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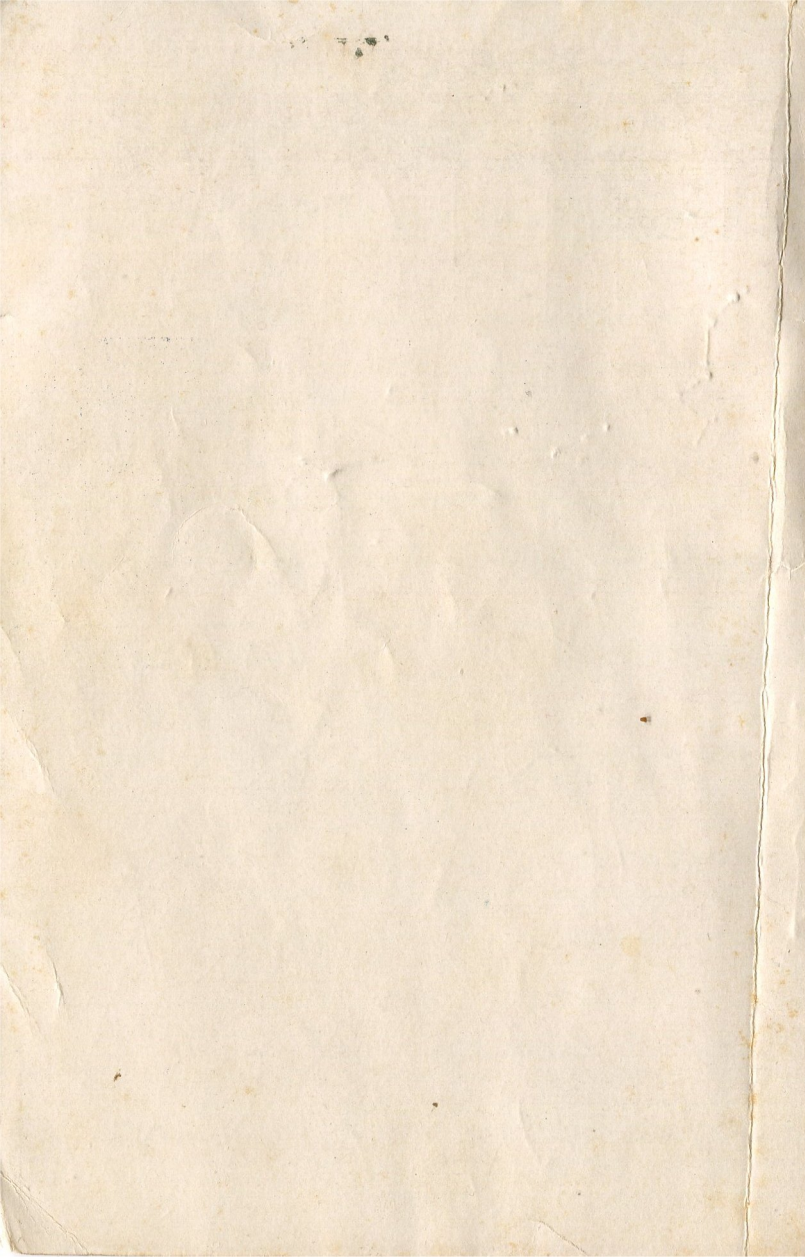
MAGAZINE



The Case of the
**BEHEADED
DOWAGER**

*A Breath-Taking,
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POCKET DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER 1950 Vol. 1, No. 1

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DEATH on a HOLIDAY



When Jarnegan cashed a check he started a lot of shooting and death.

By
Ashley
Calhoun

JARNEGAN tossed in his cards, shrugged, and reached for his glass. He sighed; the glass was empty. Across the table the heavy-jowled man with the *cafe au lait* complexion pushed in a stack of blues. The next two men dropped out, McInnes laughing, Fargo cursing.

"Up she goes!" A giggle, half drunken. The host was even smaller than Jarnegan. His face was pasty except for high spots of color in each cheek, hair black, lacquered to his skull. His eyes were bright, metallic bright. The hand that shoved the stack and a half of chips into the pot trembled so that the chips were overturned. The host giggled again, reached for the bottle, and drank from its mouth.

The man with the *cafe au lait* complexion was an imperturbable Buddha. "Tilted again." His voice was steady as the fat hand that pushed the two stacks. A pea-size diamond sparkled on one hairy finger.

Jarnegan rescued the bottle, tipped it against his own

glass. The radio in the front room said, "When you hear the sound of the musical note, it will be exactly one second after nine o'clock, Central Standard Time." Jarnegan glanced away from the game, through the open door, as soft music floated through the instrument.

THE woman was still there before the radio. She paced the floor nervously, smoke following her in long streamers from her cigarette. She glanced angrily into the gaming room and Jarnegan grinned, raised the glass in a wordless toast. His admiring eyes were tribute enough as he swept them insolently over her full figure.

Seated in an easy chair by the radio and holding his belly in his lap, was Mr. Acker, who had been introduced as the girl's father. He must have weighed three hundred. His face was round as a cheese and as expressionless. His bald head gleamed in the pale light. A pair of rimless glasses sat precariously on his pudgy nose, a long black ribbon running from them to his coat lapel.

"That beats me!" The words brought Jarnegan back to the table. Sonny Millman, the little man with the plastered hair, pushed his chair back from the table while Nick George, he of the *cafe au lait* complexion, pulled the stacks of chips toward him.

Jarnegan watched Sonny Millman sway into the front room and confront the girl. For a second the music died away and he heard their angry voices.

"Don't be a fool, Sonny, that's all, I tell you!" The woman faced him, half a head taller, at least twenty pounds heavier. Evidently Sonny Millman, world-famous jockey and their host, didn't believe her. And evidently he knew how to get at the truth. He weighed perhaps a full hundred pounds, and he put every bit of it behind his fist.

THE woman's head flew back, she staggered, fell against the davenport and bounced to the floor heavily. She lay there, twisting wrathfully.

Jarnegan and McInnes started to their feet. Sonny Millman had the woman by the heel, dragged her forward

two steps and suddenly bent over her. For a moment his small body hid the movements of his hands.

There came the sound of torn cloth, the muffled cry of the woman. Abruptly she lashed out with her free leg—too late. Sonny Millman stepped away from her and walked back into the room. He tossed a thick sheaf of bills onto the table and spoke to the man banking the game.

"Give me chips for that, McInnes." To the woman, snarling. "Go to bed, you damned fool! I'll take care of you when the game is over."

The woman, holding her torn skirt together as well as she could, walked through the room, head held high. At the bedroom door she turned, started to speak, but stood glaring instead.

Jarnegan caught her eye, grinned.

AT ONE-fifteen the jockey pushed back his chair. His hair was ruffled, his coat off, his shirt open. His eyes held a dumb look. "That's all, Nick. I'm busted." The Greek shrugged, pushed his chips toward the man acting as banker. All the men were on their feet now, reaching for coats and ties, stretching and gaping.

The Greek shrugged, Jarnegan said, "Nick, I'm cleaned out too. You got me, pal. Would you cash a check for a C-note?"

The Greek raised bushy brows, peered at Jarnegan closely. Then he grunted. "Sure. Bounce it over."

Jarnegan put the money in his pocket, kept his hand there. As the four of them—Nick George, McInnes, Fargo, and Jarnegan—made for the door, Sonny Millman staggered after them, muttering something about having to get together again. They assured him that the pleasure was theirs. Jarnegan was the last out the door. He stumbled, caught himself on the doorjamb just as the jockey closed the door.

IN THE lobby Jarnegan hesitated. "Hell!" he mumbled, "forgot my cigarette case." He hurried back into the elevator. Emerging on the Millman floor, he let the car

depart, then on noiseless feet stole down the hall. For long moments he listened at the door, then reached up quietly to grasp the thin strip of celluloid he had inserted to keep the lock from clicking into its socket. He turned the knob gently and stepped in.

For a moment he crouched listening to the angry voice of the woman coming from the other room.

"—rat! Damned fool! I ought to cut you to pieces. I ought to skin you alive! That greasy-pussed Greek was bad enough, but the little guy's a dick!"

The sound of a cracking blow, a little shriek of pain, and Millman's voice, "Let me go, Sam, let me go. I was drunk, I tell you. What's a little money! Let me go!"

Again the crack of a blow, the curses of the woman, the shriek of the jockey. Jarnegan crossed the hall and peered through the curtains at the door.

The fat man with the bald head held Sonny Millman by the back of the collar, held him at arm's length with one hand so that the little man's feet barely touched the floor. A second fat hand had both wrists of the jockey pinioned behind his back.

TREMBLING with rage the woman stood before the two. Her face was twisted and distorted, her eyes mad. Again she struck the howling Millman. The fat man with the bald head held him as easily as if he were a baby.

Jarnegan tiptoed back the way he had come and closed the door behind him. He turned and rang the bell. Again. Eventually the door was flung open. The woman stood there her cheeks still painted with anger. She gasped at Jarnegan, and glared.

Jarnegan grinned. "Look and see did I leave my cigarette case, will you, Babe?"

She slammed the door in his face. Still grinning he waited. A few more seconds and it opened a tiny crack, a tough voice said, "No!" and the door slammed again. The bolt clicked into place.

Back at his hotel he paused at the desk and wrote on a telegraph blank. When he had finished scribbling, he handed the message across the counter to the hotel clerk.

"Send this off right away, will you, mug?" The clerk nodded and as the little man entered the elevator read curiously.

"Sheriff Jud Tolliver,
Carson City, Mo.

Open bank account my name first thing this morning depositing hundred dollars stop. Having wonderful vacation stop. Jarnegan."

In his room Jarnegan put a quart of Scotch, a newspaper, a package of cigarettes and a bag of apples on the table by the bed. He hung his coat and hat in a closet, washed his hands in the bathroom, and came back to the bed. He took a drink of whiskey, chased it with a big bite of apple and unfolded the newspaper.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright, tossed the core into the wastebasket in the corner of the room and crackled the paper. The article that held his attention read:

BOETTNER RANSOM MONEY MAKES LOCAL APPEARANCE

Money Paid By Father To Kidnapper
Shows At Local Filling Station.

THE Boettner kidnapers had taken the ransom in small bills but the six-year-old girl had never been delivered as promised. It had happened nearly two months ago and as yet no one had paid the penalty for the particularly fiendish crime. The child's body had been found in a vacant lot.

Jarnegan played hunches. The scene at Millman's apartment had started the hunchbox working. Millman himself, a successful rider, vacationing in the sunny South, was in the money—yet his wife and her father raised hell because he lost a few hundred dollars.

How, wondered Jarnegan, did the dame know he was a dick. He was in San Antonio on vacation, eight hundred miles from Carson City, and had told none of his new

acquaintances who he was or what he did. Both McInnes and Fargo lived at the hotel; he had become acquainted with them in the lobby and through them had been invited to the poker game that night.

What had the wife said? *The Greek was bad enough, but the little guy is a dick.* Now what did he and Nick George have in common? What could be the tieup between a professional gambler and a detective? Suddenly Jarnegan snapped his fingers.

FROM his pocket he extracted a billfold, drew out the five twenties Nick George had given him for the check. They were all well worn, Federal Reserve notes, 1942 series—but none of the numbers were in sequence. "O. K.," said Jarnegan to himself, "this must be the answer. Nick and I have got the money the dame had in her garter."

He took another drink, went to the phone, waited for the sleepy clerk.

"Listen, fellow, you wouldn't know where Nick George, the gambler, lives, would you?"

"Sure. Why not? He lives here. 1313. Should I ring him?"

Jarnegan hesitated, then said, "Naw, I just wondered. Thanks." What the hell? He was on vacation.

AT FIRST he thought it was his imagination, that soft *tap tap tapping* at his door. Then it grew to a soft knock and eventually a full fledged rap. He said, "Yeah?" but no one answered. There was silence for a minute then the tapping was resumed.

He turned the knob, opened the door. Sonny Millman's wife stood in the hall, smiling at him. Jarnegan gaped foolishly.

She pushed past him and walked directly to the table. When he turned from the door, she had the bottle in her hand. She said, "May I?"

"Sure! Sure!" He lit a cigarette while she tossed off the Scotch neat and refilled the glass to extend toward him. Without withdrawing his eyes he drained the glass,

then grinned at her. She smiled back, lighted a cigarette and walked across the room.

"I don't know what you'll think of me," she began and his grin encouraged her. "You smiled at me several times tonight and I've got absolutely no one to turn to."

Now she was close to him, her hand on his bare arm, her eyes filled with entreaty. "Mr. Jarnegan, you saw what happened tonight. After you men left, Sonny got drunker and drunker. He tossed all my clothes into the hall and threw me out of the house. He beat me. Look."

SHE half-slid the cloak from her shoulders. Beneath the coat she wore a slip, one side of which was torn. The slope of her shoulder and her rounded upper arms were red and bruised.

Jarnegan's grin faded. He tried to look properly impressed.

"You've got to help me," she said, and as he raised his brows, "Will you lend me money to go to New York?"

"How much will it take, Babe?"

She squeezed his hand. "I could manage on a hundred. I'll send it right—"

He shook his head. "Sorry. I got hit tonight, you know that. Nick George cashed a little check, but I'm leaving in the morning. I paid my bills as I came up and it leaves me flat."

She began to sob.

"But I'll tell you what," Jarnegan went on, "I'm driving to Carson City in the morning. I've got money there. Come with me and I'll send you to New York from there."

"What the hell?" he asked softly. "We're grown up, both of us. We've been around. Sonny threw you out, didn't he?"

She set the glass back on the table. Jarnegan grinned. She said slowly, "I guess you're right."

THE words were hardly out of her mouth when there came a great banging on the door. Jarnegan stepped back. *Bam! bam! bam! bam!* A shrill voice. "Open the door, damn you, before I kick it down! Open up, I tell you!

I know you're in there." *Bam! bam! bam!* "Open up!"

"My God," groaned the woman. "It's Sonny."

"Get in the closet and get in there quick. All right, all right. I'm coming."

The woman ran for the closet. Jarnegan stopped to light a cigarette; the banging on the door continued. He flung it wide.

Sonny Millman swarmed through the door like an enraged monkey. He literally climbed the unprepared Jarnegan, knocked him backward over the ash stand and was on him pummeling with both fists.

Jarnegan felt blood in his mouth, knew the shock of bony fists, of gouging fingers. He drew back his feet, took a dozen more blows in the face, and suddenly thrust his feet up and out. Sonny Millman hurtled through the air, brought up against the wall with a crash. Stunned, he lay there while Jarnegan struggled to his feet, shook his head to clear the cobwebs.

"What's wrong with you, you little fool? I've a damned good notion—"

SONNY MILLMAN wobbled up. His face was white, his eyes mad. "Where's Margo, damn you, Jarnegan? She's here! I know she's here. Acker admitted it. You been making a play for her all night and as soon as she thought I passed out, she comes a running. Where is she? Tell me!"

He started across the room toward the closed closet. Jarnegan said, "Now wait a minute, fellow, wait a minute!" He tried to lay a hand on the little man's arm.

Millman screeched, dug at his pocket and came out with a gun. Jarnegan dove sideways. The bullet creased his shoulder and burned like a hot iron. He rolled again as the gun blazed and nerved himself for the shock of lead.

The house dick had the flailing jockey in his arms, safely pinioned from behind. The gaping clerk jerked the gun from the little man's hands and the house dick socked him hard on the jaw.

PRESENTLY he came to. The house dick said, "You're drunk, Millman. You ought to thank Jarnegan for not

bringing charges. If it was me—I'd get real tough."

"I'll kill him. Let me at him!"

"Better let me throw him in the can, Mr. Jarnegan. He's liable—"

"He's liable to do nothing." Jarnegan's voice was grim. "Now listen to me, Millman, you punk. I'm Jarnegan. Maybe that doesn't mean much to you but the houseman will tell you who I am. If I ever see that ugly mug of yours again, I'm going to blow you right out from under your hat. You're threatening me. I can shoot you on sight in this State and get away with it. Next time you bust around with a pea shooter, remember to be careful who you run into. Take him away, Bolton, and thanks."

THEIR footsteps died away. Jarnegan went back to his bottle. The closet door came open. Lips tremulous, the woman stood there, the cloak wrapped tight around her. "Did he hurt you?"

"Oh, no," sarcastically, "I enjoyed every minute of it! Just something to while away the time. I think you better go, sister."

Wide-eyed, she took a step toward the door. "Say you aren't angry," she said. "Say—"

He was beside her now, looking down into her eyes. "Of course, I'm not angry," he mimicked. "You came in here with a pile of lies and your husband shows up and tries to pot me. No, no! I'm not angry!"

Jarnegan's good right foot swung in an arc, caught the lady where she should have been caught. She ran three fast steps, stumbled on the long cloak and thudded against the wall. Jarnegan grinned, said, "I'm glad you're not mad either," and closed the door.

WEARILY he sat down on the edge of the bed. His shoulder throbbed, his head whirled. Suddenly with a startled expression he reached for his hip pocket. His face turned red with rage as the hand came away empty. He leaped for the phone and got the clerk.

"Hey," he yelled, "did a dame in a long black coat come through the lobby yet? If she does, stop her and—"

The clerk said, "Yeah, she's gone. Boy, are you a lucky one, Mr. Jarnegan! You sure got away with it, didn't you?"

Jarnegan was cold with anger. His brain seethed. The plot was obvious, of course. The dame came for the money he'd gotten from Nick George, the money that had originally reposed in her stocking.

Jarnegan was a man of action. He was little but tough. Though he had meant to keep his hands clean, to stay out of the thing while on his vacation, this dame burned him up. He jammed on his black hat, lifted his coat off the hook. It felt strangely light. Hurriedly he felt for the sewed in leather pocket beneath the left sleeve. His gun was gone.

THREE minutes later he was at the phone again. He said, "Repeat the message, Bozo." The clerk, still laughing, repeated,

"Sheriff Jud Tolliver,
Carson City, Mo.

Wire me hundred dollars without fail stop having
swell vacation stop.

Jarnegan."

"Gee, Mr. Jarnegan, that dame was dough hungry, wasn't she?" But Jarnegan had hung up. He paced the floor growling to himself. Money gone, gun gone! Messed up by a dime-a-dozen dame. In the back of his mind the money was the important thing. Why was the dame willing to risk murder to get that hundred dollars? Would Nick George know anything about it? He reached again for the phone, shook his head.

Seconds later he stood before the door of Nick George's room, 1313. He tapped gently, persistently. There was no answer. Maybe the guy was a heavy sleeper. He listened for a moment, then instinctively tried the knob. The door swung slowly open. The room was black. He listened closely. There was no sound of a sleeping man, no slight noise of breathing. He fumbled for the light switch.

THE scene was a shambles, the table was overturned, the bed a rumpled mess. In the bathroom, half in half out, lay the swarthy body of Nick George, the gambler. He wore a pair of violent purple shorts and an undershirt that had once been purple. Now it was red—and black—and crimson.

Jarnegan breathed hard through his nose as he leaned over the man. There were three stab wounds in the hairy back and a short knife protruded from the lowest. To one side lay a vacuum pitcher, battered and dented. The killer had knocked the Greek unconscious with the bottle, then stabbed him as he lay on the floor. Jarnegan gazed about the room. A pair of brown pants lay on the bed, the pockets turned inside out. He knelt beside the body, leaned close. Three red scratches spanned the swarthy cheek on the dead man. Peeping from his clenched fingers—Jarnegan pried the object loose.

It was a pink rosette, the size of a dime, fashioned of silk ribbon, resembling a rosebud. A strip of torn silk and several threads clung to it. Jarnegan grunted, thrust it in his pocket.

“Well, I’ll be damned. It’s Jarnegan!” The voice behind him was full of surprise.

HE WHIRLED. Bolton, the house dick, stood there, a gun in his hand, his eyes wide with astonishment, his mouth hanging open.

Jarnegan said, “Hell, do you think I croaked him?”

Bolton said, “I don’t know what to think. I find you like this and I know from the clerk you needed dough. You been wiring—”

“Don’t be a damned fool!” Jarnegan laughed and walked forward.

“Stay there, Jarnegan!” Bolton was white but grim. “I’ll shoot you. Hell, I don’t know you from Adam! You may not even be the Jarnegan I’ve heard about. I’m calling homicide!”

He picked up the phone and half turned his head. Jarnegan socked him with the vacuum bottle, caught his unconscious body as it slumped to the floor. He spoke into

the mouth piece in a gruff voice. "Never mind, pal," and hung up.

He went down the fire escape, a black wraith in blacker shadows. Once on the sidewalk he cursed, remembering that he had no gun. He hated to be unarmed, but he had no choice now but to go ahead.

He signaled one of the two cabs in front of the hotel and gave him an Elmira address. The cab whirled out. St. Marys swung left on Main. Jarnegan thought he heard a siren in the distance, told the cabbie to step on it. He had to hurry. If Bolton's head was hard as Jarnegan thought, the cops would be on his trail by now. The second cabbie in front of the hotel had seen him, knew the number of the first cab.

He had nearly two bucks in change. He paid off a block from Millman's and walked swiftly down the sidewalk. From the shadow of a palm tree in the next yard he figured out which was Millman's apartment. A light burned in a rear window limning the black outline of a fire escape.

A FEW minutes later he was crouched on the iron platform peering into a bedroom. Margo Millman, clad in an orchid slip, was throwing clothes into a pair of hat boxes. The door opened. The fat man called Acker appeared. He said something to the woman then looked at his watch. The woman smiled, walked over to him and threw her arms about his neck. The fat man stooped, pressed his flabby lips to hers. His pudgy hands dug deeply into her shoulders as he pulled her close. When he loosed her, the woman was breathing heavily and adoration was visible in her eyes. The fat man smiled and, arm in arm, they left the room.

Jarnegan went in through the window, left it open behind him, crept to the closed door, and listened. He heard the woman's voice saying, "You won't be long, will you, darling?" The fat man's reply was, "About three minutes, Baby."

Jarnegan dodged behind the vanity as the door opened to re-admit the woman. She walked to the bed, started

packing again, felt the draft on her shoulders and turned to find the window open. Her eyes grew wide, she moved toward it and Jarnegan was on her like a tiger.

HER strength surprised him. She was all lithe muscle, a whalebone spring suddenly snapped. Once she broke away from him and he tackled her at the door, brought her down with a thud and knew the agony of a sharp knee in his stomach. He groaned, clamped a hand over her mouth to prevent her from screaming. Sharp teeth met in tender flesh. Savagely he struck out with his clenched fist and she collapsed on the floor, her eyes glassy.

For a moment he stood staring down at her, nursing his sore hand. The orchid slip was torn now. He leaned over, jerked a bit of the wispy net away, and was examining it when Acker's voice broke in.

"Our friend Jarnegan! Grab your hat brim, fellow."

The eyes behind the black-ribboned *pince nez* were bleak and colorless. Jarnegan didn't need to see the heavy automatic in the fat hand to know he was face to face with death. He raised his hands slowly as the woman on the floor groaned and struggled to a sitting position.

"Fan him, Margo," said the fat man. The woman wobbled over to Jarnegan and ran hands over his body.

"He's clean," she snarled and stepping back swung a clenched fist to Jarnegan's nose. It spurted like a rotten tomato. He shook his head and grinned while blood trickled down over his shirt front.

The woman looked at the fat man, who smiled pleasantly. "Now what do we do with him, Sam?" She seemed eager to rip into Jarnegan again.

JARNEGAN said softly, "So it's Sam, now, eh? It wouldn't be Sam Forsyth, wanted so badly back East for a couple of murders and a few snatches?"

The woman shrilled, "You're damned right it is, shamus. You're talking to tops now. Talking to a real big shot and t'll be the last—"

Sam Forsyth grinned. "Didn't you say you lifted his

gun in his room, Margo? And didn't you say he threatened to kill Sonny before witnesses?"

The woman nodded while a slow grin overspread her face. "Boy, you're fancy! I get it! Sure, we'll put a slug in Sonny from Jarnegan's gun, then smash Jarnegan's skull and leave him with the man he's supposed to have murdered. Two birds with one stone! That's genius!"

Sam Forsyth grinned. "Pull his belt and lash his hands behind his back. Tie his ankles with a towel and we'll throw him in with Sonny till we get around to the pair of them."

THREE short minutes later they opened a closet door and flung Jarnegan into the black recesses. He hit the wall with a thump, bounced back and landed on something soft.

"Millman—Millman," he whispered, "it's me, Jarnegan."

"I'll kill you," came a weak voice. "This is your fault."

"Shut up and listen to me," snapped Jarnegan. "We're in the soup. We're both going to get rubbed out in about five minutes unless we do something. The fat guy you thought was Margo's father is Sam Forsyth, a murderer and killer."

"I know it now," groaned Sonny. "Margo used to run with him before she met me, the Cirty—"

"To hell with that now. Margo's no better. She killed Nick George tonight and they're going to take us next. Where did she get the dough she had in her stocking that started all the argument?"

"Forsyth. That's why I was sore. I saw him give it to her this evening but when I asked her for it during the poker game, she swore she didn't have it. I—"

"That money's hot, boy, that's why. It'll tie Forsyth into something. I don't know what. Now listen. Roll to the wall and put your back against mine. I'll work at your wrists and then you can untie me. Hurry, man, if you don't want to die."

LONG moments later the key clicked in the lock. Sam Forsyth grunted as he reached in and pulled Sonny

Millman from the stifling blackness of the closet. As he turned to toss him aside, Jarnegan emerged, head down like a goat, gaining impetus with each leap. His head buried itself in Forsyth's flabby paunch. Forsyth said, oof! The gun flew from his hand in a gleaming arc as the two collapsed on the floor. Sonny Millman caught the gun in midair.

Painfully Jarnegan arose. "Look out!" he screamed.

Margo Millman stood in the bedroom doorway, a gun leveled at Sonny Millman. It slapped out and Sonny whirled half around. With one movement Jarnegan snatched a bottle from the table and heaved it across the room. It caught the woman full on the temple. Her gun clattered to the floor, her body followed.

OFF in the distance a siren was plainly audible. Jarnegan grinned. "It's OK now, kid, that's the police coming for me. A prowler probably found my cab and, after hearing the hotel dick's story, they've put two and two together. We'll probably learn something interesting now."

"Stand aside, Jarnegan," said Millman and raised the gun. Jarnegan whirled. Sam Forsyth had gained his feet and was standing there smiling, his *pince nez* dangling from his lapel.

"The cop's won't get this guy," said Millman and fired. Forsyth shuddered. A spot of blood appeared on his white shirt, grew constantly larger. His eyes narrowed, his hands extended like claws, he took a step forward. Again Millman shot, and again. Forsyth staggered toward him, grimacing with pain. Almost there, he stumbled, crumpled at the knees and hit the floor like a ton of bricks.

There was a great hammering at the door. "Open up in there or I'll shoot the door down!"

Jarnegan opened the door. Two detectives and three uniformed policemen barged in, guns in hand.

Jarnegan shrugged. "They're your killers, my friends." His gesture took in the fallen fat man and the unconscious woman. "That's Sam Forsyth. In the bedroom you'll find a suitcase with a pile of jack that's hot as a fire-

cracker. My hunch is that it's the Boettner snatch money. The dame—"

THE dame, recovering, began to sob, "Yes, yes, I'll talk. He's Forsyth all right and he was in the Boettner snatch. I'll turn State's evidence. You haven't got a thing on me anyway. He's forced me into it, into everything!"

Someone laughed hollowly. Every eye in the room turned to the fallen Forsyth. Eyes still closed his voice rumbled painfully, as if each word would be his last. "You—little—rat. Sure—I'm Forsyth. Sure I was—in the snatch. But take the dame—too. She's poison. She—killed a man tonight—Nick George the—gambler. She—"

The woman screamed. "He's a liar! You can't take the word of a snatcher! I was with Jarnegan at his hotel tonight! I couldn't have killed George!"

"Yeah," said Jarnegan slowly, "you were in my room. *After you killed Nick George!*" He reached in his pocket, laid the ribbon rosette on the table before the homicide detective. "That was in Nick George's hand, Lieutenant. You'll find it came off the dame's slip. Nick had part of the hot money, I had a little. The dame came for it. She gave Nick a play and killed him. Nick snatched the rosette as he went down. Then she breezes to my room to try and get the hundred I had. They had it timed. When she didn't show up right away, Forsyth sent Millman looking for her, telling him I was making a play for his wife. In the excitement the dame was to get the jack. She did. O.K., Lieutenant, take 'em away."

COPS HAVE THEIR TROUBLES

FAKE alibis given by errant husbands to explain things to the Little Woman are causing Omaha, Nebraska, cops a headache. Inspector Harry Green says that he frequently has to assign two or more detectives to double-check stories husbands give as excuses for late hours or gambling losses. His complaint is that it takes more time to check these stories than it does bona fide cases of stick-ups and rollings.

Case of the BEHEADED DOWAGER

By Walt Grey



HE WAS a large man, touching two hundred pounds, with the wrinkled jowls and the suspicious air of an English pit bull. All around him was the *creme de societe* of the city, debutantes in all their giggling glory, dowagers like majestic galleons, millionaires and near millionaires, bored and unbored. He leaned against a marble column of the Persian Room, in the city's foremost hotel, gnawing at his mustache, his great, ham-like hands clasped beneath the tails of the first full dress suit he had ever worn.

Moody, first class detective, was living up to his name.

Once Aaba had been a crook known as Eddie Jones. Now, fifteen years later, he used magic to fight killers.

He was very moody. When the chief had asked him if he cared to cover this gala affair, a show for the benefit of homeless waifs, Moody had leaped at the chance.

YOUNG Parsons, another dick, lounged across the room and Moody hated him with his eyes. Parsons was young. The full dress suit he wore was his own, for Parsons was one of the "new type" dicks, a college man. He nodded at the frowning Moody, said, "By golly, Moody, have a look. Did you ever see so much jewelry in all your life?"

Moody snorted. "Society people! Jewels! I hate to think what would happen if, in the middle of this shindig the lights went out and there was a crook or two hereabouts!"

For at this moment, like a stately brigantine in full sail, Mrs. J. Guy Rollins bore down on them. Mrs. Rollins was the acknowledged leader of local society. Once she had been tall and willowy. Now she was still tall, but far from willowy. More like a sequoia, or a redwood, in circumference, tremendously bulgy, in spite of the most expensive corsetieres. But it wasn't her figure or her features that drew the exclamation from Moody. It was that circlet about her neck—the famous Rollins necklace!

Rollins' Folly, they called it. Years ago, when Rollins was only an ordinary man of better than average means, with nothing but a social background to keep him afloat, he had struck oil on some Texas swamps and become a millionaire and almost the first thing he had purchased was the Rollins pearls. At that time they had belonged to the Portuguese Royal family, and the price was—plenty. Rumor put it at anywhere from half to three quarters of a million, for in the string were sixty-one perfectly matched gems. A king's ransom, the price of an empire. Only on very great occasions, after arrangements had been made to surround her with protection, did Mrs. J. Guy Rollins ever wear them. Yet, here she was, in a hotel, at a benefit open to the public, wearing the things!

PRESENTLY Parsons asked her about them with just the right shade of rebuke in his cultured voice.

"—and so I thought," gushed Mrs. Rollins, smirking at the moody Moody, "that we couldn't do too much for the poor orphans. This is a benefit, and the dear public has been urged to come and give their money. Aren't they entitled to something? The least I could do for *The Cause* would be to allow the dear public to see my treasures!"

"But," protested Parsons, while Moody choked on the end of his mustache, "but this is a public gathering. Don't you see you'll have to mix, and that any number of clever thieves may be here? It isn't a question of losing them, it's a question of the danger. There are thieves who would kill for a thousandth of the worth of those jewels!"

She tapped him lightly on the shoulder with her lorgnette. "Oh, Charlie, I'm old enough to be your mother, even if you are a policeman! Don't you think I have any sense?" And as she went on to explain what she had done, Moody decided that she wasn't so dumb at that. For she had called a jeweler to her house that evening. The pearls were strung on a steel wire that could be cut only by special clippers. And the clasps were merely atmosphere. The jeweler had welded the wire together about her fat throat. There was absolutely no way in which the pearls could be slipped from her, or even yanked from her.

And so, majestically, she sailed away into the distance, and they saw young Joe Shelton come out of nowhere to extend his arm. Parsons snarled, "The fat old fool! Her and her millions and her pearls and her gigolos!" He lit a cigarette, took two drags and threw it away. Moody watched him in silence. Parsons said: "That Shelton has put the bee on every rich dame in town. She pays off too, and look what she did to me!"

PARSONS, blind with anger, turned and walked unsteadily away. Moody knew what Mrs. Rollins had done to Parsons. When Parsons had been in college, he'd eloped with the young Rollins girl. Mrs. Rollins, explaining that she had nothing personal against Parsons—except his lack of money—had promptly had the marriage annulled. Moody realized Parsons hadn't quite gotten over

it. Now that he had inherited from an uncle, and was rich in his own right, it hurt worse than ever.

As he moved through the crowd, he nodded to this person and that, but Moody's mind was on other things. He, too, had heard the gigolo stories about the shifty-eyed, though handsome, Joe Shelton. There was even a stool pigeon rumor that Joey Shelton was fingerman for the local mobs that had been pulling so many jewel robberies. Moody shrugged. He raised a hand in greeting to Guy Rollins, heavy set, red faced, drunk as a hoot-owl—as usual.

THERE was this about the woman Zerda: Not only was she beautiful, not only was her face that of an Eurasian madonna and her full curved figure that of a Persian houri, but the brain in that shapely skull, covered by the gleaming black glory of her silken hair, was the brain of a psychologist.

It might have been that she read men instinctively, or it might have been because she was Eurasian, born in a country where women are raised in seclusion and left much alone with their own thoughts. But as half of an act that had taken a dozen cities by storm, Zerda was necessary as well as beautiful. A few moments alone with a man, a few seemingly innocent questions, and she had his character.

There was one, however, whom she could not read. That man called himself Aaba the Absolute. He was the yogi, he was the shaman, the fakir, the producer of illusions, and though he and Zerda had been brought together in far away Macao by a curious set of circumstances, and though she had been a mainstay in his act ever since—she could not read him.

Aaba was tall, possibly a few inches over six feet, yet dressed in American clothing he did not seem that tall, for his shoulders were much wider than the average American's. His skin was dark, sun-tanned, and in his act he always used a grease paint to make it even darker. Yet, strangely enough, his hair was the color of ripe corn and his eyes were blue, seeming almost colorless because

of the brownness of his face. That face was lined with wrinkles, so much that to an ordinary observer the man was ageless, yet Zerda knew—and this was one of the few things she did know about him—that he was exactly forty years old.

As he worked now, setting the apparatus to rights, helped by the exotic Eurasian girl, he was in his shirt sleeves. Later he would change to the hocus pocus, the long flowing robes and the high turban always ascribed to the East Indian magician.

He was working rapidly, for there were no wasted movements about Aaba. He set up strange wires, strange tables, miniature chairs, and the like. Zerda's lips curled.

WITHOUT thinking, she said, "This, Aaba, is what I can never understand about you. You live by creating cheap illusions when it is not necessary for you to do so. You, who have studied under the greatest masters of India, of Tibet, stooping to illusion."

He straightened. "You do not understand Americans. I do. I am one of them. Should I show them the real accomplishments of the eightfold path, should I show them the true meaning of *samadhi*, they would not be interested. They expect to be fooled, they want to be fooled—and so I fool them the easiest way I can."

"And what?" she asked. "Is this the true path of wisdom? Aaba, I have followed you to this country because your will bent my will, because my mind is the receptacle for your mind, just as water may be poured into a cup. I have followed because I thought we were to demonstrate our perfection to the world—and you lead me, instead into a cheap life of—of—fakirism!"

Aaba smiled at her. She stamped her foot. He liked her best of all when she was angry, when her eyes narrowed and blazed.

His eyes also slotted. He walked slowly toward her. She tried to look away, she could not, and before he was within arm's length, all anger had left her. He it was who averted the stare. She shuddered. Shoulders shrugged hopelessly, her pink-tipped palms gestured, she mur-

mured, in a soft voice, "All right, tell me nothing. I love you. I follow you. I am the dust beneath thy chariot—"

She didn't finish. For a heavy voice filled with sardonic amusement broke in, "By God! Eddie Jones! I thought you was dead, Eddie, my boy. Must have been all of fifteen years since I sent you to the pokie! Still lifting leathers or have you a better racket?"

THERE was this about Moody, the detective. He had that which is often found in fiction but rarely run across in life. He had a photographic eye. Eddie Jones, now called Aaba, the Absolute, looked at Moody and smiled tightly. There was no need to deny his identity.

He said, "I knew I shouldn't have taken this show, Moody. I figured I might run into you."

Zerda was standing back against the wall, motionless. She had been in America long enough to recognize this taunting newcomer for what he was, in spite of the badly fitting tail coat and the sloppy butterfly tie. She looked curiously at Aaba. Eddie Jones, this man had called him, and he'd said something about a pokie. She didn't know what a pokie was. Now Eddie had the burly man by the arm and was leading him well to one side where she couldn't hear.

Moody shrugged. "Sure, sure, Eddie, they all say that. So you've been hitting the straight and narrow, hah? Doing what?"

Aaba gestured toward his apparatus. "Moody, for the past two years I've been on tour as Aaba the Absolute, Eastern Magician."

"Where in the name of hell did you learn this racket?"

"In the Orient. I shipped as a sailor after doing about four at Jeff City. I liked the East. I studied in Tibet, I studied from the finest yogi in the world in India. I'm sincere in all this; I've found a way of life!"

He talked rapidly to the disbelieving policeman, and in spite of his doubts Moody found himself believing. "M-m-m-m," he said, at last, "I believe in giving a guy every chance in the world. Because you slipped once doesn't mean you got to be a crook all your life. But me,

personally, what do I know about *yama*, and *niyama*, and *pranayama*, or whatever it is? Nope, Eddie, you'll have to convince me this isn't just the set up for a job. You'll—hey!—what are you looking at me like that for? What——?”

HE TOOK a step backward, retreating from the upraised fingers of Aaba. Aaba said nothing. The pupils of his eyes seemed to grow to an enormous size, to contract suddenly to pinpoints of light only to grow enormously larger again.

“You will give me your handcuffs,” intoned Aaba, and the detective fumbled in his tails for the bracelets. At the word of command from Aaba he held up his arms, and the magician clinched the cuffs about the wrists, locked them. As he led unresisting Moody to a small alcove, Zerda hurried forward.

“What are you going to do?” she demanded. “This man is of the police!”

“This man,” said Aaba grimly, “does not believe I am what I say I am. I will show him. When our show is over. I shall make him come forth, handcuffed, onto the center of the stage and bray like the donkey he is. Now, quickly, you must change. And so must I!”

He seated Moody in the alcove, pulled a screen before the seemingly sleepy figure, and hurried away to change into his Oriental costume.

PARSONS, the detective of the new school, looked about a bit for Moody, and not seeing him, began paying particular attention to the discreet bar at the end of the Persian Room. Charlie Parsons, as a matter of fact, was not on duty. He could drink as much as he liked as long as he behaved himself. And he took advantage of the opportunity. That was the way Mrs. J. Guy Rollins always affected him. Because of his own family, his own breeding, he treated her as well as possible, but always there was the lingering black resentment burning in his heart because she had taken from him the only woman he would or could ever love.

Over his shoulder he saw the red, florid face of Guy Rollins approaching. He nodded as the famous financier moved in on the bar.

Rollins had three quick double Scotches in a row. Then he turned to Parsons.

"Look," he said, thickly, "there's something you ought to know." Then his voice died away. He ordered another drink.

As he drank it, Parsons said, "If you mean about the National Steel stocks——?"

Parsons had money of his own, much money; police work was a hobby, something he intended to make a life's work. On the elder Rollins' advice Parsons had invested heavily in National Steel. Now, for the past three weeks the stock had been taking a terrific beating.

"Stocks?" The big man laughed. It seemed to Parsons that his eyes grew even more bloodshot. "I haven't been near the market for a month!" And that explained the sudden hammering at National Steel. When the cat's away——! "Here! Damn it, you're in it, you're entitled to see it!"

FROM his pocket came a long cablegram. Sickeningly it came to Parsons just what it was—a message from Gilda Rollins, in Switzerland. It read, in part—

"—and so father I cannot forget him stop have obeyed in every way neither writing nor wiring but can go on no longer stop I have prepared myself for seclusion and believe this the only way out stop I am taking the vows and the veil tomorrow stop where I shall not say stop please explain to Charles stop tell mother what you will. Gilda."

For the moment the mirror, the bar, the gay crowd spun before Charlie Parsons. The woman he loved, the woman whose possession he had never entirely given up! In a convent! And to him came the far away hoarse voice of Gilda's father.

"I only pray I can keep from murdering the shabby

thing that passes as a mother. She knew what Gilda intended doing, she admitted it tonight! Damn her, she's always hated Gilda, her own flesh and blood, always been jealous of her! My kid, my child, renouncing the world on account of——" He drowned the epithet in another drink.

Charlie Parsons couldn't speak to save his soul. From where he stood he could see Mrs. Rollins, over-dressed, over-figured, over-jeweled—half a million dollars worth of pearls literally wired to her throat. She was leaning coyly on the arm of Joe Shelton—a fit companion!

"——wondering why I don't leave her or divorce her. Long ago, when things were not so good with me, I had everything put in her name, money, stocks, bonds, property. Now that I'm in a market jam, I have to depend on her. The happiness of all my backers, all my employes, depends on a woman who takes great satisfaction in seeing her own daughter renounce the world over an unhappy love affair!"

Charlie Parsons couldn't stand any more. He walked blindly away.

THEY liked Aaba and his breathtaking helper, Zerda. Zerda's Oriental body, voluptuous and slender, held them entranced, revealed as it was by the thin houri costume she wore. The figure of the Hindu mystic with the gleaming eye in the center of his turban was thrilling, too. Debutante and dowager alike shuddered deliciously as his strong brown hands passed over the slender body of his helper, withdrew, as far as physical touch was concerned, but clung like magnets spiritually—clung so tightly that the lovely Eurasian was literally raised from the floor, so that another gesture of those magic fingers straightened her body out until she floated across the stage horizontally suspended on—apparently nothing.

He grew a four foot tree in a small flowerpot for them, grew it even as they watched, from a peach seed, then tossed the peaches out into his audience and let them sample them. He coiled a rope at his feet, waved those magical fingers over it, and when the rope arose, straight-

ened itself out, and disappeared above him, the crowd applauded madly as Zerda clambered up it with the agility of a saucy monkey.

AABA'S voice was thick and throaty as he stepped forward on the darkened stage. "My friends," he said, with just the touch of an acquired accent, "you have not seen magic tonight, you have seen illusions." A babble ran through the audience. "Tonight, I am going to depart from my usual procedure. The usual Hindu magician that you see, the usual mystic, is a fake. He shows you the things I have shown you. He gives you—illusions. But tonight I am going to go farther."

He went down into the audience. He looked deeply into the eyes of the first simpering woman he reached. He said one word, "Come!" He took her by the hand, led her to the stage, jerked aside the curtain, and revealed a chair. He seated the woman in the chair and Mrs. J. Guy Rollins smiled and simpered at her friends from the stage.

WHILE Aaba spoke on and on, Zerda went to work. The chair was really the interior of a collapsible box. This box she reconstructed, so that it appeared that Mrs. Rollins' over-rouged face was above it, at the top, the top fitting about her neck like a pillory. The front of the box, however, was open to view.

The lights grew dimmer and dimmer as Aaba explained the effect. He was going to make everyone in the audience see the decapitation of the woman!

Zerda it was who arranged the props, a black velvet curtain to surround the cabinet containing Mrs. Rollins on three sides and the top, like a five-sided box, with brilliant lights reflected, not as foot lights, but outward toward observers. Some six feet from it sat a small cushion of black silk. Onto this cushion dropped Aaba, the Absolute, crosslegged, his head bent.

She took a great, oversized scimitar from a velvet wrapper, tested its keenness with her thumb. In her dulcet voice she said that the audience would see Aaba, with

their very own eyes, cut the head from Mrs. J. Guy Rollins, raise it from the cabinet, allow it to be examined—then replace it. In order, Zerda continued, that he might achieve perfect concentration, she would now cover his figure with a piece of transparent gauze.

THE trick, the illusion, of course, was as old as the hills, simply with a new angle. No sooner was she shaking the gauze—which wasn't quite as transparent as it seemed—before the figure of Aaba, than Aaba went to work quickly and cunningly. The cushion was, as a matter of fact, a heavily built rubber figure of a sitting man, inflated and folded. He had only to move off it for it to assume shape. Once the gauze covered it, he had moved backward behind another deep black curtain. There he remained a few moments, before going about the completion of the illusion, which was done with a mirror apparatus.

OUT in front of the curtain Zerda danced. She always danced, for atmosphere. It was the only part of the act she enjoyed—she didn't need the music—the throb of temple drums, of nautch cymbals, in her mind was music enough for her. Her graceful body postured, her straight limbs flashed as she went through a routine of the East.

Aaba had seen the dance many times, and yet it never failed to thrill him. At last, recognizing the fact that she was almost through, that Mrs. J. Guy Rollins awaited her decapitation with a simper on her face, he moved silently behind the black velvet curtain. He touched a wire. Another curtain slid down before the cabinet in which the supposed victim sat. Quickly he arranged a pair of mirrors, he picked up the scimitar, handled the paper bag of red fluid that was to serve as blood.

And then it happened. While he could still hear the tiny swish of Zerda's bare feet on the stage, before she had finished her dance, something slithered on soft feet to a stop behind the man of the East, a heavy object swished through the air, landed with terrific force on Aaba's head

and everything was blackness, blackness momentarily interspersed with bright flame, only to fade again to blackness.

Zerda the magnificent, wilted to the stage at the end of her dance. She arose, drew aside the curtain that shielded Mrs. J. Guy Rollins from the audience. At first, because of the reversed lighting, she could make out little. She stepped past the lights.

A black silk cord hung down over the cabinet in which the society woman had been seated. By means of this cord the mechanics of the act called for a suspended mirror, whose angle practically made the illusion. But there was no mirror attached to the black silk cord now. There was something else. . . .

The audience breathed deeply, there was one brief horror stricken second, then a debutante giggled. The illusion was perfect! For, suspended over the cabinet by at least twenty-four inches, was the head of Mrs. J. Guy Rollins! The top of the cabinet was finger deep in blood. Blood still dripped from the severed neck. . . .

ZERDA was no ordinary woman. An American girl might have fainted, screamed, at least. Not Zerda. Every nerve in her body shrieked aloud for surcease from this horror, but with a smile for the audience, she pulled the cord that closed the curtains and cut off the corpse from sight of the audience. For there was no fake, no illusion about this! Mrs. J. Guy Rollins was decapitated! The red fluid that dripped from the fat column of her throat and stained the closed top of the cabinet was her life's blood! Zerda's eyes swept over the darkened scene. To one side she saw the scimitar, bloody and gleaming with blood, shiny, repellent. But there was no Aaba to be found!

Suddenly—once she left the scene and was backstage—a spectre appeared, cursing. A spectre with handcuffs on his wrists and a gun in his hand! That spectre was Moody, the detective, his face red and dark with anger. He snarled, "Stand where you are, damn you!" He approached her. He snarled, "Get the damned key out of my pocket

and unlock these cuffs. And then I'm going to beat the eternal hell out of a cheap ex-pickpocket named Eddie Jones!"

Zerda fumbled with the key, stalling for time, saying to herself: He doesn't know, he doesn't know—yet.

And all the time Moody was raging. "I saw him, saw him with my own eyes. I was just coming out of the closet after waking up. He came out of that booth there——" His nodded head indicated the velvet lined illusion booth wherein the dead body of Mrs. Rollins sat so horribly in its own blood. "——and he had a big sword in one hand—and by God, he had the dame's pearls in the other hand. I saw him! Let him get away with this one if he can!"

HE WAS just arising, dazed and glassy eyed, from behind a dusty divan. He wore his trousers, shoes and undershirt, his robes were gone. His hand was touching, wonderingly, an egg shaped lump behind his right ear. The lump was split for the space of a full inch.

"Someone—hit—me——" Aaba muttered vaguely, then the scantily clad Zerda had him by both shoulders, shaking him viciously. In split seconds she told him what had happened. His blue eyes seemed to light intensely, his mouth set grimly. He was remembering Moody, the cop, whom he had hypnotized and handcuffed as a joke. Remembering that blow in the back of the head, remembering——He said, "The necklace! The pearls she had about her neck?"

Zerda closed her eyes for a moment, re-visualizing the scene. Her wits were sharp, she never forgot, never. She shook her head, said, "The necklace was gone!"

And Aaba—Eddie Jones—was an ex-convict! There was no time now, however, for cursing. He told her exactly what to do. He leaped back of the divan where his assailant had tossed him and, once hidden from view, took his two hands and with strong fingers tore the edges of his wound wider, so that more and more blood poured down his neck, onto his shoulder.

Before the front curtain, Moody was saying in a choked

voice, "—been a small accident, must ask no one to leave the room—" Charlie Parsons and two other cops in evening clothes trotted forward, others covering the exits at Moody's command.

IT HAD been, according to a quick checkup, approximately twenty minutes past nine o'clock when Mrs. J. Guy Rollins had lost both her head and her necklace. At exactly ten o'clock, the Persian Room was cleared of its excited guests. Only a few remained on the stage where the murder had taken place, and these few were gathered around a peculiarly shaped couch that was often used by Aaba the Absolute in his act. On the couch lay Aaba, over him leaned a doctor. The doctor was using restoratives to bring the mystic back to the realm of the conscious and seemingly having a hard time of it.

He turned, shook his head, arose. "I can't understand it," he admitted gloomily. "The blow on the head might have knocked him out, but it couldn't keep him out this long. I hardly know how to bring him back to his senses."

Zerda spoke in a hollow voice. "You cannot. No one can. Aaba, through concentration, has detached his spirit. That is the husk, like an empty glove. The spirit or the hand—it is—" She shrugged her pretty shoulders.

Moody snapped, "Nuts!" He went over to Aaba. He raised one of the eyelids of the man and was rewarded by sight of a shiny eyeball, only that and nothing more. He fumbled at his pocket, came out with a penknife. He opened it, and in spite of involuntary gasps, thrust the blade slowly into the flesh of Aaba's upper forearm. There was no twitch, no involuntary reaction.

He snapped, "The guy's a killer. He went nuts, he guillotined the lady, snatched the pearls, did something with them, then took off his robes, tossed them in the alley where we found them, slapped himself on the noodle with something and toppled behind that divan where we found him."

Moody glared at Zerda. She met his gaze unflinchingly. He snapped, "Parsons, search this babe. Take her into the other room and search her, d'you hear? The guy couldn't

have disposed of the necklace without leaving the place, and he didn't leave. It's bound to be here. The rest of you guys start looking around. We've got the killer, now we want the loot."

Charlie Parsons beckoned to the proud and imperious Zerda. She preceded him into the small anteroom used as a dressing room, turned and faced him strangely. He started to say something. She said, "I do not have the jewels. Aaba did not kill the woman." There was a strange intensity in that tone. He tried to tear his eyes away from Zerda's, and found that they held his gaze. They were intense, burning, something he had never experienced before. She said, "There is hate in your eyes. There is a strange look I cannot read. You will speak—speak—speak——"

Cool fingers on his brow, eyes gazing not into his eyes, but into his soul. . . .

CHARLIE PARSONS, who had come to search this woman, could not withstand the lore of the Orient. It was as if part of him moved aside and stood as a spectator while his body talked—and talked. He tried to stop himself. The cool, coaxing fingers were always there, drawing forth words—words—words——

After a while they went back to where Moody stood, directing the search for the Rollins pearls. The morgue wagon had already removed the headless corpse. Parsons indicated the girl, Zerda and shook his head negatively. She went over and sat down beside the inert Aaba.

She had said to the man, when they were alone, that her mind was a perfect receptacle for his, that together, they were perfection. Now she leaned over him and sent a million million thought waves at him. For these two had practiced so faithfully together, they were so perfectly attuned, that thought transference worked between them perfectly.

Most of all she thoughtcast three names. Those were, Guy Rollins, Charles Parsons, and Joe Shelton. These names she had gathered from the almost incoherent raving of the influenced Charles Parsons.

The search went on all about her. Suddenly she arose and went to Moody. Her voice was dreamy. She said, "I have communicated with the *avatar* of Aaba. He sends you a message. He says three men must be searched. Rollins and Shelton, because they have no alibis, and you already are holding them. These two and—Parsons."

OF THE three men, the sleek, black-headed Joe Shelton was the one who raised the most commotion about the search. Moody, looking over the letters he found in the man's pocket, flushed after reading one. Grimly he said, "Damned if I blame you! These are really hot!" He glanced at the half drunken Rollins, who grinned, wryly.

Rollins said, "I know, I know. You can't hurt my feelings. My wife wrote them to the louse."

Stiffly Shelton, tall, but not quite so debonair, said, "I wanted to protect her memory." And Rollins snorted. He went on turning out his pockets. Suddenly he began to breathe wheezily through his red nose. Sweat popped out on his forehead!

Moody said, "Open your hand!"

"I'll swear," said Rollins desperately, "I never!" For in his hand lay three great pink pearls that could have come only from the necklace that once had graced the now severed neck of his wife.

Parsons, after all was a policeman! He could not forget this man's words against the unnatural mother who was his own wife. He could not forget his saying how desperately he needed money. After all, this was murder, and an atrocious murder. He snapped, "By God, Moody, Rollins needs the money his wife had. He's so hard up he could use the necklace!"

Rollins started toward Parsons but was stopped by a policeman. He growled, "How about you? You haven't any alibi, you young pup! You have plenty of reason for killing——"

He stopped. The whole group froze. For Parsons, like a man suddenly smitten, had taken something from his own pocket. Moody looked unbelievably at Parson's open hand. Parsons said, "I'll swear to God I——" But he didn't

finish it. He simply shrugged. For the thing in his pocket was a small roll of strong steel wire, as small as a thread and as strong as chain. Its cut ends were bright. But part of it was still blood-stained. It was the wire upon which the necklace had been strung.

THERE was no sound. But Zerda, knowing she had been called, glided swiftly across to the couch where Aaba lay. For long moments she leaned over him. And when she turned, she said, "If Aaba, my master, killed the woman, if he stole the pearls, why should three pearls be found in that man's pocket? Why should the wire be found in his?" She pointed dramatically at Parsons.

Parsons growled, "Don't you think we recognize a plant?"

Moody snarled, "That's exactly what we meant to ask him when he comes around. Where the hell is that ambulance I ordered?"

Zerda bowed her head, her voice scarcely reaching them. She said, "An ambulance is unnecessary. *Aaba is dead!*"

Moody leaped for the man on the couch. He leaned over him, fumbled for his pulse. He laid an ear against his breast, he dragged a small mirror from his pocket and held it before Aaba's mouth. For long moments—for Moody was a good cop—he held that mirror. And when he stood straight again, he muttered, "Dead! By God, no respiration, no breathing, no nothing. Dead as a herring!"

But Moody had never heard of Yoga. Nor of suspended animation. A tongue half swallowed so that it lies against the rear of the nostrils and breathing passages. A command of every muscle, including heart muscles and lung muscles, that allows a body to lie dormant and impassive, with only a feeble spark of life burning in the innermost cells of a brain.

THE morgue keeper's name does not matter. He was an ex-cop. He thought no more of handling dead bodies than a wood dealer thinks of handling cordwood. He leaned over the body of Aaba, the Absolute, ready to strip it for the cold room. The body lay on a marble slab,

an immense light over it, so that the keeper could note and write down all body scars. He touched the belt.

A hand came up and laid fingers against his temple. Eyes rolled upward to exhibit only whites, rolled downward, and great burning blue orbs fastened on the horrified face of the morgue keeper. He tried to leap back, tried to squeal, but no sound came from his pale lips. Though the fingers at his temple did not hold him, they were like bands of steel—he could not break away.

Aaba sat up. His soft voice said, "Sleep, sleep, sleep. You are very tired. You are falling—falling—asleep."

Three minutes later Aaba, the Absolute was on the sidewalk, hurrying up the street. He went into a drug-store and purchased a box of paper towels and a jar of cold cream. He went into a pool hall and took the brown stain from his face and his hands. A clothier sold him a jacket, a shirt and a necktie. In a second-hand store he bought a tool kit.

Half an hour later he was on the street again, having successfully talked his way past the suspicious cops guarding the Persian Room of the hotel, where a woman had been murdered. He was bearing the robes that had been tossed aside by the murderer. The robes and the jeweled turban.

He went into a phone booth and made three phone calls, after looking up the necessary numbers. In front of the cigar store he hailed a taxi.

THE chauffeur for Mrs. J. Guy Rollins, now decapitated, thought he had a dream. In reality, Aaba sat beside his bed, in his quarters above the garage, and awakened him by fingers on his temples, awakened him quietly, easily, so that he woke up smiling.

"Sure," said the chauffeur softly, "the missus had a pal, a confidant among her servants. That snooty French maid, Fifi——"

Fifi awakened in the same manner. She, too, spoke some soft words in answer to a bit of mental prodding, she, too, went back to sleep and thought all of this had been dreamed.

The Orient was at work that night. A million years of mystical teachings in the brain of one man. A million years of seeking that resulted in *Karma*, in reward. The Orient, mystery, mystery—

Aaba the Absolute went into the library. He fumbled through the drawer of the table and smiled. He had made a good guess. The bullets he had purchased at the all-night hardware store were the right calibre.

AT EXACTLY midnight three men sat in the Rollins library, facing each other suspiciously. Rollins was saying, "But damn it! Why should I call the two of you, why should I tell you to meet me here exactly at midnight?"

Charlie Parsons, and Shelton, the gigolo, shook their heads.

A voice floated up out of nowhere, seemed to float softly about the fastnesses of the big room. The voice said, "I am the dead! I am among you ever! One of you three, one of you three!"

Rollins leaped for the library table drawer, drew out a .38 automatic. The other men were on their feet, tense. The doorbell rang. No one moved. Nor did the doorbell ring again. Instead, the heavy curtains parted and Zerda swayed into the room.

She was bare-footed, she was veiled, her Oriental eyes were cast down. She wore the thin, gauzy, sleezy trousers she had worn in the Persian Room.

Rollins said, "Damn you, where are my servants? What do you want?"

Zerda said, "I bring you—the dead. I bring you, Aaba, the Absolute, even in death!"

The three men stared, frozen, at the door through which she had come. A voice behind them said, "I am here."

AS ONE man they wheeled. Aaba, the Absolute, the man who had been pronounced dead by Moody and the medical examiner, stood with folded arms in the doorway behind them.

Rollins, unaffected by that piercing fire in Aaba's eyes,

swore hoarsely, raised the .38, and emptied it in a crescendo of gunfire!

Aaba smiled. Smoke, acrid smoke filled the room. Aaba said, "The dead die but once. You will sit down, the three of you."

The gun dropped to the carpet and Rollins, moaning, sat down. The others followed suit. Aaba said, "It is well. I am the dead. You have seen me still in death, now you see me—again. I am the dead. The dead know all."

He moved across the room until he stood so that the three men were equally distant from him. "One of the three of you killed tonight," he said, "and only that man and I know which of you three it is."

Shelton sighed gustily. Parsons' tongue came out to lick his dry lips. Rollins continued to stare in horror.

"The dead know all, know all." There was as much hypnotic influence in Aaba's voice as in his eyes. "But I shall not tell all, for I am dead, I can not appear in the courts of the living. The killer is going to admit his guilt! The other two, the remaining two, shall witness his confession. The dead know all! Listen, Aaba, the dead, speaks."

HIS voice droned on. He told of many things, he told of all that had happened between Parsons and Rollins at the bar, the girl Gilda, going into a nunnery, the remarks, word for word that Rollins had made.

"And so you, Rollins, had a double motive. You needed money. Your wife would not give it to you. And you also hated her for the same reasons as Parsons. You, Parsons, you hated her because she kept you from the woman you loved, who loved you. Never could you give up irretrievably the dream of that woman. Until the cablegram told you!"

The inexorable voice took up the thread. "Here is what happened. I arose from my cushion behind the cloth, allowing the rubber figure of the meditating man to take my place. I moved to do the illusion. One of you three lingered there. One of you crashed something against the head of the living Aaba, took his robes. One of you swung

the heavy, sharp scimitar on the victim, picked up the pearls, and decamped. One of you planted red herrings and false clues. But Aaba knows—the dead know all!”

HEAVY, hard breathing filled the room. Every eye was fixed in fascination on the dead man who spoke.

“You, Shelton, why were you carrying letters written you by a vain and foolish woman? I will tell you why. You were expecting payment for them tonight. The dead know, Shelton. The victim meant to pay you, but she was a hard and stubborn woman. Before her maid, Fifi, she spoke. She said she’d be damned if she’d be blackmailed, that she would report you to authorities first! The money she meant to pay you is now in her safe, tossed back to safety by fingers now dead—dead—dead!”

Parsons managed to speak, though his voice seemed not his own, though his voice came from an infinite distance. “Then she told Shelton she was going to report him! He killed her through fear!”

Shelton wobbled to his feet.

Parsons said, “Of course! You could have planted the three pearls, could have planted the wire. But—” He looked vague. “What did you do with the pearls?”

Shelton started to yell. The dead man said, “Be still, earth-born. Sit down.” The strange glowing eyes transfixed Shelton. He sat down. Aaba said, “The spirit tires. The dead man wearies. We must drink.”

AND from somewhere Zerda glided into view with glasses on a tray. “Drink! Drink! Drink!” In spite of themselves three trembling hands took three glasses.

“The dead know,” said Aaba. “We know, we know. Now the dead prove the murder to the living. We give you—a murderer. The possession of the pearls will point to guilt. One of you three is guilty. You have drunk wine, wine that contained a violent emetic, *you shall prove your own guilt!*”

The three men staggered to their feet, clasped their throats. Green-tinged, they glared at one another. And suddenly a sob broke from the tortured being of Joe

Shelton. He turned and ran blindly from the room. The revolver of Parsons, policeman, spoke. Shelton plunged on his face. Parsons sprang to him, Rollins following.

The man was not sick. Only sick with fear. Blood trickled from his shattered shoulder. He babbled, "I swallowed them, I swallowed them! It seemed so safe. Yes, I killed her, she was going to turn me in."

AT FOUR o'clock Aaba went into an all-night drug-store. He made a long distance call while Zerda, patiently as usual, waited in the parked car.

Aaba said, "Yes, operator, Mr. Josephus Martins, president of the International Assurance Company, New York City. You'll find him listed." He deposited the money, and quit his pleased whistling.

"Hello, hello, Joe? This is Eddie Jones. What's that? Sure I got you out of bed; I-got a report to make. The Rollins necklace was stolen tonight, stolen from the dead body of Mrs. Rollins. Now wait, wait. Sure, I recovered it. Hell, you planted me there to watch it, didn't you, so there was nothing else for me to do but get it back. Yeah. Yeah. A gigolo named Shelton. What? How did I get it. Oh, it was nothing—nothing at all. I'll write up a full report tomorrow."

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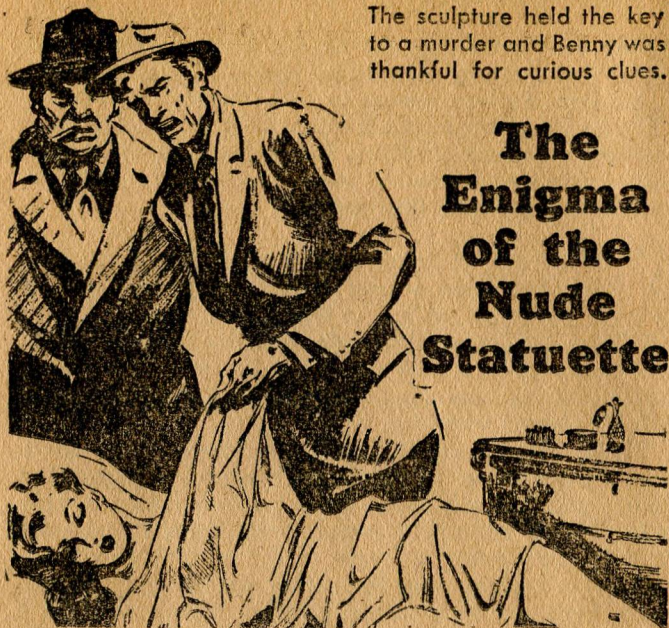
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NOVEMBER ISSUE ON SALE AUGUST 15

The sculpture held the key to a murder and Benny was thankful for curious clues.

The Enigma of the Nude Statuette



By Tom Lee

PERSONALLY I do not ever bet on the horses any more. There was a time when the name of Benny Beeman was on every sucker list in existence, but I wish to state I have learned my lesson. Peeper Poole, alack and alas, is still an ardent devotee, as they say, of the sport of kings. He reads the racing forms with his morning Scotch, his noon Scotch, and his midnight Scotch. But his interest is only on paper. The fact is, we were out at Redrock Downs that P.M. to take pictures, not to wager on the billygoats.

Hot pictures, I mean. Stuff that could be captioned: "Officials at Redrock Downs did not authorize this photo. It was taken unofficially by a Recorder photographer and

shows jockey So-and-so holding back White Ears, the favorite in the fourth yesterday, during the run to the wire. Just another vivid example of the reasons why a sucker public seldom wins at the local race course!"

We got the pictures, too. Got one in the first, another in the third, and a honey in the fourth. With the fifth event on its way up, Peeper Poole and I were on our way from a couple of highballs at the clubhouse to a point of vantage in the grandstand, and Peeper was bewailing his losses.

"Benny," he groaned, "it can't go on. No guy can keep on picking losers forever. Now you look at this goat here."

"It ain't a goat," I said. "Who ever heard of a goat getting up into a grandstand?"

"Huh?"

"It's a girl," I said. "And from the looks of things, she's fainted or something. Let's go!"

IT WAS a girl, all right, and she'd certainly attracted a heap of attention. The crowd around her was getting bigger every minute. I practically had to hack my way through, and nearly broke an ankle climbing over some of those rickety chairs.

I shouldered in closer, pushed a couple of pop-eyed goofs to one side, and found myself face to face with an usher who'd elbowed in from the opposite direction.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He stabbed a glance at me, recognized me, and growled: "How the hell do I know what's wrong? She's fainted, ain't she? Gimme a hand with her."

The crowd made way for us, and we headed for the track-police office.

I'D FORGOTTEN all about Peeper Poole, but he was at my heels when I crossed the threshold. He had a newspaper under one arm and was lugging the girl's handbag. When we eased the girl onto a couch, Peeper sank into a chair, stared, and said very quietly: "If you ask me, I'd say she was dead."

I peered into the girl's face and saw the color of her

eyes. "Go get a doctor!" I yapped at the usher. He scrambled.

Well, I'm a newspaper man. A shutter-bum. At a nod from Peeper Poole I yanked out my pet Leica and went to work. There we were, a couple of blood-hungry news-hawks if ever you saw any, left alone with what might turn out to be a story. It looked like a story, smelled like one. What else could it be?

I took half a dozen shots of the gal and while I was messing around Peeper Poole went through the lady's handbag like nobody's business.

"Now, just what would this be?" he asked in puzzlement.

The thing he was holding up for me to peer at was a small ivory statuette that looked expensive. I scowled at it. Although I've never been hauled to the altar, I have a pretty fair idea of the various bits of junk most dames lug around in their pocketbooks—yet this thing had me stumped.

This little ivory gal was stretched out with her hands clasped behind her head and one knee bent up gracefully. Her eyes were wide open, and when I took her in the palm of my hand, I almost dropped her. I'd have sworn those eyes were staring at me!

I stabbed a quick glance at the girl on the couch, but shook my head. It wasn't a likeness of her. She was too young. Then we heard footsteps outside.

PEEPER POOLE grabbed the statuette from me and shoved it into his pocket. In walked the usher with a doctor from the track hospital, a couple of cops, a couple of special tout-spotters, and Mr. J. F. C. Cornovan, the owner of the establishment. Some parade!

The doc quickly pronounced the girl dead, then examined her anatomy to find the cause of her demise. He motioned to the two cops, pointed to a two-inch purple scratch on the girl's side, and said: "What do you make of this?"

I edged in close, blinked at the scratch, and stepped back again. "Let's go," I said in a low voice to Peeper. "You got her name and so forth?"

He nodded. We slipped out and headed for a phone.

"Someone," I said to Peeper, "nicked that gal with a knife, or with a razor blade. She may not have felt it, but she died from it. Yeah—poison."

And that's how it came out in our noble rag, with some very swell pictures taken by Benny Beeman.

WELL, if it hadn't been for a guy named S. Mortimer Glump, I never would have got mixed up in the case. S. Mortimer picked the wrong time to croak, and he was important. With all our best typewriter men busy on eulogies, the boss singled me out and said: "You, Benny! Go snoop around and look into this racetrack killing. I can't spare anybody else."

So I snooped.

The gal's name was Adele Stilson and she lived in a dinky little apartment over on the West End. I went there. I found out she was unmarried, had no offspring, seldom had visitors except for a handsome boy friend who hadn't called around lately; and up till three weeks ago she'd worked for an opera-yodeling dame by name of Nina Glamoura. Yeah. As a maid.

It was nine P.M. when I buzzed the bell of La Glamoura's apartment. I'd been slaving all afternoon practically, and was weary. When I didn't get an answer, I figured what the hell, it was quitting time anyhow, and I turned to depart.

It so happened the downstairs door opened and a guy with baby blue eyes came out to exercise a poodle. The door was one of those heavy portals that take a long time closing. Being a newspaper man, I jumped for it, got inside, and moseyed up to Nina Glamoura's suite.

MAYBE she was not at home to doorbells but would answer a knock.

I knocked. Nothing happened. I turned the knob and the door opened, so I walked in. Why not? I'd been thrown out of swankier places.

But I didn't walk far. Oh, no! After a couple of steps I jerked back on my heels, took a long gander at what was in front of me, and ejaculated as follows: "What the devil," I said, "are *you* doing here?"

"Oh," said Peeper Poole, "it's you. I thought I locked that door. I didn't wish to be interrupted."

There he was, down on his knees monkeying with a tripod and a Graphic, with a bunch of bridge-lamps and floor-lamps gathered around him to throw a photo-flood glare on Nina Glamoura. Only Nina didn't know it.

"Dead?" I said.

"Yeah."

"Why the pose?"

"That's the way she was when I walked in here."

I hung a scowl on my map. "Who let you in?" I demanded.

He slapped a hand against his pants pocket and I heard keys jingle. I nodded. If there's a door in the United States that Peeper Poole can't open with his pet collection of master-keys, I've never heard of it. He gets in anywhere.

So I sagged into a nice soft easy-chair, wiped bubbles of sweat off my face, and stared at Nina.

SHE lay on a couch up against the wall. Her eyes were wide open, gazing up at the ceiling and her hands were clasped behind her head, and one leg was bent up at the knee. Peeper hadn't turned the photofloods on her yet; he was still focusing. The only light in the room was a pale amber glow from a table-lamp.

You'd have sworn the gal had just tossed her clothes off and stretched out for a nap. That is, you'd have sworn so if you hadn't seen how the soft flesh of her neck was drawn in by a loop of wire, the ends of which criss-crossed and stuck out like she was wearing a new kind of bow tie. She'd been strangled.

THE flashlight glared. I heard the shutter click on Peeper Poole's Graphic and I suddenly leaned forward, "Sa-a-ay!" I blurted. "You know something?"

He snapped a couple more pictures before turning his head and saying, "What?"

"That statuette!" I croaked. "It's the livin' image of this gal!"

"Just what," Peeper snarled, "do you think brought me here in the first place?"

I glared at him. Holding out on me, huh? But I still had a bomb to toss at him. "Take a look at the pose she's in," I said.

"What of it?"

"She's posed the same way as the statue. Whoever murdered her—"

"Benny," said Peeper Poole patiently, "you'll be late for your own funeral. Of course she's posed the same way. That's why I'm taking pictures. Now come on, let's get out of here."

I stood up, grabbed some of the junk he pushed at me. "Ain't you gonna report this to the cops?" I said, feeling scared.

"Later," he grunted.

So we sneaked out of the apartment, went down the back stairs and made our departure without being seen.

IT WAS pretty late when we got back to the *Recorder* office. A skeleton night-shift was on duty and we practically had the joint to ourselves. We filtered into Peeper's private sanctum and there, amid fragrant odors of hypo and developers, Peeper reached for a phone.

He didn't give his right name. He just told the cops there was a corpse in Nina Glamoura's apartment and the corpse was Nina, and maybe they ought to take a run up to look things over. When they asked him who *he* was, he said blandly: "I am Isidore Yaffitz, the janitor."

"How'd you know the janitor's name?" I demanded, after he'd put the phone down.

He grinned. "I don't. But I always did want to meet a guy named Isidore Yaffitz, so now maybe they'll find me one." His grin faded and he reached for a newspaper in the top drawer of his desk. "This, Benny," he said soberly, "is the paper Adele Stilson was reading at the track. Ordinarily, Benny," he said, "a person at the track would be reading the sporting section, no? So look at what Adele was reading."

It was our own rag and was turned to the movie page.

The only thing on the page other than movie blah was Packy Dinsmore's column, *Night Beat*—and part of Packy's effusions were circled with blue pencil.

I read it. "*What well-known opera-singer,*" it said, "*recently ditched her temperamental boy friend in favor of a new flame who is young, dumb, and handsome?*"

"These," said Peeper, "came out of Adele Stilson's bag."

HE HANDED me a pair of tote tickets. I blinked at them and gasped. "Two hundred bucks!" I ejaculated, hoarsely. "Where would a gal like Adele Stilson get two hundred simoleons?"

"You're asking me?" Peeper said sweetly.

I peered at the tickets again. Both were win ducats and both were on nag number six in the fifth event. I jumped out of my chair.

"If you're after a copy of the payoff edition," Peeper said, "don't bother. The nag was *Aginex*. It ran at eighty to one and finished second by a whisker. The gal lost her two hundred."

He took the tickets and slipped them into his vest pocket. "What's more," he said, "the owner of that goat was a gal named Nina Glamoura!"

I choked down a tonsil that almost got away from me. Then I leaned forward, stabbed a finger at Peeper Poole's too handsome map and spoke in a low voice as follows: "Listen to me," I said. "Maybe you don't know this, but Adele Stilson was Nina's personal maid."

Peeper's eyes popped. "Then it was Nina's dough the gal was wagering!" he yodeled. "That explains—"

I hated to do it but I had to. "It don't explain a thing," I said. "Adele Stilson got fired three weeks ago."

ANYHOW, we ran the story—with pictures—and we were the only rag in the city that had anything more than the police reports. It was quite a splash. Larimore, our two-fisted boss, wore a grin so bright you could have used it for a flash-bulb, and the grin didn't fade even when Mr. J. F. C. Cornovan, the owner of Redrock Downs, came a-calling.

Mr. J. F. C. Cornovan was angry. A big guy, weighing around two hundred and standing six feet one and seven-eighths inches, he ploughed into the office, demanded an audition, and did some of the world's finest glaring—at me and Peeper and the rest of the gang—while Larimore kept him waiting.

They did their talking in Larimore's official sanctum, but you could hear Cornovan all over the building. He was peeved. He thought it was highly inconsiderate of Larimore to have made such a sensation out of the case. After all, a murder was just a murder. Why go into hysterics about it just because it had a racetrack angle?

Larimore, God love him, had been waiting for a chance like this for months! He rolled up his sleeves, loosened his tie hitched up his belt, and went to work. A guy with broken eardrums could have heard him eight miles away.

"Listen, Cornovan!" he snapped. "We're a newspaper. We print the news as it happens. You can't browbeat me and you can't bribe me, and as for my easing up on you through any false sense of pity—don't delude yourself. You're a crook! Your whole racetrack is crooked, and I've been telling the public so for a long time, with pictures to prove it! If this murder scares the suckers away from your lousy establishment—swell!"

CORNOVAN'S face was red as a danger-flag when he stormed out of the sanctum. He started for the door, saw me, and stopped. He'd have ignored me, I guess, because after all I'm not important. But Peeper Poole was standing beside me, about four points off my starboard bow, and P. Percy Poole is a lad with a reputation. What I mean—Cornovan knew damned well who was responsible for most of the publicity that was giving him heartburn.

He strode forward, shook a fist in Peeper's face. "If I ever again see you out at the track," he thundered, "I'll personally break every bone in your body! You understand?"

I thought Cornovan would grab him. You never saw a man's face turn so white. But P. Percy Poole has a reputation for being a right-handy man with his dukes, and

I guess the other streak in Cornovan was wider than we'd suspected. He voiced some incoherent animal noises and walked out.

IN THE next edition we front-paged two beautiful photographs of crooked races at Mr. J. F. C. Cornovan's track, and we spread the murder copy all around them. Everybody in the city and suburbs must have bought a copy. The presses worked overtime grinding them out to fill the demand.

There weren't five thousand persons at Redrock Downs the following afternoon. When I sneaked out for a look, I thought I was in church on a rainy Sunday. So I said to Peeper Poole, "Mister, you better be careful where you go and what you eat from now on," and Peeper said, "Nuts."

But it happened.

I personally didn't see it. I was out checking up on Adele Stilson and Nina Glamoura. All I know is what Peeper told me later, in the hospital.

It seems he was working late and he felt the need of a mug or two of lager, so, without a word to anyone, he stepped out the back way. The beer-joint is just a few hops down the alley.

He never got to the beer-joint though. Before he'd taken three steps from the *Recorder* building, he was jumped.

It was a dark night and raining, and he didn't even get a good look at the mugs who ganged him. Yeah, I said mugs, not mug. Four of 'em. And when they got through slugging him with bricks and bludgeons, they kicked him all over the alley and dumped an ashcan over on him.

HE WAS out a long time and was still there when he came to, so he crawled right out to the main drag and passed out again. The next time the fog cleared out of his battered skull, he was stretched out in the hospital with a flock of doctors working over him. It seems some drunk stumbled over him and yelled for the cops.

"Now listen, Benny," Peeper said to me through his

bandages. "I haven't said a word to anyone, not even to the cops. Cornovan did this to me; I know that. But I'm getting him myself, after they let me out of here. You blab and I'll chew your ears off!"

"What about the rest of this screwy business?" I demanded. "What about Adele Stilson and Nina Glamoura?"

"Go to work on it," he told me.

So there I was—me, Benny Beeman, working all alone on a problem that had two million goofey angles. Me, Benny Beeman, who usually bungles things up most beautifully. And my pal in a hospital!

I SPENT two days checking up on the Glamoura gal. You see, I had it figured out this way: Only a first class sculptor could have turned out that statuette, and certainly the guy must have known Nina mighty well or she never would have posed for it.

I looked up all the sculptors and artists and suchlike individuals in the city directory, and got exactly nowhere. Damn it all, you just couldn't link any of them with Nina, because Nina's past was as hazy as a fan-dancer's feathers.

I said to myself: "Benny, you're on the wrong track. You should maybe try the racetrack instead."

And after a while I had it.

NIX on the compliments. After all, when a guy has the brains I have, it doesn't take long to add two and two and get four. Or maybe five. Anyhow, I guzzled a couple of beers, wiped the suds out of my two-day stubble and spoke to myself as follows:

"Benny," I said, "that gal Adele Stilson bet two hundred bucks on a horse that belonged to Nina Glamoura. The horse was a long shot, eighty to one, yet came damn near winning the race. Because the race was crooked, like plenty of races at Redrock Downs, and the horse was supposed to win—only something went wrong. So what? So," I said, "this coup must have been planned quite some time ago, when Adele was working for Nina, and Adele got wind of it.

"Naturally," I said, "Adele kept her eye on the entries even after she got the gate, and when the race came along, she rustled all her available dough together and slapped it on the nag's nose. Most likely she also tipped off all her friends to go and do likewise. Well, they lost.

"This," I said, "made Adele Stilson very angry. She had lost every cent she owned, and all her friends had lost every cent they owned, and on top of that she was sore with Nina Glamoura for firing her. So in the heat of her anger she went to Nina's apartment and did the murder act. At the same time she swiped the statuette."

TRIUMPHANT as hell, I rushed over to the hospital to unload my brainstorm. Peeper Poole just glared at me. So did the nurse who was sitting beside him. He was holding her hand, and I could tell by the redness creeping up into her very pretty young face that I'd interrupted something.

Peeper listened to me and attached a pained expression to his map. "Benny," he said, "Adele Stilson never even knew whether that nag won or lost. She was dead before the race was run. Now scram!"

Having got nowhere very fast with the Nina end of it, I went to work on the past history of Adele. She'd had girl friends. I looked some of them up. One was a cute, fluffy little blonde with sultry eyes and a lisp. She ladled out soft drinks and sandwiches in a tearoom.

I bought me some soft drinks and sandwiches and flashed a roll of bills. How was she to know the roll was stuffed with phonies? "Baby," I said, on my third visit, "I am a very lonely person. Is it possible that you are lonely also, perchance?"

She was. When she got through polishing the silverware that night, I was waiting for her in my car, which was the property of a Drive-it-Yourself agency, and drove out to Laure's, a cosy little tavern where the lights and music were both soft.

We had a nice time. What I mean, after four double Scotches, the fluffy little blonde with the come-hither eyes and the lisp became reasonably friendly.

The lights were low and I told her how beautiful she was, which was no lie, either, because after four double Scotches almost any female in the world would appear to be beautiful to Benny Beeman. Then I kissed her.

LATER, after more of the same, I poured another Scotch and steered the conversation the way I wanted it to go. "Baby," I said finally, "you were a friend of that gal who was murdered at the racetrack, weren't you?"

She'd had enough giggle-juice to be talkative. Yes, indeed, she'd known Adele Stilson for years. Gone to school with her. And to dances.

"She ever have any boy friends, baby?"

"Yes, indeed. She had one very *special* boy friend, tall and dark and awfully handsome. But something happened between them, I guess. He stopped calling on her."

The name of this very special and handsome boy friend was Philip Nason. He worked in a mill, lived on Warden Street. He wasn't very intelligent, but oh, was he handsome!

I peered under the table at my wrist-watch. The hour was getting late, and the temptation to stay a little longer was strong indeed. With this little bundle of affection next to me, I had no desire to go barging out into the rain, getting my dogs wet. But. . .

I hugged her close for the last time, kissed her mouth all out of shape. Then I let go with both hands and stood up.

"Gotta go now, baby," I said.

She called me all kinds of names, said I was a mug without a conscience. Go—so early? Was I crazy?

But we went. And little sultry-eyes had to take a taxi home because Benny Beeman used the car to get him to Warden Street in a hurry.

WARDEN STREET is not in a very pretty neighborhood. The dump I was seeking was a three-decker tenement house with a freight yard on one side and another three-decker squeezing close on the other. The hour was near midnight and the rain was a dismal drizzle. The only sound was a rattle of rain on tin roof-gutters.

I hesitated before ringing the bell marked *Nason*. Maybe it would be better if I waited until morning. But this *Nason* guy was a new lead and I was anxious to question him, so I thumbed the button, tried the door, found it open, and hiked on up.

It was the top floor, and the door was open before I got up to it. One look at the guy and I knew he was the egg my sweet little blonde had described. He stood six feet, had the build of a super-athlete and the face of a movie-hero. Hollywood would have made him lord of the jungle, if he could yodel.

I doubted his ability to yodel. Glaring at me, he puffed out his he-man chest and said: "Wharya? Wotyawunt? Uh?" Zoo stuff.

I'M A LITTLE guy and I figured it would be best to be polite. I said: "Mr. *Nason*, I believe?" and when he nodded, I beamed my beamiest smile and added: "I am Mr. *Beeman*—Mr. Benjamin B. *Beeman*—from the *Recorder*."

"Wotyawunt?" he demanded.

"A few words with you, Mr. *Nason*, for our Sunday magazine. You see, we are conducting a city-wide search for the most perfect specimen of physical manhood, and. . . ."

I got in. Leave it to *Benny Beeman*. The guy would have bought the Golden Gate Bridge from me if I'd tried to sell it—if he'd had any money.

He ushered me into the sitting-room and we sat. It was a dump. He told me he couldn't really afford such luxury but he'd grown tired of living in boarding-houses. He was interested in the arts. Ah, yes, the arts. "Ya see," he said, "I didn't use to appreciate none of the finer things in life. Naw. But when I seen how the other half of the world lives, I got a yen to improve myself. Yeah."

"Ah," I said. "It was Miss *Stilson* who showed you the light!"

"Her? Naw! She was just a dumb skirt without no culture. I didn't get no place with her. What I am now, I owe it all to *Nina*. Yeah. *Nina Glamoura*, the opera-singer.

She's the one. Her and me are gonna get married." He made a face. "Don't be puttin' that in your paper now. Not until she says it's okay, see?"

It's a mortal wonder I didn't slide off the chair and do my gasping on the floor. *This* guy—Nina Glamoura's new boy-friend. It was inconceivable!

WHY not? Nina Glamoura was an opera-singer with a truckload of temperament. Just the sort of dame that would go for a big, handsome dope like this, with the idea of making a pet polly-wog out of him, teaching him the finer things in life and so forth. She'd met him, naturally enough, through Adele.

"I imagine, Mr. Nason," I said, with a very knowing smile, "your former sweetheart rather resented your affiliation with Miss Glamoura."

"Huh?"

I put it in words he could understand. He shrugged his shoulders. "It ain't up to me, what Adele thinks," he grumbled. "Me and Nina is gonna get married; that's all I know."

IT WAS easy to see he hadn't read any newspapers lately, nor had he visited his Nina. The dumb dope didn't even know that both his gals were dead.

If I hadn't been so intent on what he was saying, I might have heard the door open in the other room, or I might have heard footsteps. As it was, my back was toward the threshold and the first inkling I had of any danger was when Handsome-Face Nason suddenly stiffened, stopped talking, and stared past me.

"You will not move, please," a voice said curtly.

I didn't move. I never do, when curt voices tell me not to. I guessed from the terror in Nason's pretty face that the guy, whoever he was, had a gun.

"Mr. Yazzeff!" Nason gasped.

The intruder strode forward and I got a look at him. I'd already seen pictures of him. His tag was Nazareth Yazzeff, and he was on the list of artists whose past records had caused me so much trouble and eyestrain.

HE WAS tall and thin and had a black beard. He also had eyes. They glittered like little chunks of colored glass. His voice purred out of his beard and said: "It is unfortunate, Mr. Nason, you are not alone. I did not expect to find a witness here. Now I shall be forced to kill you both."

What I mean, he might have been asking what time it was, or how are your fallen arches this evening. Cold-blooded? That guy's blood, if piped to the Arena, would have provided ice for eleven hockey seasons! There was gooseflesh all over me, and I could see he hadn't even begun to work on us yet.

"Where is the statuette?" he said, staring at Nason.

NASON'S tongue was down in his throat somewhere and was a long time wriggling up to make an answer. He finally wagged his pasty face and made movements with his hands. "I—I dunno," he whispered.

"You lie! It is not in Nina's apartment; therefore she must have given it to you! I desire it!"

"I ain't got it!" Nason wailed. "She never gimme it! Honest to God!"

Yazzef smiled. It was one of those smiles that push a man's eyes forward and tighten the cords of his throat. Nasty, what I mean. He stepped forward, and I shrank back in my chair, expecting the gun in his fist to blast.

"I will find it," he said softly. "After I have killed you, I will find it. Then I shall destroy it." His left hand opened and closed in front of Nason's face, as if cracking nuts. "When I made it," he said, "I did not know that the woman I loved was infatuated with another man. I foolishly believed that her beauty would be eternally for my eyes alone. Prepare yourself, pig, to die!"

WELL, I don't exactly know how a man prepares himself to die, but if Nason's demonstration was the accepted version, I'll take mine with arsenic. He was shaking like a leaf, and sweat just oozed out of him. He hung onto the arms of his chair and stared at the hole in the gun and tried to beg for mercy, but the sounds he

made resembled those made by water gurgling down a drain.

"For God's sake, Yazzef, wait!" I choked. "Give the guy a chance! He—"

"Be quiet!" he snapped at me. "In a moment I shall attend to you, also!"

He took a step forward. I gathered my legs under me and made ready to take a longshot lunge at his underpinning. Then my ears were full of thunder.

But, it wasn't Yazzef's gun that did the exploding. I thought it was, and I went over backward with a yelp that rocked the rafters—but when my eyes blinked open, Yazzef's gun was on the floor, Pretty-Face Nason was still among the living, and Yazzef was leaning back against the wall, clutching his right wrist with his left hand. Blood was oozing out between his fingers.

Over the threshold came P. Percy Poole and a uniformed officer of the law. "You hurt, Benny?" Peeper asked.

I SHOOK my head. I wasn't hurt, just stunned. My brain was fogged. The cop walked over to Yazzef, slapped cuffs on him and said crisply: "You're under arrest for murdering Nina Glamoura and attempting to murder Nason here."

Yazzef drew himself up to his full height. His eyes glittered. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I murdered Nina. She was untrue to me. When a woman so beautiful as she is attracted to a specimen such as this—" glaring at Nason—"she deserves to die. Bah!"

I scowled at Peeper Poole. "Listen," I snorted. "It took me three quarters of a lifetime to find out about this guy, Nason. I worked my ears off. And now *you* come bustin' in here, big as life, at the payoff. What's the big idea? I thought you were in the hospital."

"Benny," said Peeper, "you've been running around in circles again. Me, I take short cuts."

"So what?" I bellowed. "I'm here, ain't I? I figured things out this far, didn't I? And let me tell you something else! This guy Nason murdered Adele Stilson. Yeah! She was his girl once, and most likely she knew things

about him that wouldn't have helped him out with Nina. So he took the trouble to close her mouth. That's the way I figure *that* angle!" I yelped. "Ask Nason if I'm right!"

"Benny," Peeper said patiently, "you're all wet as usual. Nobody murdered Adele Stilson. If you'd asked me, I'd have told you days ago that the doctors didn't find any poison inside her. She died of heart failure—caused, no doubt, by the strain of losing her job and wagering her last cent on a horserace. That scratch on her side was made by a nail in the seat she was using."

"With Mr. Casey's help," Peeper said, smiling at the cop, "I began checking up on Yazzef even before I went to the hospital. He and Nina were thataway for months; then Nina ditched him for Nason and he got sore. He's known to be a lad with a violent temper. I figured things out and said to Casey: 'Undoubtedly this Yazzef guy murdered Nina, and perchance, Casey, he will also attempt to murder Nason. Keep tabs on him, Casey,' I said, 'and if he goes near Nason's place of residence, let me know.'"

YAZZEF snarled. Casey grabbed him by the handcuffs, twisted, and the pain in his bullet-shattered wrist shut him up. "If I have to shoot you again, rat," Casey growled, "I'll aim more for the middle."

"Benny," said Peeper, "I just walked out of my workshop and asked the first guy I came to. Yeah, I asked Packy Dinsmore, our official dirt-collector. Remember that crack in his column? 'What well-known opera-singer recently ditched her temperamental boy friend in favor of a new flame?' Well, Benny, while you were wearing out shoeleather all over town, I merely asked Packy to name some names, and Packy did. And there you are."

"Where," I asked feebly, "does Mr. J. F. C. Cornovan fit into this, if at all?"

"Mr. Cornovan," said Peeper, "is right now being fitted for new teeth, a new nose, and the nether portion of a starboard ear. I encountered him ten minutes after leaving the hospital. I accused him of having set four thugs upon me. He admitted it. Eight minutes and nine seconds later he was admitted to the hospital."

MODEL FOR MURDER

By Beresford
King



Dot was in a tough spot, what with the fur thieves outside and Horace inside.

THEY were set to crack Burley's fur store on Tuesday night. On Monday night, Cal and Tim dropped in to see Dot Lewis—just to remind her that she was going to fix things for them inside the store. They'd ferreted out the fact about a three thousand dollar coat Dot had borrowed from Burley's—and had forgotten to return. She was still modeling there and that was enough to scare her into anything short of murder, because she certainly didn't want to go to jail.

The plan was simple. The store closed at ten, and up to this time Dot posed with a group of three models in the window. These three figures were wax images of Dot herself; the moulds had been made from her own body.

Now she drew a steady salary for making up to re-

semble these imitations of herself and posing motionless among them. Despite the heavy makeup—high rouge, violet eye-shadows, long cloth lashes—there was just enough life about her, even when perfectly motionless, to arouse window-gazers' curiosity.

AT TEN minutes to ten on the appointed night Dot gazed through the thick fringe of phoney lashes at a leering smirk generated by Tim, staring at her through the plate glass window.

Just past ten o'clock, Dot disappeared into the dressing room; this was conveniently near the rear of the store, where the wax models, ten or twelve in number, were left at night. In the morning, the window dresser would change their costumes, put new furs on them for the day. But tonight they would retain their fur coats—just as Dot would.

Stalling, without removing her makeup, until the coast was clear, Dot slipped out of the dressing room and quietly joined the group of wax figures, some standing face to the wall, some not. Dot faced the wall.

This deception had been the idea of Tim or Cal—she didn't know which—after taking the layout of the store and watching her pose. There was no way to unlock the store from within without keys; that one little heavily barred window at the rear was the weak spot. It, too, was impregnable; but if Dot were locked up within the store, she could pass furs through the bars. She could then emerge from the dressing room in the morning, after two or three other girls had arrived. . . .

The catch to this, Dot figured, was that the theft might be discovered before she had had time to "arrive" for the day, and she would be caught. It was a small-time haul, anyway, since most of the furs were in a vault whose combination she didn't know.

For five minutes after she heard the big front gates clang after Burley, Dot didn't relax; when she did turn around, with a heavy sigh of relief, it was only to meet the suavely smiling approval of Horace Wright, the window dresser.

DOT nearly fainted. Why, he must have been up to her trick all the time; must have been watching her all these minutes when she had posed so studiously!

Horace grinned triumphantly. "You've reminded me often enough that you aren't a wax figure, Sweetheart. . . . Yet now you try to convince me that you are. What's the answer?"

When Dot only stood there limply, breathing hard, warmer than ever in the silver fox cape, Horace, still grinning, stepped up to her and snatched it off her unprotesting shoulders.

"You must be warm in this, Darling. You wouldn't be planning to make off with it by any chance, would you?"

She knew several ways of doing it, though . . . had used one of them once.

Horace mentioned that very one:

"Why not wrap it up and mail it to yourself? There's a post-office substation in the store, with a package box. And you might have enough stamps in your purse. . . . The coat wouldn't be missed before the morning collection was made."

Dot gasped. Did he know about that other coat?

Horace grabbed her in his arms—or tried to. Dot impulsively dodged back, twisting to one side, and caught her high heel in the thick rug. But it wasn't the rug that smacked the back of her bronze-fluffed head as she fell; it was the iron pipe frame of a hanger rack. . . .

Horace stopped dead, his heart pounding with fright. He didn't want anything to do with killing a girl. But a second's examination proved her heart was still beating strongly. He breathed more freely when he knew he didn't have a corpse on his hands.

HORACE WRIGHT had one girl who liked him a bit more than Dot did. Her name was Tessie Lane, and she was quick on the trigger—literally. Only her poor aim—and Horace's cracking her on the jaw before the second shot—had prevented her from drilling one of the girls she had found him flirting with.

And Tessie knew about Dot; had watched her in the

show-window. And with a way she had, she knew Horace had his eyes on Dot.

But that was only one of a dozen reasons why Tessie would have gotten a kick out of slipping a knife between his ribs. She had plenty to tell him tonight, and when he calmly stood her up—having forgotten all about her when he noticed Dot staying behind—she did exactly what she had intended to threaten him with doing: she called one Guy Weaver, detective-lieutenant, who had taken her out several times in the past, and made an insistent date with him.

Weaver was on duty; he drove straight to the restaurant where Tessie worked, in his roadster, and he hadn't driven her half a block before she told him that Horace Wright was planning to rob Burley's.

"Good God—why didn't you say so over the phone? When?"

"Oh—not tonight!"

"Well for—" Weaver shrugged. "Then why all the excitement?"

"Horace has done me some dirty tricks. I'd like to see him in the can for a long time. You can do it—all you have to do is catch him when he pulls the job."

"Just for curiosity—it's only a couple of blocks. Let's take a run over there."

He pulled the roadster past Burley's—saw nothing suspicious from the front. The store ran through the alley. As he turned into it, Weaver saw a sedan parked beneath the iron-grilled window. A man stood on top of the car.

DOT was out only a few minutes. When she opened her eyes, her head ached sharply.

She looked frantically at her wrist watch. It was ten minutes to eleven—and the idea came to her to make an accomplice of Horace.

She forced herself to say flippantly: "Now how the devil do we get out of this place?"

Horace fished out two keys on a ring. "Master keys for the door and gate. I had 'em made. But what makes you think you can use them?"

"Two men are coming here to rob this place at eleven o'clock," she said quietly. "I'm supposed to help them. They—forced me. Call the police and we can pretend we laid a trap for them. They'll be here soon!"

Horace didn't even have time to answer her, because Cal and Tim were, in fact, already here. They had been for five minutes. It only took Dot's last words to make Cal, who was on top of the car, sure of the double-crossing. He poked a silenced automatic through the bars and snicked a shot at her. But it was at just this moment that Weaver's roadster slipped into the alley.

Cal heard it; his aim was ruined. The bullet thudded into Horace's chest, and he stumbled back and sat down, coughing blood.

At the shot, Dot dodged back, expecting a bullet herself; then she heard three shots from the alley—not silenced. When she looked back to Horace, he was dead.

Dot stopped long enough to wrap herself in a coat from the rack; then she knelt and tore the two keys from Horace's dead hand and ran to the front of the store. She opened the door and the gate, and instantly the bell of the burglar alarm burst into brazen ringing above her head. She left the doors open but took the keys and ran. She turned the corner and the next minute was gone.

TIM, at the wheel, had fired only when he saw the glint of a gun in Weaver's fist. But his windshield wasn't bullet-proof like the police car's, and Weaver's slug bored into his mouth. Cal had fired from the top of the sedan into the side of the roadster to catch Tessie just above the collarbone and dart down into her body.

Weaver felt for her pulse; there wasn't any. "All because some guy stood her up," he muttered—"this is what she gets."

When Dot thought it over, after a week and more had safely passed, the only thing she regretted was that it hadn't been another mink coat she had snatched so hurriedly when she escaped from the shop. To her disgust she found, when she had reached safety that the coat she had thrown about her in the dark that night was—skunk!

Mike was on vacation when he ran smack into all the woe that besets a copper!



By
Kevin Blake

TROUBLE is a WOMAN

“**V**ACATION, hell,” I snorted and gave the cabbie the address. Me, Mike Cockrell, private detective in a strange Gulf Coast town for a vacation, and getting called out of bed by a dame I never heard of! A hell of a vacation! I cursed inwardly as I paid the cab on Water Street, not far from the docks.

The sign was just one word—“Duffy’s.” I ducked in, glad to get out of the fog and mist, but it was almost as bad inside as out. You could cut the smoke with a knife and the whole low room had a sort of sour, stale beer smell.

About six feet ahead of me a big guy leaned against the bar. His nose spread the breadth of his face with a couple of fingerdeep dents where the bridge used to be.

He said, “What do you see, Mac?”

I said, "Hell, I don't know, buddie. I never saw anything like it before. Is it you that smells like that?"

By that time a one-eyed bartender was swabbing in front of me. I said, "Rye, and let me see the bottle."

I poured a shot and took a chance while Drizzlepuss, the bouncer, glared.

"Hey," said a new voice, right beside me.

IT WAS a dame, a little chick, but not too little. Her blonde hair was headed in nine directions, her eyes looked sort of wild and woolly and the enamel on her face showed signs of wear and tear. She sort of tottered on her feet. With a hand on the bar to steady herself she said, "Hey, you don't like me, do you, you big bum?"

"No man can laugh at me," she roared and kicked me in the shin. I said, "Ouch!" and she slapped the hat off my head. The bouncer guffawed; the one-eyed bartender grinned.

I grabbed her and held her, too ripping mad to do anything. But while she was kicking and squirming, she was putting on her act, and muttered in my ear. "It was me who called. Get—" then I missed a few words, caught the next few—"the next booth from the end."

BY THAT time she had pulled away, had her head down on the bar and was sobbing. Drizzlepuss, still guffawing, took her by the arm and led her to a booth. I picked my hat from the floor, brushed the sawdust off it and poured another shot of rye. So she was the one that called, huh? And Margot Sanders was in the next booth from the end! What a joint for a millionaire's daughter to be in!

Drizzlepuss was back, still grinning. "Why'n't you buy your gal friend a drink, Mac? She needs it. You know her, don't you?"

I said, "Oh sure; Miss Jack Dempsey. Take her a drink." I tossed a bill on the bar and headed toward the back. Two red lights flickered above two swinging doors at the rear. One door said *Maggie*, the other said *Jiggs*. I slowed by the next to the last booth.

The man was leaning over the table, his back to me. All I could see was patent leather hair and a black suit. But the dame! His hand spanned the table and he had her by the shoulder. A strap of her flame colored evening gown was loose and she looked like she was scared.

The man sensed something, released his grip, and turned. He was dark, darker than I am, with black eyes, a wisp of a moustache and the smallest mouth I had ever seen. Damned if I could see how he managed to eat.

The girl cowered in the corner, tugged at the shoulder-strap. The man took the cork-tipped cigarette from his mouth, flipped the ashes off, and got up. Without smiling, he pulled the curtain on the booth.

I walked on across the dirty dance floor. The music had stopped but the sailor and his bim were still dancing cheek to cheek. In the washroom I smoked a cigarette and kept the door open a crack. Then I went back the way I had come. The bouncer was getting a nickel from the sailor to put in the piano.

At the bar I heard someone calling, "Hey, you!" It was the little dame who had kicked my shins. "Mush obliged for the drink. Bring two more and you can sit by me."

I winked at the bartender, took the bottle and an extra glass, and went into the booth. She set me down beside her, not opposite her. I said, "What the devil is this all about? Getting me out of a warm bed at one o'clock with a crazy story about a millionaire's daughter who's going to be killed! What—?"

She groaned, "We've got to get her out of here! You've got to help me."

I said, as cold as I could, "Maybe you haven't heard right. I'm Mike Cockrell. Why not call the cops? I don't work for charity." I still thought she was nuts.

She leaned over, hoisted a skirt and thrust three bills into my hand. "There's three hundred on account," she said. "There'll be more in it for you when you get her out of here. Will you?"

I'M NERVOUS. When the first scream rang out I jumped up, upset the whiskey and lit in the sawdust aisle,

ready for action. I felt the little lady tugging at my arm, shook her off. The curtain of the next to the last booth was belling and flopping; the screams continued.

Even as I started forward, the curtain flew into the barroom proper, torn from its hangings, and two silk clad legs were waving in the air. I froze. From the tangled curtain came the head and shoulders of the scared dame and she was still screaming a mile a minute.

Then in the doorway of the booth Greasehead appeared, an ugly snarl on his face his fists still doubled. A cigarette dangled from his lips and bobbed up and down when he shouted. "Slap me, will you, you little wench! Slap me!"

I started forward, plenty burned up. Drizzlepuss oozed away from the bar, blocked me and said, "I been waiting for this, grandpa." He swung and I ducked. He got my hat and that made me sore as hell. Twice in the sawdust and it costing me three ninety-eight!

I was mad anyway and I never was much with my fists. I reached for a gat and when Drizzlepuss came in again I slapped him hard on the wrist. He yowled, saw the roscoe and turned to beat it, so I tapped him on the conk and he flopped. Right on my hat.

BY THAT time the brunette was on her feet. Greasehead stood there glowering, but in an odd sort of way. He was looking right at my gun as I barged in. "Reach for the lights, punk," I told him, and to the girl, "Scram, sister! Out the front way."

He grinned, tight-mouthed, and said, "Oh!" and began crumpling at the knees. They hit the sawdust first, then his waist, then his chest. Finally he laid his cheek down on the floor, wiggled a couple of times and lay still. What the heck! I stood there like a goof. The one-eyed bartender came running around the bar. The sailor and his girl stopped dancing and were standing around bug-eyed.

One Eye looked up and said, "God, he's dead!"

I swallowed sort of hard and said, "That's the first guy I ever scared to death!" I hadn't squeezed the trigger, but there he was.

Then there was another scream behind me! I turned and dodged. Drizzlepuss was a tough guy. He could take it. He missed me with the bottle only because the dame screamed. Then the lights went out. Drizzlepuss and I hit the sawdust. The sailor busted the little bartender and the four of us were rolling on the floor with the dead man.

FINALLY I rolled clear, felt someone tug at my arm, started to crack down and quit just in time. "This way, hurry!" It was the little blonde. We ducked low and out the back door into the alley. The battle by the booth was still going good.

"I've got her," said the blonde. "Got her out and into my car. Hurry, there's no time to lose!"

The car was a black sedan with plenty of chromium. Looked funny as it stood there parked knee deep in ash-cans. She leaped in, got behind the wheel. I said, "Hey, where's your friend?"

She turned around to look and flipped on the dome light. Somebody had been there, all right, for the leather upholstery and the floor rug were covered with red, fresh blood. But as far as dames went, the back end of that car was empty as a vacuum.

"We've got to go back! They've got her again!" She was shoving me. In the distance I heard a siren, and a split second later heard umpty-nine police whistles.

I SAID, "Never mind my hat. We better go." So she opened the door on the other side, stepped on a garbage can and hit the alley. I cursed and went after her. We were almost to the joint when the back door flew open and a guy came running out with a gun. He saw us, pulled up, and fired from his hip. I heard it buzz past and zing against a brick wall. I gave the dame a shove that sent her sprawling and cracked a shot at the guy. He hollered and beat it back into the door. The window upstairs popped up and a fella leaned out with a gun in his hand. I got him—a man knows when he hits the guy that's shooting at him.

"Halt in the name of the law!" the ginzo in the doorway roared as he blazed. I made the car, jumped in dragging the dame after me. Bullets were landing all around when we made the street. I wheeled that baby into the darkness with a prayer in my heart, and I kept the lights off for ten minutes of alley running. Up and down alleys, across a vacant lot, bumping and thumping and the dame never saying a word. Finally I ran it into a dark parking lot that didn't do business at night. I thought the dame was asleep.

"C'mon," I said, burned up at the whole screwy affair. "it's all over but the shouting." She didn't answer, her head lolled to one side. Something was wet and sticky on my fingers. Blood. I fumbled for her heart. Thank the Lord she had one that beat. But her shoulder was a mess where a slug had nicked her.

I HATED to do it but I pushed her down on the floorboards and beat it across the street to an all night garage. Five minutes later Peg Martin, the only guy I knew in the whole blamed town, showed up with his cab in answer to my call. I did Peg a favor once by shooting a mugg that was about to gun him out. He pulled the cab across the street and we got the dame into it.

"Sure," he said, "I know a guy but it will cost you money." I looked down at the white face of the dame and had to do it. She looked like a fourteen-year-old kid in spite of the enamel, innocent as a newborn babe. I knew then she wasn't what I first thought she was.

I said, "Show me the joint. I got the money." I couldn't let her get in trouble.

Dr. Dent was about five feet tall and must have weighed four hundred pounds. I didn't like his looks, but what could I do? He said sure, he had a private sanitarium, this was it. It was a brownstone house out on Edison. Yes, he sometimes took people in and was very discreet about it. Ladies? Sure, what was wrong with the young lady? Accident, eh. What kind? A little round hole in the shoulder? Fell on a sharp stick? Certainly! To be sure!

A few minutes later the little blonde was stretched out

in a bed looking like a wax doll. Doc Dent was fixing to go to work with a granite-faced old harridan he called Mrs. Taylor, as aide. I said, "How long before I can get her out of here?"

He said, "About a week. Less time than that if there is no fever or infection. Your niece has a very clean—er—er—stick wound and a healthy body."

I said, "OK, I'll call in tomorrow."

He smiled and said, "That will be in advance, Mr.—er—Jones. Four hundred dollars please for the first week."

I nearly passed out. I gave him the three C-notes she'd given me, dug through all my pockets and got together another one. It left me three dollars and seventy-one cents and a good luck piece, a half dime I've had for years.

Peg was still waiting. I got in and he looked at me just once, then drove off to a dump he knew and got out. When he came back, he had a quart of rye. I hit it and he hit it. Neither of us said anything. I was thinking what a chump I'd been. Getting mixed up in killings and shootings on my vacation and ending up paying a C-note out of my own pocket on account of a dame I'd never seen before. I didn't even know her name!

THE sound of a rip saw on hard wood and somebody yelling woke me up. It was misty but the sky was a light grey. It was dawn. The rip saw was Peg snoring in the front seat; the yelling was a newsboy. I managed to call him, got a paper, and unfolded it.

After a while Peg woke up and said, "What the blazes are you groaning about?"

I said, "Never mind. It's these headlines. What's the quickest way to the river? You're going to lose a pal."

"Is something wrong, Mike?"

"No, no—I'm just tired of living. Something wrong? I just killed a man, and shot a police lieutenant through the window of his car! I'm accused of murdering a shyster named John Lebac who practically ran this town and they're tying me into the kidnaping of Old Man Sanders' daughter! Get started!"

He took me back on Ayers Street to the dingy old Continental where I'd rented a room a few days before. It must have been around six-thirty for the night clerk was still on duty. He grinned and winked and said, "What a man! You look like you had a hard night! And you're in for more. Your sister's upstairs in your room. She don't look much like you, Mr. Cockrell."

I said, "She's only my half sister," and took the stairs two at a time. I listened at my door before putting in the key, but couldn't hear a thing. I turned the lock, and stepped in, gat ready. The curtains were pulled. I left them down and tiptoed through the joint before I went back to the bed. The only person there was a dame in my bed, sleeping a mile a minute.

SHE had one arm over her head and her gown had fallen off the shoulder. The blanket outlined a slim form. Very nice. But I wasn't interested in her shape! Not me. It was her face! There was a half bottle of rye on the dresser and I nearly killed it, grinning in the mirror all the time. The liquor warmed my frame and pulled my aching joints together.

"Boy," I said softly to myself in the mirror, "you get all the breaks. I just can't believe it." I spread out the paper to make sure. And there it was in headlines—

POLICE SEARCH FOR DAUGHTER OF MILLIONAIRE. MARGOT SANDERS SNATCHED FROM FAMILY ESTATE SIX DAYS AGO. POLICE JUST NOTIFIED. HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS RANSOM ALLEGED TO HAVE BEEN PAID KIDNAPERS. SANDERS GIRL STILL MISSING. MILLIONAIRE TURNS CASE OVER TO POLICE—POSTS TWENTY THOUSAND DOLLAR REWARD.

Lucky! Me, Mike Cockrell with three dollars and sixty-six cents in my pocket and Margot Sanders, worth twenty grand on the hoof, in my bed. For the snoozing dame was the one the lawyer, John Lebac, old scared-to-death Greasehead, had smacked last night just before he passed

out! Now all I had to do was deliver her C. O. D. I picked up the rye and murdered it.

"Hey, grampa, what the hell you doing to my whiskey?"

I LIKE to have dropped the bottle. The dame was sitting up glaring at me. She started to get up, holding the bedclothes about her.

"You greedy hog!" she said, "now you can trot out and get another quart."

I didn't want to smack twenty grand in the puss. I said, "Sure! Sure! Now you get right back in bed, Miss Sanders, and I'll go out for more liquor." She looked at me sort of queer; I was thinking how tough some of these high-toned rich kids are. She slipped into the bathroom and came back all dressed.

"Give me a cigarette, grampa." Lying on the table were her own cigarettes in an open case. She saw me looking at them, giggled and said, "Mine aren't healthy, grampa, give me one of yours."

I lit it for her, and she said, eyes hard as flint, "When you're getting the liquor, don't make any phone calls and don't tell anyone you've got company." I didn't say anything. Talking tough she went on, "You see I was in the alley last night. I know who killed Con, the bouncer, and shot Lieutenant Hogan in the ear!"

The blood in the car! I said, "Why didn't you wait for us? There was blood all over the car and we thought—"

She said, "That? I knocked a heel off my slipper and stumbled getting in. Hit my nose on the robe rack and bled like a stuck pig. I saw you and the dame come running my way so I scrambled, didn't know who you were. Go on and get the whiskey, grampa."

TO SHOW you what I thought of the dame, I spent my last three bucks on a pint of cheap rye. Back in the room she bummed another of my cigarettes and poured a water glass half full of liquor. She tossed it off, looked startled, choked and came up smiling. I said, "Miss Sanders, what do you want for breakfast?"

"Grampa, I've been taking a bottle breakfast for six

years. I'm happy. Say, for an old man you're pretty good in a ruckus. That's what Gladys said. She heard of you in Chicago, tough guy and all that. You really went to bat, didn't you?"

I said, "Tell me about it, I'm a little mixed up. Who's Gladys?"

The dame took another three-man snort. "Gladys is my girl friend, silly. We knew a jam was coming up and she'd heard you were in town so she called you on the phone and rang you in."

"How'd she know where I was staying?"

"She knows a lot of drunks that work on newspapers. Gladys is a smart kid, she remembers what she hears. Don't stick to that bottle; momma wants a drink."

We sat talking for ten minutes, me itching all over all the time. I was afraid to mention taking her home again, but piped up, "How about breakfast, Miss Sanders?"

She laughed and said she wouldn't go out for a banquet, let alone breakfast. "Buddy," she went on, "I sort of like it here. I came here on purpose. And I'm going to stay a while. See?"

I went over and sat in a chair, watched her pace back and forth and marveling at how tough these rich kids can be. She had the bottle in her hand and kept hitting it. That gave me an idea. Pretty soon I thought she'd get woozy and I'd deliver her and collect. She was getting woozy all right. She flopped down in my lap, put her arms around my neck and began to cry. I patted her and said, "Don't cry, Miss Sanders. Everything is going to be all right. Take another drink."

She did. Then she said:

"You aren't such a bad looking guy, grampa," and pulled my chin up. Before I could dodge, I was kissing twenty thousand dollars worth of cherry-red lips.

WE TALKED for a while. The whiskey was gone and the dame wasn't out yet. But I was out—out of cigarettes. I walked over to her case, started to get one of hers and she stopped me, hand on my arm. "For God's sake, Mike, put that fag down."

I said, "Listen, Miss Sanders, let me take you home. Your old man and your mother are out there at the house worrying to death."

She said, "What the devil you calling me? You been doing that all morning! I'm Babe Dumont, and if you want to know, I'm the baby that knocked John Lebac over last night. The rat!"

Dumbfounded I sat on the bed. "What are you doing here, then?"

She grinned and said, "You're supposed to be a tough guy, Mike Cockrell. A sort of legalized gunman. I got it on you. Hogan won't appreciate getting his ear blown off and he'll sock a murder charge on you for killing Con, the bouncer. So what? I got to hole up a few days until my boy friend can get me out of town. John Lebac's got plenty of mob that would like to find me. But you're going to take care of me or I squawk my head off to the police."

"What about the Sanders kid?"

"She was in the car in the alley when I got there. I didn't want any part of a kidnaping so I dumped her behind some garbage cans. I suppose Lebac's gang got her back."

"Is she the reason you killed John Lebac?"

She grinned. "Naw. What the hell? I killed him for ten grand. I'm working for a little fellow that would like to have John's place. Understand?"

I started for the door. "Where you going?"

"Darned if I know, any place away from here. I don't want any part of this screwy mixup." I felt plenty bad, twenty grand having gone up the spout. With my hand on the knob, she stopped me.

"Step out that door and I tip off the police. You'll face the hot squat and, even if you beat the rap, you're a ruined man!"

I said, "Nuts," and opened the door, then stepped back fast and reached for the ceiling.

THE one-eyed bartender slouched in, a gun in his hand, followed by a boy friend with an automatic

and murder in his eyes. "Keep Cockrell covered, Waldo," said One-Eye and grinned at the woman, "Hello, Babe."

She didn't say a word. "Smart, ain't you," he went on, "but not smart as me. You see, I knew Cockrell from St. Louis, saw him shoot Stony Brooks in a saloon where I was working. He stuck up for you at the joint, so I figured it out. And sure enough here you are! Get ready to travel, Babe."

I said, "Take it easy. What's this all about?"

"Watch him, Waldo. If he moves, burn him down. What's it all about? Why nothing, only some of the boys would like to see Babe. She knocked off the boss last night. Don't you read the newspapers?"

I said. "Nuts. I was there. He dropped dead, scared to death."

"Guys like John Lebac don't scare," said One-Eye. "You ought to keep up with things." He stuck the gun in his coat pocket, pulled out a paper and tapped it with a long finger. "John Lebac didn't have heart trouble, sap. The autopsy showed he was poisoned. They analyzed the cigarette he was smoking and found sixty-five percent oil of nicotine had been dropped under the cork tip. The dame gave him the cigarette. He smoked plain ones himself. Come on, Babe, get going, the boys are waiting."

Babe shrugged, turned to a little overnight bag that stood on the washstand and pulled out a jacket. One-Eye started to say something to me and the dame's voice cracked out.

She said, "Waldo!" Waldo whirled. The little gun she had said spat and Waldo dropped his rod with a surprised look on his face. There was a little blue hole between his eyes. She shot again but One-Eye was diving for her, low. He hit her, knee high, and they went down, clawing, scratching, rolling over and over on the floor. The dame sure put up a terrific tussle.

FOR a minute I watched, then I picked up Waldo's gun and dove out the window. I made two flights of fire escape in nothing flat and ran like hell down the alley. Before I hit the street, I stuck Waldo's .32 in the middle

of my back, between waist band and vest. I already had a gat beneath each arm.

I grabbed a cab and fifteen minutes later pulled up in front of Doc Dent's.

A Filipino boy answered the door. I pushed right by. At the end of the hall I ran into Doc Dent, fat as a pig, his little eyes gleaming. He said, "Good-morning, Mr.—er—er—Brown."

I said, "I want to go upstairs and see my niece. How is she?"

He said, "She isn't here, Mr.—er—er—Jones. You see she felt sufficiently well this morning to leave. She said to tell you this, word for word. *'I said through the booth, not in it!'*"

It sounded screwy. I snapped, "Dent, you're lying. I'm going up."

He said, "No you're not, Mr. Smith." So I wopped him in the paunch. It felt like hitting a pillow. He grunted and I socked his middle chin. He dropped like a bed bolster and looked cockeyed. I made the steps.

Sure enough the girl was gone.

Downstairs again, I shook Doc Dent's fat shoulder but his eyes stayed crossed. So I dug in his pocket and came out with a fat wallet. I didn't take it all—just two hundred, figuring that was reasonable.

In the hall the Filipino boy was talking on the phone, ashy, wild-eyed. He saw me coming and yelled, "Hurry, hurry!" I grabbed the phone, hung it up.

"Who you calling?"

"I—I—I calling my gal fren'. I—" I bopped him for luck. Then I grabbed the doc's yellow topcoat and a hat off the halltree and hit the sidewalk. I jumped in the cab and said, "Step on it, mug, any place away from here." As we turned the corner, I could hear police sirens.

SCREWY, and how, wasn't it? I sank down in the cab and tried to think. All I could think of was the message the little blonde had left with the fat doc. "*I said through the booth, not in it.*" Then I began to get mad. For a private dick with a reputation like mine I

was getting pushed around all over the lot! And me on a vacation!

So I said to the driver, "You know Duffy's place down on Water Street?"

He did. By the time we got there I had on doc's coat and hat and a pair of cheaters I'd found in the pocket.

Another bartender was on duty. He walked up with his dirty rag and I groaned, "What a head, what a head! Give me a shot, quick."

He grinned, poured a shot and said, "A little of the hair, eh?"

"Whatta night, whatta night," I groaned and slopped the liquor all over the bar.

I groaned and said, "Excuse me," tottered through the joint and hit the door marked *Jiggs*. With the door open a crack I waited a minute.

The bartender went on shining glasses. There was no one else in the saloon. So I wobbled back to the bar, took another drink and groaned. I said, "Is it all right to sit down a little while?" and before he could answer I wobbled to the next booth from the end and flopped down.

He came over and looked at me. I thought for a minute I was going to have to let him have it but he decided I was just another drunk with a hangover and went back of the bar.

"I said through the booth, not in it." I began feeling the panel at the back of the booth. With my pocket knife I found a crack along the right edge and slipped the blade up and down. Pretty soon I hit the bolt that held it in place. With my head still down on the table, I picked and picked, until at last I heard the bolt slip. It took about half a second to ooze through the open panel.

DARKNESS and a flight of steps, me on tiptoe and a gat in my hand. A long hall with light beneath a door at the end. Now I was at the door, listening. Then something cold poked into my right kidney and a voice said, "Drop the gun." I dropped it. "Open the door and go on in." I did.

One-Eye the bartender was sitting at a table counting

bills. He said, "Hello, Mike. Frisk him, Monk, and tie him up." Monk frisked me, got the other gun from my armpit, and tied my wrists behind me with a piece of rope. He shoved me down in a chair.

On a cot across from me was the little blonde. Doc Dent's patient, tied and gagged. Her eyes were frantic. The big gorilla named Monk walked over toward her, reached over and gave her a good slap and guffawed when she squirmed away.

Wearily One-Eye said, "Leave her alone, Monk. Go outside, I'll call you. We got work to do. We got to bump this mug and the kid."

Monk went out, glowering at me. Trying to be as calm as possible, I said, "Well, One-Eye, I hate to die curious. I'm all in the mud about this. Just who is the dame anyway, and what did you do with Babe?"

ONE-EYE pushed a stack of dough aside. "What you know won't hurt you. You ain't never going to tell anybody. Babe is still at the hotel—dead, I hope. I got away the same way you did. This dame here is a wise dame. Her name is Gladys Hastings and she's one of them nosey newspaper reporters. Someway she got a tip on the Sanders' kidnaping and found out John Lebác was behind it. So she came down here to the joint and worked up an acquaintance with Babe. That's how she got on the inside. Now she's got to pay for being nosey. The racket's over and I'm all that's left besides Monk." He grinned and I knew Monk wouldn't be left long. "So I'm fixing for the finale, then I'm going to fade."

He had the jack—Sanders' hundred grand tied in a neat bundle. He hollered, "Monk!" Monk came in grinning. "Take the dame in the next room with the kid and bump them both off."

By that time I had Waldo's automatic in my tied hands. I had stuck it between my vest and belt in the back, remember? But I was doing a lot of thinking. Could I get away with it? *I had to.* I turned it until the muzzle was right against one strand of rope. I leaned forward and pulled the trigger.

One-Eye whirled, tugging at his pocket. His gat lung and I guessed that saved my life for I had to pull like hell to loosen the rest of the rope. He shot first but I was diving sideways and he only nicked my shoulder. After I fired again, he wasn't in the picture any more.

I wheeled in time to see Monk coming out of the other room, eyes a-blazing. I dropped him with one through the guts and let him have another in the face for luck as he was falling.

Gladys was cowering in the other room, holding a yellow-headed little girl of about twelve years close to her.

Gladys said, "You sap, if you could understand English this wouldn't have happened! Now let's get upstairs."

The bartender had scrambled. There was no one in the saloon. I stood behind the bar and poured a drink while she called her paper and told them to rush a photographer before she called the police.

"Say," I told her, "call the Continental Hotel and see if the cops found a dead jane in my room. It was your friend, Babe." Then I told her the story while she dialed the number. She turned with a grin.

"Babe is tough," she said. "The only person found in the room was a dead thug named Waldo. She must have scrambled like you and One-Eye did. Pour me a drink."

She walked behind the bar. After a while she said, "We'd have made this last night if you hadn't been so dumb. I said *through the booth, not in it*."

I felt pretty good cutting in on that reward and all. I said, "Aw, Babe, don't be mad! I thought you said *in the booth*. How was I to know? I'm a stranger here!"

She said, "You may be a stranger here but you know your way around, Mike Cockrell."

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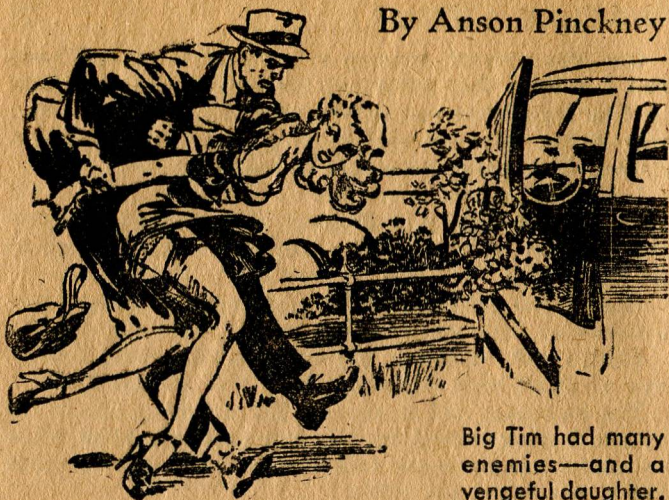
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By Anson Pinckney



Big Tim had many enemies—and a vengeful daughter.

CONTRACT for DEATH

SHE wasn't a girl who cried easily. In that way she was like the guy we had just left on the slab. He had been tough, too. Could dish it out and take it.

She was crying. That dry-eyed stuff that tears your insides out. Her head was on my shoulder as we drove back behind the stiff-necked chauffeur. I could smell the perfume on her hair. It was a relief after him.

Dr. Nadel stayed behind. To complete the identification, he said. I knew it wasn't that. There had been only one way to identify him. And that had been an accident. The time he fell from the horse. "That split bone there," the doc had said, gingerly prying the flesh apart and pointing to the shredded right knee, "I set it."

Well, anyway, the hunt was over. It was Big Tim Tamoney all right and now his disappearance was solved.

Then she spoke icily: "I want you to get his murderers."

"He had lots of enemies," I said.

"He was my father," she said.

She went on. She didn't have to. Everybody knew what Big Tim had done for his daughter Janet. He always got what he wanted. No matter how. And I knew he had always wanted his daughter to have everything she wanted. In a clean way.

THE car pulled into the driveway and purred along the elm-lined gravel up to the doors of Big Tim's mansion. She was still talking, even as she walked into the library. She spoke to the butler: "It was Dad, Walter. Bring some whiskey."

We had two apiece. I was fascinated as she continued. Family history now. Talk. More talk. It took the place of crying with her.

Then I said: "Shut up."

Her eyes snapped. It worked. They brimmed with tears. And then she cried. Torrents of tears. Her shoulders shook. I cradled her in my arms. She was just like a little girl whose favorite doll has been broken.

I released her. "Know anything about his business?" I asked.

She nodded: "Some."

"Go on. You hired me. I'm on your side."

"He had a partner."

"So the papers hinted."

"It was Ricky Malerno."

She downed her drink. "He was here the night before Dad . . . before he . . ."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. But they were quarreling. I had gone upstairs early. I couldn't sleep and decided to come down to the library and get something to read. The doors were closed, but I could hear them talking loudly. Rickey was saying something about bringing it in even if it was hot. Dad was yelling back when I knocked. They were both excited, I noticed. I got the book and went back upstairs."

"When did he leave? Did you hear him?"

"I couldn't have. My room is in the back of the house.

I read awhile and went to sleep."

I finished my drink. "I'll see you later," I said.

HE WAS a shrewd operator. Didn't go in for flash like most of his kind, All it said on the door was:

RICARDO MALERNO
Contractor

A dame with a face like a mudder fish looked up. "I want to see Mr. Malerno," I said. "Mr. Hanley."

She disappeared behind a door in back of the desk. Came back: "You may go in, Mr. Hanley."

It would have been impossible to guess his age. I roughed it at fifty-seven. He was short, stocky, plenty of power. His eyes were sharp, darting. His mouth thin, cold. A tough customer. And don't you miss the first punch.

He looked inquiringly. "Private detective," I said. "Miss Tamoney hired me. They found her father. Somebody dumped him in the river."

The eyes darted, stopped. "Too bad," he said. "Big Tim was a nice guy. Good politician. But what can I do about it? I scarcely knew him."

I said: "You were at his house a week ago. I happen to know about that."

No sign. "Business appointment," he said: "the big feller wanted to build a place up near Throgg's Point. He asked me to dinner. First time I'd ever been there. What's that go to do with it?"

"Well you know how it is in my racket, Mr. Malerno. We like to check on everything."

His smile was thin. "Detectives always do."

I thought: "You ought to know. You've been fooling them for years."

"I'm sorry I can't help you," he said. "I'm busy today. Figuring on a big job."

There were no papers on his desk. I could have said: "You're a liar." I said good-bye and closed the door behind me. Old fishface outside didn't look up.

I MADE a show of shutting the door on the hall, closed it easily, left it open a crack. I lit a butt as a buzzer sounded. I figured it would.

Before I touched the elevator button, I doped out a way to make it easy for the boys to follow, to let Malerno think he was getting a lucky break. It was an old trick. I bent over my shoe and fumbled with the laces.

He came out of the office next to Malerno's as I pressed the button and stood alongside me as I waited. He was swarthy, about my height, a faint scar on the right side of his face. I knew then I had been right about that door in Malerno's office. Guys like Malerno always have a couple of hoods around some place. I was hot. And I didn't have a thing. I knew where to get it, though. I made up my mind to go see somebody I knew.

When I was covering crime news for the *Blade* I used to get a lot of stuff out of Sicily Stella's down in the Quarter. It was one of those coffee houses with card tables out in front. They used to drink coffee spiked with grappa. Day and night. I used to wonder whether Stella paid them, but I wasn't sure. It didn't make much difference. The knock was what counted. I rapped on the back door. Two short. Pause. One hard. It opened.

BEING afternoon, only a few were in the place. A couple of them were giving the bird-cage a play. I saw Stella. She had put on a few extra pounds I noticed. About 230 now.

She was pleasant though. "Hello, Mr. Hanley," she said, her big face beaming, "coming in to try your luck? Or just drink?"

"Important talk" I said. "But be careful. My shadow's right behind me. He ought to be outside by now."

"Back here," she said, heading for a cubby hole she used for an office. She squeezed through the door and locked it. She looked at me. I told her about Big Tim and his kid. "It's in the papers already," she said. "Some stink."

"It'll be worse when I get what I'm after," I said. "I just came from Malerno's office."

I used to do a lot for Stella. So she leveled now. "Count me out," she said, "I don't know a thing."

"That 'S' in my middle name means Sphinx," I said.

"They might get me."

"You know me. I haven't missed yet."

She thought a moment. "I know they both had the joints sewed up," she said. "I paid them before I got into the racket. I'm still paying."

"Means nothing," I said.

"It might when I tell you they've eased up on the collections. One of the hoods told me something big was in the wind. That was a week or so ago."

"Any idea?"

"Not especially. He started talking about a couple of speed boats the Boss was trying out."

I laughed. "He's the boy type, I guess. Anything else?"

"No."

"You've been a big help, Stella," I said. "I won't forget it."

She said: "Maybe you'd better. I want to live a while longer."

HE WAS sitting at a table in the back, dropping cards onto each other, face up. He kept his eyes on them until I walked through the shop. Then he rose and followed me.

I began my mental filing. Throggs Point. Speed boats. A home. Collections off. I put them all together and then started thinking about my boy friend, my shadow. Some attachment.

I hailed a Yellow and piled in. "1907 Elm Drive," I said. "And take your time. I've false teeth and they might drop out." The guy stared.

Then I had a hunch. A wild one like that Pimlico long shot I pulled out of a hat. I felt lucky that time, too. I felt the same way now. I rapped on the window. Jehu turned around. "Pull over," I said. He stopped in front of the drugstore I had noticed a few feet up. "Wait," I said.

The booths were in the back and some dame, as usual,

was taking her time on the books. She glared as I coughed harshly, "I'm sorry, ma'am," I said, spitting into my handkerchief. "It's t.b." She dropped the books quick and left the store. I thumbed under the B's in the Red Book. There were only two of them. One was a couple of blocks away.

His Yellow was parked on the other side of the street when I looked after giving my hackie the address. They had to make a "U" turn to get behind me, so I said, "Go slow, now," again. It would make it easier for him.

I ALWAYS liked automobile salesmen. They knew they had a tough job trying to pry heavy sugar from a guy and I guess boat salesmen are kin to them. The guy I talked to in the display room was a nice guy, even after I told him I was only "interested" in a speed boat. I didn't say I wanted to buy one.

He told me all about them and showed me some catalogues. The boats were beauties, all right. "We had one of these on the floor last week," he said, pointing to a sleek number labeled \$7,500, "but the customer wanted immediate delivery so we shipped it right out. We expect another any day," he said apologetically.

My ears quivered. I reached for my wallet, pulled out some cards and selected one from a French Restaurant on the North Side. "Here's my card," I said, "call me when it comes in." I thanked him and left.

"Now go to Elm Drive," I told the cabbie, "1907."

He threw in the clutch. So did the cabbie handling the hack down the street.

On the way to my apartment I looked over my .45. They're heavy guns to handle but I like 'em. Heavy butts save carrying a billy around. I whipped out my handkerchief and cleaned it off a little before sticking it back under my arm. The cab was still behind me.

WHEN I got into the apartment I left the door ajar a little and made for the phone right away. She was home. I told her what I wanted. "Make sure that they're small packages," I said, "then leave the rest to me, Miss

Tamoney." She sounded mystified, but I knew she'd obey orders. Then she hung up.

This time I dialed Barney Baron at Headquarters. "Gimme Homicide," I told the cop on the board. "And quick." It must have been my lucky day. Barney was in. He caught on quick. "I'll be right over," he said. "Keep him there."

The dick in me made me furnish the apartment the way I did. A mirror faced the door and in front of the mirror I had a low lounging chair. I lowered myself into it and waited for my fish to bite. He took the hook quickly.

The door opened slowly as he slid himself in. He moved fast considering the top of my head was all he could see. The knife swished past my ear as I grabbed his wrist, pulled hard, braced. I could feel the arm snap. He hit the wall heavily and lay still, white. I picked up the knife. Nice slender stiletto. I stuck it into my desk drawer then walked over, grabbed his leg and dragged him into the kitchenette. There was a tough pipe holding up the sink. I snapped the cuff on his good arm, locked the other link around the pipe.

"Pleasant dreams," I said, "until the cops wake you up."

I didn't bother to clean up. I stepped downstairs and grabbed the first cab, figuring on being out of the house before Barney blew in and started asking questions. Besides, he could give my little fish a workout.

THROGGS POINT is a five buck cab ride out of the city. Quite a place since what the town called Society took it up and erected summer homes on the long strip of land abutting clear out into the ocean like a finger reaching for the horizon. Pretty as a picture. There was a shorter strip, like a truncated finger right across an inlet that wasn't so pretty. They called it "The Beach" and it consisted of a bunch of shacks, a couple of low slung boathouses, and a three-story warehouse that was an eyesore if ever there was one. It was hideous, done in yellow. Brown letters across the face said:

R. MALERNO

Warehouse

It was no secret. Malerno had built practically every house on the Society side of the Point. I knew how the warehouse had been erected. Malerno had been in the liquor racket during prohibition and used this as his base. With Big Tim behind him—that was something I knew now but didn't know then—no wonder Rickey hadn't been pinched.

I was heading for the warehouse when a soft voice said:
"Howya flatfoot?"

IT WAS Rosie Baroni. I masked my surprise and looked at her. She was a gorgeous dish, all olive-complexioned. Her hair was black, her eyes like black-eyed Susans. She was wearing a tight-fitting sweater that did everything it was supposed to do. A knee length skirt and suede shoes completed the outfit. She didn't need stockings. Not with those browned legs.

"Hello, Rosie," I said. "What are you doing up here?"

"I'm on my vacation," she said, "at the city's expense."

I remarked that it was all right with me considering that the taxes I paid were letting her take a vacation. I didn't want to talk too much, right now. Even though Barney Baron down at Homicide was one of my best pals. So when she said: 'And what are you doing up here? Slumming?' I said:

"No. I'm doing a little fishing next week and I figured on chartering a boat."

SHE linked her arm in mine. "How about me coming along?" she asked.

I thought fast. "Too late," I said, "I've already finished."

"How about coming into my place for a little snort then?" she asked. She nodded up the street. "It's right over there."

I said all right and we walked over. It wasn't a bad place inside. Rosie had it fixed up neat. Plenty of comfortable chairs and pillows. A studio couch. A window that looked out over the water. And whiskey. She poured me a drink and one for herself.

"From one old trapper to another," I said, gulping mine.

She liked the crack. "That's funny," she said. "From one old trapper to another. Me a stoolie, you a dick."

THE hands of the clock stood like a sentinel when we spoke again. "Rosie," I said, "what's in that warehouse of Malerno's now-a-days? There used to be liquor there."

"I'm not sure," she said, "but I think he keeps his construction stuff there. You know he builds lots of houses on the Society side."

I said I'd like to look into it myself and she said: "Maybe you can. I got to know the watchman pretty well. He says I'm the best thing he ever saw in a bathing suit."

The fresh salt air pepped me up and I felt like a frisky yearling on the way over. The warehouse was on the tip of the stretch. The door was locked when we got there. Rosie rapped on the small door cut into the big swinging one. A pair of eyes peered out. "OK," a voice said. "Come in."

Rosie stepped through the door, me after her. The place was in semi-darkness. Rosie was speaking to the guy who let us in. "This is Mr. Hanley, Charlie," she said. "He's a detective."

The guy's voice was harsh. "Yeah," he said. He barked at me. "And don't reach for that gun under your arm, flatfoot or I'll plug you." He had a murderous snub-nosed .32 trained on me. "Get his gat, Rosie," he said.

THAT was wrong. As Rosie moved alongside me I let her have it. My right foot hit her left one; my arm slapped the back of her neck. She stumbled right into the guy as his gun went off. The flame split the gloom and the bullet spat into the stuff lined along the wall.

I brought the butt end of my .45 down hard, and he fell. He'd be in the hospital for a month. Rosie was still a little dazed, sitting on the floor. I walked over and barked: "Get up, rat."

"This is gonna be tough on you when Barney Baron gets a gander," I said. "He'll frame you for life."

She didn't say a word. I put the cuffs on her, doing it

the hard way so she wouldn't run out. It was my own method. One cuff around an ankle, bend the leg and hook the other end on an arm. Awkward. But they never got away.

I fumbled around the place until I found a light. This Rosie business had me puzzled. A stoolie who had been working for years with the cops and now, like that, she swings over to the other side. I didn't figure she was playing both ends against the middle. She'd never have gotten away with it.

BOXES and bales were piled all over the place. What a hideout. Everything in the world from furs to dresses. It was easy to figure out. This was where Malerno's highjackers brought the loot. I walked down to the end of the warehouse. No back doors. I looked on the floor. It was there. A big trap door. I climbed down, throwing my fountain pen flash around. The sliver of light was enough to show a big speedboat rocking beneath the warehouse.

Now I was puzzled. I was sure I had the right idea, but nothing to base it on. Rosie was still sitting where I left her. "What have you been rolling in?" I said, pointing to white patches on her blue sports skirt. It looked like flour—or talcum powder.

"This place is filthy," she said disgustedly.

She shouldn't have spoken. "Oh, yeah," I said. I grabbed her, pushed her away from the bale she was leaning against.

That small bale the shot had split was gone!

I found it easily enough. Rosie had rolled it behind a big box. The white stuff fell as I hefted the package. I ripped it open. It was there all right, plenty of tins. And the snow was there too.

I looked at my watch, 6:30. I had to work fast.

"Listen, Rosie," I said. "You're coming into town with me. I'm going to take the cuffs off you, but the first time you open your mouth I'll drill you, so help me." She knew I meant it. Once in the car, though, I cuffed her ankles together.

WE DROVE back to the city in her flivver. It was one of those eights with an overdrive on it. She stepped along like a falcon in flight. Rosie didn't say a word all the way down. I kept my eyes on the road.

It was 8:10 when we drove into the city limits and I saw the police car. I called them over. "Here's a passenger for Barney Baron, down in Homicide, boys," I said. "Tell him to wait for a call from me. Hanley's the name."

They drove off with Rosie. I threw the car into gear, swung around and set off for Janet Tamoney's house. Five minutes wasted.

There was a big sedan parked out front when I halted Rosie's car a few hundred yards away. No sign of the chauffeur. Ho-ho, I thought, it's the back way for me.

I moved along through the darkness into the shrubbery, feeling my way cautiously. The dining room was on the north side of the house. The curtains were drawn, but not tight enough to retain all the light. I crept close and looked in. Empty! I knew then they were in the library.

I tried one of the windows with my knife. It opened easily and I slid into the dining room. I knew the library was across the hall. I started to step out when I saw the chauffeur. He was sitting at an angle to me, his back turned. A pretty scared looking butler identified as Walter was sitting across from him. His face was white. This was probably the first time Walter ever had a man train a gun on him.

He didn't see me, thank God. As a matter of fact, he didn't see any too much because as I brought my gun down on the chauffeur's head, he fainted.

JANET was in the library with Malerno. I could hear her and Rickey talking when I touched open the door a crack. Rickey's voice was hard: "I want to know what the idea is of giving me those wrapped up newspaper clippings," he said, "and you'd better spill fast."

"But I've already told you," Janet said, "after Dad was found today I opened his safe and saw those little packages addressed to you. That's why I invited you to dinner, to tell you about them."

I couldn't get in before he slapped her, hard. I spun

him around quick-like, jabbed a left into his stomach, turned it. Then crossed with my right. He didn't go down. He was plenty tough.

I got my gat out first. A slug tore into his arm and he dropped the gun. "Sit down, Rickey," I said. "It's all over, but the shooting."

I turned to Janet. "There's the rat that murdered your father," I said. "He wanted your pop to run dope and Big Tim wouldn't stand for that. Rickey knew it. He had been chiseling your old man for years, bringing in the snow. Someone tipped Big Tim off, he called Rickey that night you heard them arguing. That was the show down."

RICKEY spoke: "My mouthpiece will rip that to pieces. There's no evidence."

"Shut up, rat," I said. "There's enough opium and snow up there in that warehouse on Throggs Point to keep you in jail for life. Maybe I can't prove by law of evidence that you dumped Big Tim in the river, but I'll bet plenty you called him to the warehouse next morning, bumped him on the head and dropped him into the drink."

I snapped my gun at the door as a shadow fell. It was Walter. White and weak. He started to speak, almost fainted when he saw the roscoe. "Phone for Mr. Hanley," he said. I'll bet he never even knew I was there.

I picked up the receiver on the library desk extension.

"What's the idea," a voice boomed, "are you running a one man round-up?" It was Barney, down at Homicide.

"You guessed it," I said. "Did you pick up my two rats?"

"Got 'em both," he said. His voice sounded puzzled. "But how did you know we were looking for Rosie and her boy friend?"

"What boy friend?" I said.

"Scars Scarpati," he said. "We've been looking for that guy on a carving charge for a couple of days. He's been hiding out. We were looking for Rosie, too. She quit our side when she found out we were after Scarpati."

It was too much for me. Love does funny things to dames, even when they're tough like Rosie. "Listen, Bar-

ney," I said, "come up with a couple of men, pronto. And bring the reporters. This story will make you a captain."

I HUNG up and spoke to Rickey. "P. S. to my story," I said. "When you sent Scarpati to tail me, you called up the warehouse on Throggs Point. You told your gunman to plug me after Rosie brought me in. The only hitch you made, sweetheart, was in not figuring I'd drop Scarpati. You see, Rosie spent too much time with me. Waiting for her sweetheart to knife me."

I handed Walter the heater I had taken away from Scarpati. "Look, Walter," I said, making sure the safety catch was off, "all you have to do is press the trigger on this thing if Malerno moves a hair. Understand?"

"Mr. Hanley," said Janet. "I don't know how to thank you for all this. I know there'll be plenty of scandal, but I don't care. I'm going away."

"There's a boat sailing at midnight," I said. "Can you pack to leave right after the cops leave?"

She nodded. She was as good a packer as she was a prophet. The scandal broke all right.

The steward said we were the talk of the ship.

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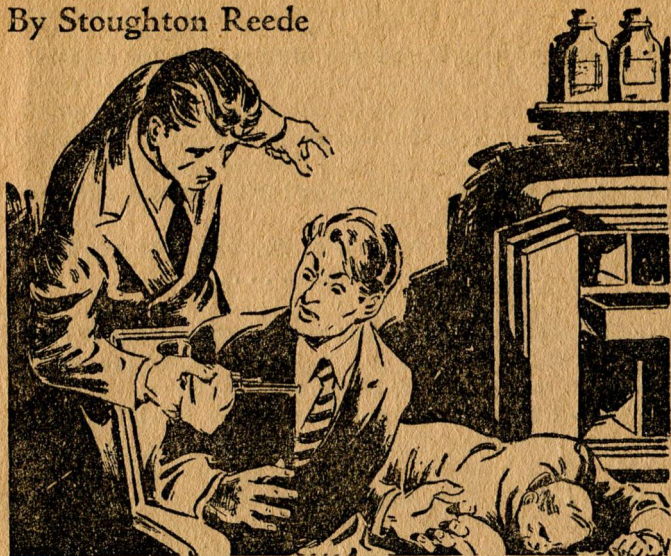
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• ASK FOR IT AT YOUR NEWSSTAND •
OCTOBER ISSUE ON SALE JULY 16

By Stoughton Reede



STUCK WITH MURDER

“**H**ONEY, will you stop and get me a pack of cigarettes? I'm all out and I'm dying for a smoke.” I glanced in the direction of the voice and brought the car to a stop near a drug store, which was across the street. “Sure, Baby,” I grinned. “What'll you have?”

“Happy Hits.” The voice was soft, warm.

I edged out of the seat and walked toward the shop. What a lucky stiff I am. As a private detective I had met all sorts of women in my work, but nowhere had I ever run across a girl like Marilyn. And the funny part about it was that she had been under my nose all the time.

She was a waitress in a small cafe near my office. I had just finished a job of tagging after a Park Avenue lothario, whose wife wanted to pin a divorce on his dinner jacket.

A girl's innocent request sent private eye Wilder to the store, and into a serious murder jam.

Incidentally, of course, she was after a deep cut into his wallet. I didn't like those kinds of cases, but you gotta eat. I was tired and needed some relaxation. I dropped into the cafe for a cup of coffee, and there she was. Blonde, big innocent grey eyes and more freckles than all the kids in Kansas combined. Kansas was her home and she had a soft, leisurely drawl.

I sighed as I opened the door of the store. She was new, fresh. This was just what I needed. . . .

SOMETHING cracked against the side of my head. Everything turned red, and dazzling lights danced before my eyes. I felt another blow, and blacked out.

It seemed as if in the next second my head began to throb like an electric drill. Slowly, I opened my eyes and looked into the pink, round face of none other than Sergeant Ellwyn P. O'Hara of Homicide.

"All right, Wilder," he growled. "Snap out of it."

I blew air, hot and loud. The fathead. I get flattened like an iron and he wants me to do a jig. "Shut up," I mumbled, "and leave me alone."

He grabbed me by the lapel and heaved me on my feet. I felt like the roof had caved in. "For Pete's sake," I yelled, "take your hands off me. What do you think I am, a sack of potatoes?"

O'Hara grunted and, by way of answer, gently hurled me into a chair. A uniformed cop handed me a glass of water.

"I could do better with a slug of rye," I grumbled as I downed the tumbler.

"All right, wise guy, let's have it." His voice clicked like a typewriter. "Is your business so bad that you have to bump off a drug store hackney, or did you just want some small change?"

I blinked my eyes. The static in my head hadn't cleared, and it seemed like the whole Atlantic Ocean was roaring in my ears.

"What are you driving at, O'Hara?" I asked. "I came in for some cigarettes."

HE LAUGHED loudly. "That's the most innocent thing I've heard in fifteen minutes. Take a look around, Junior."

I straightened up. The place was neat and orderly. Nothing was disturbed—except the small safe behind the drug counter. It was wide open and quite empty. I noticed a trickle of blood that edged into a pool. I rubbed my head. Not mine.

"Over here, Sonny Boy." O'Hara's voice was beginning to annoy me. He pointed to a crumpled figure of an old man. His voice droned on:

"The safe is empty. The old guy is dead, and this—" he shoved a gun, partially covered with a handkerchief, under my nose "--this was found clenched tightly in your dainty hand."

"Gimme an aspirin," I said wearily. "I got a headache." I still wasn't fully aware of what had happened.

"Quit stalling, Wilder." O'Hara never raised his voice. "This is open and shut. . . ."

"O.K.—O.K." I interrupted, throwing up my hands. "I get the old coot to open the safe, bump him off. And just to make things easy for you, I tap myself on the head, not once, but twice."

O'Hara glared at me, his small eyes burning. But he didn't say a word.

"Get wise, O'Hara," I continued. "The gun isn't mine. I never carry one unless I am on a job."

"And what do you call this?" He leaned close to me. "The gun can be traced. This is a murder rap." The last he said slowly, letting each word sink in. I began to realize what I spot I was in!

An ambulance howled up and a police doctor, without saying a word to anyone, strode over to the body and leaned over it. I finally woke up. This isn't a game, O'Hara's playing. I am on the tail end of a beautiful frame.

The doctor straightened up, walked over to O'Hara and mumbled a few words to him. O'Hara turned to me: "Well, he isn't quite dead yet. He may be able to identify you."

MY HEAD hurt and I didn't feel like arguing. O'Hara didn't have it in for private detectives like many policemen. But like too many of them he had got into a rut and couldn't see any farther than the nearest suspect.

He straddled a chair, resting his chin on an arm. "I suppose you're going to stick to the cigarette story."

I said nothing.

"Naturally, you have an alibi," he purred on.

"Naturally," I replied. "There was a girl with me in my car."

O'Hara looked closely at me for an instant. Without batting an eye, he said: "Get set for a shock, Sonny Boy. There's nobody outside."

I cursed and sprang out of my chair. Except for police cars, the street was empty. I didn't get it. Marilyn seemed so nice and not the type to pull out like that.

O'Hara laid a hand on my shoulder. "All right, Wilder, let's go. I'm holding you for. . . ."

"Never mind the oratory," I interjected. I was in as deep a fog as ever with that bump on my head. This was one sweet mess, I realized.

I turned to O'Hara. "Now listen! There was a girl with me, I tell you. In my car. She was right across the street. Maybe the thug who pulled this job grabbed her, too. Trace the car and you've got your man."

I could see he wasn't impressed. He looked at me for a moment and then said softly: "O.K., Sonny, we'll check for you." He shoved me into the nearest prowler car. "Right now, you are my guest."

In a few minutes I was getting the works at the local precinct. But I stuck doggedly to my story. The boys finally let up and let me get some sleep.

THE next day one of my few grateful clients posted my bail. The police had checked for my car. It had disappeared into thin air. As for the gun, it was as I had suspected—it could not be traced. I stopped by my office for my own gun. This job was pulled by one of a thousand of small-time operators. He would be as easy to find as a submerged sub in the middle of the Pacific.

Just as I was about to leave the phone rang. I picked up the receiver, and a familiar voice came over the wire.

"Is that you, Steve?" It was Marilyn.

"Well, what in hell happened to you last night?" I growled.

Her voice sounded anxious. "After you went into the drug store last night, I saw a man walk out. I waited for a few minutes and then somebody else went in. He ran right out again and in a few minutes I heard the police."

"Well," she continued, "I was afraid. I didn't want to get into any trouble, so I left."

She started to cry: "I know. . . . I know. I'm terribly sorry. I didn't know what to do. I was so scared."

"Sure, sure, Baby. Forget it for now. What did you do with my car?"

"Your car?" she queried back at me. "Oh, yes! I parked it around the corner from the drug store."

"You what?" I was incredulous.

"Yes," she said. "I thought you might need it. I took a cab home."

I never laughed so hard in all my life. The police dragged the entire city of New York, and there was the car right under O'Hara's nose. I promised myself never to let the thick-headed cop forget it.

"What's the matter, Steve?" Marilyn sounded worried. "Are you all right?"

"Sure, Honey, sure," I said. "I'll tell you all about it some other time."

AFTER I hung up I sobered up. Things were still bad—damned bad. After getting my own car, I headed for the East Side. I reached for a cigarette. Damn! I had left them in another suit. I stopped near a small bar. The Third Avenue El rattled above me as I entered. I got a beer and then ambled over to the cigarette machine. Sitting close to it was a neatly dressed man of about 40. I pushed the lever of the machine. The man turned. His eyes flew up in surprise. Yanking a gun from his hip pocket, he sent a slug past me crashing into the machine, and ran out into the street.

He must have been the guy who had pulled that job the night before and had recognized me. I pulled out my gun and dashed after him. I spotted him running across the street. The walks were crowded and I didn't dare shoot. Some one screamed. I ran into the middle of the street and plunged through the crowd that had begun to collect. The fool had run into the path of a truck. I sped up to him and grabbed his gun. He was only dazed.

"O. K., Punk," I said, grabbing him, "get up!"

I glanced at the truck. On one side there was a large placard with a picture that bore these familiar words:

SMOKE HAPPY HITS FOR A HAPPY SMOKE

Well, to make a long story short the old guy identified him as the hold-up man, and I became the recipient of the city's apologies in the person of none other than Sergeant Ellwyn P. O'Hara of Homicide.

After that ordeal I really needed some relaxation. This time I called on another doll. She was slick, worked in a small night club and a brunette. Soon we're heading for the open country. The night air is sweet and good. This babe turns to me and says:

"Darling, I'm all out of cigarettes. Will you stop and get me a pack of Happy Hits?"

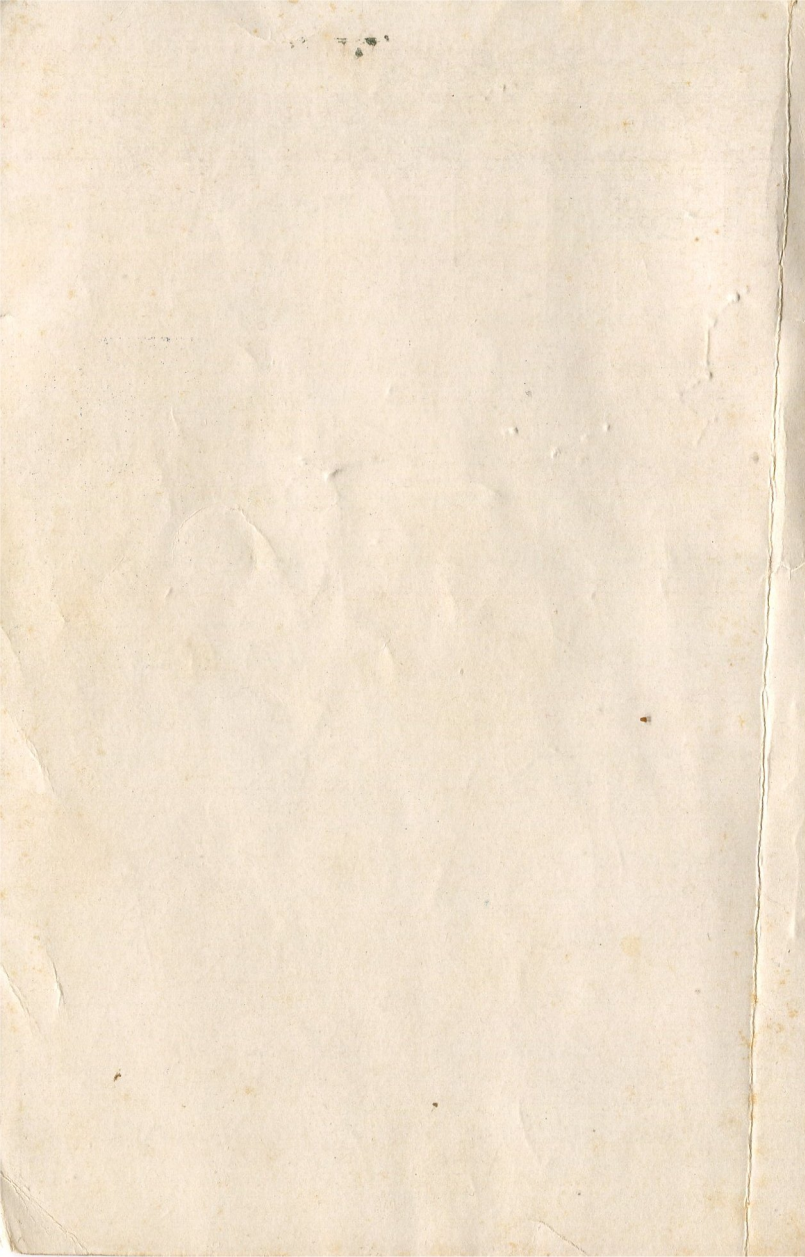
I almost lost control of the car.

Well, friends, we come to the end of the first issue of **POCKET DETECTIVE** Magazine. We hope you liked it, and we'll strive to give you a swell issue every time. How about letting us hear what **YOU** think about it? Tell us what you like and what you don't.

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