have another. I went into my palming act again, putting the genuine soporific in my pocket, swallowing the harmless sugar. The stupid jerk never caught on.

"You ought to sleep for a week," said Johnny. "Gabriel's horn won't wake you tonight."

I groaned again and went back to bed. Naturally, I didn't sleep. I was never more alert in my life.

At ten I got out of bed, noted with satisfaction that it was a dark, clouded night. I made a dummy from my dirty clothes and put it under the blanket. Not that anyone would disturb me, but it was better to play it safe in case anyone glanced through the window. Then I climbed over the window sill and set out toward the orange groves.

Unseen, I made my way to an abandoned tool shed at the edge of the trees. Inside, buried under a pile of burlap bags, I found the motorcycle Carson had hidden there.

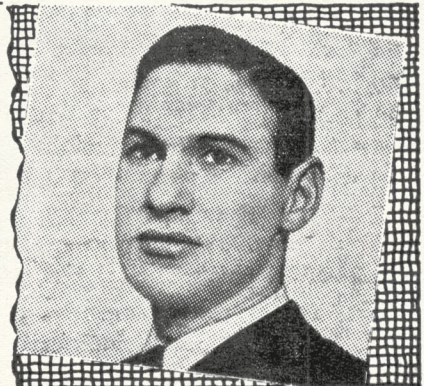
I drew a deep breath and wheeled the bike outside. I looked around carefully. There was no one in sight. Cautiously, I made my way to the side of the big garage where the company's trucks were kept. Parked outside the buildings was a single vehicle. I checked the license number to make sure I was right, then took the key from my pocket, the key Carson had given me when he gave me the phoney pills.

This was the truck which was to make the run to Ballston at eleven o'clock. The garage boys had gassed it up, and left it outside when they'd quit. I approached its locked rear door and inserted the key into its Yale lock. With some effort I loaded the motorcycle aboard, then

REPORTER REPORTS ON SWITCH TO CALVERT

WASHINGTON, D. C.—Arnold Fine, Washington reporter and night club editor, flashes this news about today's whiskies. "Switch to Calvert," he says. "I have. Calvert honestly is lighter, smoother, milder."

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N.Y.C.



climbed in myself, locking the door behind me.

There were only two keys to the truck door. I, obviously, possessed one; Carson had the other. I would use mine tonight twice. Carson would use his when he loaded the machinery in the morning. Or so he thought. The truck driver had no key. It was merely his job to drive to Ballston tonight and drive back to the grove tomorrow.

I waited quietly for the better part of an hour. Then I heard someone climb into the cab, heard the starter turn over and the engine come to life. The gears shifted and the truck moved. I sat down on the floor and put my hand on the gun in my pocket. The gun was my own idea; it wasn't any part of Carson's plan.

I reflected that this was not only a moneymaking proposition; it was an ironic one. Carson was going to die after he'd gone to a great deal of trouble fixing up an alibi for his killer. It was funny. But I'd laugh afterwards. I had too much on my mind right now.

Carson's plan was simple and foolproof. First, there was evidence that I had swallowed no less than seven seconal pills that day, enough to keep me snoring until well after dawn. No one would even suspect that I had been out of camp this night.

I would return long before dawn upon the motorcycle here in the truck. In the meantime, I was to stage my fake holdup. Then, while Carson threw the coppers off the trail with a false description of the thief, I would have the dough stashed under my bunk at the grove. Later, when Carson returned, we'd cut up the loot into equal portions of twenty-five G's each.

At least that was the way Carson had it figured. I'd added a few improvements of my own to the original plan.

At last the truck came to a grinding halt. My wrist watch indicated twenty minutes to one. I waited until the driver

went away, then carefully let myself out of the van. I walked swiftly through the streets to Carson's hotel. I slipped, unobserved, through a side entrance and walked up the stairs.

I knocked, waited for Carson's "Come in," and entered. I was tense and my pulse was racing. I held myself steady and touched the gun in my pocket.

I said, "Okay, let's hurry this up. Where's the dough?"

"Take it easy," he counseled. "There's plenty of time. I'll have to go out and get the money."

My eyebrows lifted. "You mean it isn't here?"

He shook his head. "It's in the office. I ran into some guys I knew downtown after leaving the bank. I put the dough in the office. Didn't want to carry it around in bars."

It struck me as damned careless for a man to bum around in saloons with fifty G's at stake. Still, under the circumstances, I had nothing to complain about. I said, "Well, get it."

He jammed on his hat, said, "Be right back," and went out of the room. I sat down to wait.

I was jittery at the end of fifteen minutes. When a half hour had gone by I began to pace the floor. I was a man with murder on my mind, and I wanted to get it over as soon as possible. At a quarter to two, almost an hour since I'd come into this room, I cursed Carson, wondered if he'd run into some more friends, wondered if he'd stopped to have more drinks with a fortune in his pocket.

My watch was almost at the hour when the telephone rang. I glanced at it nervously. It certainly couldn't be for me. No one, save Carson, knew I was here. It rang again. Then it occurred to me that perhaps Carson himself was calling to explain the delay.

I reached for the receiver and said, "Hello," guardedly. I heard a vague blur

of sound, then the click of someone hanging up.

NOW I was really scared. For a second, my mind was blank. Then came the thought that Carson was crossing me. I examined that idea and found no angles to it. I continued to pace the floor, smoking and staring at the minute hand on my watch.

I had to be back in my bed by dawn. I had to leave here no later than three-thirty, whether or not Carson returned. At three minutes to three my stomach was sick and empty. I had lost my great chance. I'd lost fifty G's and probably because Carson was a drunken lout. I was hating him bitterly when the door opened and he came into the room. In his hand was a black leather bag.

"Damn you," I said. "Where were you?"

"Got tied up. Here's the dough. Hurry. You'll just make it. Sneak down the back stairway. The coast's clear. I'll give you fifteen minutes, then I'll call the cops."

I grinned and a great tranquility came over me. I took the bag from his hand and took the automatic from my pocket.

He gaped at me. He said, "You fool! Why did you bring a gun? It wasn't necessary. It's. . . ." He read my face accurately. His face went white.

I looked at his terror over the muzzle of my gun. I said, "Why should I waste a foolproof alibi for twenty-five grand when I can use it for twice as much?"

His jaw dropped. There was panic in his gaze. He said, "No. It's impossible. It couldn't—"

And that was the last thing he ever said. I let him have a single slug directly in the temple. He pitched forward on the carpet and his blood stained it.

I drew a deep breath, thrust the gun back in my pocket and left the room, closing the door silently behind me. Cautiously, I made my way down the back

stairs. I left the hotel through a rear entrance which led into an alley behind the kitchen. I strode rapidly into the street and gained the truck in less than ten minutes.

I unlocked it, dragged out the motorcycle, straddled it and headed for the state highway.

It was almost a quarter past three. Once outside the town, I could hit seventy miles an hour. I should be back in bed long before the first stirring of the orange pickers. As for Carson, it was highly unlikely that anyone would find him before mid-morning, if then.

Coming into the camp, I returned the motor bike to the shed where Carson had left it. I buried my automatic among the orange trees. Walking carefully to avoid the eye of Allcott, the watchman, I made my way toward my own shack. I gained it unobserved. I stashed the black bag beneath my mattress and clambered into bed.

I breathed a sigh of relief and all the tension went from me. It had been easy. No one would dream I'd been away from the camp. No one would even suspect Carson's killer had come from here. And I had fifty G's under my back. More dough than I'd ever dreamed of. I was set for life.

As the first ray of dawn came over the horizon I slept.

I slept until seven. I got up, showered, donned clean clothes and went to the cafeteria in the commissary for my breakfast. I figured on sticking around for a couple of weeks. A fast disappearance now might cause the coppers to come after me with a few questions when they found Carson's body.

I was on my second cup of coffee, half way through my ham and eggs when I heard the siren. I swung my head around and looked through the window behind me. A police car drove up the street between the lines of shacks. Behind it were

two black limousines and three more coppers on motorcycles.

The food in my stomach turned to lead. I blinked and I could hear my heart pounding against my chest. It was utterly impossible that they'd already found Carson's corpse, that the investigation had brought them here so soon.

I'd read a hundred stories in which the crook invariably goes dumb and leaves a subtle clue behind him. But that was fiction. I was positive I had done no such thing.

The white-hatted cook stood in the doorway watching the coppers get out of their cars. I fought to make my voice natural and said, "What's wrong?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Some guy told me something happened over at the office."

I breathed deeply and some of my assurance returned. It was probably a crazy coincidence. Something else had happened. Something other than Carson's murder had brought the law here.

The coppers moved out of sight around one of the houses. I lit a cigarette and finished my coffee. There couldn't be anything to worry about. I went out of the room and headed toward the grove.

I'd been working for some twenty minutes when I heard a sharp voice behind me.

"Are you Bayer?"

I turned around to see a fat guy in a shabby blue serge suit. A blind man would have known he was a policeman. I said, "Yeah. What of it?"

"Come along with me."

I never did like coppers and I didn't particularly like this one. I said, "Why should I?"

"Because you're under arrest."

My pulse jumped but I kept my voice steady. "For what?"

"For murder. Come on."

Panic rose in me then. "You're crazy," I yelled. "I ain't committed any murder!"

"No? We found the company payroll under your mattress."

"I couldn't have killed anybody! I was here all night. Ask the guy in the pharmacy. I took seven seconal pills. I *had* to be here all night."

He looked at me strangely. "Well," he said, "I'm glad you're not claiming an alibi. We'll certainly agree you were here all night. There may be some argument about the seconal, though."

That didn't make much sense to me. But by now he had his hand on my arm and was leading me from the grove to the office.

THE place was crawling with cops. Seated in Carson's chair was a gaunt, elderly guy. This was Smith, supervisor of the whole outfit. A big guy with the gold bars of a police captain came forward as I entered.

"You're Bayer?"

I nodded.

"You want to give us a confession? Not that it matters. The case is cold."

With a tremendous effort, I fought down my nerves. "Do you mind telling me what you're talking about?"

"I'm talking about the fact of finding the company payroll under your mattress. And the fact of your killing Allcott to get it."

"I didn't kill anyone! I couldn't have. I—" I stopped and did a double take. "Allcott, you said? You said I killed Allcott, the night watchman?"

The captain nodded. "Somehow you swiped the combination of the safe. Probably from Carson's desk. You came here last night to open it. Allcott, on his rounds, surprised you, and you killed him."

I still didn't quite understand it, but somehow I felt relieved.

"You're nuts," I said. "In the first place the payroll wasn't here. Carson went to Ballston to get it yesterday."

The captain looked inquiringly at Smith.

"I don't know what he's talking about," said Smith. "The payroll's been in that safe for four days. Carson got it last week."

I was dizzy, trying to think. I said, "I couldn't have done anything last night. I was loaded with seven seconal tablets."

The captain shook his head. "We found seven pills in your coat pocket," he said. "An analysis will reveal whether you actually took the seconal or merely pretended to."

I was in a maze now. I knew I was in deep trouble, but I couldn't put even half the pieces into place.

I said desperately, "You mean Allcott's dead and a fifty thousand dollar payroll was taken from the safe?"

"And found under your bed," said the captain. "Take him in, boys."

I didn't squawk as they led me to one of the police cars. I had to figure this setup. I might just as well figure it out in a cell as anywhere.

Three hours later I had the answers. I paced the floor of my cell; hatred and bitterness consumed me. Carson had framed me!

From the beginning, his unholy scheme had aimed at sending me to the gallows. Allcott was friendly with Carson's wife. Carson decided to kill him. But he needed a fall guy to hang for it. When he'd found out about my prison record, he picked me.

He framed the holdup, framed my

phoney alibi. But he'd never drawn the payroll that Monday. He'd never had it when I first went into his hotel room.

It was easy now to see what he'd done. He left me alone in the room, gone to the truck, taken out the motor bike. He'd ridden hell for leather back to camp, shot Allcott, opened the safe and taken out the payroll. He could have done that in three hours easily. Then he returned to go through with the fake holdup, knowing the coppers would find me with the dough.

Of course, he'd never figured on my killing him first. After the coppers got me, he would just deny anything I said. My tale was preposterous anyway. No one would believe the payroll had ever been in Ballston that night.

And to clinch it absolutely, there was that phone call. The one I'd answered in the hotel room. The guy on the other end of the wire had been Carson. There'd be a record of a call to his room, a call which had been answered. The operator wouldn't know his voice—or mine. That call would prove he was in his room at two o'clock. Thus, even if anyone believed my fantastic true story, the call would prove it had been impossible for Carson to have left Ballston in order to kill Allcott at the time he was killed.

Finally, even if I could prove the truth, I'd hang for killing Carson instead of Allcott.

(Continued on page 128)

Warning! Act fast on PIN-WORMS



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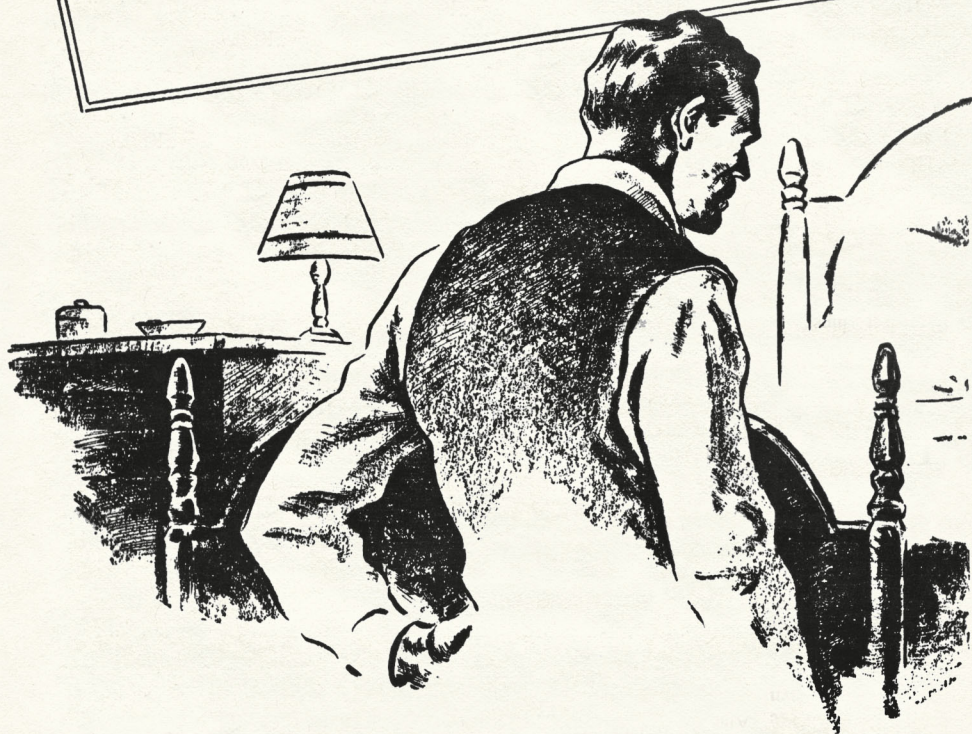
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HALF PAST MAYHEM



CHAPTER ONE

Blood Money

UPSTAIRS the old woman was dying.

She wasn't dying like it says in the books. There wasn't any of this business of a deathbed scene and farewell words and the stern doc by the window.

The doctor had been there on Sunday when they found her and couldn't wake

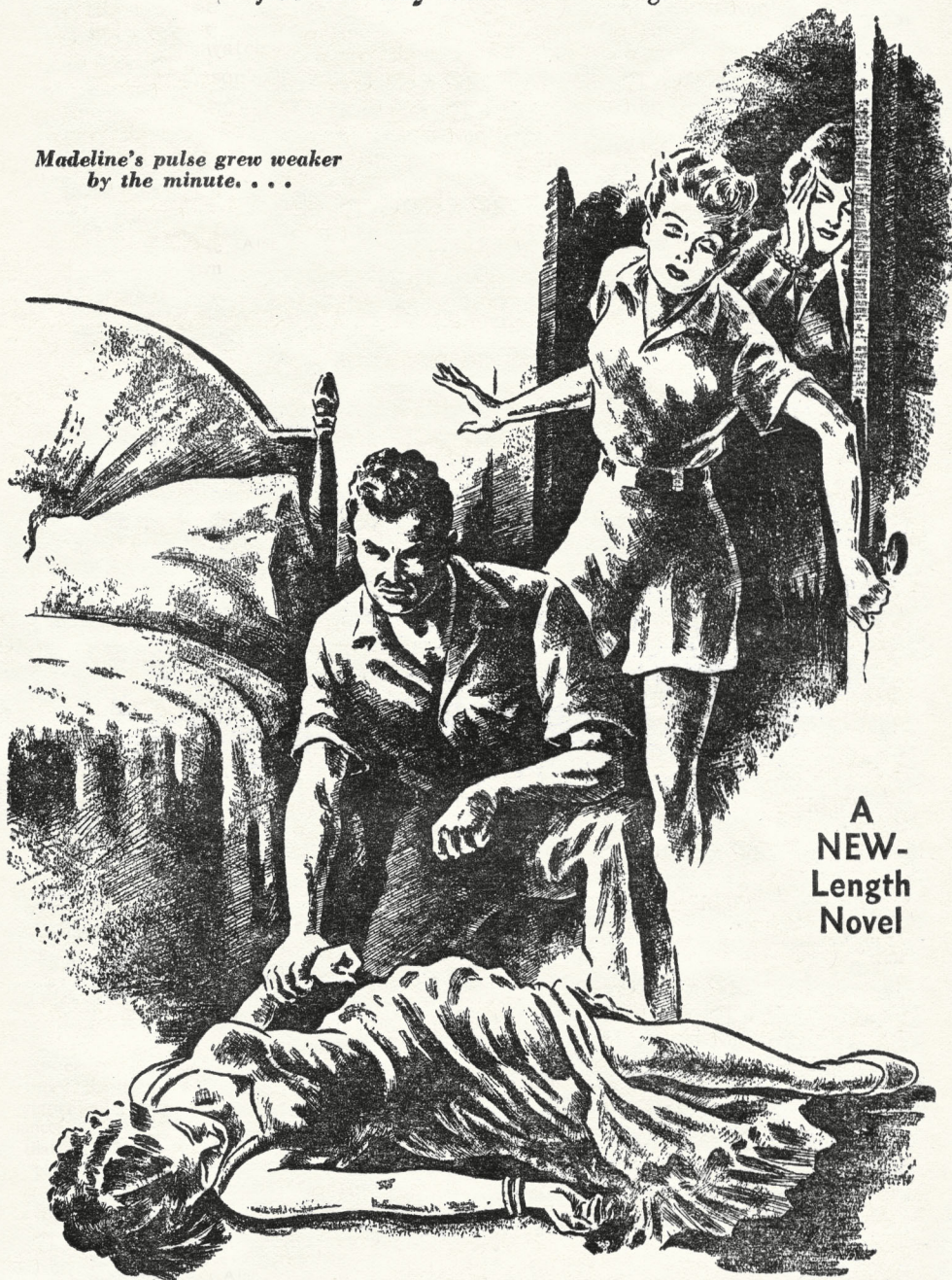
her up. She was a flabby, grey, monolithic woman in her seventies, with a cold blue eye and vast wealth, and she had taken pleasure out of using her wealth like a club.

The doctor explained to us that she had been dying for nearly a year of a certain kind of heart failure. I can't remember the name. The way it works, the heart supplies less and less blood and the organs fail one by one. It's a messy affair.

By John D. MacDonald

*The corpse who couldn't stay dead left a
legacy of hate for six who couldn't live
—five one-way tickets to the grave!*

*Madeline's pulse grew weaker
by the minute. . . .*



A
NEW-
Length
Novel

He was a young guy with a local reputation for being quite a hand with the female patients. He explained that a blood vessel in the brain had ruptured and that it would be a question of time. He couldn't say how long. She was comatose, and when he left he seemed glad to get out of the house.

There were just the three of us there, besides the old lady, after the doc left. Barbara Fleck, a cool, dark-haired item who favored tailored suits as though she wanted to conceal any evidence of being a woman, was the old lady's secretary. She made me want to grab her and muss up her hair a little. That type.

Then there was Lucy Rockland, the nurse. A chubby little item in starched white, always looking as if she had been scrubbed by a big brush. Because Lucy doesn't mind an affectionate pat once in a while, Barbara Fleck kept her cold dark eye on us for a long time, waiting for a chance to get rid of either of us or both. We didn't give her that chance.

Like I said, that was on a Sunday. I was living over the garages in the place where a chauffeur had lived, back in the days when old lady Kryle had employed a chauffeur.

The close relatives had raised a stink when I had come to stay. They figured that the old lady had gone off her rocker. But they didn't have the guts to try to commit her. Five months before the stroke, she had the grounds strung with electrified wire and had good locks and burglar alarms installed. She had contacted the agency and they had sent me along.

I remember when she interviewed me. She filled the big chair as though she had been dropped into it like unbaked dough.

"You look strong," she said.

"Like a horse."

"You have a ruthless look around the mouth, Mr. Flagin. I like ruthless people. What's your first name? Roger? Don't

tell me you're called that. Oh, Rack is the nickname. It seems more suitable. Come closer please."

I stepped closer to her chair. She had a knobby walking stick in her hand. She swung it at my head with a speed that surprised me. I got a hand up and caught the blow and pulled the stick out of her hand. I was mad.

"My stick, please," she said, cool as you please, holding her hand out. I gave it back to her. She was that type. "I wanted to see about your reaction time, Rack Flagin. You're quick. That's good. You may need to be very quick."

"Who are you afraid of?"

"I am not afraid of anything or anybody in this world or the next, Mr. Flagin. Your job is to protect me. It will be a simple job, because I cannot move out of the house. Barbara will show you to your rooms. You will move in today. You will not leave the grounds until you are no longer employed by me. I shall pay you one hundred dollars a week plus your rooms and your meals. I have spoken to your superiors. You will be off the agency payroll until this employment is terminated."

There were just the three of us there that Sunday morning after the doctor left because Mrs. Stukey, the cook, was at church. The gardener slept out and didn't put in an appearance on Sunday.

You couldn't count the old lady among the living. According to what the doctor had said, she was already dead. It was a case of waiting for poisons to build up in the body and stop the heart. She lay flat on her back. I could see her from the hall. Her breathing was like the sound of a wood rasp being used with long, slow strokes on hard, seasoned wood.

I followed Barbara Fleck, at her request, down to the study where she did her work. For the thousandth time, walking behind her, I wondered how she'd look in a dress instead of those suits she

wore. Lucy Rockland stayed up in the room with the old lady.

Barbara sat at her desk. Upstairs the old lady was dying. I pulled a chair over and slouched in it, tapping a cigarette on my thumb nail. She looked at me as though I was out of order, not standing at attention.

"There's a great deal to do, Flagin, and I will take care of you first. I'll make out a check from the petty cash account, and I'm certain Mrs. Kryle would have wanted me to give you a check for a week's salary as termination pay." She flipped open the big checkbook.

"Aren't we going a little fast, Fleckey?"

She gave me the cold, dark-eyed stare. "I hardly think so. I understand that this has been a soft spot for you and that you're reluctant to give it up."

"Come off it, Fleckey. We're both hired hands."

"I hardly care to be so categorized, Flagin. I feel that I have been more to Mrs. Kryle than a servant."

"I can see your big bitter tears. Think she'll remember you in the will?"

"You're impertinent!"

"Before we bandy any more words, darling, I have an envelope out in the garage. The old lady gave it to me the second day I was here. She said that I should open it should anything happen to her. I think we ought to take a look before you start being generous with her money."

"Get it immediately. I can't understand why she wouldn't leave such an envelope with me. Certainly I always followed her instructions to the letter."

"I'll get it immediately, Fleckey. On the way through the kitchen I'm going to have a cup of coffee. Maybe two. And then I want to finish a letter I started last night. When I'm through I'll bring the envelope around immediately."

I walked out. The house was Victorian and enormous. Eleven bedrooms, library, study, ballroom, dining room, billiard

room—all with high ceilings and dark, heavy furniture, a lot of it fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian. There was a lot of ugly stained glass in the arched windows.

I went into the garage and up to my rooms and took the envelope out of the bureau drawer from under my shirts. I stood and tapped it on my hand. Barbara was dead wrong about my wanting to stay on. I was slightly stir crazy. The place was big enough, with the four acres of fenced grounds, but a little radio is no substitute for night life.

DURING the five months I had banked ninety a week, and for once in my life I had some dough in reserve. But it had been dull. I stayed close to the old lady whenever she had visitors and I made four watchman trips every night at different intervals, so that if anybody was casing the place, they wouldn't be able to depend on me. Five months of steadily wearing a gun and you begin to feel that you'd been born with it.

I slit open the envelope. Mrs. Kryle wrote a large scrawling hand.

Mr. Flagin, It is my wish that when I die you remain on at the same salary until the terms of my will have been made clear to the beneficiaries thereof, and until the terms of the will have been fulfilled. This will be clear to you when you have heard the will. I have instructed Mr. Cheeney to have you present at the reading. Mr. Cheeney also understands that should you undertake this extra work, there will be a bonus of one thousand dollars paid to you at the end of that time. I shall expect you to prevent any acts of violence in this house.

Sincerely,

Myra Kryle.

I turned quickly as I heard the footstep behind me. I had left my door open. Barbara Fleck had come softly up the stairs. I realized that is wasn't a conscious attempt at stealth. She moves like a dark cat at night.

"What does it say?" she asked.

I handed it to her. She stood by my bed and read it. I watched her closely and saw no change of expression.

"I'm afraid," she said, "that poor Mrs. Kryle was becoming quite incompetent at the time she wrote that. I think it would be better if you left."

"You interest me."

I saw the change of approach. She sat down on the bed and made her eyes soft. "We've never gotten along, Mr. Flagin. I have to send wires immediately. The relatives mentioned in the will will be arriving. It will be awkward to have you here."

"I haven't heard anything yet that sounds like a thousand dollars."

"I'm sure that the bonus could be arranged almost immediately. That is, if you will leave."

I played along. I moved close to her. She stood up. She gave me a coy little smile and the parted lips. I put my hands on her shoulders and said, "I'm really sorry that we never got along, honeybun. How about a goodbye kiss?"

I kissed her and made it good enough so that after a little while she began to fight. When I let go of her she was flushed.

I said, "That'll save us time when I do leave. You see, I'm staying around."

She went dead white. As she went down the stairs fast, I called after her, "It'll be fun finding out why you're so anxious to get rid of me."

Sunday night I made the rounds, out of habit. When I was on the east side of the house I could hear the old lady's rattling breath. It went on and on in a never-ending rhythm. I looked up at the window and I could see Lucy Rockland asleep in the chair, the night light glowing on her pale hair, her starched white uniform.

I stood by the fence and looked down at the village. Mrs. Kryle's father had built the house. He had been the son of the village drunk. He went to the Austra-

lian gold fields and got his original stake. He had run the stake into the millions in business. When he had retired, he had brought his motherless daughter back to Cherry Point, the village of his birth, and had built this house on the hill overlooking the village because he wanted them to forget that he had been the son of the town drunk. But of course they didn't forget.

Myra, at thirty-seven, had married Duke Kryle, a twenty-four year old kid who was hungry for money, hungry enough to marry Myra. A year after the marriage, he had joined up for War One and had been killed on the troop ship by a guy who hadn't cared for five aces in the same poker game. There was a picture of him in the library.

The only lights on in the village were the street lights and the night lights in the stores.

Barbara's bedroom was on the ground floor. I went under the window and listened until I made out the soft cadence of her breathing. Then I went back and flipped a pebble against the old lady's window. The cook, Mrs. Stukey, took off her hearing aid when she went to sleep.

Lucy stood up, made a small wave with her hand and disappeared. She met me by the grape arbors. The starched uniform rustled as I took her in my arms. She smelled faintly of antiseptic.

"Oh, Rack, honey," she said, standing on tiptoe and nuzzling her face against my throat, "I'm so sick of everything."

"Even me?"

"No, silly. Not you. I'm going to hear the way she breathes the rest of my life."

"Come now. You're a tough old nurse. Those things don't bother you."

We were silent, and even out there, thirty yards from the house, you could hear the old lady fighting for each breath.

I said, "You could use a shot. Lew bought me a bottle yesterday. Come on up."

"Not tonight, Rack. She might—it might stop."

I leaned against the arbor and lit a cigarette and watched her going back across the yard, her uniform pale in the night. I saw her go into the bedroom, lean over the bed for a moment. Then she went back to her chair. I like Lucy. No big talk about forever and ever. Just two lonely people trapped in a frame mausoleum.

I went back to my room and found a wee-hours disk boy. The music was good, but the chatter nearly turned my stomach. Somehow I didn't feel like sleeping.

MONDAY she was still hanging on. At noon the first relative arrived. He blatted the horn of his English sports car at the iron gate. I took my time about opening it just wide enough to walk through.

"Come on, old man!" he said. "Get a leg on."

He had a long, thin, florid face with a long upper lip and sandy hair receding more than a little. His British accent was as phoney as a nine cent dime. I imagined that he thought he looked like a fair-haired Basil Rathbone.

I leaned on the door of his little car and said, "Want to get in?"

"No, I'm going in the opposite direction entirely. I always drive backwards."

"Who are you?"

He said with sudden stilted dignity. "Old man, it appears that my sistah-in-law is dying and I have received a telegram to that effect. Kindly open the gates."

"So you're Duke's brother. You don't look old enough."

"I'm his younger brother. I was seven when he died, if that's any of your business."

Pigskin luggage was stacked beside him. The car had Virginia plates. He'd apparently driven all night. I didn't like

the color of his shirt, his eyes or his car.

I let him in. The exhaust on his car sounded like a speed boat running slowly. As I started to shut the gates, a taxi drove up. It stopped and the girl in the back seat leaned forward to talk out the window to me.

I walked toward her. Twenty feet away she was sweet sixteen. Ten feet away she was twenty-five. When I came right up to her I saw that she could be anything, all the way up to forty-five. Her face was tiny and heart-shaped, with a cleft chin, round, hazy blue eyes and tiptilt nose. There was a tautness around the eyes and a shiny look to her throat that indicated a recent lift job. I added another five years.

In a little-girl voice and with a breath that staggered under the gin it was carrying around she said, "Isn't it just too awful? The damnable train was fifty minutes late and I suppose that she's dead now and I'll never see her alive again. I don't remember you. I didn't know I had any such virile-looking relatives. Please, am I too late?"

"You," I said, "would be Madeline Burke, star of the silent screen and daughter of Mrs. Kryle's deceased husband's half brother. The older half-brother. The younger full brother just drove in."

"Leonard Kryle? Is he here? Perfectly horrible type. And when you talk about the silent pictures, you must remember that I was a child then. Just a child."

I had a vague memory of her having three husbands before Valentino died, but I let it pass.

The driver said, wearily, "Lady, I've got to charge you for all this time."

I let the cab through and told the driver to stop at the side of the porch. I told Madeline that the old lady was still hanging on.

Nobody else came until dusk on Monday. Then it was the Jannisons—brother and sister—Joseph and Meg. Their re-

lationship to Myra Kryle was pretty tenuous. They were the grandchildren of the younger sister of Myra's father. I guess you'd call them second cousins.

Joe Jannison was an enormous young man with red hair and a full red beard. He wore blue jeans with all the air of royalty and his voice was a deep rumble. I guessed his age at about thirty. Barbara had told me that he was a musician. Meg, his sister, was tall the way I like a woman to be tall—tall, straight, proud of it. Red hair too, but darker than Joe's. She had unplucked eyebrows, oddly tufted at the outside corners, which, along with the green eyes, gave her somewhat the look of a cat.

The last one had to come from Denver, and so she didn't arrive until Tuesday afternoon. The old woman was breathing harder and faster, but she was still alive when Toby Morrow arrived. Toby was a young lady with chestnut hair cropped short, a lean, competent, boyish face and cool, amused eyes. Her relationship to Myra Kryle was most interesting. I found out that after Duke Kryle died, they found out that his marriage to Myra had been bigamous, and that he had a wife on the west coast, along with a daughter who must have been born after Duke had married Myra. The daughter, Toby, used her mother's maiden name. Toby was a top flight free-lance photographer. She had been in Denver doing a feature article on sanitariums.

After Toby had checked in and had been assigned a room by Barbara, Barbara looked me up and said, "That's the lot, Flagin."

"Choice bunch, eh?"

She said the next part as if it hurt her mouth to say it. "I've talked to Mr. Cheeney over the phone. He has recommended that you move into the house here and eat with—with the relatives."

"And you couldn't talk him out of it?"

"No, I—" She caught herself. "Take

the last room on the left at the end of the west corridor, please."

I emptied the bureau drawers into the suitcase, hung my suits over my arm, picked up the little radio by the handle, and moved into the big house. Eleven bedrooms. Five relatives, the old lady, the nurse, Barbara and me. That left two empty ones. Barbara had stationed me out in left field. The room she had given me looked like an afterthought. I put my stuff down in the hall and went on a tour. After I found what I wanted and moved in, I went down and found Barbara discussing the meal problem with Mrs. Stukey.

When she came to a comma, I said, "I took the one on the right in the middle of the east corridor, honey. It's more comfortable."

"Really, Flagin, I—"

"Who were you saving it for? You wouldn't want me to tell Señor Cheeney that you put me so far away that I couldn't comply with the old lady's wishes, would you?"

She broke the stare first. "I don't care which room you have, actually. Now, Mrs. Stukey. Can you hear me? Mrs. Stukey! You said your niece isn't very bright, but she's strong and willing. You may bring her here tomorrow to help. And she—"

I pushed through the swinging door and went through the big dining room into the front hall and up the stairs to my new room.

I opened the door and closed it behind me before I saw Madeline Burke. She held a water glass and it looked like water, but I knew it wasn't.

"Cocktail time," she said. "There's the bottle. This is a grim, grim old house. Who are you, darling?"

I gave her a blank stare. "Why, I'm Uncle Fudd's little boy, come to get his inheritance."

She frowned. "Fudd? Well, no mat-

ter. Sit down and we will speak of life and the ways of man."

I looked at her. Knocking fifty, but still with a pert little figure and that heart-shaped little face and the enormous blue eyes. Somehow it wasn't right; it wasn't decent. It was like the walking dead. I had the hunch that touching her would be like touching brittle old parchment.

I yawned. "Look, mother," I said. "Suppose you go back to your own room."

She reacted as though I had slapped her across the mouth. She wavered a bit. When she jerked the glass toward me the gin soared out in a long gout. I moved and it went over my shoulder, a few drops wetting my cheek.

She slammed the door as she left.

I SHOWERED and shaved and dressed with care, the dark sharkskin and the blue tie with the small white figures. In the full-length mirror in the back of the bathroom door, the .38 made too much of a bulge. I stashed it behind the books in the built-in case and took the Belgian .25 caliber automatic and put it naked in my packet pocket. It made no more bulge than a flat cigarette case.

When I went down, they were in the library. Leonard Kryle was stirring a big pitcher of golden martinis with a long spoon, the ice clinking nicely against the glass. He gave me a quick, cool look, turned toward Barbara and raised one eyebrow. Madeline Burke was sitting fuzzily on the window seat, her eyes glued to the pitcher. Toby Morrow was in a deep leather chair, looking at a magazine. Joe and Meg Jannison stood by the french doors that opened onto the terrace, talking in low tones. Barbara was standing near Leonard Kryle, spreading cream cheese with chopped chives on crisp little crackers.

"Is there something you would like?" Leonard asked me, in his best my-good-man air.

"A martini or two," I said. The others looked at me.

In the silence Barbara said, "This is Mr. Flagin. He has been Mrs. Kryle's bodyguard for five months. Mr. Cheeney, Mrs. Kryle's lawyer, has suggested that he move in with us. I'm afraid you'll have to give him a martini."

I bowed. "Your hospitality is touching," I smiled at them.

Madeline glared at me. Toby seemed amused. Meg Jannison gave me a speculative look out of those green eyes.

Leonard said, "Strange idea," and finished his stirring.

Even with a ten-foot handicap, Madeline got the first glass. She took it back to the window seat and cupped her hands around it and looked as if she were about to start rocking from side to side and crooning to it.

With my drink in my hand, I moved over beside Toby Morrow. She had laid the magazine aside.

"You made good time," I said.

"Good plane connections. Just luck." She looked around the room. She said, "Someday I'd like to do a portfolio of pictures on these old interiors. Pictures with lots of shadows. Something to express the feeling that we moderns are interlopers and that the only people who ever really fitted in were the robber barons."

"Maybe," I said, "they were looking for rationalization. Live with stained glass and marble long enough and maybe you can feel virtuous and clean."

She gave me a quick sharp look. "Blow me down," she said. "I hope that isn't something you heard somebody say."

"Want some more?"

"Sure thing."

"Shoddy living today is a question of little crimes. And so king-size houses don't help—they merely heighten the contrast. The old boy's crimes were of a size to match the height of these ceilings."

She gave me a nice crooked grin. "And don't you get the feeling that the house is waiting? Waiting for more of the same?"

Joseph Jannison intruded on our little session. "Waiting for what?" he asked. The glass looked like a thimble in his big hand. Red hair curled thickly on the back of his hand and on the fingers between the knuckles. He looked like Robin Hood's Little John ought to look.

"We were saying the house had an air of expectancy."

"I couldn't write here," he rumbled. "Nothing but dirges would come out."

Glancing over, I saw that he had left Meg alone by the french doors. I detached myself and moved over. Standing beside her, I saw that the top of her head was on a line with my eyes. That would make her about five-ten. She wore jade green.

"The house depresses your brother," I said.

She turned and gave me a quick glance before looking out again at the night. The antique gold earrings swayed as she moved her head. "Many, many things depress Joe," she said softly. Behind us, Leonard, talking to Barbara, laughed. His voice was a whinny. Meg's voice was deeper than Leonard's. I wondered about Leonard.

"You've met your relatives before?"

"All but Toby. And I'm ready to call her the best of the lot."

I took her glass and refilled it and my own, took them back to where she stood. "Why did Myra Kryle feel that she needed a bodyguard, Mr. Flagin?"

"Rack to my friends. I don't know why. She paid me and she got protection."

We stood without talking and I found that it was not an awkward silence. I didn't feel any urgency to say something semi-sparkling. She was a good girl to be silent with.

A drink later, dinner was served. Barbara had gone out of her way to make an impression. The centerpiece was of flowers

from the garden, crisp and cold, with beads of water on the petals. The lighting was dim, the silver polished and heavy, the plates old and vast. Water looked better than water should in the cut crystal. Clear soup, crab-flake cocktail, a roast of beef.

Leonard Kryle sat at the head of the table, and Barbara at the foot. Madeline was on Leonard's right. The lighting was kind to her. Her mouth had become loose and it sagged like a little purse with a weak drawstring. I was on Barbara's left at the foot of the table, with Meg beside me, Joe directly opposite. Toby was between Joe and Madeline. A cozy little dinner for seven.

It is interesting to watch people eat. Leonard carved the roast with too-nice mannerisms. Madeline ate with the mechanical listlessness of the alcoholic. Joe shoveled lustily with both hands, occasionally smearing his beard. Barbara, cutting neat little cubes of meat, avoided looking at Joe. Meg ate with precise and feline gusto, and her lips looked very red. Toby was a pleasant woman eating. Nothing more. There were frequent periods of silence during the meal. They were thinking not of food, but of money.

There was one of those periods of silence over the coffee. The breathing of the old woman was clearly audible. It had a rusty, weary sound. And suddenly it stopped. It seemed as though every sound in the whole world had stopped with it. Madeline gave a tiny gasp and her eyes were impossibly large. Barbara's coffee spoon clattered against the saucer. Everyone listened. With a strangled rasp, the breathing started again, much slower. Everyone seemed to be counting. Seven slow breaths and then the silence again. The seconds added up. I knew that she was dead. The others knew it when they heard Lucy's slow and heavy footsteps coming swiftly down the wide, curving stairs.

CHAPTER TWO

Name Your Poison

SHE died on Tuesday night and they came and got her and the funeral was Thursday afternoon. *Time* magazine came in the mail Thursday morning and it amazed me that they had been able to get the notice of the death in that issue. "Eccentric daughter of Joshua Merrit, who ran Australian gold into an industrial empire before. . ."

We were not bothered with reporters. That came later—after the terms of the will were made public.

I went to the funeral. Everyone was well behaved. Leonard and Barbara managed to squeeze out a few tears. Madeline bawled in the exaggerated fashion of the silent film. The rest of us were subdued.

Friday morning, Mr. Cheeney came with his black briefcase. He called me into the study and shut the door. He was a little man with an oversized white face and protruding teeth. I sat on the edge of the desk and he trotted back and forth, looking at his watch, for all the world as though he were late to tea with Alice and the Mad Hatter.

"I don't like it, Mr. Flagin. I don't like it a bit. I warned her against it, but you couldn't talk sense to the woman. She wouldn't listen. My grandfather handled some of her father's affairs. You'd think that I'd be in a position of trust. But no. Just an errand boy, and I had to cater to her ridiculous whims."

"Something strange about the will?"

"You'll hear it in the proper time. Mr. Flagin. She did tell me why she had you here."

"That I would like to know."

"She knew that her mind was a little bit affected by the illness. She was afraid the periods of—ah—incompetence, would grow more severe and that during one of

those periods some of her relatives might try to influence her to change her will. She was afraid they would force their way in here."

"That would be quite a risk, wouldn't it?"

"Six million dollars is worth taking a risk for, I believe."

I whistled softly. "It is indeed a bundle."

"And all very liquid. Negotiable bonds and cash. I've been liquidating holdings for over a year. Finished the job three months ago. Now here is what I want to say to you. She was a devil. She knows—knew, I mean, that the terms of this will are going to mean trouble. Bad trouble. She hated her relatives and she despised most of them as weaklings. She wants—I mean, wanted, her relatives to be forced, through their weakness, to do things—they shouldn't. And she wanted you here to catch them in the act."

"Can the will be broken?"

"No. She insisted on a psychiatric examination the morning before she dictated the terms to me. There's no basis for breaking the will. She was examined at the time she dictated it and at the time she signed it. A very reputable man attested to her competence. Oh, how I dread reading that thing!"

"They're waiting for you anxiously."

"Suppose I'd better get it over with."

He looked at his watch again. "Send them all in here. The five relatives and Miss Fleck and the nurse and the cook and the gardener. They're the ones mentioned."

It was no chore rounding them up. I brought some extra chairs in from the library. Cheeney sat licking his lips until they were all assembled and silent. I looked at the faces. Meg slowly ran the tip of her tongue along her lower lip. Toby's eyes were very bright. Leonard was pale. Madeline was struggling with the hiccups. I took her a glass of water and she bent over and drank out of the

far edge of the rim of the big tumbler.

Cheeny coughed, gave a nervous smile and said, with stilted joviality, "Well, I suppose we'd better read the will."

Cheeny was executor. The first part was standard bequests. Five thousand to Mrs. Stukey. Twenty-five hundred to Lew, the gardener, fifteen hundred to Lucy. Mrs. Stukey's lips worked and Lew glared at her. Never have I seen such livid hate on a person's face as when Mr. Cheeny came to the bequest for Barbara Fleck. The old lady left Barbara one dollar, and Cheeny's voice was hoarse as he read, "... because it would not be fair to Miss Fleck to handicap her ambition and her energy with funds which she has not earned."

Miss Barbara Fleck said one short hard word which I was surprised to find that she knew. Madeline giggled.

Then came the interesting part. It was full of whereases, buts and to-wits and parties of first and second parts. Very, very legal.

When he had finished, Leonard said hoarsely, "Give it to us in English, Mr. Cheeny. I'm afraid I know what it said."

Cheeny took off his glasses and wiped them on a white handkerchief. "In brief, the idea is this. Each of you five is left six hundred thousand apiece. In order to collect it, you must stay within the grounds for thirty days, not leaving for any reason, whether through free will or through being forced to leave. Should one of you leave the grounds, his or her share is divided equally among the remaining four, raising the inheritance to seven hundred and fifty thousand. If a second person should leave, the remaining three would receive, of course, one million apiece. If at the end of thirty days only two persons should be left, they would each receive a million and a half. If only one is left, he or she would receive the entire three million."

"What about that part where I'm men-

tioned again—at the end?" Barbara asked.

"It says that if you stay here for the thirty days and run the household, you will receive ten thousand dollars from the balance of the estate. It says that it will be money earned, and thus not as destructive as a direct inheritance."

Some of the hate faded from Barbara's face.

He continued. "The same sort of arrangement holds true for Mrs. Stukey, the cook, Mr. Frame, the gardener, and Mr. Flagin. If they remain for the thirty day period they will continue to receive their regular wages, plus a bonus of a thousand dollars apiece at the end of the thirty days."

Leonard said hoarsely, "That will can be broken. It isn't fair. I'm the closest relative. I thought you had to have a reason for screwy bequests."

"The will gives the reason. You heard it. She said in the will that she wished to give her money to those of her relatives who could live in peace with each other for a short period."

"I thought there was more than three million," Joe rumbled.

"There is considerably more. The house and grounds and a residue of about three millions will go toward the establishment of a research center to discover the causes and the possible cures for all types of heart diseases. The invested residue will provide an income of over a hundred thousand a year for the research center. It is to be called the Kryle Foundation."

Joe groaned. "Thirty days in this fantastic tomb!"

"At twenty thousand dollars a day," Meg said firmly. "I think you can stand it, Joe."

"MY GOODNESS!" Mrs. Stukey said, with the loud metallic tone of the very deaf. "Five thousand dollars! Wasn't that nice

of her. Can I have it now, Mr. Cheeney?"

"As soon as the will is probated."

Mr. Cheeney shoved the papers back into his briefcase. The show was over, but they still sat there and you could almost hear the solid sound of the figures thudding in their brains. Six hundred thousand dollars.

Cheeney said to me, "You will report immediately if anyone leaves the grounds, Mr. Flagin."

"It would be an expensive little trip," I said.

I hadn't noticed Joe Jannison leave the room. The mighty crash of his hands on the keyboard of the piano startled all of us. It was the first time he had played. The piano was in tune and it was a concert grand. The music was like the crash of great storm waves on a beach. It had a sound of triumph, but hidden under the swell of the music was minor discord, like a thin little chant of evil. It seemed to rock the old house. Cheeney paused with his fat white little hands on one of the briefcase straps. The music ran up my spine and raised the hairs on the back of my neck. He played with enormous power and we sat as though under a spell until he brought both hands down in three mighty chords, discordant and lusty. The music, or noise, stopped.

The piano was still. Meg said calmly, "That's one of his."

We heard him go up to his room and heard the door slam. Cheeney left. There was polite conversation in the huge living room for about an hour. The brandy was old and very good. The words had no meaning. They were light words, said while the eyes expressed suspicion and glee over sudden wealth, and determination to live up to the terms of the will.

Lucy was gone, of course. And I missed her. She would have been one sane person to talk to, and her eagerness would have been something fresh and young and dependable.

When they started to go upstairs, I got my flash and made one slow circuit of the grounds. Lights were on in the bedrooms. I sat on the bench under the grape arbor and smoked and watched while they went out, one by one.

When I saw the faint movement in the starlight, I cupped my hand around the cigarette glow and moved away from the bench into the deeper shadows. She came close and I saw that it was Toby Morrow. She looked shorter and I guessed that she had changed to low heels. She wore a cardigan over her dress against the night chill and her hands were shoved deep in the pockets. She walked slowly with her head down.

When I spoke, I heard the quick intake of breath. But her voice was calm as she said, "Oh, it's you."

"Come over and have half a bench and a whole cigarette."

She sat down beside me. "What does that much money do to you?" I asked. She looked up at the stars.

"Do to me? Oh, it means things, I guess. Security. New wardrobe. New car. A few new items of equipment. But one-tenth of that amount would do almost as well."

"Strange woman."

She looked at me quickly. "Strange? Maybe the things women want aren't buyable. Ever think of that?"

"He must have been a louse."

"No. Just weak. A fine upstanding young American tramp. Maybe he was proving something to himself. Maybe chasing women is a sort of disease that a man who is unsure of himself has. I talk too much."

"I won't tell."

She giggled. "You don't look like you would. Anyway, it's over. It was over three years ago and the time for licking wounds should be over too, I guess. I'm thirty-one years old. Rack. Old enough to know better than to moon around."

"Suppose he sent you a message to come to him. How about the six hundred thousand?"

"I'd go in a minute. Now you know what I am."

I looked at the clear line of her profile. I said, and my voice was unexpectedly harsh, "Don't moon about him. Don't walk around at night. Keep your door locked. One way to go out the main gate is to be carried out. The old woman set this up for murder. Now I've said it. It's what the rest of them are thinking. There's a price of six hundred thousand on your head, Toby. Take care of yourself, because I think maybe you are the best of them."

She leaned over and kissed me lightly on the cheek. "Thanks, Rack. I do need straightening out. Just like you do."

I grunted in surprise. "Me?"

"Certainly. It takes a certain kind of misery to detect that same kind in others. What did she do to you?"

"Walked out. His dough spoke louder than I could. They live in South America."

"What did you used to do, Rack?"

"Architect. I was designing a house for us. It sort of took the frosting off the cake. So I bummed around for a while, and now I've got a job where muscles are more important than front elevation and how many windows in the dining room."

"Maybe some day you'll build me a house."

"Maybe, Toby."

I watched her until she was out of sight in the darkness. I had never talked about it before. It made me feel oddly relaxed. It made me feel almost as though one day I might be able to forget Lucille for as long as an hour at a time.

I went up the stairs and the hall was dark. The stairs were well padded. I was thinking about Toby and about the good planes of her face and the amused eyes. A board creaked in the hall. I centered the

flash in the general direction and pushed the button.

Barbara Fleck blinked in the glare. Her dark hair was down, falling softly to her shoulders, softening her face. She wore a negligee. There was lace across the top of the nightgown under it. She looked frightened.

"Sleepwalking, honeybun?" I asked.

"It's you! Do you have to creep around at night?"

"Going visiting?"

"I was going downstairs for a drink of water," she said.

"Very careful makeup job just to go get a drink. Isn't there any water in your bathroom?"

"I want ice water. And I don't care for your inferences."

"Honeybun, it's lovely to see you looking like a woman."

"Shut up! Please shut up!" She went by me and turned on the lower hall light and went down the stairs. When she was out of sight, I debated going along the hall and giving a tiny feminine tap on Leonard's door. If he was expecting her, he'd open it quickly. It would be fun to say boo and watch him sputter.

The old house creaked in the night. After a time she came back. I was out of sight. I heard her pause and wait for long seconds. Then she went on to her own room and closed the door softly.

I went to bed and went to sleep immediately.

When I went down to breakfast at seven, Mrs. Stuke's niece, Agnes, was in the kitchen. She was a girl of middle height with a flat face, dull eyes, stringy hair, run-over shoes and an insane giggle.

She started to babble about, "Gee, all that money. Howja like to have a slice a that dough, hah?"

The morning was crisp, but not too cool for breakfast on the terrace. I made up a tray and carried it out, away from Agnes. Mrs. Stuke was doing some

early morning dusting in the big library.

I was about to start on the toast when Meg Jannison appeared in the doorway. She wore a yellow sweater and a rust-colored skirt. Her hair was tied with a strand of yellow yarn. "Mmm," she said. "Nice out here. Can I join you?"

"Don't laugh or talk until five minutes after my coffee is down."

"If you so much as smile, friend, you'll have orange seeds in your hair."

She brought her breakfast out and we ate in moody and companionable silence. Agnes brought out the coffee pot and I poured second cups for both of us. She took one of my cigarettes out of the pack on the table, lit it and leaned back with a sigh.

"Good morning," I said.

"And good morning to you, sir."

"I don't often eat with heiresses."

"Potential heiresses. What a night! I could still hear her breathing. All my nightmares had cloven hooves and sharp teeth. Whoosh!"

I enjoyed looking at her. The faintly feline air was gone. With the morning sun touching her hair, she looked like a magazine cover. I could see about a baker's dozen of faint freckles across the bridge of her nose.

"What's to do here?" she asked. "Bessies eat and sleep."

"There's a fair asphalt court behind the garages. I used to play tennis with the nurse. There are racquets and balls in the garage. Interested?"

"I'll be terrible, Rack. Haven't played in two years. Give me ten minutes to change."

She changed faster than I did. She was tightening the net when I came out. She wore white shorts and a polo shirt. I found that she wasn't bad. She could cover ground with those long, slim, tanned legs. And when she belted the ball, she did it with gusto. But her wind was bad. After one set she went over onto the grass and

dropped. She rolled onto her back, arms outstretched, and panted at the sky. I lit a cigarette and tucked it in the corner of her mouth.

"Thanks," she gasped.

At that moment the long, echoing, quivering scream came distantly from the house.

I GLANCED at my watch as I got up. Just twenty after eight. I got into the kitchen while the house was still echoing with startled questions.

I went up the stairs three at a time. Agnes stood with her back against the corridor wall, looking through the open door of Madeline Burke's room. I went down to the room. Leonard Kryle was on one knee beside the face-down figure of Madeline Burke. He glanced up at me as I came in.

"What is it?"

He smiled faintly. "The old girl just imbibed just a bit more than she could handle. She seems to have passed out. The girl came up to make the beds. It scared her to see Miss Burke on the floor, so she screamed her fool head off."

I took her wrist and felt the pulse. It was thready and irregular. I rolled her over. Her eyes were shadowed and bluish. Meg stood in the doorway, with Toby behind her. Agnes was still whimpering.

I said, "Toby, call the doctor and have him get right over here. Tell him to bring a stomach pump. Somebody shut that girl up."

I lifted Madeline onto the bed. She wouldn't weigh much over a hundred pounds. She breathed heavily through her parted lips. There was a little clot of dried blood on the inside of her lower lip. I guessed that she had bitten it, but it looked like more of a scratch than a bite. The hairline scars of the face-lifting operation showed at her temples. Her breathing was stertorous, unpleasantly reminis-

cent of the breathing of the old lady.

Dr. Braddick arrived in a remarkably short time. He nodded at me, glanced at the figure on the bed and shut the door, herding Leonard Kryle out as he did so.

He thumbed up her eyelids, grunted, took her pulse. He glanced around the room, saw the empty gin bottle on the bureau, the other empty near where she had been stretched out on the floor.

He took the stethoscope out of his bag, carefully listened at different places on her chest as she breathed.

"Well?" I asked.

"Too late for a stomach pump. The alcohol has poisoned her. Lungs are filling. Pneumonia, I guess. Phone Cherry Point 883 and have an ambulance sent out."

"Could you possibly treat her here, Doc?"

"I don't care to be called Doc, as I've told you before. No, I couldn't. She'll have to go into an oxygen tent."

"If you take her through those gates, she loses exactly six hundred thousand bucks, friend."

His eyes widened. "Kidding me?"

"No. That was in the old lady's will. They have to stay here thirty days to get the dough."

He pursed his lips and checked again. He said, "Pulse weaker. She can't use six hundred thousand if she's dead. If you say don't move her, I'm off the case right now. Get yourself a new doctor. She'll be dead in an hour, maybe two. You phone while I shove a little adrenalin into her."

I phoned. They carried her down and put her in the ambulance and drove her out the gate. While we were waiting, Dr. Braddick had said, in a wondering tone, "Shows all the symptoms of a hardened drinker. Funny she could stay conscious long enough to drink all that down. You say she was by the window? Her dress is dry, but it's wrinkled like it had been wet.

If she had been soaking wet when she fell down there. . . ."

The siren whined into the distance. I went back up to her room and looked into the bathroom. One small black pump, so small that it looked like it would fit a child, was in the corner of the shower stall. I wondered if she had taken a shower to try to sober up. I shook my head. The ways of the alcoholic are mysterious indeed. And suddenly I remembered looking down at her on the bed, seeing the tiny blobs of mascara at the tip of each eyelash. Mascara runs when water hits it. Hers hadn't.

When I went through the kitchen, Mrs. Stukey was grumbling at a subdued Agnes. "House full of people. Enough work to do without 'em messing around in my kitchen after I've gone home. Mis-laying things. What would they want with a funnel, anyhow?"

I had my hand on the swinging door. I stopped and turned. "A what?"

"Eh?"

"What was mislaid, Mrs. Stukey?"

"My funnel, that's what. Found it in the wrong drawer this morning. Think I don't know where I put it? Well, I do. A place for everything and everything in its place, I always say. Don't know what they wanted with it. Red stuff all over the end of it."

"Could I see it?" I asked, trying to control the tension in my voice.

She handed it to me. "What red stuff?" I asked.

"I scrubbed it off, that's what."

"Could it have been lipstick?"

"Eh?"

"Lipstick?"

"How do I know that? Maybe it was. Drive a woman crazy. Everybody eating breakfast at different hours. As if there wasn't enough work around here as it is and . . ."

She was still grumbling as I left the kitchen. I had a nice picture in my mind.

A pretty picture. A dark room, starlight coming in the window. Madeline passed out on the bed. Door unlocked. A figure comes in and looks over the situation. Stealthy trip downstairs for the gin and the funnel. Hold Madeline's head steady. Jam the funnel into the mouth, scratching the lip. Slow patience in the night, probably holding the woman's nose so that, with unconscious reflex, she'd have to swallow the gin. And then, to make doubly sure, lugging the woman off the bed and laying her face down by the window. A black pump planted in the shower to make it look good. Water poured from a pitcher, soaking the dress. Empty bottles artfully placed. A final survey of the scene. Then a trip down to replace the funnel. But of course it would be too dark to see the lipstick on the funnel.

Any one of the other four could have done it. Both Toby and Meg were strong enough. Emotionally I wanted to rule out Toby, but this was a game where the stakes were so high that no one could be ruled out.

What did I have to go on? A drunken woman had gotten a bit more soused than usual. Surely not enough to interest the police.

And then I was wanted down at the gate by Lew to help him fend off the first crew of reporters and photographers. The will had hit the newspapers.

CHAPTER THREE

Women and Death

IT WAS dusk, and the reporters were gone. I had put it to a test vote, whether or not we should let them in. The ayes had come from Leonard, Joe and Barbara. Meg had said nay. Toby had refused to vote. And so for a long time the pop of flash bulbs had echoed in the house and everyone had made quaint

little statements and guesses as to what they would do with what was left after taxes.

Once again, Leonard stood stirring the pitcher of martinis. Toby said brightly, "And now all you lucky people get seven hundred and fifty thousand. I'm going to turn my extra one fifty back to Madeline. There's no law against that, is there?"

"Not that I know of," Leonard said coldly. "But why you should want to do her a favor is more than I can understand. Sloppy little woman! She did it to herself, you know."

Meg said, very sweetly, "Why Leonard! Suppose you were taken through that gate against your will? Wouldn't you want me to give you that part of your share that would come to me?"

"Well," he said uneasily, "When you look at it that way. . . ."

"But of course, I wouldn't," Meg said.

"We shouldn't quarrel," Barbara said firmly.

Joe Jannison snorted. "'We,' she says. As near as I can figure, Miss Fleck, you are the house mother. I doubt whether one of your duties is that of referee."

Barbara turned pale. "Really, Mr. Jannison."

He chuckled. "Really, Mr. Jannison," he said, mimicing her. Leonard patted Barbara on the shoulder and whispered something to her. Barbara's color came back.

I spoke up. "Now everybody gets three quarters of one million round dollars. A fine sum. I think it would be unpleasant if anybody got any more piggy ideas."

"What does that mean?" Barbara asked, accenting it with a sniff meant to show my precise social level.

"It means that somebody fed Madeline Burke her gin through a funnel last night. That clever character will be a murderer if she dies. It was a clumsy fake."

I watched them. Whoever had done it was good. Almost identical surprise was

mirrored in the five pairs of eyes. Neat.

Joe snorted, "Look, everybody. He's earning his money."

The surprise faded. "I'm likely to believe you," Leonard said.

"So I was just joking," I said.

"We can get along without that slightly macabre sense of humor," Barbara pointed out.

I sauntered up and refilled my glass. I said, easily, "But just in case I might be guessing too close to the mark, maybe you'd all better keep pretty well locked up at night. Women shouldn't wander around the halls in their pretties."

I looked at Barbara. Her eyes narrowed a bit and she moved a half step closer to Leonard.

The seating was easier with six instead of seven. In the middle of dinner, Lew came back with the city papers I had sent him for. They had arrived at the station on the seven o'clock. The late editions featured Madeline Burke. They wept tears of bitter black ink over the poor little woman being forced by 'a sudden illness' to give up a fortune. They had some pictures of her from the files. From way back in the files. The siren of 1924, swooning in the arms of a svelte customer with a Dewey mustache, and there were some pictures of the Hollywood house she had once owned. They said that Miss Burke had been in poor health for several years.

Over the brandy, Joe said brashly, "Cheer up, everybody. Only twenty-nine days to go." If looks could have killed, he was a dead man.

At midnight, Dr. Braddick phoned to say that Madeline Burke had died. Barbara took the call. She gave the news in a voice that came softly up the stairwell. I went back to my room and sat on the edge of the bed for a long time. I remembered the vague blue eyes and the heart-shaped face, the cleft chin. In her silent film days a few million pimply

young men had been in love with her flickering image. It seemed a very messy way to die.

And it seemed even messier that none of her relatives could go to the funeral.

I was wide awake the moment the latch on my door clicked. I scooped the .38 out from under the pillow and stood up, took two cautious steps toward the door. It began to swing open. I realized that, with my penchant for sleeping in pajama tops, it could turn out to be a very confusing situation.

I moved to where the figure was silhouetted against the window. With an inward sigh of relief, I leaned forward and jabbed hard with the muzzle of the gun, hearing the breath go out of him. I pulled the gun back to a safe distance and said, "Sit on the edge of the bed, friend."

"You startled me," Leonard said plaintively.

He sat down. I pulled on my pants and clicked on the light. He blinked at the light.

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

"I heard about Madeline. I've been thinking, you know."

"Congratulations. Want your hand held?"

"Please don't be a boor, old man. This is business. I thought about what you said. I don't think you were joking about Madeline. It wasn't a thing that—that one jokes about, you know."

"Keep going."

"I would feel better with someone looking out for my interests, Flagin. I would feel more comfortable, you know."

"Assuredly."

"We haven't anything in common. The only way I can make my interests your interests is to make a financial offer. If, at the end of thirty days, I am still here and I get a share of the inheritance . . . it should be at least seven hundred and fifty thousand, you know, I shall give you ten thousand dollars."

"Who are you afraid of?"

"I . . . I don't know. I had to force myself to walk down that dark hall. I would just feel safer if we had that agreement."

"And if you were the one who took care of Madeline, this would make you look a lot better."

He surprised me by not bursting into objections and protestations of innocence. He said mildly, "I can't help what you may think, Flagin. Will you do it?"

"There's the desk. Sit down and write what I tell you to write. I, Leonard Kryle, do hereby employ Roger Flagin as body-guard for the twenty-nine day period beginning as of the date of this contract. I am employing him at a fee of three hundred and fifty dollars a day, the total payable at the end of the twenty-nine day period. Should I, however, for some reason, become ineligible for a share in the will of the late Myra Kryle, this contract will be null and void."

He dated it and signed it with a flourish. I folded it and put it in my wallet.

He said, "Now, of course, you have to walk me back to my room. I'll lock the door. Please come and get me for breakfast at nine."

I shrugged. The man was paying.

Meg joined me again for breakfast at seven. She had a drawn look around the mouth and shadowed circles around her eyes.

As I lit her cigarette I said, "Bothered by Madeline?"

She shook her head. "You don't want to listen to my troubles. Besides, it makes me sorry for myself when I talk about them."

"Try me. Innumerable troubled women have wept on these tweed shoulders. The padding fools 'em."

She grinned. "It's the sort of trouble that seems worse in the middle of the night. Did you notice how Joe acted last night?"

"He has a knack for laughing at the wrong places. Is that bad?"

"With Joe it is. He's three years younger than I am. I'm twenty-six. His beard fools people. Our parents died when I was nineteen. I was a junior in college. Joe had just won a musical scholarship. It wasn't enough to keep him going. I quit school and went to work. I figured that Joe had the talent in the family. He worked hard and did well. Maybe he worked too hard. He went all to pieces three years ago. Two weeks before the day I was to be married. It was a sort of nervous breakdown. The guy I was going to marry thought it over and decided that he didn't want a wife and dependent brother-in-law. I guess it was a good thing. I know now I wasn't in love with the guy. I just thought I was. I managed to keep Joe in a private hospital for five months. He was all right when they released him. A year ago, I landed a fine job. I was going to the continent with a man and his wife, sort of companion and secretary. Good pay. Joe was working too hard on his Concerto, I guess. He folded again and I had to stay around. A friend of mine got the job. We came here and stayed with Myra until he was all right again. I worked down in the village that time. We left when he was all right. Now he's beginning to go off the rails again."

"Why?" I asked. "You're here. Apparently the trigger before was some idea of losing you. Maybe the parents died when he was too young. At least there's a pattern there. I think, don't you?"

"I've known that since the first time, Rack. You're right. But the difference is that now it takes just little things to make him feel insecure. Do you hate frank women, Rack? Do you?"

"I can't think of any brand I hate."

"Look, I like you. And I guess I show it. I have fun talking to you and I liked the tennis game and I've liked these two

breakfasts together. Joe has seen us together. Last night he was very sarcastic about my having 'stars in my eyes'. Maybe he's right. I wouldn't know yet. But he's the genius in the Jannison family and I'm the serf. He's my job, Rack. And I can see him veering toward the edge. If he goes over, he gets quite frighteningly violent. So please forgive me if I get cool as hell. Poor simile, I guess."

She gave me a level and direct look, full of meaning.

I sipped my coffee. "Not fair, Meg. You're grown. Why don't you cut loose and let him get over his tantrums by himself?"

"I'd like to. If I thought they were conscious, I would. Believe me. But I want to stop this before we get acquainted, you and I."

"I suddenly feel as though we'd gotten very well acquainted, Meg."

"Please don't, Rack. Please!"

And as she said that I knew what it was about her that had bothered me. The hollow of temple and the high cheekbones and the concave curve of cheek was entirely Lucille. I wondered why I hadn't seen it before.

I stood up suddenly. My voice was unexpectedly hoarse. "See you around."

When I looked back, she was still sitting at the table. Her shoulders were slumped and her head was bowed.

ON THAT day the pattern seemed to become fixed. Twenty-eight days to go. Twenty-seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. . . . The tension was there. And the wariness. But at dusk every day we gathered for cocktails. Dinner was the only joint meal. Leonard arranged to have breakfast and lunch in his room. Joe prowled the house like a tiger, if there is such a thing as a red-bearded tiger. Meg repulsed my every effort to start a conversation, and she also took her breakfasts in her room.

New equipment that Toby had ordered was delivered. She spent a lot of her time taking both indoor and outdoor shots. She got some black material from Mrs. Stukey and fixed up a room in the cellar as a darkroom.

Barbara Fleck did not seem to change in any degree. She wore her neat, dark suits and her white blouses and her severe hairdo. The one room in the house never opened was the room in which the old lady had died. Agnes refused flatly to dust it. Mrs. Stukey said she had enough to do without being an upstairs maid.

We were much like passengers on a life boat. The course was set so that we would raise land at the end of a specific time. In the meantime, there was little to do but endure each other.

I had time to think of many things, and I found my thoughts returning to Barbara Fleck, particularly to the offer she made to me to clear out in the beginning, promising that I'd get the thousand dollars. Obviously she could not hope to gain unless she were allied with one of the heirs. Then her hope of gaining would be dependent on whether she could increase her friend's stake by eliminating one of the others. It seemed possible to link Leonard and Barbara. If he had made a deal with her to give her everything over six hundred thousand, it would still be a very profitable murder. Yet the difficulty was in linking the two of them. They were very friendly, but a prior relationship had to be proven. None of the heirs had arrived at the time she made her offer.

That led to another step in the Flagin mental processes. She would also have had to have prior knowledge of the terms of the will.

With twenty days to go, I phoned Cheeney and asked him who had witnessed the will. He said, "Miss Fleck and Mrs. Stukey. Why?"

"But Miss Fleck was surprised at that

dollar inheritance. How come that?"

"Being a witness means merely witnessing the signature. She didn't read the will. In fact, Myra—Mrs. Kryle—covered the body of the will with another piece of paper."

"Did Mrs. Kryle speak to Barbara about the crazy terms of the will?"

"Oh, yes. I was there at the time. Certainly Miss Fleck knew the terms."

"Knowing them, she could have forewarned one of the legatees?"

"Of course. But what would she have to gain?"

"How long ago was the will written?"

"Just about a year ago, Mr. Flagin."

That rang a large bell. "Were the Jannisons living here then?"

There was a long silence and he said, "Why, yes. I'd forgotten that completely."

"Thanks, Mr. Cheeney."

I heard him hang up. I listened carefully. I heard the muted click as one of the extensions was carefully replaced.

My mind was going off on too many tangents. A little elimination was in order. Flagin was about to become a catalyst. Not because I was bored. Just because I couldn't get Madeline out of my mind.

I went out to the workshop in the garage and found a rat-tail file. I ground the point on a carborundum wheel, set the file in a wooden handle from a broken pair of hedge clippers and wound the handle with tar tape. It made a very businesslike-looking weapon.

At two in the morning, when the house was still, I went to the door of Barbara's room. I put my ear against the door and, with my own key, I made tiny grating sounds against the lock. She did not sleep soundly. After maybe twenty seconds I heard the soft rhythm of her breathing stop, heard the creak of the springs.

I made a grunt of surprise, thumped my fist against my thigh, dropped the

knife and banged my shoulder against the door. I made four running steps down the hall, tiptoed back.

Her voice was taut, and very close to the door. "Who is it?"

"Rack. Bloody but unbowed."

"What happened?"

"Open up and I'll give you a play by play description," I said, keeping my voice so low that I would disturb no one.

The bolt of the lock clicked back and the door opened. I made certain that she saw me stoop and pick up something. I slid into the room and she turned on the bedside lamp. I balanced the file in my hand and said, "Cute little item, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought I heard somebody moving around. So I pulled on my pants and came to take a look. When my eyes got used to the darkness, I saw somebody hunched up by your door."

"Somebody was trying to get in."

"So I figured. I tried to be quiet, but a board creaked. He spun around and belted me one. I tried to grab him as I fell against your door but he pulled away and I heard this thing drop."

"Who was it?"

"It was a man. How many men have we got? Leonard and Joe. Either one of them or somebody who came in from outside."

She sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her robe around her, as though she were cold.

I said, "Who doesn't like you, honey? Who's trying to cross you up?"

She looked as though she had forgotten I was there. Her face could have been carved out of clearest marble. She was lost in her thoughts.

I said, "Could it have been the character who was going to supply the thousand dollars for me so that I wouldn't be around here getting in your way?"

"What do you mean by that?" she snapped.

"It's obvious, isn't it? You knew the terms of the will. Maybe you made a deal with one of the heirs. Maybe the other party thinks it would be cheaper to handle you this way. You might know what happened to Madeline and you might be using the information as a club to get a bigger slice. Lots of things, honey."

"What do you think I am?" Her voice was sharp.

"I think you're a cool item who places a high value on money. The smell of the old lady's money brought you here. When the agency found out that the old lady wanted a bodyguard, we made a routine check of the staff. I saw the reports. You're a bootstraps lassy and you hauled yourself up from a pretty shoddy environment. With your background, it would be pretty tough to be casual about money."

"I seem to have underestimated you all the way down the line, Flagin."

"It's this neanderthal face, honey."

"I'm scared, Flagin. Really scared." She huddled her shoulders. "Nothing is going the way it was supposed to."

"Suppose you tell me the way it was supposed to go."

It took her ten long seconds to make up her mind. "No, Rack. I'll play my own cards. Thanks for the assist."

"Think nothing of it."

I stood in the dark hall and heard the bolt click again. Something ventured, almost nothing gained. Only confirmation of a hunch.

I took a walk through the cool night across the lawns wet with dew. I went out and leaned against the little concrete doghouse that held the transformer that changed the current to DC for the electrified wire. I felt rather than heard the hum. The old lady had really made the place tough to get into. The hurricane fence was ten feet high and the trees that had been near the old fence had been taken down. Atop the fence were Y braces, with barbed wire on the arms of the Y.

The electrified wire, a single strand of it, ran between the arms of the Y.

A million dollars was a nice fat figure. Five little legatees, each wanting more. One drank herself to death and then there were four. Four little legatees, waiting for their fee. Something's going to happen, and then there'll be three.

I felt it in the air. Tomorrow there'd be nineteen days to go. The face of the moon was puffy and sardonic, and when I began to think of it as the face of the old lady looking down and waiting for violence, I knew it was time to go to bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Murderer Walks

JOE JANNISON awakened me at six. The thunder of the piano music rolled through the house, shaking the walls.

I dressed quickly and went down. Nothing irritates me quite as much as music before breakfast. He sat on the bench, swaying as his hard fingers banged the keys. I walked up to him and yelled, "Knock it off!"

He continued playing. The expression in his eyes bothered me. His eyes were absolutely empty, like the eyes of a corpse. I grabbed his thick wrist and yanked his hand away from the keys. He sat like a stone image and then, with a low growl in his throat, he lunged up at me, overturning the bench.

I am not exactly frail, but he made me feel frail. His arms under the wool shirt were like oak limbs. The blue eyes blazed with a mad light. He forced me back across the room, twisting his wrist out of my grasp, reaching for me. I heard my shirt rip and then he had me around the chest. The red beard was harsh against my face and his locked fists pressed against the small of my back. Slowly he bent me back and I heard a small fright-

ened voice in my head telling me that this kid was going to break me right in half. My ribs cracked and I didn't dare exhale. He was too close to me for the Flagin Sunday punch.

I remembered page nineteen of the manual, kicked my feet out to the side and let myself fall back. He staggered two steps with my weight, and then we both went down, with Flagin on the bottom. It was like having a tractor fall on you. The room spun into an interesting pattern of whirling red dots and he shifted fast to my throat, thumbs digging into the sides of my neck. I tensed my throat. If he'd kept his arms straight, I would have been all through. But his elbows were bent. I measured the distance as well as I could and brought the right up. The beard was crisp under my knuckles, but they thudded against the bone underneath. He sagged a trifle, but his fingers were still tight. I hit him four times before the sawdust ran out of him. He dropped onto me and rolled off to one side. I sat up, coughing and gagging. Leonard stood in the doorway.

"You're a help," I said in a rusty voice.

Meg pushed by him and ran to Joe's side. He was sleeping like a baby. By the time I got to my feet he was beginning to stir. His eyes were bland and baffled when he opened them. He got up unsteadily and I looked around for something solid to hit him with.

"What happened?" he asked, his deep voice almost gentle.

Meg said, "Go on up to your room and lie down, Joe."

He lumbered obediently off. When he was out of earshot she said, "What started him off?"

"I had an objection to six o'clock concerts. He tried to kill me."

"I was afraid of this," she said. "It's over for a little while."

"I refuse," Leonard said, his voice shaking a little, "to remain in a house

with a madman. I understand that the standard procedure is to call the State Police and the Health Officer. With two witnesses to what he tried to do, they'll put him where he won't harm anybody."

"Won't that be nice," Meg said, her hands on her hips, her face flushed. "Won't that be just dandy! Have you spent his share yet?"

"Don't be a fishwife, my dear. I'm going to phone immediately."

She gave me a quick look of appeal. I said, "What do you mean about two witnesses? I didn't see anything. Did you, Meg?"

She opened her eyes wide. "Not a thing. What's wrong with Mr. Kryle?"

"I'm paying you, Flagin!" Leonard said in a dangerous voice. "Don't forget that."

"You still have your health, Leonard," I said,

He turned on his heel and walked out. Meg looked at me. "Thanks, pal. I wondered about your solicitude for dear Leonard. I hope he's paying through the nose."

"He is. What about Joe?"

"Did you tell anyone what I told you about him, Rack?"

"Of course not!"

She frowned. "Then I don't understand it. I thought he was coming out of it after I started to avoid you. Have you missed anything lately?"

"Like what?"

"Like a necktie. A blue one with small white figures."

"I don't catch on. Maybe it's missing. I'd have to look."

"Yesterday morning Joe was in my room. He found it under my bed. He ripped it in half."

I whistled softly. "Very pretty, whoever did it. Very suggestive and very efficient."

"You could have put it there," she said in a small voice, not looking at me.

"But I didn't, of course. And I know what you mean. With all this dough floating around loose, who can you trust?"

"I feel as though I could trust you. Rack. Joe has what amounts to an insane sort of jealousy about me, and anything that comes close to me threatens his very precarious sense of security. Who knows that?"

"Did he have medical care when you were here before?"

"Of course."

"Then Miss Fleck could be a candidate for the quaint game of Hide-the-Necktie. She would know the facts about Joe."

"How could she profit though . . . unless. . . ."

"Exactly. Unless she has a partner. If they could figure out a way to push Joe over the edge, the chances are that he might have to be carted out of here."

"And he might kill me," she said calmly. "He tried to once, you know."

"I think it must have been a half-hearted attempt. He's as strong as a bull."

She looked so forlorn and so worried that I went over to where she was sitting and put my hands on her shoulders. She looked up with a half smile. I kissed her lightly on the lips, then bounced a very gentle right uppercut off her jaw.

"You're a nice guy, Rack," she said.

"This my nice-guy imitation, baby. We'll keep Joe inside the grounds if I have to spend the next nineteen days sitting on him."

"I have a sedative that he takes when he gets like this. Id better go up and give him some."

"Take his key and lock his door. I'll tell Agnes not to try to make up his room this morning."

IT WAS an overcast day with scudding clouds that seemed low enough to brush the tops of the big elms. Leonard stayed in his room. Meg sat in the

garden reading. I wandered around like a caged bear. The necktie incident showed an almost diabolical cleverness. I kept massaging the back of my neck to ease the tension.

At dusk, the thunder began to mutter over the west. Five of us gathered for cocktails, the three women, Leonard and I. Barbara had new lines in her face. I gathered that she hadn't slept well. Leonard still had the jitters from the scene at dawn, and he had a nice little hate for me. I could see him thinking that I'd cost him two hundred and fifty thousand by refusing to back him. Leonard was a rat, I decided.

Only Toby Morrow seemed normal. We sat on the window seat and ignored the others. The first hard raindrops began to hiss and spatter outside.

I said, "Getting bored?"

"No. For the first time in too long I'm getting a chance to relax and think and let the springs unwind. It's a good feeling, Rack. Better than I knew."

"I wouldn't pick this situation for a rest cure, Toby."

"It is a bit grim, I suppose."

"How you coming on with the pictures? I saw some more stuff being delivered this morning."

She gave me an odd smile. "I'll have something to show you in a day or two. Something interesting, maybe."

"Portraits of Flagin? Unposed?"

"Could be. You never can tell."

It was raining when I went to sleep and when I awoke the first thing I was conscious of was the utter silence. I couldn't tell what had awakened me. I pulled on my pants and slipped the .38 into the waistband. It made an awkward and uncomfortable bulge.

It was a black, black night. The clouds were still low, I guessed, obscuring the stars and the waning moon.

Listening, I could hear the slow thud of my pulse, the roaring of the blood in

my ears, the distant howling of a dog. Nothing more.

Barefooted, I went down the hall, pausing to listen, my fingertips touching the cool butt of the revolver.

I checked on my boy. I had to find his door by feel. I held my ear against the panel and heard him snoring softly. My ten thousand was still warm and healthy.

My brain said that nothing was wrong, go back to sleep. But that primitive something that spreads the alarm kept every muscle tightened up.

I went down the back stairs, across the cool linoleum and out the back door. The grass was wet and cold against my bare feet. I pulled the flash out of my pants pocket and held it leveled, thumb on the switch. The distant storm, having passed over, still muttered. The trees dripped.

The scream seemed to come from the direction of the gate. While it lasted, I couldn't move. It was high and harsh and like the scream of an animal.

When it stopped, I started running, switching the flash to my left hand, yanking out the revolver and holding it in my right hand. I stepped on a pebble and cursed as it bit into the sole of my bare foot.

The flashlight cut a white beam into the ground mist, rising after the rain. She stood by the little concrete house that held the transformer. She blinked into the bright light. Her brown hair was in tight ringlets from the dampness. I got it all in one quick flash, her look of surprise and fear, the wrench on the wet grass, the broken padlock on the wooden door set into the concrete.

"Did you scream?" I demanded.

She didn't have time to answer. The scream came again, from the fence twenty feet away. I centered the light. He hung there, waist and thighs over the outer branch of the Y, writhing against the barbs. His two hands were clenched on the live wire. As he writhed, there was

a blue sparking where the barbs tore into him. His eyes were rolling wildly above the red beard.

I pushed Toby roughly out of the way, yanked the wooden door open and opened the knife switch.

Joe Jannison moved slowly, sliding, and then fell heavily outside the fence and lay still. I fumbled with my keys and finally found the one that unlocked the massive gate. I tugged it open, slid through and went to his side. I held the light on him. He was unconscious, but he was breathing.

I ran back inside, opened the switch box inside the gate house, and cut on the floodlights. The wet lawn was sharply illuminated. I saw Meg running down from the house, with Barbara and Leonard following her. The light gleamed on the weapon in Leonard's hand. Toby still stood where I had left her.

I yelled to Leonard, "Come give me a hand with him!"

He started toward the gate and then stopped. I saw his smile. "Don't be absurd, old man. I can't leave the grounds. But I see that he has."

I picked up the heavy legs, turned, put a foot under each armpit, and dragged him back through the gate.

"He's no longer eligible," Leonard said triumphantly.

"Shut up, shut up!" Meg said, her voice shrill.

Once I got him inside the gate, Leonard was willing to help. I got him upright, and with one massive arm over my shoulders and one over Leonard's, we staggered up to the house with him. Meg clicked on the living room lights and we put him on the couch. He looked as though a giant had picked him up and grated him a few times against a coral reef.

He was bleeding from a hundred gashes and gouges and I wasn't medical man enough to tell how serious they were. I spoke to Leonard and he went to the

phone to call Braddick. He was smiling.

Meg said, "Something woke me up. I looked in his room and he was gone. I went to get you, Rack, and you were gone too. Then I heard him scream. That was him, wasn't it. What happened to him?"

"He got on the wire." I looked at Toby. "Somebody broke the lock on the transformer house and cut the current and got him to climb out somehow. And then they put the current back on. Apparently Joe didn't know it. He climbed up there and grabbed the hot wire. He couldn't let go with the current flowing through him and into the fence."

"Do you think I did that?" Toby asked.

"What am I supposed to think?" I asked harshly. "You were there, friend."

Suddenly I noticed the expression on Barbara's face. Her face had gone slack and she looked like an old woman. She sat down slowly. "He won't get a thing, will he?" she said in a dead voice.

"Not a dime, according to the will."

She began to chuckle, deep in her throat. It rose to a shrill laugh, an empty and endless laugh. I went to her and slapped her. It didn't bring her out of it. I shook her until her teeth chattered.

Staring at nothing, she said shrilly, between the hoots of laughter, "Silly, isn't it! M-m-murder for n-n-nothing. For n-n-nothing at all. B-b-but I didn't know it would be m-m-murder. That woman! Joe held her and th-th-then we got the funnel because it k-k-kept running out of her mouth."

Meg pushed me aside with a surprising strength. She leaned over Barbara. She said, "You thought I didn't know a thing. It was all you and Joe, eh? I knew how it was with you two when we were here before. Heads always together. Now you won't get a dime. Not a dime! You think I'd want him marrying trash like you?"

Barbara's hand cracked off Meg's cheek. I grabbed Meg and held her until the fight went out of her.

Leonard came back in and said the doctor would be along soon.

I turned to Toby again. "How did you do it?" I asked.

She gave me a funny smile. She said, "I'm money-mad, Rack. Listen, it's raining again. I'm going to take a walk, Joe."

She went out the front door. I followed her halfway to the gate and then stopped. She walked with her shoulders straight, her head high.

Then I saw what she was going to do. I ran as fast as I had ever run in my life. I caught her and hauled her back just as she was ready to slip through the gate, which I had left ajar.

I pulled her back into my arms and held her tight.

SHE cried for a little while as we stood there in the rain, and then I began to walk her slowly back toward the house.

When she could talk, she said, "I was out there, Rack, because Meg woke me up and said that you wanted to see me out there in fifteen minutes."

"I'll never doubt you again," I said.

"You thought I did a thing like that for the sake of getting more money, Rack. I had to prove to you how much the money meant to me."

"By taking a million dollar walk?"

We went into the house and I sent her upstairs with instructions about a rough towel and dry clothes.

Meg met me in the entrance to the living room. She said coldly, "While you were trotting around in the rain, I called the police. We heard a confession, you know. They won't hurt Joe because he isn't right, but they'll be very interested in this woman."

Barbara sat on the piano bench. She was making a series of tiny creases in the material of her housecoat. She stared at the rug.

I wiped the rain off my face with my

sleeve and said, "Meg, you are a lovely character indeed."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you gave it to me wrong, Meg. It isn't the weakling brother clinging to you. It's you holding onto him. That's probably what has made him a little weird. You were the whole works to him when he was sixteen. Mother and father and brother and sister. You kept your thumb right on the back of his neck. Every time he tried to wiggle out, you snatched him back. You could do it by playing on that jealousy of his, which persisted in spite of his desire to be free of you."

"Do you know what you're saying?"

Leonard had moved closer. He protested. I told him to shut his face.

I said, "Meg, you saw this building up between Joe and Barbara Fleck. You were going to lose your brother to her. You found out that they were plotting together, and planned to be married on the money when he got it. Barbara is too strong-willed to let you interfere in Joe's life after their marriage. You planted that necktie under your bed for Joe to find."

"How absurd!"

"Absurd? Toby took a nice clear print of you coming out of my room with the necktie balled up in your hand."

"But she wasn't . . ."

I grinned. "She wasn't there? I bluffed you into that, Meg. Come on with the rest of it. Give."

"Okay," she said, and more than ever I saw the resemblance to Lucille, the same hardness breaking through the surface. "I egged him on. I told him lies about you and me. And then I told him that you were bothering me. Three hours ago I went to him and told him that you wanted to take me outside the fence. I steered his thinking. We decided that if we cut off the current, he could get over the fence and be waiting for the two of us when we came out the gate. When he's in one of his queer spells, he's very agile and strong. He made it over the fence. Then I turned the current back on. I went down to the fence and told him that he couldn't get back in, so he'd lost his share and the Fleck woman wouldn't marry him—that I'd have his share and I'd put him on an allowance so small that nobody would ever marry him."



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"And so he tried to climb back in to get at you."

"I turned and ran. I had to hide when I nearly ran into Toby walking down, expecting to meet you. I was on the front stairs when he screamed and I knew he was on the wire. I went to wake you up, but you were already gone."

She said the last defiantly. I glanced over at the couch. Joe's eyes were open and he was staring at his sister. When she turned to look at him, I saw him shut his eyes.

Dr. Braddick arrived a moment ahead of the police. He checked Joe quickly and then said, "I suppose you want to be treated here, Mr. Jannison."

"It doesn't matter," Joe said weakly. His clothes were heavy and dark with blood.

"In that case, I'll drive you into town after I stop the worst ones. A transfusion won't hurt you any. You've lost a lot of blood."

The police were three in number. There were the Cherry Point Chief, who looked as though he had dressed hurriedly, one gangling young man in uniform and one chubby young man without a uniform.

They had taken Barbara and Leonard into the study. They came filling back out.

The Chief went over to Meg. "Ready to come along with us, Miss?"

Her eyes widened. "That isn't necessary."

"Oh, but it is. We're booking you on a murder charge, Miss Jannison. You should know that we can't let you stay here."

"Me!" she said wildly. "Me? Are you mad? It was that woman there and my brother that did it. We all heard her."

"You don't hear so good," the Chief said.

Barbara's dark eyes were glowing. She said, "Miss Jannison did most of it. I got the funnel for her. But she did most of it."

Leonard said smoothly, "I heard the confession and it was Miss Jannison, all right."

"It was my brother! Not me!" Meg screamed. The cords stood out in her throat.

Joe propped himself up on one elbow. His face, above the matted beard, was gray with pain. "She's crazy," he said weakly. "I know she did it. She's trying to pin it onto me."

It was then that Meg seemed to go crazy in earnest. The chubby one got a long gash down his cheek and the gangling one got soundly kicked on the shins before, between them, they got her under control.

Leonard and I stood in the doorway. We could hear her screaming until the police sedan was halfway down the hill.

He said smugly. "Good idea, what? Just before they came, I had a minute alone with Barbara. I agreed to foot the expense of the best legal talent if she'd play along."

"But you didn't expect Joe to back you?"

"No. That was fortunate. And I intend to give you another five thousand for keeping your mouth shut, Flagin. Now that she's been off the grounds, Barbara will tell the truth."

I moved around in front of him and let him see my intentions. He gasped and got his hands up.

I fainted with the right, sunk a left hook deep into his middle. He retched and bent over. I teed off with the right. He straightened up and ran backwards into the hall and dropped like a stone.

I knew that it had cost me five thousand dollars, but hitting him made me feel almost clean again.

It was nineteen days later and exactly five minutes to midnight. Cheeney had been out late in the afternoon to assure us that everything would go through as scheduled. Agnes and Mrs. Stukey and

Lew had left at nine o'clock, after sounds of revelry from the kitchen.

Leonard Kryle, celebrating in advance, had started drinking as soon as Cheeney left. When he passed out, I carried him up and dumped him on his bed.

A heavy electrical storm had put the lights out. Toby and I sat by candlelight, drinking wine from a dusty bottle that I had found in the cellar. We were in the library and the candle flame flickered as the draft from the storm came through the poorly insulated windows.

She sat on a low stool, her arms crossed, elbows on her knees. The candlelight brought out the good planes of her face, the strong brow, the fine and sensitive lips.

"Five minutes more and you're an heiress," I said.

She gave me a quick smile. "I'm almost glad you caught me at the gate, Rack."

"What are you going to do with it all?"

She frowned. "I'm going to go someplace where the sea comes in over the rocks and there's a high hill. Then I'm going to buy the top of the hill. Then I want you to build a house for me. A house with the flavor of the sea and the

look of the rocks. A house to be content in. Not a house like this, certainly."

I reached down and took her hand. It curled in mine. "Suppose I go all moody on you, Toby? Suppose I've forgotten how?"

Her hand tightened in mine. "You'll remember."

"I only do my best work when it's for a place I'm going to live in."

Again the quick smile. "Is this a sudden proposal?"

"I always marry my heiresses."

She sobered. "Remember, Rack? We're no good for each other. We tried and it wasn't any good. I wish it had been good. I wish it so much. She looked away from me.

"Any harm in trying again?" I asked.

She turned her face up like a child waiting to be kissed. I took both her hands in mine. At first her lips were cool and there was nothing there for either of us.

Then the melting and the intake of breath and the sound like a sob in her throat. Somehow we were standing and it was all right for us and would be all right from then on.



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THE SEVENTH PALLBEARER

By Robert C. Dennis

When voluptuous Vivian hired Private-Eye Carmody to pinch-hit as the late, liquidated gambling czar's coffin-carrier, she forgot to tell him he'd soon be promoted . . . from pallbearer to corpse!

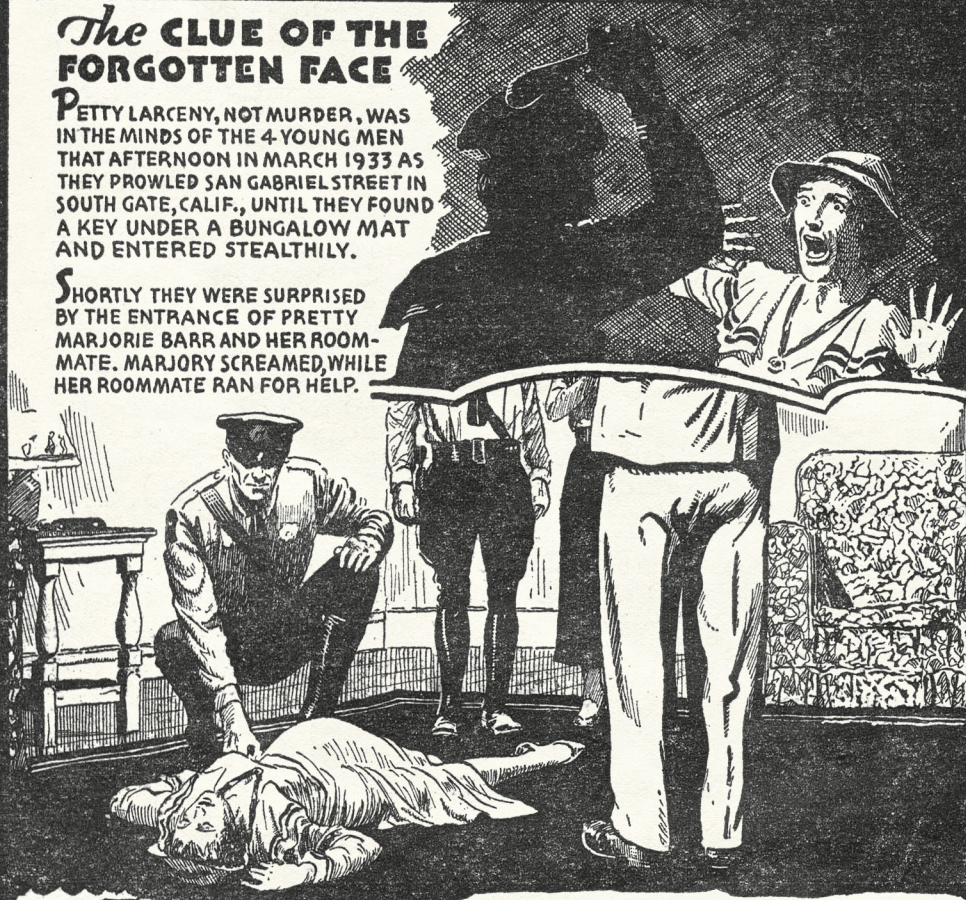
BLACK MASK
25c

STRANGE TRAILS

The CLUE OF THE FORGOTTEN FACE

PETTY LARCENY, NOT MURDER, WAS IN THE MINDS OF THE 4-YOUNG MEN THAT AFTERNOON IN MARCH 1933 AS THEY PROWLED SAN GABRIEL STREET IN SOUTH GATE, CALIF., UNTIL THEY FOUND A KEY UNDER A BUNGALOW MAT AND ENTERED STEALTHILY.

SHORTLY THEY WERE SURPRISED BY THE ENTRANCE OF PRETTY MARJORIE BARR AND HER ROOMMATE. MARJORY SCREAMED, WHILE HER ROOMMATE RAN FOR HELP.



LOS ANGELES COUNTY POLICE ARRIVED TO FIND MARJORIE BLUDGEONED TO DEATH ON THE FLOOR. THE MEN WERE GONE.

AN INVENTORY BY THE COUPLE WITH WHOM THE GIRLS BOARDED REVEALED AS MISSING A CIGARETTE LIGHTER SHAPED LIKE A LAMP POST. IT ALSO REVEALED A SMALL CAMERA AND A NAVY-ISSUE KNIFE THEY'D NEVER SEEN BEFORE.

WHEN POLICE DEVELOPED THE FILM IN THE CAMERA, IT SHOWED A SNAPSHOT OF A SAILOR. FROM THIS, AND THE KNIFE, THEY REASONED THE KILLERS WERE SAILORS. BUT WHICH SAILORS? THE FLEET WAS IN AND THOUSANDS OF THEM WITH IT. THEY'D HAVE TO WORK FAST TO FIND THEIR MEN BEFORE THE TRAIL WENT COLD.

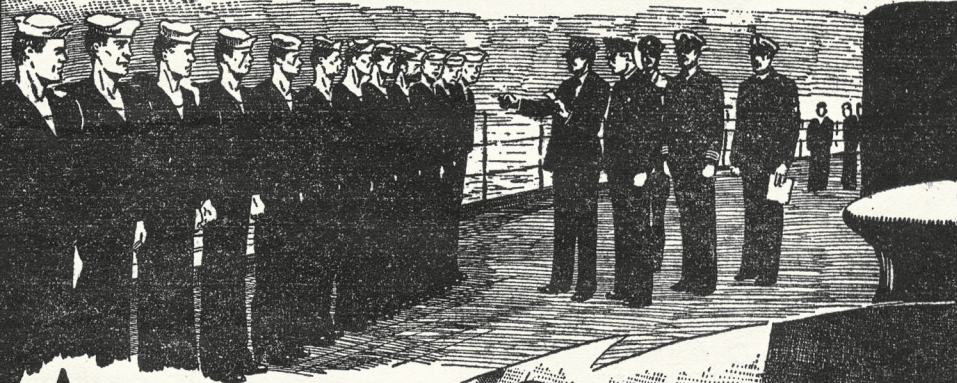
31-151

... to MURDER

by
LEE

RE-EXAMINING THE PHOTO UNDER A POWERFUL LENS, THE NAME OF THE SHIP ON THE SAILOR'S HAT RIBBON COULD BARELY BE SEEN AS AN 8-LETTER WORD, THE 5TH LETTER AN H. A QUICK RUNDOWN DISCLOSED **OKLAHOMA** AS THE ONLY 8-LETTER STATE WITH AN H AS ITS 5TH LETTER.

THE BATTLEWAGON **OKLAHOMA** WAS IN AND THE POLICE BOARDED HER PRONTO. THERE THE SNAP WAS SOON IDENTIFIED AS SEAMAN ROBERT BARNETT, WHO SAID HE'D VISITED THE PORT SECTION WITH SEAMAN WILLIAM HOZAK. HOZAK VERIFIED THIS AND BOTH DENIED BEING IN SOUTH GATE.



A METHODICAL SEARCH OF THE SHIP'S LOCKERS BEGAN. IN KENNETH COVINGTON'S WAS FOUND A CIGARETTE LIGHTER SHAPED LIKE A LAMP POST. HARRY PETERSON'S PEAJACKET YIELDED A BLACKJACK.

ALL DENIED THE CRIME UNTIL, IDENTIFIED BY THE DEAD GIRL'S ROOMMATE, PETERSON CONFESSED HE'D HIT MARJORIE WITH THE SAP WHEN SHE SCREAMED. HE RECEIVED A LIFE SENTENCE, THE OTHERS 10 YEARS-- BECAUSE IN THE COURSE OF THEIR SENSELESS MURDER ONE OF THEM HAD INADVERTENTLY FORGOTTEN HIS FACE-- IN THEIR VICTIM'S CAMERA.



THE DEVIL'S HIGHWAY

By Jim Bosworth



Sax pulled the guard in and choked him. . . .

At the end of the blood-red road, Derrick saw freedom—freedom to kill—or die!

IT BEGAN to rain. Splattering obliquely against the brick walls of the alley, wetness dribbled silently down to an overhanging ledge, and fell with bombsight accuracy to ping noisily on the lid of a garbage can. Gusts of wind caught the rain and bent it around the edges of a

large packing case. The two men crouching inside the case winced with the impact of each needle-like drop.

Derrick shivered violently, twisting his body in the cramped space, and Phil Saxon peered through the rain at the opposite wall of the alley, his eyes testing the darkness.

"Sit still, will you?"

"I'm getting stiff. How much longer, Sax?"

"Another hour maybe. With this rain, maybe less."

Derrick studied Saxon's face and wondered at the calmness of the man. Sax was a convicted murderer. In a way of speaking, he had been close enough to the electric chair to smell the ozone. When they made the break, it had been a scant twelve hours before the guards would have taken him from the county jail and escorted him by train to the state prison. It was enough to take the stiffness out of any man's spine, yet Sax retained enough icy calm to sit in an alley four blocks away from the jail and wait for darkness to fall. It was cunning, animal-like. The police, fanning out over the small town in pursuit, had failed to look in their own back yard.

Derrick remembered the cold, clear-cut suddenness with which it happened. Sax had become talkative. Bursting with the glibness of an actor, Sax had spoken the words and disjointed phrases which had been on the tongues of all such men when they found their time running out. He spoke of cities; little cities, big cities, each with their own little Great White Way, their shows, their night spots, and the nose-teasing delicatessens on the corners. He cried about his mother, picnics in the green grass of the hills, and of a girl in the next block, and of all the fabulous bars and character joints he knew of, and what he wouldn't do for one stinking, watered-down drink.

Then there was that clean, thankful

look of reverence in his face when the old guard meekly held a pint through the bars for "just one swallow," and the brutal sneer on Sax's face when he pulled the guard against the bars and choked him to unconsciousness.

It had happened so quickly, Derrick wasn't sure he wanted to break out. The open cell gate stared him in the face over the reeking stench of spilled whiskey, and he just wasn't sure. But ten years was a long time for one bad check charge. He stopped thinking, stepped over the broken glass, and followed Sax to the door in the rear. From there, he had followed unquestioningly in the tiptoe race through a back street to the alley and the packing case. And now, it was dark and raining. . . .

"Wait here, kid. I want to take a look."

Derrick watched the squat figure slip cautiously through the shadows to the street, pause momentarily and come back in a low, quick, crouching gait.

"The hicks have gone home to get out of the rain. Streets are almost empty. Let's get out of here."

The rain dimpled the sidewalks and danced in wind-driven whirligigs through the narrow streets. In spite of its protective screen, Derrick and Sax hugged the walls of the building, feeling naked and exposed, as if a cop, Paul Bunyan size, were scanning the street from above with a gigantic magnifying glass.

They avoided every stray passer-by who came along, for fear that the sight of two coatless men running in the rain would arouse suspicion.

Derrick could almost hear the words from behind the doors of the buildings they passed. . . .

"Hear about the jail break? Yeah, and can you beat it, one's a killer too!"

Party lines would jangle in farm houses in the isolation of the rain and the word would spread like the water in the street, getting bigger with each drop that fell.

They arrived at a mortician's establishment, of which Sax had spoken briefly. There, in a large garage at the side of the building were a couple of hearses, and two ambulances.

The local hospital was small, too small to provide its own space for the ambulances. When one was needed, a call went from the hospital switchboard to the phone in the mortician's garage, and the drivers there would go on the assignment. Sax had operated around the town and the countryside about it long enough to understand the setup. In the privacy of the alley, while they were waiting for darkness to come, Sax had told the plan to Derrick.

Derrick grinned at the daring of the plan. Who would expect two jail breakers to make an escape in a gleaming white ambulance, casually and quietly, as simple as a hayride?

The two ambulance drivers lounged comfortably in the warmth of a kerosene heater. One was dozing on a cot, and the other deeply absorbed in a dime detective novel.

Sax wiped the rain out of his eyes, and nodded to Derrick.

It took just a few seconds. A murderous clout behind the ear and the easing of the man to the floor, and a rude but short awakening for the other on the cot.

Quickly, they ripped the gilt cording from the plush interiors of the hearses, tied the drivers' arms and legs, and propped them up in the small room that housed the furnace.

In the white uniforms, which were too small, they grinned confidently at each other, and Derrick nosed the white bulk of the ambulance through the doorway to the street.

At Sax's instructions, Derrick swung immediately to the west of town. In that direction, there were small roads leading out of the residential district into farmland. On the shoulders of a mountain

range, thirty miles beyond, stretched the concrete ribbon of a main highway. Sax dug in the white pockets for a cigarette and spoke.

"We're going to hit a road block somewhere between here and the mountains past that and once we get out on the highway, we'll get rid of this boat and pick up a car—drive by day with the rest of the crowd until we get a few states away from this burg, then we'll split up, changes names, grow a beard or a mustache and start all over. Just keep your mouth shut, act natural. It's as easy as that."

The parade of street lights thinned away, and the road became bumpy, narrow. Shimmering glimpses of farmland, its green-mossed fences, red-roofed barns, plowed fields presented themselves in the sweep of the headlights like the flickering slides of a magic lantern. Derrick leaned forward, building up a little speed. Around the first sharp turn, they met the road block.

"Keep your shirt on, kid, and don't get rattled. We're out on a call, see? If they see through the gag, I'll start shooting and you get the bus rolling."

Derrick pulled to a stop at the signal of a cop with a flashlight, and felt his foot shaking on the clutch.

"We've been expecting you."

DERRICK was aware of Sax tensing beside him.

"We'll get the squad car out of your way. The woman is in the house on the first dirt road to the right . . . hell, guess you guys know where the Kimberly farm is. Okay, go ahead."

It was the first proof that the wind can change and blow smoke in your eyes. A coincidence. A coincidence like the fingers picking a slip of paper out of a big fishbowl at a lottery and coming up with the same number you hold in your hand. A chance happening out of the blue, nothing

else, but Derrick was trembling when he started the ambulance to rolling again.

Sax swore angrily, spitting the words out like the troublesome seeds in a Monday morning glass of orange juice.

"Somebody just put a couple holes in our little plan! They're really expecting an ambulance up here . . . and when we pass the place up, it will be just that much sooner before they get wise!"

Derrick's throat felt as dry as the inside of a bone pit.

"Funny that guy didn't recognize us."

"Naw, it was too dark for him to see. Besides, he's a state cop and maybe all he had to identify us with was a bum photo some lieutenant flashed in front of his puss. If he had been from the local lockup they might have been typing up our obit in the morning."

Derrick pictured what had happened. The call from the Kimberly place had reached the hospital, and one of the doctors promised an ambulance. At that moment, they were probably sending someone over to the mortuary to see why no one was answering the phone. But how did the police know that an ambulance had been asked for? He asked Sax.

"Don't know, kid, I don't know. We'll worry about that later. Right now, the cops don't seem to know about a stolen meat wagon, and that's what counts."

It was ticklish. The whole scheme of things walked a tightrope between one frightening possibility and another. . . .

At first it looked like another blockade, with the headlights dancing on the reflecting surfaces of a motorcycle, but instead, it was just a lone state cop standing in the road, waving a flash. To the right, a dirt road wound off into the darkness.

"I got a hunch we'd better follow this through until we're rid of the cops, and take an out later. Gives us a better chance."

It would have taken just an instant to

run the cop down, and no longer a time to have shot him where he stood. And again Derrick was admiring the icy calmness of the man beside him.

The cop came to the window and grinned.

"It's a half mile up the road. I'll come up with you to help with the girl. You go on ahead."

The road was narrow and winding, and on some turns, Derrick could barely swing the ambulance around without scraping the midsection against the high dirt bank.

The house showed dimly in the headlights. Under a feeble bulb, an old woman with a shawl over her head stood on the back porch steps.

They grabbed the stretcher and followed the cop and the old woman to a room off the hallway.

The young lady on the bed was about to have a baby.

The old woman hovered at their heels, with her black-veined hands nervously twisting the ends of the cloth covering her hair.

"She's very young . . . and take care, the road is a little rough."

Derrick mumbled something and helped get the girl on the stretcher. The cop was talking.

"Where's the husband? He ought to be around for the big events."

The woman waved a hand in despair and pointed in a vague direction.

"He's out of town on business." She shoved Derrick aside and tucked the blankets in close around the girl's body. "He didn't know it would be this soon. It's premature, the poor thing."

They carried the girl to the ambulance and the cop climbed on his motorcycle.

"You won't be needing an escort. There's no traffic this time of night. I've got to get back to the block . . . got all main roads covered waiting for those birds that broke out this evening—say, maybe you guys ought to have company."

Derrick saw Sax's hand go to his pocket and a muscle twitching along his jaw.

"We'll be all right, officer. Those guys probably wouldn't risk hitting the road until things cooled off . . . besides, I brought a revolver along, just in case."

Derrick flinched visibly, and the cop stared.

"What's the matter—jumpy?"

Derrick felt his pulse throb crazily and he wondered what his voice would do when he answered.

"It was a moth or something . . . headlights attract them. One slapped the back of my neck." His voice sounded strained, uneven, but he managed to crack a grin.

The cop flicked on his ignition and laughed.

"Know how it is. You ought to be down at the barricade with all those lights. Bugs drive you crazy. Well, if you guys don't need me. . . ."

Sax pulled his hand out of his pocket.

"Oh, say, how did you guys get wind of this gal having the baby?"

"The old dame. Seems the nearest phone is quite a way down the road and a neighbor was driving her there. Came to where we were. We put the call over the radio and the local station called the hospital. Why?"

"Oh, just wondered. Didn't expect to see blue uniforms on a maternity case."

The cop grinned and started down the road.

Derrick started the engine, and slowly turned the ambulance around in the yard, listening to the sounds of the motorcycle dying away. He turned to Sax, feeling shaken and a little sore.

"Why did you have to mention the gun? We might have been spotted right then, and why did you have to gas with the guy so long?"

"Cool down kid," Sax interrupted, "just cool off and drive. Best way to handle these guys is just to act natural, like you got nothing to hide. Besides. I

could have shot him before he could have done a thing. Turn right when we get off this road."

"What now, Sax?"

"What do you mean, what now? What do you think?"

Derrick nodded his head back at the girl.

"I mean her. What do we do with her?"

"Kid, I think the dame is going on a nice long ride."

Derrick hunched forward over the wheel and stared at the road under the headlights.

THE whole scheme was beginning to crumble, a fragment here, a splinter there, and the second hand of his watch relentlessly pursued its circular course around the dial.

The police had had plenty of time to find out about the ambulance now. They would be looking. And it wasn't like riding around in an ordinary car. It was parading around in a block long, gleaming white ambulance, and it might as well have had their names printed in blood-red letters along its length.

"We can't do it, Sax."

"And why not?"

"The gal's about to have a baby. We can't drag her around like this. She needs a doc."

"Look, kid, nobody begged you to break out with me. Since you did, let me run the show. To hell with the girl."

The road narrowed down and the deep shadows of the mountains leaned over them.

"It's too late to make that highway now. They'll have it covered down this far. We'll cut over to the next road and hit the highway higher up. Then we'll switch to another car."

"What if there's another road block?"

"Didn't you hear what that cop said back there? Main roads only. This one

we're going to hit is just a narrow dirt road. It hits the highway way up the line. Take us longer, but safer."

Derrick turned over to the smaller road at the first cross section and they hit the jagged ruts and water-filled holes of a dirt road that went bad every winter.

The girl began to moan and whimper, and Derrick heard her sobbing something about "Harry."

"Please—please hurry."

Rage and uncertainty clouded his mind, and his voice was ragged.

"Shut up!"

But the whimpering continued, and Derrick couldn't shut it out of his mind. The girl couldn't be over nineteen. Why did women have to have babies so young? His stomach tied itself in knots. He remembered her face below his when they carried her to the ambulance. It was round, full cheeked, with a suggestion of dimples at the corners of the mouth, and the blond hair spilled out around the edges of the blanket.

"Damn! Stop that noise, will you? It's driving me crazy!"

"Driving you crazy, is it?" Sax grinned. "Think of what the father will be feeling when he finds out where his wife is. Forget it."

The words hit hard and Derrick began to see the whole thing clearly for the first time.

If the girl died, they'd call it murder, and what difference did it make to Sax? They couldn't send him to the chair twice. Derrick could be sent to the chair too, if the girl died. It was a free ride to hell, and he wanted to climb off before the last stop.

"I don't think the father has too much to worry about, Sax. Not yet. I'm stopping right here."

He saw Sax turn pale in the glow of the instrument panel.

"Why you dirty—crossing me up—"

Derrick braked the ambulance and came

to a stop. He turned halfway in the seat and faced Sax. He saw the revolver clenched tightly in Sax's hand.

Derrick felt the skin prickle along the back of his neck. One sudden move. . . .

"I'm turning around, Sax. This girl is going to get a decent break. Are you coming with me, or are you going to get out and walk?"

Sax grinned evilly over the blue steel of the revolver.

"You got a lot of nerve, kid, sitting over there with your bare hands and me with a gun pointed between your eyes. I'm staying and you're driving. Now, start it up and don't get reckless."

Derrick could almost feel the finger tightening on the curve of the trigger and he took a gamble.

"Wait. . . .," he looked back through the rear window, "I think there's a motorcycle coming up the road."

Sax instinctively jerked his eyes back toward the window. Explosively, one of Derrick's hands detached itself from the seat and skidded across Sax's jaw like a hot brand. The pistol clattered against the instrument panel and lost itself somewhere on the floorboards.

Sax was the bigger man. He shook off the first blow like a prize fighter and his bull strength forced Derrick back against the door.

Derrick tried to shield his face and concentrated on locating the pistol hidden somewhere in the darkness under their feet. But Sax's fists hammered at his face and shoulders as he groped. His brain was reeling and growing numb with flashing lights, and oblivion threatened when his hand touched something round and cold—a fire extinguisher.

With a desperate wrench of his arm, Derrick yanked the brass casing from the clips that held it, and brought it down in a short glittering arc. Sax crumpled quietly over the seat.

Derrick panted, tried to shake the fog

out of his head, and tore off the tight, ill-fitting jacket he had taken from the driver.

"All right, we're going back." He wondered if she could hear him. "Just take it easy, I'll get you there on time."

The engine labored, and then suddenly raced as he tried to go forward again. He heard the thin singing sound of the rear wheels as they spun in the loose earth.

He jumped out and looked. The wheels were up to the hubcaps in the silt of a freshly dug drainage ditch.

For the first time, he knew panic.

What would happen if the girl didn't get there on time? He knew what could happen, and he was afraid.

Derrick stumbled around in the blackness, trying to find something to put under the wheels, and saw the light out of the corner of his eye. It was a farm, about three quarters of a mile away.

Derrick tore the white jacket he had been wearing into thin white strips, bound Sax securely, and stuffed him down into the narrow space on the floorboard. As an added precaution, he removed the keys from the ignition switch.

He stepped out of the road, away from the friendly half circle of light from the headlights, and started running over the black, rain-soft earth. The mud pulled at his shoes with wet sucking sounds.

It felt like running in a nightmare, one stride ahead of a strange nocturnal beast whose miasmic breath fouled the coolness of the night air, robbing the lungs and filling the chest with pain until it pushed you to the ground, and a deeper blackness seemed near.

Derrick lay crumpled in the mud, struggling for breath until he felt as if filling his tortured lungs was an exhausting effort in itself. He remembered the ambulance back on the road, forced himself to his feet and went on, crawling, running, staggering, slipping, until there was a strange light bobbing and whirling in the air before him. . . .

He stumbled up the back steps of the farm house and pounded on the door with what strength he had left.

The farmer's rust-colored feet, shoved in ragged slippers, was all he could see as he lost control of his knees and fell to the floor.

"Ambulance stuck . . . gotta get pulled out . . . girl in back."

The farmer pulled Derrick inside.

"Maw, get this feller a drink. I'll be getting my clothes on."

Derrick scarcely remembered the slow, jolting ride across the field in the tractor. He watched the blue flame of the exhaust winking, and concentrated on moving as little as possible, feeling the heaving of his chest slowly drop to normal. By that time, the farmer had hitched the tractor to the bumper of the ambulance and pulled it from the ditch.

It was slow, painfully cautious driving over the dirt road until it blossomed into pavement, and then the swift race against time to town. The road, small as it was, fortunately did not offer the interference of a road block, and Derrick sighed with relief as they rolled under the first row of street lights on the edge of town. He heard the shrill shriek of a police whistle and saw a cop run to a phone box. He grinned, honked his horn, and discovered it didn't bother him to see a cop.

The police were waiting at the hospital, and before the girl was taken inside, Derrick leaned over her for a moment.

"Everything's going to be all right," he said reassuringly, "It's going to be all right now." He thought he saw a little smile come over her face.

Derrick watched the cops shove the trussed-up Sax into the patrol wagon and felt a little strange. Sax wasn't going to miss the morning train after all.

He suddenly felt very tired, and he looked at the police officers next to him.

"Well, what in hell you guys waiting for? Cigars?"



Founded in 1924

Article No. 846

M. E. Ohaver

A CIPHER is a secret writing. The way to solve ciphers is to experiment with substitute letters until real words begin to appear. In solving, notice the frequency of certain letters. For instance, the letters e, t, a, o, n, i, are the most used in our language. So if the puzzle maker has used X to represent e, X will probably appear very frequently. Combinations of letters will also give you clues. Thus, the affixes -ing, -ion, -ally are frequent. Helpful hints appear in this department each month. Study them carefully.

CRYPTOGRAMS

No. 5271—Friendly Rivals. By *Sara. Special clues for new fans: try affixes TH- and -THY as in- and -ing, duly noting short words TH and T as *in* and *I*. Next, CTYC, using letters thus found, becomes -ig-, suggesting *high*.

ATHEN THONGNAOTHY ANZNGUM BGTNHFA TH DNEPXTHY
UZTF EGKLOPYGUX EMRD XNXDNGA, T HPS CUZN APXN
AOTBB EPXLNOTOTPH TH AEPGTHY CTYC LPTHOA.

No. 5272—Down in the Deep. By Waggoner. Compare D, UAH, and ADXH; also YABPA and UL. Substitute in RPBHKUBRUR and RHD. Follow up with quoted words "NADKULG ELUULG."

RPBHKUBRUR ADXH SLVKT D GZRUHOBLVR LPHDK-YBTH
FDZHO LS YDUHO, DELVU SBXH AVKTOHT SHHU UABPC,
LKH-SBSUA UL LKH-ADFS GBFH EHFLY RVOSDPH, YABPA
OHSFHPUR RLVKT. D "NADKULG ELUULG" LS UAH RHD!

No. 5273—Genealogical Note. By *Alphamega. Identify ENSE, four-letter pattern word, with first and last letters alike, checking with ENR. Thus to OTH'E and OH; SHKORHE and *HASN.

SFENAXVN ENR YOUR AU *HASN OTH'E HSDRP OH ENR
*ZOZFR, SHKORHE *GRYOTN ELSPOEOAH LRFSEET ENSE
TNR YST *HSSDSN, ENR TOTERL AU *EXZSF.*KSOH.

No. 5274—Strange Disappearance. By Zadig. Apostrophe will help you with final -'C. Continue with GO and -GOF, then CZAGOF and AGXDGS, duly attending to letters in common.
FENCE NKTSGCLC KRLBSZDGCS XBKL. DZPLC QTSZO'C
HGUL CZAGOF, KBYC STOLE TALK, UTHVC GO NZNLK,

NBDC GO DKBOP, VLNZKDC. AGXDGS BOHTXPC DKBOP,
TNLOC NZNLK. OT STOLE! NHLODE TU KRLBSZDGCS!

No. 5275—Public Patron No. 1. By †Sourdough. Enter through common short words YHYA, FSAYY, ZFSYA, and ZHYA. Next in line, KSZ, KSZDY, and EKEL; and so on.

*EXRAYK *BEAXYPTY, KSZDY MYXYOEBFTZXD FZFEUYR
ZHYA FSAYY SGXRAYR VTUUTZXD, PEHY EKEL VZAY
VZXYL FSEX EXL ZFSYA *DBZFBSVEX KSZ YHYA UTHYR.

No. 5276—A Rest at Best. Ednasande. Suffix -VDT, after double in first word, provides entering wedge. Same letters occur in DVTAK, which readily follows.

NAVYYVDT FGMZZX MPUGDUY GNGBUDL UEAGZLKUS
SGJKVXU LPUUHUY. GOKUY LUFUYGP FGVD GKKUXHKL,
NYULKPVDT NVKA UPZLVFU *XRYHAUZL, FUEUS DVTAK
NRYBUY OVDGPPJ LUUBL XRFVU, SRQUL ZDSVLKZYCUS.

No. 5277—Synthetic Sympathy. By Krypton. High frequency of symbol Z (14 times), and ending -U, will help with ZOZU, which in turn will unlock the long last word.

AGEY-AZGEFZY. AHUNGRY EHNU ZOZU LTFA BRTBR GF
LTXZ'U XHRZEGS, XGCZU FZGEU. ZJDSGTRU UPZSS:
"MHUF GFZ AGPNHEVZE UGRYLTQA LTFA ZKZEOFATRVI!"

No. 5278—Educational Program. By †Sally Fischer. Twice-used ending -OYS will unlock phrase TOYS TRYST. The final phrase TRUA URDA will then drop into place.

BOYZADSFDPAY GLOEZDAY HKOEZ HERGB LRKTAT, TBOX
FDRKYZ DRRU, TOYS TRYST FHRKP DFOYZDRXT, UFBA
YAGBEFGAT, ZDFN XOGPKDAT, XDAPAYZ TEAAX NLOEA
DATPOYS, PLAY VDREOG TRUA URDA.

No. 5279—Beyond the Blue. By †Gracias. Guess XDK-NXX through its distinctive pattern. Next try for HZPYOSXPXZ, using POSN and HSDKH as check words.

NFNPT HSDKH ZDGHY YDVYK HSPK DENOVHS HZPYOSXPXZ
VYOSKA; TDKS SUKNGVU XPYKA SKNGVU, FDOPHU TPERA
POSN XDK-NXX HLDZY, RNHS DEPTHS GOMONBO YNOH.

No. 5280—Contingent Terms. By †Florence Mack. Spot your own clews in this final cryptogram! Asterisks in ciphers are prefixed to capitalized words.

ZSDN NWONUGVZ CUSD RFKHQ OUSZZPSUR GXAAHN:
"NTXKBSOFVKYE" DNFYZ "PNFZNHKYE"; "ZQDLSHKO
RKFEUFD" DNFYZ "EUFGM"; "ENSDNVUKOFH CKEXUN"
DNFYZ "NHHKGZN"; "SZOKHHFVN" DNFYZ "ZPKYE."

THANKS to the faithful support and continuing interest of our many readers, "Solving Cipher Secrets" with this issue completes its twenty-fifth year! Our first SCS article was published in December, 1924. And in the ensuing quarter century of uninterrupted cipher service, our fans have presented through this department a grand total of 5,282 problems.

No. 5282—Double Cipher. By †Diana Forrest.

| | | | |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| UJDNP | ODQFV | JJFSJ | GOFSO |
| QTUPJ | DNJBJ | OJIBT | SMICU |
| DMIGT | CUUUP | ITPQV | EJISU |
| MATBM | FDUBT | PJJOO | PCOUP |
| XUDFB | BQBFJ | BTJUV | TJVJO |

To this terrific total of more than 5,000 cipher problems, readers of the magazine, during the twenty-five year period, have submitted better than nine-tenths of a million solutions. Cumulative totals for each issue appear in the currently published *Cipher Solvers' Club*. And the grand total for 1949 will be given here when tabulation is completed. The yearly list of fans who have made the grade during 1949 with individual scores of 100, 500, or 1,000, thus qualifying for admission into special solvers' groups, will include entrants for all three classes—*dagger*, *star*, and *degree*! This list also will appear soon. Watch for it!

No. X-5270—Spherical astral bodies when viewed through vast firmamental space oftentimes appear five-point-formed.

Key: C A M E L

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| a | b | c | d | e |
| f | g | h | i | j |
| k | l | m | n | o |
| p | q | r | s | t |
| u | v | w | x | y |
| z | | | | |

Message: S P H E R I C A L ...
Cipher: E C M L M E M C A ...

Now a short digression into current puzzles. †Diana Forrest submits a combination cipher, involving transposition and substitution, with self-explanatory plain-text. Hint: identify the alphabet by frequency count; then unfold the transposition scheme. *Alphamega dedicates his new **Five Hundred Club* membership with No. 5273. †Sourdough, old-timer returned, comes again with No. 5275. Ednasande, new fan, offers her second, No. 5276. While †Sally Fischer and †Florence Mack, sisters, publish another excellent pair of their cryptograms. Other fine entries complete the current bill. Also, solution to †Rebbina's No. X-5270 appears herewith. Any reader may contribute ciphers, or submit answers, to this department. All solvers are listed in our bi-monthly *Solvers' Club*. Keep up the good work, fans!

No. 5281—Cryptic Division. By *Jack-Hi. The 10-letter keyword runs from 0 up to 9. Value

of symbol D, used but once, is evident upon inspection. Try for P in divisor.

A T O P) R E P O R T (E S N
P P S P

A R O A R
A O R T P

T E V T
R N O D

T O T

5259—The cheetah, world's fastest four-legged animal, runs down his prey in a blinding seventy miles per hour sprint, but can't hold that speed long!

5260—Grade school pupil from Tulsa, Okla., defined "spinster" as "bachelor's wife." Others guessed the plural of "ox" to be "oxygen," and located the "alimentary canal" in northern Indiana!

5261—Iowa has become the state where the short corn grows. Ninety-nine per cent of the states corn acreage now is planted to short-stalked hybrids.

5262—Mysterious flying discs may be space travelers, from another planet in our universe, worrying about sun spots concurrent with atom-bomb earth blasts. After all—it is their sun, too!

5263—"Send me my Apson T. Ballard," away-from-home voter wrote election board. Officials finally solved puzzling request, sent "absentee ballot."

5264—Chickens, chased by Charlie for chop suey shop, led merry chase all around yard. Exhausted, Charlie clubbed clucking chicks amidst flying feathers. Menu: "Shredded chicken chow mein."

5265—Hopping freight, rollicking road-knight ducks wintry blasts. Train zooms south. Days pass. Landed amidst Florida blizzard, hobo swoons!

5266—Youngsters quickly grasp engineering know-how, build ferris wheel, bascule bridge, parachute jump, walking giant, other exciting mechanical models, with world-famed wonder-toy, Erector!

5267—Silage gas explodes, Prairie State silo walls collapse against barn, barn folds upon feed shed, feed shed knocks over windmill, windmill drops onto machine shed. Farmhouse undamaged!

5268—Words synonymous with "thoughtful": provident, cogitant, attentive, considerate, contemplative, reflective, heedful, cautious, pensive, dreamy.

5269—Key:

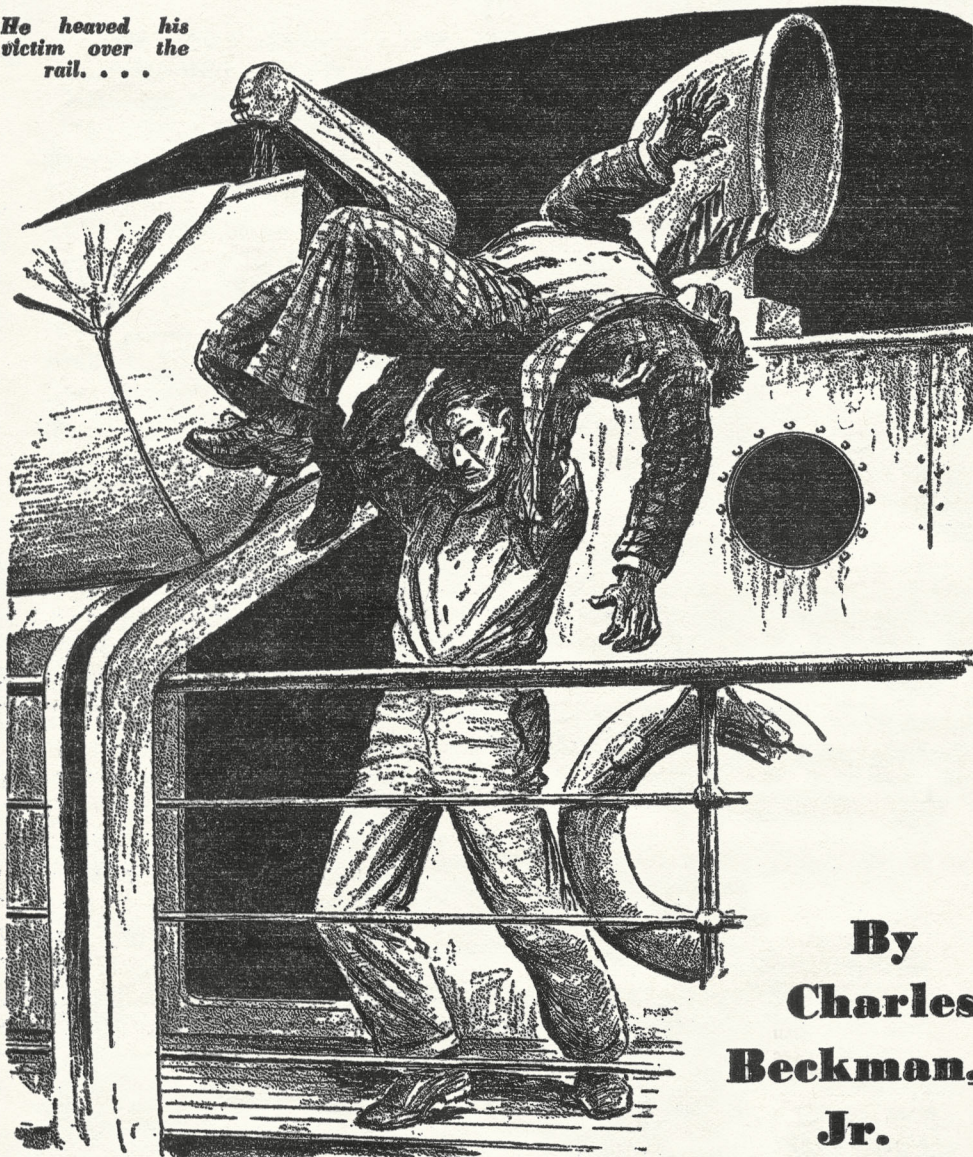
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
Y A R M O U T H, N. S.

All answers to current ciphers will be duly credited in our *Cipher Solvers' Club*. Address: M. E. Ohaver, *New Detective Magazine*, Fictioneers, Inc., 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y.

(*Cipher Solvers' Club* on page 128)

MURDER ON MY MIND

*He heaved his
victim over the
rail. . . .*



**By
Charles
Beckman,
Jr.**

*It's easy to live with yourself
and several crooked grand—
but dying with them comes
harder!*

FEAR can drive a man to desperate measures. At first, whiskey dulled the nightmare in which John Henry Mascheck lived. But after a while, that wasn't enough. When his ship docked in Far Eastern ports, he sought refuge in opium dens, and there, for a few hours, floated in safe warm clouds, freed tem-

porarily from the grim spectre that haunted his waking and sleeping.

But, back aboard ship, at sea, the horror returned. He would wake up in the night, drenched with sweat, whimpering under the covers, the frightening details of his dream still fresh in his mind—a nightmare in which dark waters closed over his head, dragging him down to deep, silent green depths. . . .

John Henry didn't know the medical name for it. He only knew that drowning held an awesome fear for him, far beyond the normal dread of death.

That fear had lived with him for four years, ever since the night he had been washed over the side in a rough Pacific sea and had been saved only by a miracle. It had become the most important thing in his life. Now, one obsession filled his mind; he was going to drown some day and nothing he could do would prevent it.

It drove him at last to murder.

"First, I need money," he whispered, sitting on the edge of his bunk that night. He had wasted away to a shadow. His eyes were great, dark shadows sunk far back in deep sockets. His face was a grey, lined mask.

As if mocking him, the rough sea lashed the ship's sides. He shuddered and great beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

Again he looked down at the letter in his shaking fingers. He had read it a hundred times. Its corners were frayed from its being repeatedly taken out of his pocket and folded away again.

It was from his cousin, Alec Mascheck, in Texas, an old bachelor John Henry hadn't seen in years.

"We were like brothers when we were children, here on Papa's farm, John Henry. That's why I am glad that you will inherit this place when I pass away. I have never married and there are no other relatives. The doctor says I have only a month or two. . . ."

The letter had reached Mascheck in

Shanghai a week ago. It had been mailed two months before that. Alec Mascheck would be dead by now. The farm belonged to him, John Henry.

But you won't get it, the sea mocked him. You dock in San Francisco next week and all your pay will go to cover gambling debts and you are already signed up for another cruise. You won't get the farm, but I'll get you! I'll suck you down some night. Down where you can't breathe—smothering you. . . .

"No!" John Henry screamed. His voice reverberated from the steel bulkhead. He lurched to his feet, swaying, soaked with cold sweat. "I won't drown. I'll go to Texas, on a farm. Miles away from water . . . where there's only land. . . ."

He ran up on deck. The wind tore at his hair and the salt spray filmed his face. Off in the darkness, alone, a single passenger clutched the rail, looking out to sea. It was the wealthy Englishman who had flashed his bulging wallet more than once since they left Shanghai. . . .

Seaman John Henry Mascheck moved silently up behind him. His left palm covered the Englishman's mouth while the clutching fingers of his other hand found the man's wallet. Then he heaved his victim over the rail. The Englishman's screams were lost in the darkness of the foaming waters. John Henry visualized the man's struggles down there in the depths that sucked him down, down, smothering him. He shuddered and stumbled back to his bunk.

THREE weeks later, John Henry drove through Goliad, Texas. He wore a new suit and sat behind the wheel of a second hand automobile he had bought in San Antonio. There had been enough money in the Englishman's wallet to pay his bus fare from San Francisco to San Antonio and to buy this car. Now he was down to his last five dollars. But that no longer mattered, for he had

reached his destination. He gazed around the dusty lane he was now following, a few miles out of Goliad, at the acres of rolling prairie land, stretching as far as the eye could see—dotted with scrubby chaparral, mesquite and clumps of live oak. At the old, moss-covered Spanish mission, "La Bahia," that stood like a sentinel high on a hill, overlooking this countryside.

He was here and he was safe! No more water, no more nightmares. He chuckled deeply, clutching the steering wheel with trembling hands.

He recognized the boundary of the old Mascheck farm. The soil was all rich, fertile loam. It had been planted in cotton when he was a child. Now, waving acres of flax greeted his eyes. A combine stood in a field where it had been threshing seed.

"Good—good," he nodded, wetting his lips. A man could make fine money here. His cousin, Alec, must have planted all these fields before the sickness overtook him.

John Henry drove up to the house. Later, he'd talk with the lawyer in town. First, he wanted to look the place over, see what shape it was in.

He was surprised to find signs of life around the house. Chickens clucked under the creaking windmill in the back yard. Curtains fluttered at open windows. There was the fragrance of cooking in the air.

A moment of panic overtook him. Had Alec Mascheck recovered? Heart thudding, he walked up on the porch of the freshly painted white frame house, rapped on the edge of the screen door.

A woman waddled out of the kitchen. A cheap calico dress hung around her sweating bulk like a sack. She wore anklet socks and frayed bedroom slippers that scuffed the floor as she walked. She was fanning herself with a folded newspaper. A thin white cat wound back and forth between her ankles as she stood there.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"I—" John Henry moistened his lips. "A-Alec Mascheck. Is he here?"

"Dead," she told him. "Died last month. I'm his widder. Whut kin I do fer you?"

"Widow!" The word struck John Henry with stunning force. "But—but he wasn't married. He wrote me that he'd never married. He said there were no next of kin, other than myself!"

She eyed him suspiciously through the screen door. "By the way, you ain't that cousin feller he was always talkin' about? Out to sea, you was?"

"Yes . . . yes. I'm John Henry Mascheck. I'm Alec's legal heir. He wrote me. This place is mine. He wrote and told me—"

She threw her head back, laughed shrilly. "Well, Mister, you missed it by a little. I married Alec after he wrote you that letter. I was nursin' him, an' he seemed t' take a fancy to me toward the end. He wrote you, but I guess th' letter never reached you."

A roar of anguish and rage tore from Mascheck's lips. "Robbed him, you mean, you old fat devil! And robbed me of what is mine. Why he must have been so sick he was out of his mind!"

She retreated two steps. "Now you jest hold on," she warned stridently. "I married him fair and legal. Got th' papers to prove it. You come around here, startin' trouble and I'll phone th' law!"

She reached for the telephone. John Henry drove a weather beaten fist through the screen wire. He unhooked the door, entered the room. The sea was roaring in his ears, mocking him again. *You see, Mascheck. you can't get away from me. You don't have a farm after all. You'll have to come back to me. And I'll get you this time!*

"No," John Henry choked. "No!" He reached for the woman.

She squealed once, like a frightened pig.

Then his fingers closed around her throat. He held on for a long time after she was dead, to be sure. . . .

He stumbled outside, out in the clean sunshine. He knelt and scooped up a handful of dry earth. Then he began laughing, wildly. "I cheated you," he swore. "By heaven, I cheated you!"

Thank Providence, he hadn't stopped to see the lawyer in Goliad first. He'd driven right out and no one had seen him. He could get back in the car, drive to San Antonio, sell the car and hide for a few weeks or a month. Then he'd come back here to claim the place, acting like he'd just arrived from San Francisco. He'd make it look like a thief had broken into the house, killed the woman. . . .

He hurried back in, ransacked drawers, stuffed some of her cheap jewelry and some cash he found in his pockets. Enough to make the murder appear the work of a thief. Then he walked through the house and out the back door.

He gazed around him, at the miles of farmland that was now his. And he laughed back at the sea. "I beat you! I'm safe at last." There was no water for miles. No more fear of drowning ever to haunt him again. He would be safe here for the rest of his life!

Then he heard voices coming from the field. Hired hands!

If he ran around the house to his car, they'd see him sure . . . and if he stayed here, they'd see him. But they were headed toward the barn. If he could hide for a few minutes, it would be all right.

He looked around frantically. By now they had gotten so near, they'd see him if he tried to get back in the house.

His gaze fell on a trailer with high side boards in the back yard. Almost between him and the approaching men. He ducked, ran toward it bent over. He crawled up one side. It was deep. Ten feet or more. It was filled with flaxseed up to within two feet of the top. The closely-packed seed looked smooth and inviting. He could lie down on that.

He wriggled over the side, rolled to the middle of the surface of seed. And then he felt himself sinking, down . . . down . . .

There was a relentless sucking that grew worse as he floundered. Frantically, he clawed for the sideboards. But he was already down to his armpits. He could not reach the sides! Too late he tried to scream. His mouth was below the surface. He knew a moment of unspeakable terror. The whole nightmare of four years had become a reality! His eyes were filled and his nostrils and mouth and lungs, with the sifting, choking seeds. He was sucked down into blinding smothering depths. . . .

Two of the hands drove a pickup truck out of the barn, backed it to the trailer of flaxseed.

One of the men nodded at the deep load of flaxseed. "Bad business leaving that stuff uncovered like that. I ought to tell the widow. It's just like quicksand. I've seen men fall into a bin of that stuff and drown before you could get to 'em."

The two men got in the truck and started off.

And far on the other side of the world, the restless Pacific washed on a sandy beach and the mutter of its surf sounded like a chuckle . . .

STILL on U. S. statute books are many ordinances regulating the conduct of animals. Typical of them is a Kenilworth, Illinois, law which requires roosters to step back 300 feet from any residence before crowing.

—Will James

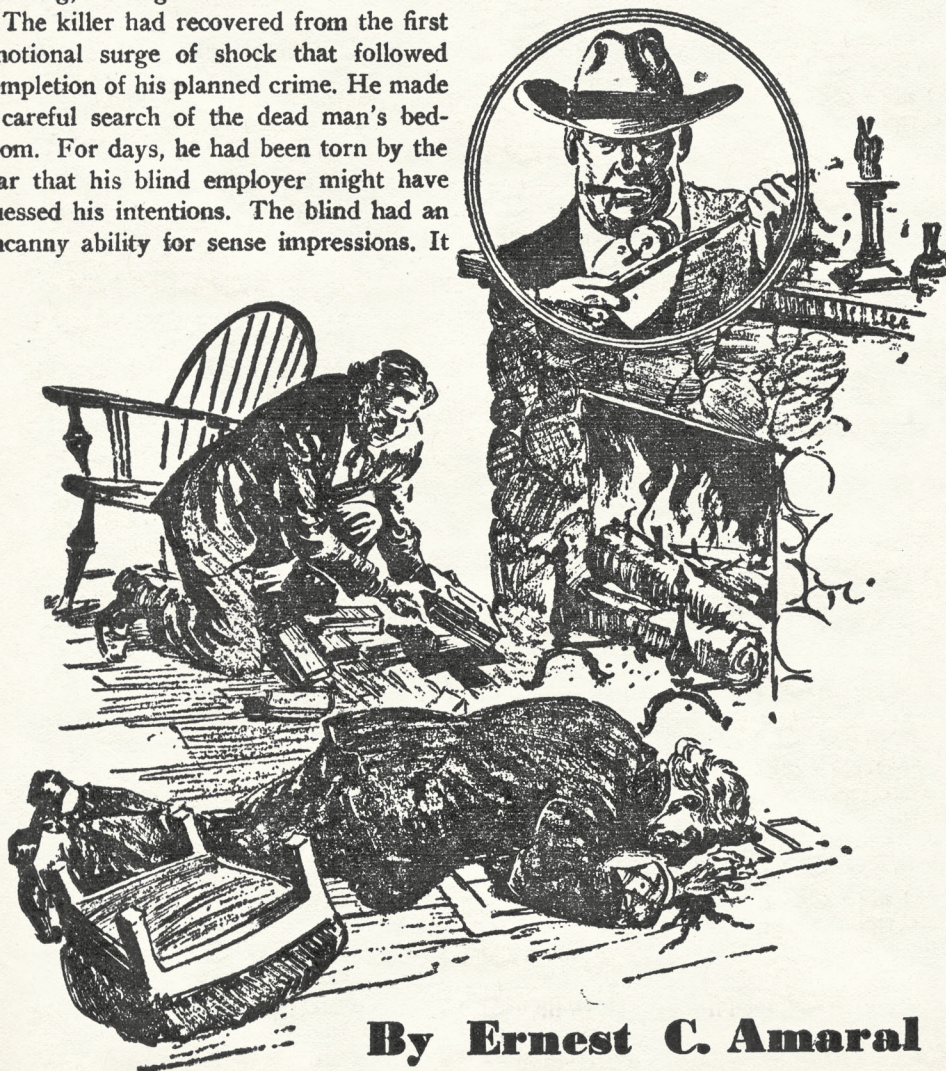
Ned Randolph thought he had committed the perfect crime, but he never stopped to realize that. . . .

DEAD MEN TALK

THE body was sprawled on the floor like a grotesque, inanimate doll discarded by a fickle child. A trickle of blood oozed from its head. It seeped slowly into the dark, uncarpeted floor planking, making it darker still.

The killer had recovered from the first emotional surge of shock that followed completion of his planned crime. He made a careful search of the dead man's bedroom. For days, he had been torn by the fear that his blind employer might have guessed his intentions. The blind had an uncanny ability for sense impressions. It

He withdrew the old man's hoard. . . .



By Ernest C. Amaral

was as if they sent out invisible antennae to perceive waves of emotion.

His search allayed his fears. Everything in the room was placidly and mutely at peace with the world. Nothing screamed a revelation of unnatural horror. The dead man's clothes hung emptily in the closet. The old ship's radio uniform with the gold on the sleeves stood out sharply among the dull, prosaic wear of everyday existence. Over the fireplace mantel, the gleaming fishing rod testified silently to the old man's interests. It had been his pride. An "enchanted wand," he had called it. Fish came to it like iron filings to a magnet. Even his good friend, the sheriff, had gruffly and testily admitted its magical powers as he returned empty-handed beside his laden fishing companion.

The killer left the room. He set about rearranging the picture of death in the kitchen. He lifted the dead man's head then dropped it with a sickening thud against the heavy, metal stand holding the fire-irons. The blood stained it a dull lusterless red like cheap, thin paint. He picked up the poker that had been the murder weapon and washed it in the tin sink of the farmhouse. Returning to the fireplace, he worked it back and forth in the hot ash powder before replacing it in the stand.

He kicked over a footstool. Several other touches completed his work. The picture still held the aura of death. However, instead of murder, it now suggested an unfortunate accident. A blind, old man had tripped and cracked his skull open. It was as simple as that.

The killer now reached down and clawed at several of the bricks forming the hearth. He withdrew the old man's hidden hoard, which he had discovered by accident. The square, metal box contained the money for which he had killed. He went outside and buried it behind the barn. Returning, he checked his setting,

a little smile of satisfaction easing the sullen grimness of his mouth. He left, closing the door behind him softly, as if not to jar any piece of his setting out of place. He started out on the long walk to the town. The devoted manservant was going to report the accidental death of his employer to the authorities.

"Hello, Ned."

The startled killer whirled to face the man standing in the doorway. Sheriff Tom Taggart's face was heavy and solemn even in natural repose. Now, an added sadness gave it the morose look of a bloodhound contemplating the enigma of human behavior.

"I just got in from that conference out in Chicago," the sheriff said. "They told me about Bill at the office."

The killer was prepared for this moment. Knowledge of the sheriff's departure had set his murder plan into motion. He nodded silently to the other, secure in the knowledge that the authorities had written off the death as an accident.

The sheriff entered the room, pausing uncertainly in its center. His eyes took in the worn leather chair that had been the old man's favorite.

"I'll miss him, Ned," he said huskily.

He walked into the dead man's bedroom. The other felt a nameless fear coil up tightly inside himself. Unreasoningly, his heart fluttered wildly, like a trapped, panic-stricken bird. He waited for the sheriff to emerge. The moments drew out, and time seemed to be suspended in a vacuum. His eyes were riveted on the bedroom door.

"Sheriff," he croaked hoarsely, "Sheriff, you all right?"

The sheriff appeared in the doorway. "Sorry to leave you like that, Ned. I kinda got lost in thought."

Ned's eyes were held by the long, gleaming rod that was clutched in the sheriff's hand.

"I thought I'd take it along," the sheriff explained. "Bill and I joshed each other so much about it. It will almost feel like having him around again."

Ned shook off the stiff, wary watching that held him. "Sure, Sheriff. I understand," he said. "I guess Bill would have wanted you to have it."

The sheriff crossed to the door. He started to open it, then paused. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Guess I'll be moving on," Ned answered casually. "I didn't know what to do about this stuff." He waved at the room's furnishings. "Now that you're here, I guess you'll know how to handle it."

The big, morose man nodded, pinching his lip reflectively. "How soon you going?"

"A day or so."

"I'll drop by before you go." The sheriff went out the door and Ned heard him drive away. Relief flooded over the killer like an insurmountable wave. He dropped weakly into a chair.

TWO days later, Ned knelt in the center of the room, tugging at the strap of his suitcase. With a grunt he fastened it and straightened up.

The sound of a car stopping outside held him momentarily still. There was the slam of a door and the crunch of footsteps approaching. The door swung open and Tom Taggart entered.

"'Lo, Ned." The sheriff's eyes noticed Ned's suitcase. "Leavin'?"

"I was figuring to," Ned answered. Silently, he cursed his luck. He had planned to be gone before the sheriff's arrival.

The sheriff crossed to the suitcase and picked it up. "I'll drop you off. It's the least I can do for a good friend of Bill's."

Ned stared sharply at him. There was a curious edge to the sheriff's voice.

"Comin'?" he called back over his shoulder.

Ned mentally damned his imagination and followed Tom out to the car. They drove off in silence.

Just outside of town, the sheriff spoke. "Got to drop by my office. You don't mind?"

Ned shook his head. A curious sense of desolation swept over him.

They pulled up at the office, a two story red-brick building containing cells for prisoners. Tom Taggart came around to Ned's side and opened the door. "Come on in. I got something to show you."

They entered the building and went into a small room, sparsely furnished with a desk and two chairs. A little, bald-headed man was seated behind the desk.

The sheriff spoke to him. "I'll have that paper now, Pete."

Pete nodded and reached into an open drawer of the desk, silently handing a folded document to the sheriff. He gave it a perfunctory examination then handed it to Ned. "Guess you'll be interested in this," he remarked in an ominously soft voice.

The two stared at each other over the paper. Ned reached dumbly for it and read the black, staring print on the front of the document. Words stood out on the white paper, words that wavered and shimmered like something alive. Ned reached up to wipe away the mist that clouded his eyes. The words came into focus. "Warrant of Arrest--Ned Randolph."

The next half hour was a blank in Ned's mind. There had been the paper, and now it was the cell with a cot in the corner and a high barred window above his head. He sat heavily on the edge of his cot. They knew he had killed his employer. That, he had been able to retain. But how? The question kept plaguing his mind. How?

A shadow fell across his face. He looked

(Continued on page 127)



ANSWERS TO THE THIRD DEGREE

(Questions on page 37)

1. If called in to solve a jewelry store robbery, you should probably start looking for an experienced crook. An experienced crook is generally more likely to attempt such a job than an amateur is.

2. False. Small payroll jobs are generally done by young men who operate alone.

3. False. Revenge is quite likely the motive for arson.

4. If a crook friend told you they were planning to send him to the "fit house," you should know they were thinking of sending him to a place where the criminally insane are housed.

5. "Em" is a crook slang term for "morphine."

6. If your acquaintance told you he had "just hit the bricks," this would mean he had just been released from prison.

7. According to convict slang, a "herder" is a prison guard.

8. True. When a criminal is said to have a long "pedigree," this means he has a long prison record.

9. If you heard your man was "on the loop," probably the sensible thing to do would be to get in the car and try and catch him. "On the loop" means "traveling fast."

10. It is possible under the circumstances that Bichloride of mercury might have been used to poison the victim. Persons poisoned with this item have been known not to die for as long as a week after the poison had been administered.

11. If rigor mortis set in rapidly in the body of a poisoned person, you might reasonably suspect that strychnine had been used to do the job.

12. A dry desert will sometimes preserve the body . . . as well as the clothing worn. Thus, identification is simplified. Similarly, the shifting of sands tends to make actual concealment difficult.

13. False. Dope addicts not infrequently drink liquor.

14. If the chief of detectives asked you to hand him some "readers," and you knew your underworld, you would hand him some marked playing cards.

15. A "reef" is a pickpocket, or the act of picking a pocket. A "reefer" is a marijuana cigaret.

16. During a robbery, the "soldier" for the mob is the one who stands outside ready to sound the warning of the approach of police.

17. True. A "speed ball" is an injection of dope.

18. True. "Lands" are the raised spiral surfaces found inside a rifle barrel.

19. False. "A "whisky cutter" these days is not one who runs whisky across the border. Rather, a whisky cutter is one who dilutes whisky or other liquor and resells it as the full-strength article.

20. True. According to the language of prisoners, a "wing waiter" is a prison mail carrier.

WRONG WAY CORPSE

By Richard E. Glendinning



A shot rang out as Jim hit the pavement. . . .

Six were lost to this world—and Detective Ross was lost to both this and the next, unless he answered, alone, the killer's demand—come die with me!

"GIVE me those involved story-book killings any day," said Police Commissioner Lander, spreading his neatly manicured hands on the desk top. "They're a darned sight easier to crack."

He peered over his steel-rimmed glasses at the half-dozen reporters around him. Not one of them was bothering to jot

down his comment. Retrenching, he said, "Of course, that's off the record."

The reporters stirred restlessly and Detective Jim Ross, standing quietly in the corner of the office, frowned.

"Just one thing the *Times* wants to know," a stocky, blunt-chinned reporter said. "What are you doing about Fred Martin's killer?"

Lander smiled mysteriously, as if an arrest were imminent. "What you fellows must realize—"

"Is it true," the *Times* persisted, "that you're dropping the case?"

The Lander smile faded. "In a crime like this, it isn't easy—"

"Are you calling your men off?"

"Some of them," Lander admitted reluctantly, looking down at his hands, "but I've still got one of my best men on it." His eyes lifted almost imperceptibly and met Jim's.

"Just one?" exclaimed the *Inquirer*. "Who?"

"Well, I—" Lander mopped his brow. "I can't tell you. It's hush-hush." He stood up and forced an affable grin, but his eyes were troubled. "That's all I can give you for the present, gentlemen." He leaned on the desk.

Grumbling, the reporters pushed from the office. Lander sighed wearily, sank back in his chair and beckoned to Jim. "See the spot I'm in, Ross?"

Jim nodded. "Thanks for the compliment, Commissioner."

"I couldn't very well admit—"

"Sure, that's all right by me."

Jim Ross, who, only two weeks ago, had been just another uniformed cop on a quiet beat, was hardly one of the commissioner's best men. Now in plainclothes, after three years of inconspicuous plugging, he had just one case to his credit, and that was a dreary trip to Chicago to bring back a man.

Until this morning, when he had been called into Lander's office and assigned to the Fred Martin killing, he had been thanking the commissioner for keeping him in Chicago while practically everyone else on the force was having to swallow the taunts of the press.

"No sense kidding you, Ross," Lander said. "The only reason I'm putting you on the Martin case is to keep the papers happy. When they ask me what we're

doing, I've got to be able to say we're still digging."

"How long do I stay with it?"

"Until the press has something else to stew about. And," Lander groaned, "all over a mere cab driver!"

Jim had already read the newspapers and every scrap of information on file at headquarters.

It was true that Fred Martin had been no more than a cabby. There had been no triangles in his life, no diary filled with purple prose, no love nests. Fred Martin had been a quiet man of twenty-six with a pretty wife, Virginia, and a three-year-old son, Fred Jr., and the little family was close-knit. Fred's life had been as unostentatious as his little bungalow on the outskirts of town.

On the face of it, his murder had had none of the lurid details upon which the papers feasted, but Fred Martin, cab driver, had been the sixth cab driver to be slain in less than a year. The newspapers, bolstered by indignant citizens and the combined forces of the cab companies and the drivers' union, were howling for police action.

"There's no question of motive, Ross," the commissioner said. "Robbery, pure and simple. The toughest kind of a case. I don't expect you to break it."

Jim knew he had only to look busy, but he was acutely conscious of his record. When the Fred Martin case was filed under *Unsolved*, the black mark would be against Jim Ross, the last man to work on it.

"What do we have to work on?" Jim asked glumly.

"Nothing," Lander muttered. "Absolutely nothing. Oh, we've got Martin's manifest, all right, and his cab's down in the garage for whatever good it does us. The lab went over it with a fine-toothed comb. Dirt and mud on the rear floor, cigarette butts in the ashtray, things like that. But when you consider how many

people ride a cab in a day, those things don't mean a thing."

"What about the addresses on the manifest?"

"They were checked first thing. Only one queer thing about the manifest. Apparently, Martin started to write down the address of his last drop-off. He got as far as "three-five—" and then broke off. No street name, no nothing."

Jim started to speak, but Lander stopped him. "Yeah, we thought about that, but it didn't hold water. Martin was shot in the fifteen-hundred block of Ridgeview Road."

"Then he must have picked up another fare right after his drop-off at that three-five-something or other. Maybe he stopped at a traffic light on his way to Ridgeview Road and remembered he hadn't filled out the manifest for the last fare. He begins to write but the light changes and—"

"That's the size of it." Lander stood up, terminating the interview. "Don't work yourself to death, Ross. The only way we'll break this is to catch the killer in another job and wring a confession out of him."

Jim walked to the door and paused a moment, his hand on the knob. "What about the slug?"

"A thirty-eight. Martin got it in the forehead. He must have turned to make change, and—boom!"

"He didn't stand a chance."

"Say, you wouldn't mind going out to see the widow, would you?"

"Why should I mind?"

Lander shrugged. "I don't know, some cops don't like to call on widows."

"It's all part of the job. Anyway, it keeps the papers happy and makes the widow think we're doing something."

Lander stared at Jim strangely as if seeing him for the first time. "You're a chilly customer."

"Just a cop," Jim replied, opening the door. "A cop's got to be impersonal,

maybe aloof, to do his job. Get too close and you can't see the forest for the trees."

"Nice theory," Lander murmured, tugging his chin.

"Just one thing, Commissioner. What about my record? If I have to give the case up, it will—"

"Don't worry," Lander said. "I'll keep you on it no more than a week, then assign you to something else. You'll be covered."

"Thanks," Jim said, smiling. He returned to his own desk down the hall and thumbed through the file on Fred Martin's murder.

THE file was beautifully complete. Commissioner Lander, goaded by the press, had put every available man on the case, and the assembled data showed the results of their painstaking labor.

All pawn shops had been visited in search of a .38 which might have been hocked in the past week; several had been found, but none matched the slug which had killed Martin. The nineteen complete addresses on Martin's manifest had been checked and each fare questioned. The only tangible results from that were that all nineteen fares were in the clear and that the mud and dirt on the rear floor had been put there by a bricklayer who had hailed Martin's cab on his way home from work. The cigarette butts, which had been accumulating in the ashtray for three days, were of no help.

Countless people—stool pigeons, cab drivers, storekeepers, newsboys, residents of the block where Martin had been killed—had been interviewed. One woman on Ridgeview Road recalled a sharp report shortly after midnight, but had attributed it to a backfire. The milkman who had come upon Martin's body on his pre-dawn route could add nothing.

As a last resort, the cops had tackled the tough job of visiting every house they

could find whose street number began with 35, but the search availed nothing and Martin's next to last fare, whose address he had left unfinished, was as dark a mystery as his last one.

Jim closed the file thoughtfully and put on his hat. As he was walking toward the door, Sid Stanley, an old cop who was nearing the age of compulsory retirement, called him.

"I hear you're on the Martin job, Jim," he said. "That's a vacation with pay."

"Lander promised not to hold me on it for more than a week," Jim replied. "Is there any chance of this counting against me, Sid?"

"Not if you don't try to dream up any new angles," Sid said softly. "Take my advice and spend the next week at the movies."

"Good idea," Jim said, running his fingers through his stiff black hair. "But first I've got to see the widow."

Sid's brow furrowed worriedly. "She's a pretty little thing—but for God's sake, don't promise her anything!"

"Don't worry. The day I make a promise to a woman I'll give up my bachelor standing. Anyway, I'm remembering that record."

Jim went out and caught a bus to Virginia Martin's home at 3260 Grove St. in the suburbs. A little solicitous talk would satisfy her, he thought, and then he'd follow Sid Stanley's advice and go to a movie. Jim had never dogged it on anything in his life, but this case was different.

Virginia Martin opened the door at his knock. She was slim and dainty and looked to be about twenty-four. Her soft brown hair was swept back in curls over her ears and caught to the side by a bow. She stood in the doorway for a moment and studied Jim with quiet brown eyes, then she led him into the living room and showed him to a worn leather chair at the front window. He knew that this

must have been her husband's favorite easy chair.

"How can I help you, Mr. Ross?" she asked immediately, sitting opposite him. There were no tears in her eyes but her lids were red and swollen. She had emptied herself of tears in the past week.

Blurting out the first thing that came to him, Jim said, "We're working on a new angle."

She leaned forward eagerly. "Do you think you know who shot—"

"Did your husband have any enemies?"

"Only the person who shot him." She sank back in her chair and buried her face in her hands.

"Did he go out much nights?"

Her eyes lifted defiantly. "Once a week," she said coldly. "I know what you're getting at, but you're wrong. There was no other woman. Fred bowled with friends every Thursday night."

"Uh-huh," Jim said. He was beginning to sweat and he was nowhere near as sure of himself as he had been just a little while ago, but having started this, he had to go through with it. "Who were his friends?"

"So this is your new angle, is it? You know very well why Fred was killed—for money and nothing else." She stood up abruptly and walked to the door, opening it. "Please leave, Mr. Ross."

Jim squirmed uneasily. "If you expect us to solve this, you—"

"Please leave," she said again.

"All right, Mrs. Martin." He strode to the door, hat in hand, as a small boy came into the hall from the kitchen and pressed his cheek against his mother's leg. "Fred Jr.?" Jim asked uncomfortably.

"It is," Virginia Martin replied stiffly.

"Nice young fellow." Jim patted the boy's blond head.

The youngster looked up at him with open-eyed trust. "Where's my daddy?" he asked.

Jim coughed and looked away.

Virginia Martin said, "Daddy won't be home, son. He's—he's—" But she couldn't finish.

"Is he gonna find out what happened to my daddy?" the boy asked his mother.

"I don't know," the mother said. She stared at Jim scornfully. "Are you?"

"We're doing all we can," Jim said, "if you'll only cooperate."

She began to laugh softly, jerkily, but then her laughter became shrill and her slim shoulders shook. Jim had witnessed hysteria before; it hadn't been pleasant.

Automatically, he slapped her face with his right hand and her outburst gave way to an expression of pained surprise as she rubbed her cheek.

Jim stood, staring down at his right hand. Then turned and bolted out the door, calling over his shoulder, "I'll get in touch with you."

He took the bus downtown and got off in the theatre district. There were several good pictures playing but, for some reason, he didn't want to see any of them. Maybe he hadn't handled Virginia Martin very tactfully, but that certainly wasn't his fault. He had been told only to see the widow and let her think something was being done to find her husband's killer. No one had told him to soft-soap her.

He went into the first theatre he came to. The picture was a good Western with plenty of hard riding and fast action, but he couldn't keep his mind on the screen. It kept straying to Virginia Martin and her three year old son. No wonder she had been bitter. She knew as well as Jim that the talk of new angles and hidden motives was so much baloney.

IRRITABLY, he left his seat and went to the phone in the lobby. He called the Martin home and Virginia answered.

"This is Ross, Mrs. Martin," he said

almost apologetically. "I was wondering about your husband's manifest. Some cabbies don't keep very good records."

"Fred did."

"Some of them forget to write down their drop-offs. Later, when they try to remember their calls, they don't get the addresses right."

"Fred wrote his immediately."

"Is there any chance that that three-five-something or other wasn't, let's say, three-six or maybe three-four?"

"No. He would have written the address as soon as he let the fare out and while it was fresh in his mind."

"Then why didn't he finish it?"

"I asked one of the other officers that same question. He gave me some rigamarole about a changing traffic light." Her voice changed, softening a little. "You're the first one who has—"

"Oh, I don't think it means anything," Jim said hastily. "I'm not making any promises, understand?"

"But it is a puzzle, isn't it?"

"It's that, all right. . . . Uh, Mrs. Martin, I'm sorry about that slap. I—well, you know how it is."

"Perhaps I needed it," she said. "I swore I wouldn't break down like that in front of my son, but when you implied there was another woman and when you said I wasn't cooperating, I—"

"I shouldn't have," Jim mumbled. "I didn't mean it."

"Six drivers have been killed in a year and there have been more than twenty armed robberies that I know about."

"Thirty would be closer to it," Jim said glumly. "Did your husband have a regular stand or did he cruise?"

"A stand at Monroe and Tenth. He worked the night shift—five to two—and most of his business was the theatre and night club crowd. . . . Mr. Ross, can you do anything? *Can* you? I don't mean just as revenge for Fred, but I

know how other wives must be worrying about their husbands. Cab drivers take their lives in their hands every time they pick up a fare."

"We're doing our best," Jim said with a sickening feeling of hopelessness.

"Will you let me know if anything—"

"Right away," Jim said. He hung up and returned to headquarters. He hadn't been at his desk five minutes when he was summoned to Lander's office.

Lander, beaming happily, pointed to the five-star edition of the Times which lay opened to the editorial page on his desk. "Did you see what the Times said?"

"Not yet."

"It looks as if things will cool off sooner than we expected. The Times just as good as admitted that there isn't much we can do to crack this case. Listen." Lander read:

"After a week of diligent search, the hard-working police are no closer to a solution to the Fred Martin murder. It is clear that the case will be solved only when the killer is caught for another crime. It is equally apparent that robbery and murder are almost occupational hazards of cab driving. Our drivers must be protected from assault, perhaps by the installation of bullet-proof windows between the front seat and—"

Lander put down the paper. "We're clear. Now the press will scream for burglar alarms on cabs. So I'm taking you off the case. It won't even show in your record. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Jim said morosely. "But what about Martin's widow? Do we tell her we're quitting?"

"She'll find out for herself—or maybe you'd like to tell her. You claim you're a cold guy."

"Not that cold." Jim returned to his desk and stared blankly at his folded hands. His phone rang and he picked it up absently, mumbling into it. He chilled

at the sound of Virginia Martin's bitter voice.

"I just read the paper," she said, "and I can guess what happens next. You're going to drop the investigation."

"Mrs. Martin, I—" Jim began haltingly. "Mrs. Martin, yours isn't the only—oh, hell, I'll admit it. As far as the department is concerned, the case is closed."

"I thought so." The disgust was so sharp in her voice that Jim writhed in his chair. "I knew it when you came to see me. That visit was just a sop, wasn't it?"

"Mrs. Martin," Jim said earnestly, "I'll see what I can do. I'll talk to the Commissioner."

"What good will that do?"

"Let me come talk to you. I'll explain the—" She had hung up.

Sid Stanley came across the room and dropped his hand lightly on Jim's broad shoulder. "Forget it, kid. You'll get used to it."

"Have you?"

"No," Sid replied somberly, "and I've been on the force for thirty-five years. It's tough, but there's nothing you can do. Leave it alone and stay in the clear. Mess around, and it will be against you as long as you're a cop. Anyway, you don't have anything to work on."

"Maybe not," said Jim tersely. He went to the files and dug out everything he could find on cab stickups and murders. He read thoughtfully, making notes, then he went to the wall map of the city and studied it carefully.

An hour later, he squared his stubborn chin and went down the hall to the commissioner's office.

Glaring at Lander across the desk, he said, "I'd like to stick with the Martin case for a couple of more days."

"Think you've got something?"

"Nothing but a hunch."

"Then forget it."

But Jim held his ground. "Give me two more days."

"I thought you were the lad who wanted to be taken off?" Lander settled back in his chair and looked at Jim shrewdly. "What's your idea?"

"I studied the records and charted all holdups and murders on the map, looking for a pattern. I found one in a couple of cases. Out of thirty-two robberies in the last year, all but three were scattered, not counting Martin's. Six of those stick-ups wound up in a killing, and again all but three were scattered."

"So?"

"Martin's made four, and all four happened within a six-block radius of each other. That isn't all. According to the old manifests, all four cab drivers had their stands near Monroe and Tenth."

"Along with a hundred other cabbies," Lander said.

"Wait a minute. Three of them were killed within a month of each other just a year ago, and it happened on a Saturday night each time. Martin was killed on a Saturday night, too."

"Coincidence," Lander scoffed.

"I don't think so. A cab driver has his heaviest take on Saturday nights. If I'm right, there's a definite pattern and the killer might try a repeat—tomorrow, Saturday."

Lander laughed harshly. "You mean he's going to knock somebody off every Saturday night for the next couple of weeks, then lay off until next year? Nuts!"

"That would be smart and I figure this killer is smart. He knows what he's doing. I want to drive a cab tonight and tomorrow. I want to work out of Martin's old stand."

"You're crazy!" Lander snorted. "And even if you were right, the chances are all against you that the killer would pick your cab out of all the others." He started to turn in his chair.

"Suppose we stacked the cards," Jim said, grinning. "Every driver, every cab company in the city wants to get this

guy. They'd be willing to do business some place else and let me have that stand alone."

Lander drummed his fingers on the desk. "I'm ready to take you off the case right now with no mark against you, but if I keep you on it, you'll be responsible for—"

"I know all that," Jim snapped. "I'll take the chance."

"Even of getting shot yourself?"

"Even that."

Lander's eyes twinkled. "Cold, impersonal—that's how a cop gets ahead, is it? Okay, I'll make the arrangements."

"One thing more. You'd better tell the papers we've dropped the case. It might help smoke the killer out for another job."

"I've already done it. It will be in all the finals."

And Virginia Martin would see it, Jim thought, returning to his desk. She would be more positive than ever that he was a liar and had had no intention of talking the commissioner into continuing the case.

HIS first night as a cab driver was uneventful. A hard rain began shortly before the dinner hour and kept the theatre-goers and nightclubbers away in droves. Though he worked the corner of Monroe and Tenth alone, he picked up only five fares all Friday evening, and at two A.M. he wearily drove the cab back to the garage.

He slept till noon on Saturday, then got up and made himself breakfast. The fried eggs tasted like sawdust and the coffee was worse than mud. What had come over him? A smart cop would have known when to leave well enough alone, but Jim was out on a limb and busily sawing it off under him. Twenty-four hours ago, he could have walked out of the case with the Commissioner's blessing; by opening up no new avenues of investigation, he could have kept his record clean. But now nothing less than an

arrest would be satisfying to Lander.

And all because of a widow and a tow-headed kid.

At five, he was back at Martin's old stand. Business was brisk and he watched every fare carefully in his rear-vision mirror for any suspicious movement. He couldn't tell anything from the faces; there is no typical killer's face, and any one of the passengers could have shot Martin. The little old lady who sat so primly on the edge of the seat, her hands in a big muff; the hard-eyed sailor with the bruised fists; the buxom girl who had swayed invitingly from the dime-a-dance hall; the quiet man with the scarred briefcase on his knees.

A little before ten, a short, swarthy man in a tight suit sidled up to the cab and looked into Jim's face with shrewd eyes. "Busy?" he muttered from the corner of his mouth.

"Hop in," Jim replied, his hands tightening on the wheel.

The man gave an address on the outskirts of town. It was a section of vacant lots, cheap tenements and dimly lighted streets. Jim wrote the address on the manifest before pulling from the curb.

"What're you doing?" the fare demanded.

"Getting the address. Company rules."

"I used to wheel a hack," the man muttered. "I always wrote the address *after* I dropped the fare. Suppose the chump changed his mind, see, and wanted to go someplace else?"

The fare knew what he was talking about. "I forgot," Jim said. If this were the killer, Jim's mistake might have been all the tipoff he needed that a cop was at the wheel.

"You guys must be itchy," the fare sneered, "what with these stickups and killings."

Jim felt a tingle at the base of his spine. Cautiously, his eyes on the traffic, he dropped his right hand and touched the

butt of the gun concealed under his leg.

"Now what?" the fare snapped.

"I've got an itch." Jim put his hand back on the wheel.

"Scratch on your own time." The fare leaned forward as Jim turned into the street he had given. "Slow down."

"At this vacant lot? What kind of a—"

"Stop!" the fare barked and Jim slapped on the brakes, freeing his gun at the same time. He brought it up and held it below the window sill as the fare came to the side of the cab and reached under his coat. "You know where we are, buster?"

"A vacant lot."

The man laughed and took his wallet from an inner pocket. "I'll give you a tip. If you ever pick up a guy who's looking for a fast game, bring him here." He handed Jim a five spot. "Keep the change." He walked across the lot toward a pinpoint of light far to the rear.

Jim let out his breath slowly and wiped his clammy brow. He smiled wanly, wondering what the fare would have said if he had known that a cop had chauffeured him to his crap game.

It proved even more conclusively that there was no such thing as the killer type, and when he picked up two flashy youths who looked like juvenile delinquents, he was less wary than he should have been. Only when he heard them talking about Martin's murder in excited voices did he begin to worry. These kids, their imaginations stirred by the papers, were the kind who would like to pull such a job for the thrill.

But they gave no trouble and they paid the fare in front of a gin mill. Remembering what the ex-cabby had said, Jim waited until after the drop-off to fill out the manifest. Then he drove back to the stand.

By midnight, he was sick of the assignment he had given himself. Almost all the fares were tight and they traveled in noisy groups. They weren't the ones Jim want-

(Continued on page 123)

THE COCKEYED CASEBOOK

By Webb B. Garrison

ONE of the most sought-after objects in the Middle Ages was "The Hand of Glory"—the pickled hand of a malefactor who had died on the gallows. Criminals prized these gruesome trophies because they were believed to guarantee their owner against capture when engaged in burglary.

IN THE sixteenth century, a certain Lord Stourton was convicted of murder and hanged.* As was customary in the case of persons of noble blood, a silk rope was used for the execution. The widow of the killer had him buried in the town cathedral, and about his monument wound the rope with which he was hanged!

IN MORE than one instance, professional forgers have found autographs of the famous more profitable than bad checks. Not content with vending fake signatures of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, a certain Robert Spring even invented a fictitious daughter for General Stonewall Jackson.

Only after he had sold hundreds of letters from Jackson to "his daughter Fanny" did collectors trouble themselves to remember that Stonewall Jackson had no daughter Fanny!

AMONG the Omaha Indians, any murderer whose life was spared was forced to observe a very strict set of rules for four years. Though not imprisoned, he was not permitted to wear moccasins or to eat warm food. Neither could he comb or cut his hair, and he was required to pitch his tent at least a quarter of a mile away from his fellow tribesmen.

A LOVE-STRUCK Pennsylvania youth recently placed six sticks of dynamite under the home of a rival. Caught in the act of placing them, he was dragged before the local judge—who set him free on the ground that he couldn't be tried for mischief by dynamite since the charge failed to go off!

INJURED in a gun fight, a youthful mobster of Los Angeles, California, explained to police that he had shot himself in the shoulder because he had hiccoughs, and thought a sudden shock would cure him!

Wrong Way Corpse

(Continued from page 121)

ed. He was looking for the solo fare, perhaps one who simulated drunkenness.

A nicely dressed man with a handsome, tanned face and brown hair came out of one of the better night spots with a cute, refined blonde on his arm. The girl clung to him.

They got into the cab and gave an address in the fifteen hundred block of Lark Avenue, a good street, then they settled back in the seat and the man put his arm around the girl. Jim, watching in the mirror, blushed. To passengers, a cab driver was as impersonal as the wheels of the cab, but Jim felt like a peeping Tom.

The couple in the rear were whispering lovingly. Then the girl said, "When shall we tell the gang at the office?" Her voice was warm and vibrant.

"Anytime you say, Grace."

"Oh, Bob—I'm so happy."

Jim smiled. A taxicab was better than the tunnel of love at the amusement park. He drove down Lark Avenue and pulled to a stop in front of a big, dark house. The girl and man got out, smiling dreamily, and Jim grinned at them.

Resting his manifest against the steering wheel, he began to write: 1-5—.

"Never mind it now, driver," the man said pleasantly. "I'm just going to drop the lady off, then you can take me home."

"Right," Jim said. He sat back and watched the passengers go up the walk to the house. They paused in the shadows of the porch and their silhouettes merged to one.

Sheepishly, Jim dropped his eyes to the manifest. Suddenly, he sat bolt upright and stared at the figures 1-5—. Fred Martin, too, had written two digits, then had stopped. Virginia Martin had been sure that a changing traffic light had not caused her husband to break off; Fred had always completed his manifest while his

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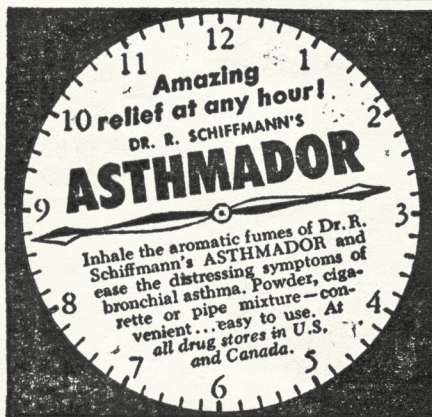
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New Detective Magazine

memory was fresh. Jim remembered that.

Suppose Martin had picked up a couple, taking them to an address only to discover that he was not through with the haul. He would have stopped writing, just as Jim had, and—

Jim laughed at his nervousness and dropped the manifest on the seat beside him. These people hadn't caused Martin's death. They were too nice. Anyway, Martin's last entry had been 3-5—

The man came back to the cab, laughing self-consciously as he wiped lipstick from his mouth. He got in and said, "Goodnight is the hardest word in the dictionary."

"It sure is." Jim pulled out from the curb and drove slowly down the street, waiting for the man to give his address. "Nice girl."

"You're not kidding."

"Have you known her long?"

"About six months."

Jim relaxed. If this couple had been dating seriously for that long, it couldn't be the same couple Martin carried a week ago.

"Where shall I take you?" Jim asked.

"Turn left at the next corner." Jim made the turn and the fare said, "Now, thirty-two sixty Grove Street."

JIM'S heart came up in his throat and his foot moved instinctively toward the brake. That address was Virginia Martin's! But maybe this guy knew Virginia. Maybe he had been a friend of Fred's. He eased his foot from the brake. Warily, he said, "That's where— Are you a friend of the Martins?"

"Hardly," the man chuckled dryly.

Jim's stomach tightened into a hard knot.

"Listen, buddy," Jim groaned, succeeding without effort in sounding like a frightened cab driver, "if this is a stickup, take it here."

Wrong Way Corpse

"Oh no, I have a flair for the dramatic." The fare's voice was as calm and pleasant as the mirrored surface of a pond at sunset. "Imagine the excitement in the papers if you were found in front of Martin's house!"

"Found?"

"Yes, found. You don't expect—turn off your meter, please—to live, do you? I learned long ago to destroy all the evidence and never to overdo a good thing. In a few weeks, I'll move on to another town."

"I—I don't have much money," Jim gulped. "Only about twenty-five bucks."

"A little here, a little there. It all adds up."

"What about that girl?" Jim asked. "She seemed like a nice—"

"Grace, nice?" The fare laughed. "Don't go too much on appearances."

"She doesn't live in that big house?"

"Of course not. We simply chose an address from the society columns. The people who live there are in Florida. By now, Grace is waiting for me at the Lyle Arms Hotel." Without raising his voice, he said, "I told you to shut off your meter."

"Okay." Swiftly, Jim knocked down the flag and wrenched hard on the wheel, hoping to spill the fare to the floor.

But the passenger was braced. "Don't do that again. I'm holding a gun on you."

Jim's wet palms were slippery on the wheel as he drove into Virginia Martin's street and stopped in front of her house.

"Keep your hands on the wheel," the fare commanded. He slid out of the cab and came to Jim's window. There was a gun in his right hand.

In about ten seconds, Jim thought, he was going to get it between the eyes just as Martin had. Only a sap would sit here and wait for it, but there was a slim chance for the man who was willing to—

He jammed down on the doorhandle,

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throwing his weight against the door. The heavy door swung out and slammed against the killer's chest, knocking him back a half-dozen feet. In one movement, Jim snatched up the gun from the seat and rolled out of the cab, landing hard on the pavement.

A shot rang out, and Jim felt a stab of pain burn through his left shoulder. Twisting and squirming, he scrambled under the cab and supported himself on his right elbow. The killer had backed into the shadows of a huge elm and Jim could no longer see him, but the killer knew where Jim was. Another shot went off and the slug whined off the cement to Jim's right.

Suddenly, as Jim strained into the darkness, Virginia Martin's porch light flashed on and Virginia, her voice taut with fear, cried out. She ran down the steps toward the cab. At the same moment, the killer dashed for cover behind another tree and was silhouetted against the porch light like a target in a shooting gallery.

Jim took careful aim and fired with a prayer on his lips, knowing that if he missed the killer, he might hit Virginia.

But the shot was true. The killer flipped up and over, his arms and legs outstretched like the vanes of a crazy pinwheel. He made one last desperate attempt to get away, then lay still at Virginia Martin's feet.

She stared at Jim over the dead body of her husband's killer. "I heard the shot. I didn't know and I—"

"It's all right now." He pointed to the man in front of her. "That's the man."

The stiffness of terror began to flow from her, but her oval face was still dead-white. "You might have been killed yourself!" She moved toward Jim. "Come in the house. Let me fix you up."

He crossed the porch and went toward the phone in the hall to call headquarters for men to pick up the girl at the Lyle Arms Hotel.

Dead Men Talk

(Continued from page 112)

up to see the sheriff. His mouth opened.

"You're wondering how we found out, aren't you, Ned?" The sheriff spoke through the bars. His expression was more doleful than ever. "I don't mind telling you. Bill told us."

Ned looked blankly into the sheriff's eyes. He shook his head in an effort to clear it. "I don't understand."

"Bill left a message."

"He couldn't have. I made sure. I searched everything."

"Everything except the one thing Bill knew I would want," the sheriff rejoined. "You neglected the fishing line, Ned. The reel was tied in a series of knots. That seemed like an odd thing for a fisherman like Bill to do. I noticed the knots had an orderly pattern. After that, it was easy to figure out."

Ned's jaw hung slack and a dazed expression held his face. "Knots? I don't understand."

"Morse code, Ned," the sheriff answered. "Ever hear of it? There are many ways to send a message with it besides tapping out what you want to say. You had a bad break there. You killed a man who had once been a ship's radio officer. He knew—with the uncanny sense of the blind—what you were up to before you committed the crime. He knotted a message on the fishing line knowing that I would want the rod as a keepsake."

"Morse code? Message?"

"The knots represented dots and dashes. It took me a little while to figure out which was which. Want to hear Bill's last words, Ned?" The sheriff withdrew a piece of paper from his pocket. "'Money under fireplace. Ned knows. Means to kill me.'"

The sheriff looked grimly at the trapped killer. "A message from the grave, Ned. You can kill a man, but that doesn't stop him from talking."

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(Continued from page 65)

I pounded my fist violently on the concrete wall of the cell. I sobbed and cursed Carson to eternal, tortured damnation. Then suddenly my anger left me and black fear replaced it.

Coldly, irrefutably it came to me then that in whatever hell Carson languished, I was doomed to join him; whatever agony he suffered, I was doomed to share.

The screw took my empty plate and cup. I said in a tight voice, "What time is it?"

He didn't look at his watch. He said, "You got three and a half hours to go," and walked down the long concrete corridor.

I watched him go and felt the ice of fear in my veins. I had a hundred and twenty minutes to live. *And though the state executioner would spring the trap of the gal-lows, I knew quite well that it would be Bull Carson who killed me, as surely as I had once killed him!*

Cipher Solvers' Club for March, 1949

Current Grand Total: 903,841 Answers

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Ten Answers—Mrs. Hugh Boyd, 408; Marguerite Gleason, 594; While Happy, 10; *Nick Spar, 3322; *Ike N. Wynne, 3550.

Nine Answers—Mrs. H. H. Bailey, 270; *P. W. B., 1380; *Ray Boyd, 153; *Gold Bug, 1724; *Honey Dew, 152; George Hein, Jr., 18; *Ian, 354; *Pearl Knowler, 2466; J. E. L., 419; *Lucille E. Little, 2152; *M. J. Martinson, 31; *H. F. Pool, 254; *C. Retherford, 226; *R. B. Shrewsbury, 1663; *U. Solv'm, 492; *James H. Williams, 878.

Corrections—*N. Dak. Ump, 10 answers for Jan., '49, 9 for Nov., '48, and 8 for July, '48; *Alphamega, 11 answers for Mar., '48; *Rush, 11 answers for Jan., '48; not previously credited.

Two Can Die

(Continued from page 36)

A pencil streak of flame leapt from the bole of the tree, and Tad Blake's head banged into the door of the car. Then all was silence, except for the distant clamor of excited voices and the faint whine of a police siren.

May came to her feet, her eyes on Marty. "Gainer shot you! You're hurt," she sobbed.

Marty nodded soberly, "That's right. But I don't think it's too serious." He looked from her to the dead men on the ground. He hadn't planned it this way. All he had done was to refuse to go through with his part of the scheme.

His mind began to forge ahead. He could lie his way out of any guilt in this and come out of the affair a hero.

Supporting him with one arm, May asked what he was thinking.

"That I would be lying," he told her.

And he couldn't, he wouldn't, do that. Now that he had broken with the past, he meant to keep the future clean. He would tell Sheriff White the truth. In the eyes of the law, he had plotted to rob the bank. His guilt, slight as it was, might even earn him a short prison term. But May would be waiting when he got out, and this time there would be no family ties to trip him. His future, their future, would be what he and hard work could make it.

The wailing siren was bearing down on the bank now. Tightening his fingers on May's arm, Marty framed his opening sentence. He would say—

"Pete Gainer, two box men from Chicago, Tad and Lait, planned to rob the bank. I was weak enough and fool enough to allow them to talk and bully me into taking part. But at the last minute I knew I couldn't go through with it. So. . ."

May stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "Are you all right, sweetheart. How do you feel?"

"I feel just fine," he assured her.

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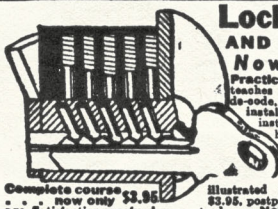
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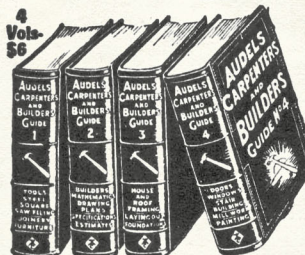
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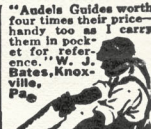


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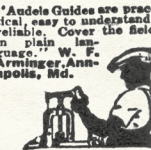


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Chas A. Morrow

CHAS. A. MORROW, Vice President in Charge of Merchandising



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