

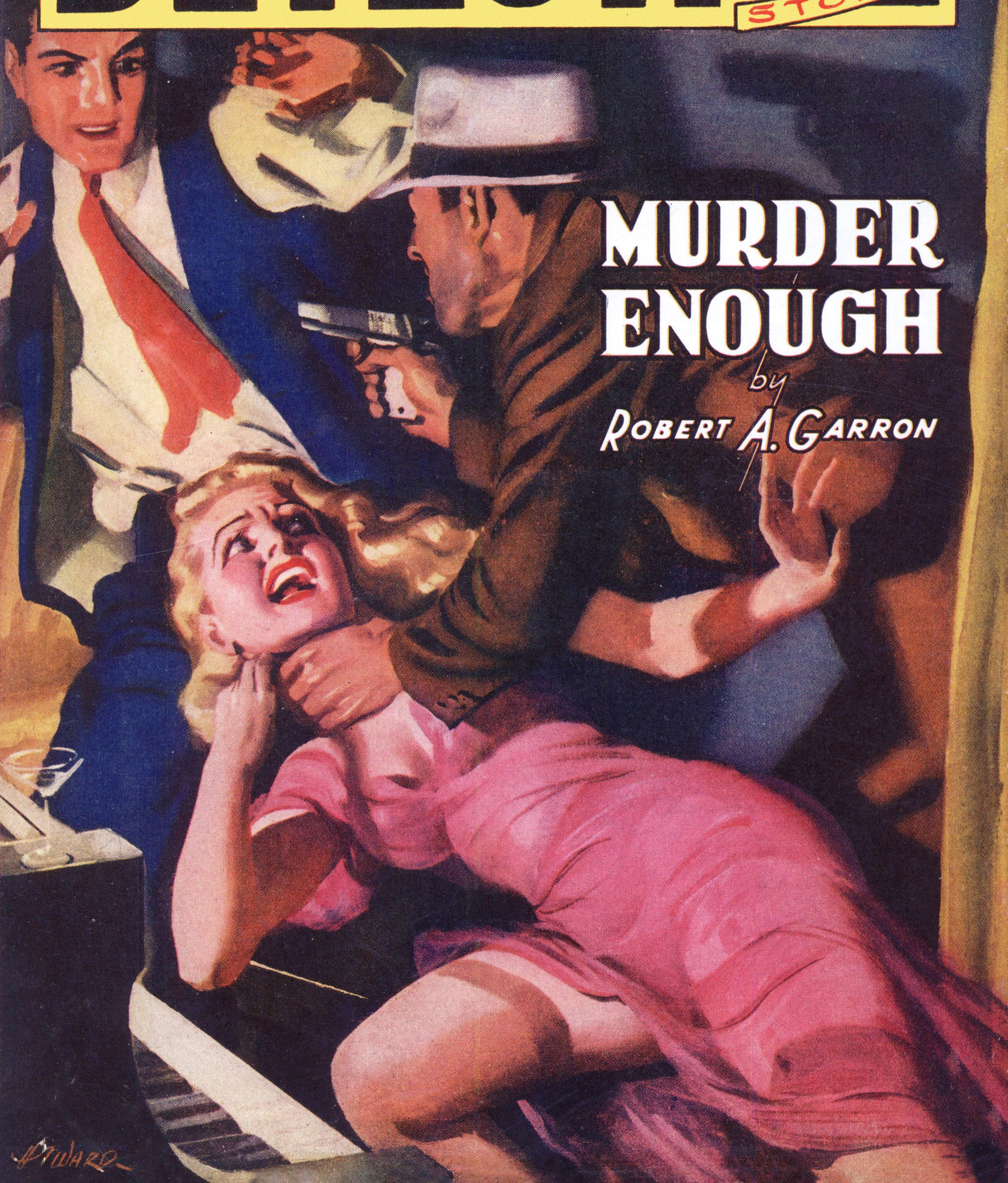
February 15th

PRIVATE

DETECTIVE

IND

STORIES



MURDER ENOUGH

by
ROBERT A. GARRON

PTWARD



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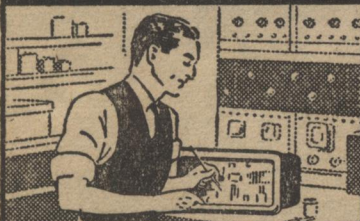
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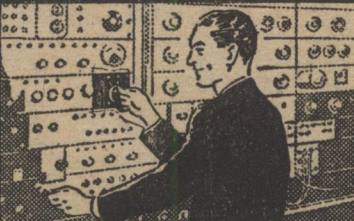
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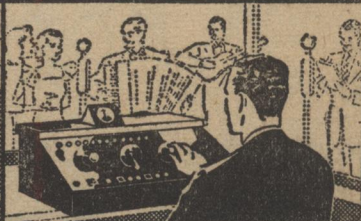
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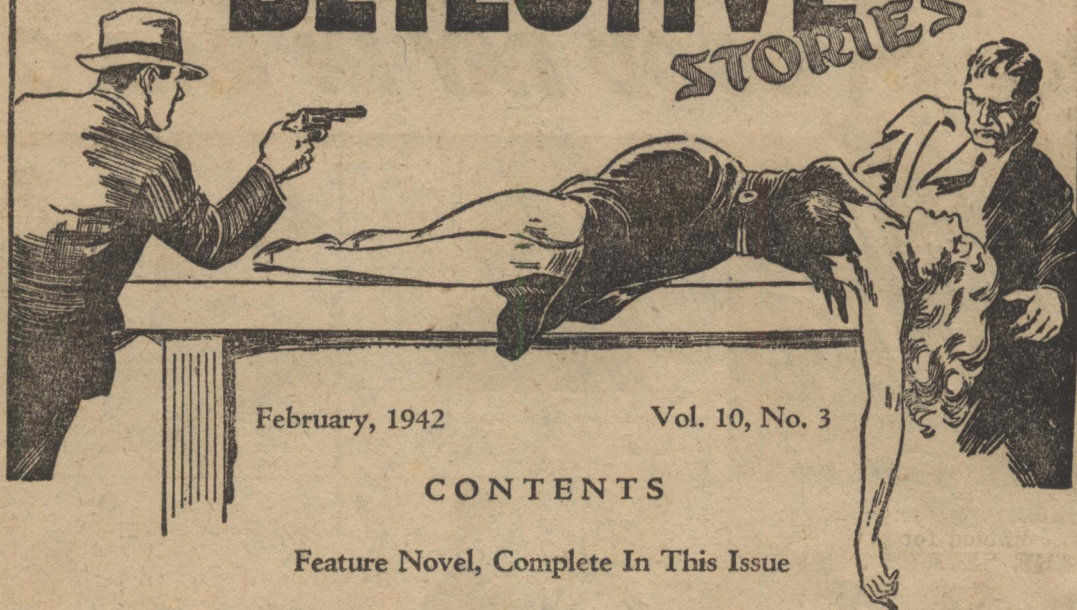


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PRIVATE DETECTIVE STORIES



February, 1942

Vol. 10, No. 3

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The names and descriptions of all characters appearing in this magazine are entirely fictitious. If there is any resemblance either in name or description, to any living person, it is purely a coincidence.

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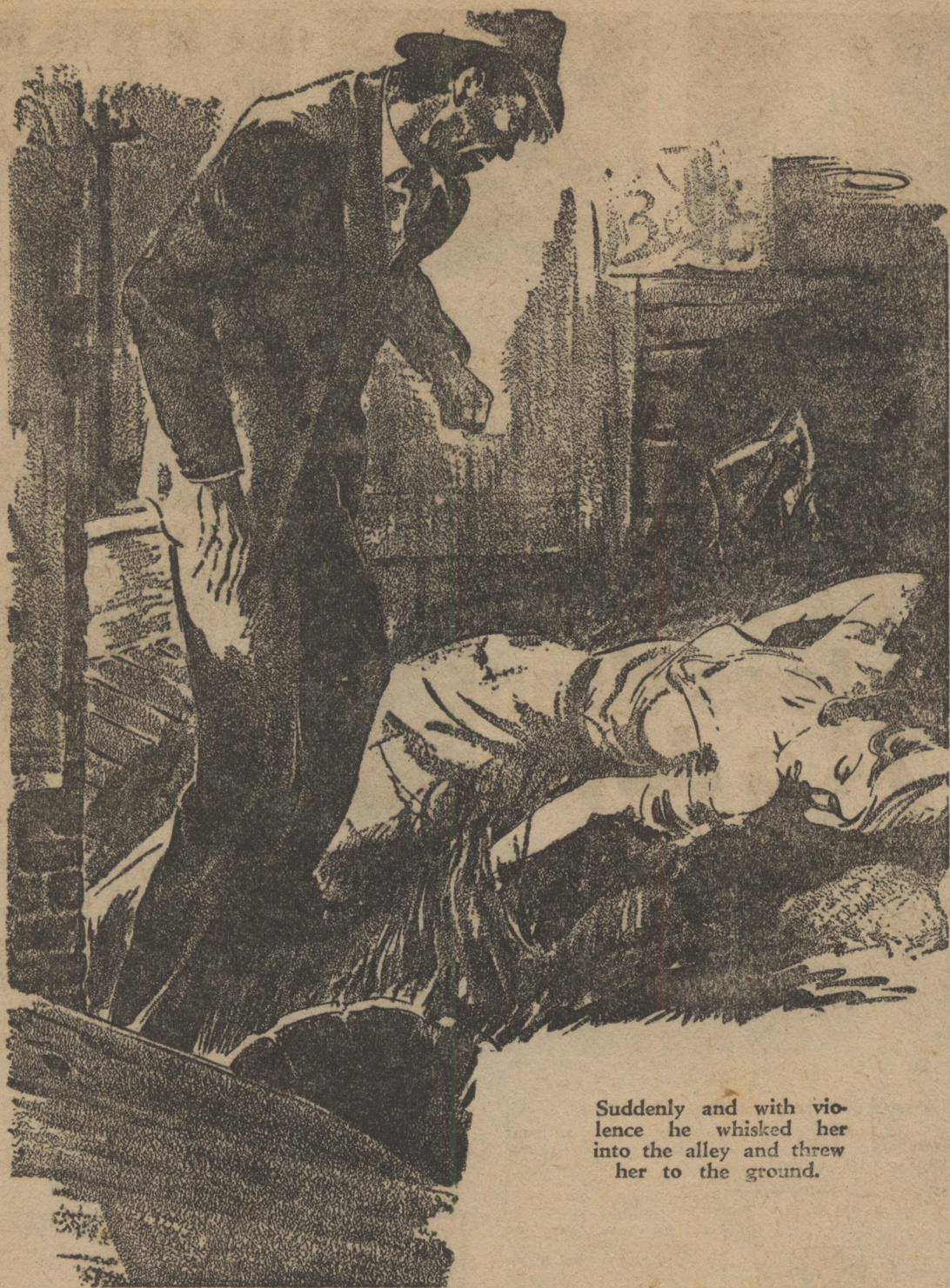
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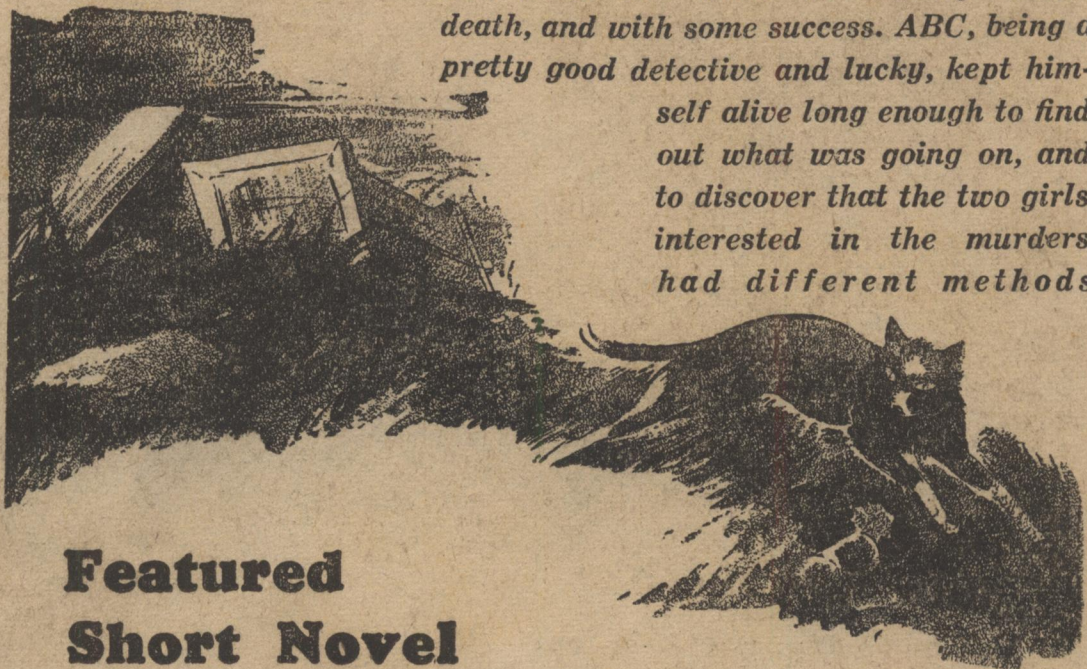


Suddenly and with violence he whisked her into the alley and threw her to the ground.

MURDER

By ROBERT A. GARRON

The killer was intent on creating violent death, and with some success. ABC, being a pretty good detective and lucky, kept himself alive long enough to find out what was going on, and to discover that the two girls interested in the murders had different methods



**Featured
Short Novel
Complete in This Issue**



USTIN CORBETT was a very patient individual, even for a private investigator. His car was a business coupe, which he drove into the extreme northwest corner of an all-night parking lot. This was also the street corner, at a T-intersection. The cross street didn't go through because Dawes Boulevard followed the river. Diagonally across the boulevard rose two stories of the Gates Metal Products Company.

A stranger would be surprised twice. Firstly, it would be remarkable that a plant doing such a known volume of business could be crammed into a two-decker, only half a block in length. Then the stranger would be dizzied if he leaned over the boulevard railing and saw that the plant dropped straight down the bluff for five stories more to the river flats, where there was a considerable maze of railway tracks, switches, siding and loading sheds, and boxcars. Only a quarter of a mile farther down

ENOUGH

the river was the Union Depot.

It was night, and dark. The sky was overcast, and only alternate street lights were burning. On a hunch, Corbett had chosen this point of vantage for the simple reason that he had nothing to go on. Tonight he was going to do nothing but wait. And hope. He was looking for Morton Gates, former president of the Gates Metal Products Company. His employers were Gogh, Pratt, and Avery, the new owners, Eastern financiers who had come to the Midwest looking for a good thing and found it in Gates' plant.

Careful footsteps crunched the cinders covering the parking lot. Corbett didn't have to turn his head. In the rear-vision mirror he could see the shape of the man easing up to the car, and he bided his time until the stranger was at the open window. Then they were looking at each other.

Corbett stuck his cigarette in his lips and drew on it. The coal brightened, and in the dim, ruddy light they could make out each other's features easily. Corbett exhaled and asked, "What do you want?"

The other man, Rennels, looked hard and didn't answer at once. He looked hard—that is, his appearance was tough. His eyes were deliberately narrowed, his lips were lean, and his nostrils were shaped as though he were about to sneer. Corbett didn't like men like this, and cool, tiny bells tinkled down his spine. He spoke again: "What is this? A hold-up?"

"What are you doing here?" Rennels countered.

"What are you doing here?" Rennett asked interestedly.

Promptly Rennels grabbed down the door handle, and when he did that, Corbett, a huge man, threw his weight at the door. The unexpected impact of the door hurled Rennels backward a dozen feet or more before he fell to the cinders, losing his hat, as Corbett got out in pursuit.

Before he arrived there, Rennels had a revolver out and was sitting up with it. Corbett halted abruptly and gravely watched Rennels climb to his feet, swearing. The private detective was outraged, but he didn't show any emotion. He advanced slowly, "bellying up" to the gun.

At that point Rennels, furious, said, "You're a very funny kind of citizen."

"Am I?"

"You are, pal. You are."

"I'm curious about that," Corbett suggested.

"What do you know about the Gates Company?" Rennels asked.

"I'm waiting for my wife," Corbett answered, lying. He was not married and never intended to marry. He was afraid of women, big as he was.

"Come on, come on," said Rennels.

"If you're going to hold me up, go ahead and do it and get stuck," said Corbett. "I haven't got any money. Go ahead and find out, and get it over with."

He turned his head deliberately, looking around as though in search of an ambling cop. He knew what Rennels was thinking: This was a very peculiar way for an average citizen to act. The average citizen, confronted with the law, would be meek and anxious to go away and hide in his cellar as fast as possible. Rennels

shoved a hand in his pocket and briefly showed a detective's shield.

"Maybe you're waiting for your wife, and maybe you're not," said Rennels. "But I wouldn't wait too long, friend."

"How would I know you were a detective, poking your head in my car like that?" Corbett argued.

"Never mind it. I hope your wife shows up."

CORBETT turned his back deliberately and returned to his car, and entered it. The city detective stared for a while, then eased away into the darkness and was gone. Corbett measured his time by smoking a cigarette, then started the car and drove out of the lot. Definitely he wasn't wanted around here, and it was folly to risk another encounter with Rennels, and a quarrel. Cops had a way of making it tough for private dicks.

On the one hand, he had a perfect right to stay; he was in an all night parking lot. Also, he could fix things easily by talking to his employers. But it would sound pretty silly, earning his pay by just sitting on his derriere across from the plant on the chance that Gates would show up; he'd probably get fired from the job.

He had to drive only a couple of blocks, when he went down an underpass and cut back again at the first intersection, and he stopped finally in the Gates parking lot. If he were challenged by a watchman it would be all right, but he wished to do a little challenging of his own. There was something very intriguing about this job, and his curiosity about the plant itself was unsatisfied.

Down on the flats the gloom was

as thick as gravy, and the smell of the river was in the air. Across the river was the boat club on Margaret Island. Aided by lights from over there, thin lines that trickled across the water, he was able to pick his way across the tracks.

At the south end of the plant was a steel-framework, plank stairway running up the face of the shale bluff to the fourth story, one below street level. The heavy planks were soundless under his weight as he ascended. He explored the landings carefully on each floor. On each was an entrance, locked and barred, flanked by windows barred similarly. The architecture of all four landings was identical, except for one small detail.

It was mere accident that he tried the bars of the window on the top landing, casually wondering what it would be like to be in prison. He staggered back, struck the railing, and his weight all but launched him overboard. Unpleasantly surprised, he heard the dull shock of metal engaging with metal. A section of the bars had come free in his hand, and then fallen back into place.

"Hmh," he commented, almost cooing. It didn't occur to him that he had almost taken sickening flight over the rail, to be mangled on the loose rocks at the base of the bluff.

He returned to the window, grinning like a giant pixie, and tried the bars again. His grin went away; he prowled and probed, pulled with all his might, and it took him more than a quarter of an hour to make the thing work again. This time he was braced, and he held on.

Before, things had happened so unexpectedly that he thought the section was hinged on top. It wasn't.

It was hinged like a gate and he had been forcing it at the wrong angle. He could have missed it easily; now, again, it was luck that found him squeezing the crossbar as he pulled, instead of yanking at it, at the same spot.

There was a small buglight clipped in his pocket, and he risked snapping it on.

THE bars had been sawed through, but when the little gate was closed there was no sign of tampering except on close inspection. Some putty-like black lubricant concealed the saw cuts, and the latch itself was admirably contrived. The flat crossbar had been sawed in two, and a slot was cut. The slot was filled neatly with a pad of rubber which kept the bars from rattling. Also, it froze the simple latchbolt so that the gate wouldn't open unless the crossbar was squeezed hard.

There was even a powerful spring for shutting the gate automatically.

Corbett held it open and tried the window. It was a large window, but it was perfectly hung and rolled up with very little persuasion; the slides were oiled, and the bottom window rolled up and bumped gently to a stop.

The detective smiled again, contenting himself with a long look at the interior, at the piles of stock, the brass tubing and rods, the screw machines and lathes and bins of cuttings, racks of bulk metal, benches, gleams. He inhaled the lovely smell of a machine shop—of cut metal and oil and heat and motors, a bitter composition of odors, but exciting. A few random, dim lights were burning in the shop, providing enough illumination

for him to enjoy the sight of the ranks of machine tools.

He realized that he would be in sight of anyone leaning over the rail above him on the street. He closed the window and let the gate shut, marveling at the way it clunked solidly into place to form an innocent section of the bars.

This shop had received a war order or orders, for what and for what amount not being advertised. The plant was equipped to turn out surprising articles. It had kept going on beer spigots, car heaters, furniture hardware, and various orders of metal items ranging from simple sections of brass tubing for dental castings to a single fantastic article like an aluminum tjanting, an involved pen-shaped gadget for tooling the covers of books bound in leather. The plant, with war arrived, was also excellently equipped to turn out gun carriages, shells, small arms, gun parts for big guns, airplane parts—a number of important little items or any one of them, whatever the government wanted. The word going around was that the government was dallying, that Gates was dallying, that Gates couldn't fill the order without a guarantee of metal deliveries, that the government wasn't sure. Mostly it was said that in Washington the government had commandeered the warehouses of all the manufacturers of red tape. There wasn't enough red tape to go around.

Corbett knew about this, but it wasn't his job to wonder. All he had to do was find a man—Gates.

He murmured, because it was funny, "This is very interesting."

He wanted to go inside and look

around, but there was a major drawback. He weighed two hundred and twenty pounds, and it was impossible for him to squeeze his beef through the aperture in the barred window.

He examined the hinging, the beautifully-done latch, the rubber cushion in the slot, and he murmured a remarkable understatement:

"Somebody did that on purpose."

Softly he descended the heavy wooden stairs, walking as lightly as a balloon on his little feet.

HE HAD discovered something, but he could have been luckier. Because Morton Gates was only seven blocks away. If Corbett had driven in that direction on his way home, he would have run smack into the fight which was going on.

Wadsworth Massey, a mechanic at Gates, was loitering homeward, home being a room he rented from a somewhat buxom young widow named Flo Barron. He was supposed to get meals with the moderate rent he was paying, but generally, morning, noon, and dinner time, he found Flo napping or drunk or just not there. The modest house, small and pretty well gnawed at by the weather, was the third from the far end of the block. As he approached it he thought with furious intensity and worry about the little job he was doing at Gates. It was an upsetting thing if it was so, what he had found just before quitting time at five-thirty. Only an insignificant detail it was, and it wouldn't be noticed by a man off-guard. But Woddie, a nickname he detested, wanted tautly to know whether that detail was a dud or a delayed-action bomb. The only way he could find out was

to remember one automatic action of his own, of the day before, and he couldn't remember.

It was this: He was working on a gunsight that was important in America's national defense. There was no doubt in the world that the U.S. Army would order it in millions, and related orders would be given unquestionably, probably making subcontracting necessary.

Like most of the men, Woddie left his toolbox at the shop. For one thing, it was too damned heavy to keep lugging back and forth, and he didn't want to be kidded about being afraid that someone would swipe them. The tools. He never loaned a single tool, not even a screwdriver, on principle. He had some Belgian stuff that was unobtainable any more, German likewise, delicate instruments which could shave fractions inside a thousandth of an inch. The box had a lock and was kept locked. Because he felt about the marvelous tools the way a tobacco heiress feels about a binful of jewels she never wears.

Inside the toolbox was an oblong compartment with a lid which was not locked, but fitted as tightly as the cover of a paint can, and in that he kept the model of the gunsight when he wasn't working on it. He had no blueprints; the blueprints were in his head.

At quitting time the model was there unharmed on its pad of chamois. He always made sure of that, sticking a steel point into a hole drilled for the purpose and prying up the lid, snapping it shut again.

What chilled him, this time, was that the model was reversed in its chamois bed. There was ample room

in the compartment, lengthwise, but he didn't remember having replaced the gadget in that position. There wasn't enough room for the sight to be tumbled over, supposing that his toolbox had merely been shifted.

It was possible that the box had been opened and prowled through, some mechanics being born borrowers when they want a special tool. But he wanted to know whether the prowling was purposeful, first of all whether there had been any prowling. He had reviewed his simplest actions therefore, checking back until he was dizzy. So tonight he had gone to a movie to clear his mind,

and then went walking and thinking, and he still had no answer. In one respect and in any case he had an edge: The model wasn't finished and was no good to anyone now, though a shrewd gunsmith might figure it out in time. There was a part missing, deliberately, and he wasn't going to incorporate that till the last.



This had been a respectable neighborhood thirty years ago, but now it had only the huge elms spaced along the hard, bare-earth boulevard.

A bulky shadow detached itself from the trunk of the tree in front of Flo Barron's place and blocked Woddie's way on the sidewalk.

"Hello," said big, gray old Morton Gates. He had the low, husky voice of a lion purring a secret: "I can get along without you, Massey." And he struck.

CHAPTERR II

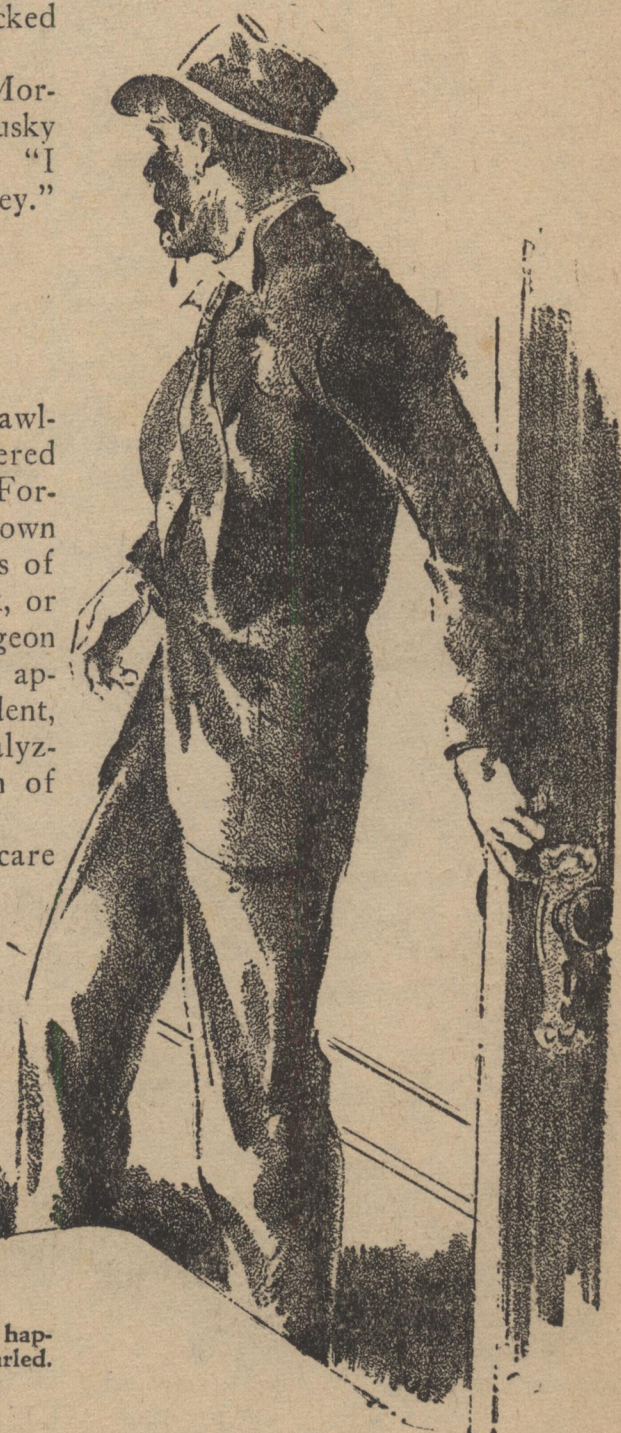
Only a Whack?



ODDIE dived sprawling before he recovered from his surprise. Fortunately he went down on the scanty grass of the lawn instead of the sidewalk, or later on there would be a surgeon taking stitches in his scalp. The appearance of the former president, his former employer, was as paralyzing as would be the apparition of Lucifer to a learned atheist.

However, Woddie could take care

of himself. He stood just under six feet, not quite so tall as Gates; he was a lean, tough, blond bozo, and he had been around. Slowly, ready, he rose from the ground in a crouch.



"Never mind what happened to me!" he snarled.

Instead of jumping down Gates' throat, which he was certain he could do, he asked, "What was that for?"

"I just thought I'd see whether I could take you apart."

"You've gone wacky," said Massey. "Old as you are, I ought to beat you to a jelly for giving me that sock." He was careful in the way he stood; however cockily he talked, he had a healthy respect for his former boss, who was big-boned and formidable no matter how old.

"Where have you been?" Gates asked grimly. "I've been here looking for you half a dozen times."

"Why, I've been here and there. Tonight it was a movie," said Woddie, willing to let matters end here. "I don't know why you want to make something out of this."

"You don't!" Gates exploded. He glowered at Woddie incredulously, and recounted, "I did you a good turn once. I listened to your hard-luck yarn and hired you, without caring whether you were a good mechanic or not. What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

"I wasn't the only one," said Woddie defensively.

"You're a liar," said Gates. "You're worse than a crook; you're a snide and a scoundrel. You knew damned well that you were selling me out."

"That's not true, sir," said Massey levelly.

"How can anyone talk to you?" Gates asked bitterly. "How can you lie like that?"

"Mr. Gates," Woddie insisted, "you're off your trolley."

"You sold your stock in the company, didn't you?" Gates demanded.

"Yes, sir," Woddie admitted cau-

tiously. "But so did the others."

Gates waved that aside impatiently. "I'm not talking about the other men. Wasn't it understood that the stock wouldn't be sold to outsiders?"

Woddie argued, "It didn't seem that my few shares would matter very much."

The older man sneered, "I suppose the other men I trusted will save their faces with the same argument."

"I needed the money," said Woddie, his anger rising at Gates' unreasonableness. "You can't deny that I held out to the last."

"You damned right you held out to the last," said Gates in a kind of gruff snarl. "You *held out*. So you got twice as much as anyone else."

"I didn't know that," Woddie claimed flatly. "I saw a chance to set up a small business for myself."

"You didn't know that!" Gates mocked. "You know what the market value of that stock is. And you could not imagine what was going on when they kept bidding up the price out of sight."

"No, sir. I thought they were just gambling on profits from government orders."

"Why didn't you come to me?"

"Why?" Woddie expostulated. "Can't you understand? I just didn't know I was doing any harm!"

"You sold me out," said Gates.

"I'm afraid that I'm getting tired of this," said Woddie civilly. "Good-night."

GATES lifted his fist in a jerk, only a couple of inches. But Woddie naturally assumed that he was going to get socked again, and

lashed out with wildcat speed. As a matter of fact, he had been in fights before, and he had been told that he fought like a wildcat. But striking out like that for Gates' head was imprudent. It was a terrible mistake.

His blow was knocked aside, and then Gates hit him with a big stone. His bony fist felt like rock, anyhow. This time, when Woddie got up off the ground, he catapulted himself, tackling Gates' midsection. He planned to make the fight rough and tumble, but when both went down he bounced and went flying through the air, his hold torn free.

There was no sparring at all when they came together again. He was sure that he was landing wonderful, solid blows, but dull detonations inside his head were insidiously hypnotizing him. Somewhere Gates must have learned the manly art of bruising, because he kept bludgeoning Woddie with regularity, as though timing himself with a metronome. Then he hung one, a sockdolager. Woddie's feet left the ground and he kerfopped on his back and stayed there twitching, like a sleeping dog dreaming of chasing rabbits. In his imagination the fight was still going on, and his fists were functioning like striking snakes, to the awful detriment of Gates' countenance.

He started swearing mechanically, and a big fist gripped him at the throat and jerked him to his feet. Gates bludgeoned him a few times, shook him, and when he let go Woddie simply descended to the grass and spread out in all directions.

He was out cold for only a few seconds.

And he heard Gates say, panting, "I'm not through. Not by a damned

sight, after all these years. You're not as smart as you think, Massey. Some wonderful things are going to happen to you yet, or I miss my guess. You wait."

He hadn't taken off his coat, which was split at both arms, and he was breathing hard. Otherwise, the only damage he had received was a cut over one eye and a bruised lip. Turning his back he walked away heavily, dabbing the cut with a kerchief.

ON THE ground, Woddie kept taking deep lungfuls of air. He was mildly consternated at receiving the worst beating of his life from a gray oldster, but there was no thought of revenge in his mind. Apparently the old so-and-so could see in the dark. If it had been daylight, probably Woddie could have given a better account of himself. He was disgusted with himself, but in his shaken reasoning he was mostly alarmed. What Gates had said amounted to an ambiguous, personal threat. It wasn't so much vindictiveness in Gates—more a cold pronouncement that unpleasantness was ahead. He couldn't think of what Mort Gates meant, unless the old boy was simply touched in the head.

Resentment burned in him. Shortly he would be in a position to resign and go into business for himself, and anyhow it was none of Gates' affair what he did. Nor was it any concern of his how Gates' affairs mended. He doubted very much whether Gates would waylay him again, but he felt very much abused. He was in the right. No one out of envy or revenge could prevent him from going ahead with his plans.

A light veil of rain was feather-

ing down, and the cool drizzle made him sit up, then stand on his feet lurchingly.

"You old gray crow," he said, thinking of Gates.

He climbed the wooden steps of Flo Barron's porch and let himself in with his key. He was in a short passageway the size of a closet, both sides being lined with coathooks from which a few garments and two umbrellas hung. He opened the inner, unlocked door, and started through a narrow hall. All the woodwork in the house was golden oak. To the right was an archway flanked by two ornamental, cylindrical pillars. In there was the living room.

For once Flo was on hand. She arose from a worn, tapestried sofa, carrying a drink, and asked, "What happened to you?"

"I fell down," he said, irritated. He wanted to be alone.

"You look as though you fell down into a barrel full of fists," she remarked.

"That's what it felt like," he said curtly, and went to his room, to the rear on the left.

Back there he had a lowboy, a low chest of drawers with a tall mirror, in which his reflection was disconcerting. He was badly battered and unrecognizable. Both eyes had been blacked and his lower lip was split. His nose was bloodied, nearly broken, and one ear was burning hot, almost torn off by one of Gates' lucky punches. His teeth were sound, though. His legs ached, and his chest hurt from the hammering he had been caught in. Gates had used brass knucks or a blackjack; it was so dark that Woddie didn't know

what had been used on him. The strain of the battle had dried up his throat so that he couldn't swallow. He poured a tumbler of water and was emptying it down his throat when Flo entered the room without knocking. She carried a pan of hot water and a first-aid kit.

"I'm all right," Woddie snapped, facing her.

"I can take care of your face, anyhow," Flo said. "I don't know what else you've got."

"Get out of here! Will you?"

"Oh, shut up," she said, putting the pan of water down. She ordered him to sit in a chair.

Reluctantly he obeyed, because he wanted to think. He closed his eyes, and Flo never said another word. She washed the blood from his face, and he sat tensely, breathing the perfume of her closeness.

She was a voluptuous girl of twenty-seven or -eight. She drank a lot, but she slept a lot; her eyes were clear, and her skin was as smooth and flawless as cool cream. She was behind him, leaning over, and it was a while before he realized that his head was cushioned on her breast.

There was nothing to keep Woddie from going right on thinking, and he had some very interesting thoughts.

CHAPTER III

Start from Zero



ND at approximately the same time Miss Daphne Gates, all alone in the old red brick house at 960 Summit Avenue, was going through the papers in her father's desk.

She was quite intent about it; it was something she had never done before, and she would be content to be caught at it now.

The straight chair was deep and solid, made to accommodate a big frame like her father's. She sat on the edge of it, erect and a little breathless like a model posing in the nude for the first time. Her hair was a deep, ruddy amber, a sunrise color, and her skin golden, so unblemishedly golden that it was not so much a 24K tan as the natural tint of her smooth hide. She had remarkable, large eyes of a brown that was almost red. Her eyes were as hard as topaz.

She read business letters methodically, went through perforated checks rapidly, absorbing details, hardening her soft mouth now and then. She skimmed through notebooks.

In a bottom drawer, was a steel box. She picked the lock, having learned the art of picking locks when she was very young and an admirer of the lone-wolf, Robin-Hood type of master criminal, and found nothing inside but grisly keepsakes. A watch chain braided of her grandmother's red hair, a sheaf of Daphne's childhood stickmen drawings, and such garbage. She slammed the box back into the drawer and riffled through all the books in the single glass-protected shelf over the desk. Nothing.

One of the notebooks contained names and addresses of persons working at Gates, men and women. There were comments on each name. E.g. "Maizie Phipps. Janitress, night. Steals a few stamps." "Jane Porter. Cashier; 21; very lovely

wench; crackpot communist boyfriend."

Daphne's own name was in the book. She read: "Daphne Gates. Unemployed; female, otherwise president and owner of Gates. Serpent daughter. Bites hand that feeds. Most costly article so far . . ." It went on for a couple of lines; she closed the book impatiently and put it aside.

She walked all around the house, all alone. She went down the basement where it was cool and moist, and in a chamber where the limestone walls were crumbling she sampled a bottle of rhubarb wine which her dead mother had made. The greenish wine had turned to champagne. The ghastly silence of the house was aroused to brief echoes by the gunshot bang of the cork.

She drank a glass of the wine, and it reminded her of climbing trees and skinning her legs when she was a tomboy. She hadn't tasted wine like it since she sneaked a bottle and got plastered when she was thirteen years old. Almost fourteen. And just getting disturbingly healthy in the chest.

HAVING explored the cellar, she toured the ground floor, detesting the built-in sideboard with its leaded glass cupboards, the mantel with its leper-gray mirror, the out-of-shape Oriental rugs, the priceless, fragile whatnot and its contents, everything. Since she was old enough to spit when she was angry, she'd hated the place.

So she toured the upper floor to see whether she remembered everything, and she even hated the slim spindles of the railing along the balcony. She wended through her fa-

ther's bedroom and out onto the exposed rear sunporch, from which she had once fallen and broken an arm.

There was her own room, exactly as it was when she went East. There was the deep top shelf of the closet where she had hidden successfully many a time when she didn't want to eat, until the time the maid had shut the unlatched door and imprisoned her. Then the old damned bathroom, with its monstrous tub stilted on ball-and-claw legs, and the marble washbasin, and the medieval plumbing. There was a shower arrangement, but it consisted only of a curtain hanging from a ring, with a head connected by rubber tubing with the tub faucet. Pretty rococo, gals.

Even the bathroom door was still off its hinges. The mahogany was so old that it was like punk, and the screws had simply come out like onions from the garden that time she got into a tantrum, when the lock jammed. She didn't have any mother to guide her; her philosophy was that when you were taking a bath you were necessarily naked, so she gamboled around that way, and if there were visitors in the house they could go ahead and avert their orbs upon sighting her in the altogether; that was their business.

But now she was twenty-three years old, a death-hag. In fact, she called herself The Hag of the Seven States. For a crone she was eye-filling. She was wearing tawny magic, a woolen suit with a very snug jacket, a pleated skirt that advertised legs if the legs had an owner, and in the throat of the jacket showed an apple-green silk blouse. She had a lovely body, and whatever she

wore she was scandalous, the loveliest murderess who ever sat in a witness chair, if she ever happened to murder anybody. When she was in school, a sophomore, a senior eyed her dazedly and requested, "Please chloroform me now, boys. Quickly—O!" The color of the silk she wore was approximately chloroform-green.

She slammed the door of the horrible house and strode long-leggedly down to her car, turning an ankle on the herringbone brick walk, and swearing, before she got there.

She had the bad habit of leaving her keys in the ignition lock, but driving a car was as simple as spinning a top. The door snapped tight, the key being turned; starter; in gear, brake released, off. In brief, the car shoved away from the curb with the slam of the door, very rapidly.

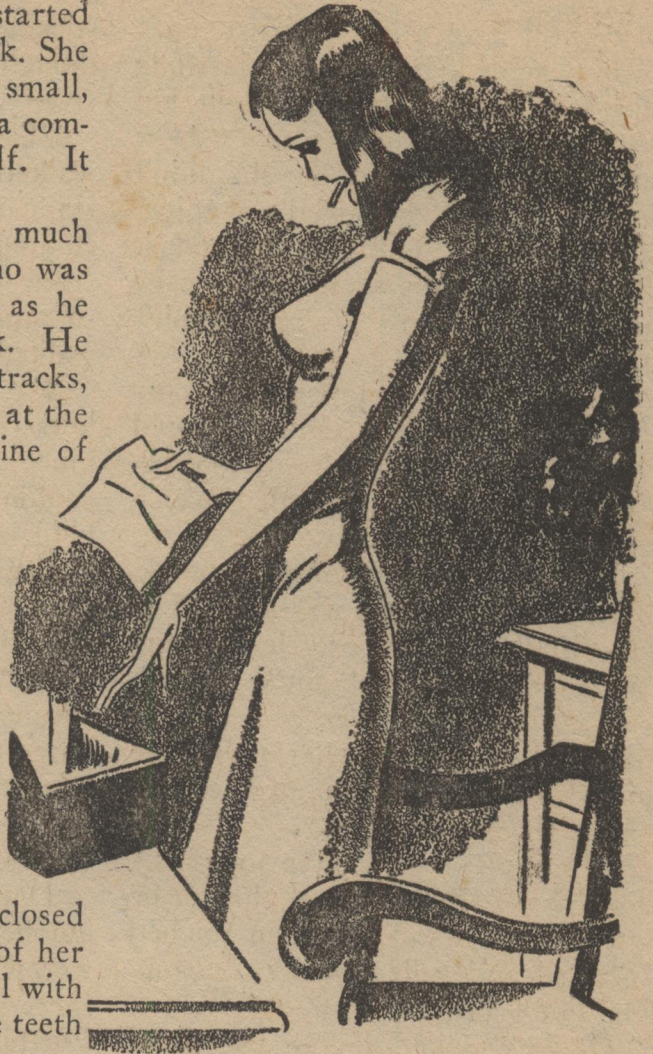
Daph held all little motions and gestures in contempt. She thought she would go down on the flats, below Marshall's Bluff, and visit that stupid, fat private detective, Austin Corbett. What an address. She had never been down there before, the place being as inky at night as a Polish Corridor. Unpaved. Or cobbled. And hugged by the smell of the river, and sewage, all along. There were astonished, scarecrow children living down there in houseboats.

AN ANNOYING, light, sticky rain was falling, and the street glistened like the back of a broad snake in the headlights. She smoked as she drove. She entered the tangled streets of the "suburb" below the bluff, passed bars, and got lost.

She parked the car and started walking, on a wooden sidewalk. She was amazed. Here was a small, vicious, frightening plague of a community within the city itself. It wasn't policed.

In a way, she didn't have much sense. She stopped a man who was counting boards, head down, as he held a course along the walk. He looked up and he stood in his tracks, no doubt marveling drunkenly at the shape of her face and the shine of

She went through the box methodically, reading—and finding nothing.



her lips, and how her hair enclosed the fresh, asking composition of her features. She was a smiling gal with dandy eyes, and her white little teeth gleamed.

"My name is Bud," he said. He was youngish, but his face was bloated and he hadn't shaved for several days. He was drunk. He looked as though he was looking for a disease to happen to him. "Bud," he blurted. "Bud Hodges. What's yours?"

Still smiling she asked, "Where is 29 Cunard Street?"

"Ah-h-h, forget it," he admonished wisely, blurring his words. He was swaying, and he was a caricature, stretching his neck and keeping his eyes open like a couple of birds' eggs fried sunny-side up. He ex-

tended a freckled arm so suddenly that she couldn't escape.

His fingernails scraped her throat, and a couple of buttons popped from her jacket when she tried to twist away. She had sharp fingernails, and she tried to claw him. He caught her by the wrists and chuckled. A gloomy man came upon them, stared, and stepped into the street in order to get past them. He was a tall, dark, remote zombie, and he kept on walking out of hearing.

Daph said, coaxingly, "Don't, Bud. Where's 29 Cunard?"

"Oh. You don't know where

Cunard Street is? Come on."

He guided her along, lurching now and then, keeping a light but firm grip on her upper arm. Now and then he squeezed, but she didn't look at him. They passed a sagging, dead building, and just beyond it Bud got his arm around her waist and bore her into the absolute midnight off the walk.

They were on a sloping bank covered with rank grass, and she could smell the river and hear it, too, because here the water gurgled over a bed of round stones.

She had been thrown down so hard that her breath was gone. The ugly Bud's fingers were clumsy, and in the meantime Daph got her breath back. The drizzle was cool against her skin. She brought her right knee up with all her might and caught him alongside the jaw.

It was a very peculiar sound. A bony *clunk*. Bud acted as though he intended to stand up, then pitched forward and rolled over to a stop. He didn't move.

Daphne looked at him and stood up; she looked back at the street and the passing people. She arranged herself, slapping her skirts and brushing her knees, and went up the slope to the sidewalk. There were runs, "ladders," in her stockings, and she was angry.

SHE walked into a bar and asked where Cunard was. She was told that it was two blocks north. The barkeep was sweating and mischievously pleasant. He said, "No ladies at the bar. At the tables, if you don't mind."

She looked at the men at the tables. This bar was a houseboat

sticking out into the river, and she thought the silent men were like the river's scum.

"Thank you," she said, and walked out. Her skirt was grass-stained, but she wasn't disheveled. A couple of buttons were missing from her jacket; she wanted a bath or shower; she tidied her hair as she walked.

She turned a corner and found herself on Cunard Street. Twenty-nine. It wasn't a long street; it couldn't be, because it ran under the bluff into the river.

It was a strange, perplexing place; she couldn't see anything, and when she kicked a tin can she stopped short. A cat wailed like a circular saw cutting into a knot. A light illuminated a low, tired porch; a coughing woman appeared, looked around, and went back in again and turned the light off.

Daphne couldn't find Corbett's number, and she was irritated. There weren't any numbers; if there were, there weren't any lights to see them. Further and more, she didn't know where in the hell she had parked her car. She was lost.

"Start from zero," she said thoughtfully. "Odd numbers on the north, even on the south side of the street." She looked at the dark houses as she walked, and said, "This is it."

She lit a cigarette, held up the match, and on a painted post found the rusty tin numerals. 29. The house was dark, and no one answered the bell. There was a canvas hammock on the porch. Daphne sat, and then slept in the hammock. She raised a silken knee, her skirt slipping down, and a mosquito chose a

spot of choice epidermis to alight and shortly took flight sluggishly with a fat red drop of her blood in his gorged innards without awakening her.

CHAPTER IV

Cops All Over



USTIN BALLINGER CORBETT, "ABC," was a man of simple but encompassing appetite. Eating, of his own choice, engrossed him. In the murk of another gray morning he was preparing breakfast, his motto being: "Fry your own eggs, and if they are wrong eggs you can blame yourself in privacy."

He preferred sleeping alone and in the raw, in the cauld blast or the throttling tropics. A happy little mastodon, he. But when he arose, it was his habit to don flowing garb, because it had always struck him as obscene—a nekkid man at a stove, aside from the danger of getting needled by hot, snapping fat.

So he wore a favorite, remarkable garment, a thing he had had made to fit his monkish stature, a sort of silk tent. It was a giant dressing gown of the heaviest, hand-loomed Chinese silk. On the back was devised a dragonish monster, in brilliant colors, batiked with his own hands by Lungo Go, a withered Oriental gentleman whom ABC had once done a great favor.

This was the person whom Daphne saw for the first time, and she watched his operations with calculated interest. For he was so huge—not fat, but just big—and she was fascinated just as other gals had been

before. Wherein lay his lure for the lasses was a mystery. He was built like a kiln. He was a six-footer, beefy, but if he was barbecued whole he wouldn't render as much grease as a Christmas goose. He was freckled, small of nose, small of feet—wearing size seven shoes and 6½ crocodile slippers—and his hands were sensitive and long-fingered enough to pick a pickpocket's pocket. He could span twelve keys on a piano he once played.

His eyes were the silly, guileless, heavenly blue of morning glories, and with his mad grin he could pass for an idiot child anywhere. Even to his hair he was unattractive, for under certain lighting he looked to be abalding. He wasn't; he had plenty of healthy follicles but his hair was uncommonly silky on his head. Everything wrong. But to his abiding consternation the gals made trouble for him, as though they were asking themselves under some inexplicable hypnosis, "Holy Moses, is this thing true? There is naught to do but find out for myself, in person and so on, and I'll be in Scotland afore ye."

He was Scottish on his mother's side.

There may have been something in the fact that there was a birthmark on his scalp, visible through his hair—a large freckle of delicate draftsmanship in the shape of an elaborate keyhole.

HE TOOK a box of eggs out of the refrigerator, and candled them automatically before he cracked them on the edge of the frying pan. He was particular about the eggs that he fried. These were marvel-

ous, plump eggs, of translucent white porcelain as alike as golf balls. One by one he cracked them on the edge of a big iron spider and they hissed exquisitely as solid white framed each upright yellow yolk.

"Will you have breakfast?" he asked politely, without turning around.

She jumped, thinking for a moment that he was addressing someone else in the kitchen. For she had entered without making a sound. There was an old, stained mirror, but it was at the wrong angle for her reflection.

"You have sharp ears." Her voice was naturally low and slow, lazyish.

"No; your perfume," he said.

The front door was open, and so was the window over the sink, the draft passing him of course.

"What if I were a robber and had a gun?" she asked.

"I'd be a fool to turn around suddenly and scare a jumpy gunman into shooting me," he said. "Well, breakfast or no breakfast?"

"I never have anything but coffee and a cigarette, thank you, sir, she said," she responded lightly.

He ignored her levity, nursing his eggs along to perfection, but spared her a glance. "You're a fool," he said, but it was impossible to dislike what he saw. "However, you're certainly not overweight. . . . You may watch me eat," he told her generously, and had the half dozen eggs onto a plate as though it were some magician's trick. He also had a plate of bacon and six slices of toast previously prepared and kept warm, plus a tumbler of tomato juice with a piece of ice in it and a full pot of clear, strong coffee.

He spared her a cup of the coffee. She had her own cigarettes and then lighted one for herself because, seated and with a pelt of bronze hair showing in the opening of his robe, he was attacking his repast methodically. He ate the items in rotation, sipping the big glass of red juice as he proceeded, pouring a mug of coffee at the last. She did not interrupt him, sitting quietly in her straight chair, and finished her first cigarette at the same time he reached for the coffee pot.

"Now, who are you?" he asked.

"Daphne Gates."

"You'd hardly be anyone else, at that. What do you want?"

"You're a private detective, aren't you? I'd like to hire you."

"For what?"

"To find out where my father is."

"Do you just want to know where he is, or do you want him found, persuaded, and delivered?"

"I'd be satisfied just to know what happened to him."

"You know that I'm in the other camp, don't you? I'm working for Gogh, Pratt, and Avery."

"They're dirty crooks," she said with quiet venom.

"You're prejudiced. I don't happen to like them nor their breed but what I'm doing is straight. I'm just an employee."

"You're sure you don't know where my Dad is?"

Corbett stared at her and waved his cigarette under his nose as though it had a suspicious odor.

SHE outed with it: "Something happened to Dad. He has a good, sound mind and he wouldn't go to pieces, suffer amnesia or some-

thing like that. Something was done to him, or is being done. Haven't I a right to think that perhaps *they don't want to know where Dad is?*"

"If that were true, I'd be party to a kidnaping," he said softly. "No, darling; not Austin Corbett. This is strictly business and no shenanigans."

"It doesn't make sense," she insisted. "He'd have no reason for going into hiding." She was using her eyes, taking in his massive shape as he sat like a dreamy, blond gorilla. For herself, she showed little sign other than a minimum of wrinkles that she had slept in her dress. Simply by crossing her legs she managed to be highly provocative; the silk made her knees gleam. And she said suggestively, irrelevantly, "I slept on your porch last night."

"I can't imagine why you did that," he said carefully.

"I parked my car somewhere down here in Little River, and I couldn't find it again," she said absently. Her eyes found the V of hair on his chest in a glance so bemused that he half expected her to get up and curl that blonde lock around her finger.

That was the trouble with women—forever pulling such tricks on a man.

"It strikes me," he remarked, "that it doesn't matter who my employer is, because my job is the same: I am to find a man."

"Wouldn't you rather work for me?"

"Once upon a time, yes," he admitted.

"What do you mean by that?" She gave him a bewitching smile with her mouth but there was no amusement in her odd eyes of rust-brown.

"You don't want your father home," he suggested. "You simply want him located, just to talk to him on the phone, perhaps. You don't want Avery and his bunch to know where he is."

"What makes you think so?" She honeyed the words.

"There's been systematic, out-and-out sabotage down at the plant. Gates can't get going on its government orders. The man behind the slowdowns and missing or stolen tools would logically be Gates himself, your father. I'm not calling him unpatriotic, just blinded by revenge. In which case he could be put behind prison bars for a long stretch."

"Revenge," she mused. "Why?"

"He built up that plant from nothing, and, except for yourself, perhaps, it was his only interest in life; it was taken away from him, and he's getting even with these Easterners who outsmarted him. You want to stop him before it's too late. When I find him, which I probably will, you want me to keep as still as a bunny about it."

SHE was thinking that with his tonnage he'd do better keeping still as a temple-size buddha. She asked, "Did they—did they hire you, literally, to *find* him? Just *find* him? Then you see," she continued rapidly, "you could do that and you wouldn't necessarily have to tell. I don't see anything wrong with it at all. You can work for them and for me, too. I'll double what they're paying you, or you can name your own figure. I have plenty of money, I'm sure."

In figures, he was thinking of hers,

and what wonders there were in nature. Daphne. That was a nymph's name, and he murmured, "A nymph, all right, but a wicked one."

Possibly she expected to hook him with her seductiveness, a sort of bonus, but gals don't have to keep promises, spoken or silent, and ABC was not chump enough to maneuver himself into getting laughed at. He mentioned, "I happen to have sufficient funds for a long time, myself. Besides, the more money I make, the greedier they get in Washington."

Her teeth sparkled. "Oh, I merely wanted you to do this for me. The money is merely a gift, of course, and isn't taxable, is it?" She batted her eyes brightly a couple of times. "May I have another cup of coffee?"

She offered the cup and touched him casually; her fingers were cool and smooth on the back of his hand as he poured. That was done on purpose; he looked at her fingers idly. Her nails were lacquered a dull ruby-red; they were long and rounded, not pointed. She had beautiful hands, with skin as fine in texture as the surface of cream.

"You want me to do it for you," he said crossing his legs and frowning at her. He shook his head. "I don't think that I will. . . . I have some work to do now."

He dismissed her with a nod, but she stayed.

"You have to go," he said. "I've got to take a shave and shower, and I look like hell when I'm naked. Go and look for your car; you can find it easily enough, and you won't be molested in daylight. Good-by, now."

She sat for a minute, staring at him and looking him over. Then without a word she rose, turned and

made her skirt swing, and left the house. Her silk stockings gave the calves of her legs a shine. Corbett registered a feeling of pain.

At Gates later in the morning he heard the news.

MARVELOUSLY battered and wearing a pair of exaggerated shiners and various mice about his face, Woddie nevertheless turned up for work. The foreman spotted him at once, and the big mechanic was bulled into telling the truth. He had been beaten up by old man Gates himself.

A little while later he was called to the front—the main office. All three were there—wiry Avery, Gogh, and Ira Pratt, three of a kind, beating two pairs—walking around nervously as though a tarantula had escaped from a cage. A cop was there, too, and he took down Woddie's statement in a little notebook diligently.

The cop had pale blue eyes, narrow ones. He asked, "What did he use on you, a sap?"

"I don't know. It was dark," said Woddie. "He must have used something."

"Brass knucks," said the cop, writing it down. He asked a few more questions, took notes, and barged out of the place.

"Stay here," Avery ordered Woddie. "How the devil did that snide cop show up? Did you talk to the police, Massey?"

"No, sir. I simply reported for work."

"You contemptible fool," said Pratt.

"I'll cut your throat," said Gogh venomously.

"Okay, I'm canned," said Woddie angrily. "So long."

"Like hell you're canned. Go back to your bench," said Avery. "But I'd like to know how that blasted cop got in here. Somebody reported."

"There are cops all over the place," Pratt gloomed. "Any nosey guy could phone Headquarters."

Woddie had gone by that time. A few minutes later Corbett walked in. He didn't say a word, but just waited until they volunteered the story.

Avery said, "The police are looking for Gates. He beat up Massey last night. First degree assault with brass knuckles."

"Oh, brass knuckles," said Corbett skeptically. "The police have taken over. I suppose I'm through."

"No, no!" Avery snarled. "It's just more trouble, and we've had trouble enough already. Why weren't you there?"

"I was somewhere else," Corbett said thoughtfully. "The cops ought to be able to handle this now. They are more than I am."

"You're a detective," Avery said nastily. "What's the difference whether you're private or on the city payroll? Go ahead and find Gates."

"All right," said Corbett mildly. "I'll find him."

He reached the door before Avery warned, "You report here to me, not to the police. Our business is private. I want to see Gates first."

"Mh-hmh," said Corbett.

"Get hold of his daughter; she'll know where he is."

"I've thought of that," said Corbett.

No. He didn't like them. He closed the door behind, and went down the hall, out onto the street.

When he got into his car he sat for a moment; he was itching for activity, and there wasn't any. He got out again and reentered the plant. He hiked, and found Massey's machine. Woddie was bandaged; he was squinting, working on aluminum castings for a bomber. In the machine the metal looked like bright platinum.

"Pretty," said Corbett. Woddie turned his head. "Very pretty indeed."

Massey waited until the detective asked, "Are you sure that it was Gates who beat you up?"

"It was Gates; he hired me."

"You'd know him anywhere, wouldn't you? I hear he used brass knucks."

"Yes, sir. He hit me with something. I don't know what."

"Then he just walked away."

"Yes," said Woddie. A couple of men were looking on. He was embarrassed and fumbling and not doing his work.

"Have you any idea where Gates is?" Corbett asked.

"No idea at all. He said he'd get me again; I didn't do anything to him. I think he's insane."

"I think so, too," said Corbett. "So long, and thanks."

He drove away.

IT WAS ten o'clock in the evening. Ira Pratt was cursing; his fountain pen was empty, and he was of a notion to throw it away; it didn't hold enough ink; no pen did. The patent barrel was supposed to reveal the amount of ink left, but it was clouded up. And he'd have sworn that he had just loaded the pen.

It did not occur to him that his

wastebasket needed emptying, or he would have lived longer. Earlier, he had reported a prowler to the police, and a cop had come up to look around. A burglar had called, undoubtedly, but nothing was stolen. However, the litter in the wastebasket was ink-spattered with the contents of the desk pen.

The pen worked on the plunger principle, and Pratt inserted it in the handy ink bottle. He was a creature of habit, and did desk work customarily here in his study, at home, promptly at ten o'clock.

Nitroglycerine is nervous stuff, and the tickling of the pen's plunger excited it quite some, for the ink bottle was indeed full of nitro.

There was a hell of a roar, a monstrous gush of sound, and Ira Pratt was smithereened in all directions.

The neighborhood traced the blast without difficulty, for a gas line had been ruptured, the gas ignited, and the house was blazing fit to make an arsonist caper.

This was two days after Woddie's beating up.

CHAPTER V

ABC Is Not Simple



THE same evening, A. J. Gogh reported a prowler to the police. In this case, too, nothing was stolen. It was as though all the burglars in River City were getting scared off tonight before they could glom anything.

Gogh heard the burglar, stalked him with a gun, and fired six shots at a big man fleeing into the night. This was around ten-thirty.

A couple of detectives showed up promptly, stayed for a half hour and departed after taking down notes in little books.

Gogh, too, was a creature of habit, and invariably got into striped flannel pajamas at eleven-thirty or thereabouts. There was a glass of water on the table at his bedside. He had beautiful, white, even, sparkling false teeth, and the last thing he did at night was peg his dentures into the glass, with a *clink*, before jerking the light off. It was the last thing he ever did, except for traveling apart at high velocity, for the glass contained not water but nitroglycerine. The flash and boom were volcanic, and A. J. Gogh became in the wink of an eye a totally missing person. Shingles took flight from the roof like autumn leaves, but the house didn't catch on fire this time. But some hard object, mayhap a piece of the bed, turned a bathroom faucet on full blast.

It was the same big burglar, and shortly the cops were unanimously of

She appeared at the window and for a moment he thought he had been discovered.



the opinion that there was labor disaffection at the Gates plant. Once is an accident. Twice is a coincidence. Three times is a moral certainty.

The third occasion involved Jerome Avery.

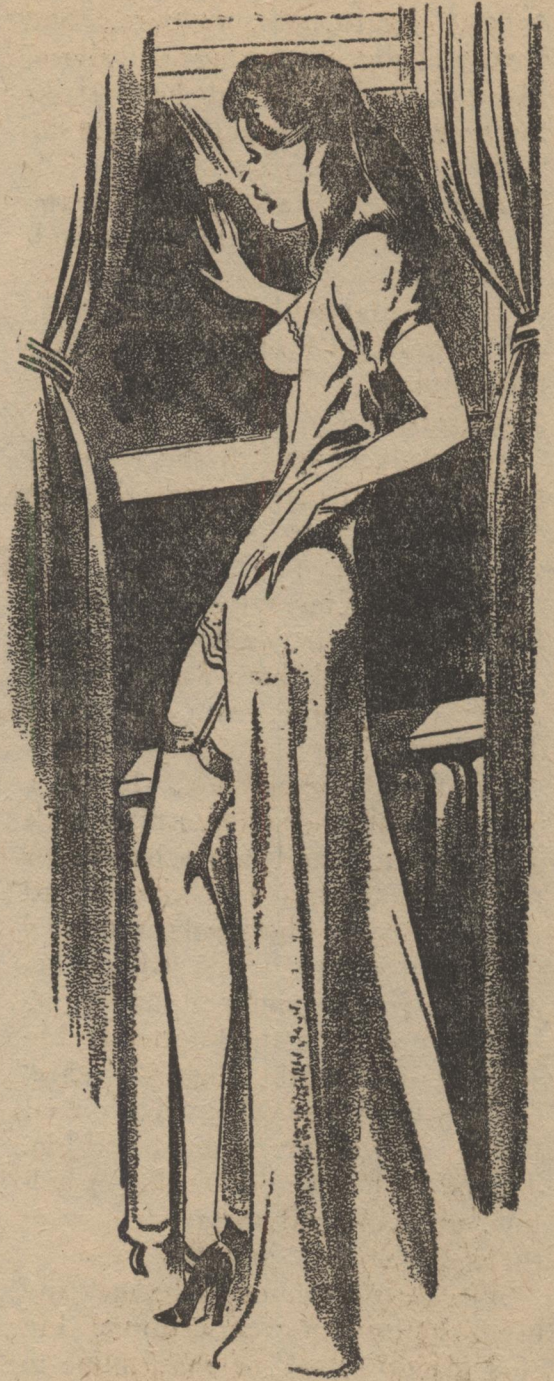
CRANKY old Avery was the richest man of the three. He had a beautiful but perverse daughter Elaine, and lived in an old mansion in the Marshall's Bluff district. Of the three, he alone didn't hear the prowler. Or, rather, he heard sounds but thought that his daughter was up to something or other.

The sounds were those of the burglar trying to get into the house, and failing. All the windows and doors were locked fast, and it was impossible to commit entry without breaking a window. The hulking burglar considered just that, and then hit on an idea that was pretty good, just by accident.

He was out behind the mansion, and Elaine was preparing to go to bed. This was after midnight and all was dark. The street lights were far away and hidden by shrubbery and trees and landscaping. The bulking burglar stood in the back yard near the stone garage. This was on the bluff, and behind him was the river. He was looking at a lighted window, and the window was Elaine Avery's.

She was framed, picking up a letter from a vanity to read it, smoking a cigarette. She was lean, handsome, and the burglar got the impression that she was cruel. She burned the letter in an ashtray, and broke up the crinkles of carbon with a nail file.

When she looked out the window she said something profane, and the



burglar thought he had been seen. He tensed, starting to run, but she tossed her cigarette out the window and turned, and paced.

She reappeared in the frame of the window again and again, slender and graceful and white, with dark

hair falling to her shoulders. She wore a negligee, stockings and shoes. He could hear the high heels striking bare floor now and then when she walked.

Abruptly she started unbelting the negligee, and the window was suddenly dark.

The burglar said softly to himself, "Woo-woo! I'll bet guys send her love letters."

Letters.

He went around to the front of the house and made a way through the shrubbery to scale the front porch.

There wasn't a sign of a soul. The brick mansion had a long, curving, front drive, and there were a lot of trees. The light from the street didn't reach here.

He found the mailbox. It was a large iron affair, having a door with a glass panel, and hooks below for rolled magazines. The window had miniature bars. The burglar threaded the end of a hank of silk fishline, because he was so equipped, under one of the small bars, and knotted it. He snipped off a length. Then, with care, he drew from his pocket what looked like a small bottle of unlabeled gin. The bottle had an odd cork. A hollow, goose-necked metal stem went through the cork into the flask.

The burglar removed the cork and brass sipper with great caution. He tied the other end of the fishline to the neck of the bottle. Then he stretched the fishline and placed the bottle on the ledge, to the left of the box, hidden amongst vines clinging to the porch elevation. He stretched the line tight, and only then forced a cork into the neck of the bottle.

He was pretty well scared, because

the bottle was full of nitro, and he ran like mad. A couple of blocks away he slowed down, and sauntered, whistling snatches of popular songs.

This: Avery had a crotchet: He always collected the mail, and when the postman let the lid of the box clang he opened the front door himself. The box had to be opened with a key. When the door was opened, the fishline would pull the bottle of nitro off the brick ledge, and Avery would be blown to bloody slush.

He had the luck of the devil.

A SPARROW flew in and roosted in the vines covering the porch. It flipped up into another hole in the vines, seeking a beddy-bye for the night, and alighted on the taut string, the fishline. The weight of the sparrow tipped the bottle off the ledge.

There was an eruption of flame, and an earthquake of noise that shook tramps off their benches in the parks. The front of the house caved in, and many windows were broken. Naturally, the burglar heard it, and he stopped whistling and snapped his fingers. The nitro had gone off prematurely, and now he would have to listen to the morning news broadcast to find out whether he had got his man.

The sparrow was badly frightened and flew off gasping with the loss of considerable feathers. Avery awoke with a start, snarled, and went downstairs to see whether a bottle had exploded or what. Sleek, slim Elaine arose from the floor after awhile. She had been thrown out of bed, hit her head against a radiator and knocked starwards. A cruising squad car arrived in a few seconds and en-

tered without knocking because there was no door, and the wires were crossed and the doorbell was already ringing like mad. They found the beauteous Elaine walking around in circles, holding her head and cursing with her eyes closed. She was wearing a diaphanous robe which clad her no more than would a green moonbeam. She was a walking dream which the cops would not forget in many a day, goggling. In fact, they said to themselves at the time, "I won't forget this in many a day."

There was only property damage at Avery's.

The big man was an indefatigable burglar when pursuing his profession, and he had one more job to do. He had plenty of nitro left, and he went home to get it. There had been murder enough already, but he wasn't satisfied. He was embarked on a bold venture which would lead to a life of ease, and tonight his problem was to discourage all opposition. So he went to his house, got out his bottle of nitro, and made a bomb.

He was an ingenious man and knew all the tricks of his trade. He was an old nitro-handler, but still respected the unpredictability of the stuff, so he tilted the flagon of potent liquid with caution. The bomb which he contrived was a dandy, fragile as a ripe egg. In his way, Crackers, as he was known to intimates in his early slugging days, because of his liking for crackers, was a genius. He had drilled and mined, knew the qualities and treacheries of rock, where to drill and how to place a charge. In his philosophy human beings resembled mining terrain. You

had to know where to drill so that the explosive would do an efficient job. Thus he was painstaking in learning the daily routine of his victims, for by their habits and character formation they would be destroyed.

He knew, even, the brand of tooth powder which Elaine Avery used. Her enamel glistened that way.

With his bomb, walking in a sort of glide and carrying it gingerly, he sallied forth into the night, heading for the domicile of Austin Ballinger Corbett.

ABC did not hear the prowler, the exception of the lot. He didn't hear any sounds at all because he was not at home. The burglar's stealth was totally unnecessary, and he could have turned on all the lights and made the job easier, and no one would have been the wiser.

When ABC did arrive home he was correctly suspicious. He had been tagging Daphne Gates and he had lost her in such a way that indicated she knew she was being followed. If she was concerned about being followed, probably she knew where her father was.

First repairing to the kitchen, Corbett opened the refrigerator and poured himself a pint-glass of cold milk after shaking up the bottle. He investigated the supply of eggs.

Dairy products received his unanimous approval. He liked his bacon Canadian, his eggs white and fresh, his milk raw and the hell with undulant fever, Minnesota butter, Wisconsin cheese, but the devil with forced-fed poultry stamped out by the packers. The refrigerator was

bulging with provender. He was thinking, and so closed the door gently. He had a suspicion that slamming the door turned on the unit, and he never did any better thinking in his life.

In the morning he followed his exact routine: he awakened. Thereafter the routine went to hell. Sometimes he ate before taking a shower, sometimes after. This morning he brushed his teeth, gargled the foam away, and, enwrapped in his silk tent of a bathrobe advanced upon the refrigerator.

"Eggs," he said. "Nummy. Nummy."

He flopped the package of thin bacon out onto the table and then paused.

There was one egg out. On the rack, loose.

He did not recollect the history of that egg, and he possessed a fairly exact mind. As he remembered it, he had just bought a carton of grade-A eggs from a purveyor of dairy products, because he was out.

Picking up the lone egg, he candled it against the sunlight in the window, and it looked all right.

He was about to crack it against the edge of the iron spider, when he was aware of moisture in his palm. He posed, leaning forward somewhat, huge and funny with the questioning look in his eye. In the base of the egg a hole was punctured.

Corbett stole from the house. He stole like a thief, like a bulging gourmet treading a corridor paved with caviar in wartime, sheeted in his hissing silk.

He crossed a dirt road, penetrated a fringe of trees on tiptoe, and paused on the stony bank of the

river. The dam, he guessed, was up far enough to the north.

There was a simple way of doing it, but he wanted to find out: He slung the egg far out and downstream, toward a shark-size island with tree stumps which made it look like a half-submerged skeleton with broken ribs.

The egg landed, Corbett pitching a perfect strike, and gave. Neglecting to throw himself to the ground, because he didn't really believe that it was a bomb, he was shocked with water and mud. "Shark Island" vanished and went downstream in small particles. The roar of the explosion re-echoed like thunder in the mountains; Little River people popped out of their houseboats, some of them rocking; a couple of babies hollered; down the river, later on, fishermen found dead bullheads and catfish floating in numbers, and two prime sturgeon.

ABC returned to his house and took the shower which he was needing. He forgot to eat breakfast for the first time. Just by a winker he had not cracked that egg on the edge of the frying pan.

CHAPTER VI

Value Received



APHNE GATES arose, got into her car and drove downtown in mid-morning, and parked. She walked to 412 Decatur Street, which was a frame place and about to come apart. There was a tailor shop on the street, and a sour woolen smell issued from it. She entered a lobby which was surfaced with a portrait-size piece of

uneven yellow linoleum, and mounted the stairs.

They were steep, and she was hurrying, so she stumbled. She pitched forward, her left knee striking the carpeted edge of a step. She scrambled and descended a few steps sitting down. By the time she was sitting still, with her skirt up far enough for anyone to see lace, the door at the head of the stairs had opened.

Morton Gates, in a baggy suit, looked down at her.

"It's you," he said, unpleasant and scowling. "You make a lot of noise. Well, come on in."

She solved the architecture of the stairs and danced up, passing him into the room without kissing him. He shut the door and looked at her as though he didn't like her.

After she took a chair in the narrow room she lit a cigarette and smoked it, and he lit up a dead cigar. Neither said anything for awhile. Then she said through the smoke, "This is ridiculous. It's terrible."

He said, "I don't pay any attention to persons who say things like that, excepting my wife, and she's dead."

"What are you up to?" She was angry. "Stop it."

"Don't you know what's going on?"

"I certainly do."

"The damned snides. No, you don't know what's going on."

"You're being a fool!" There were tears in her eyes, but they were fake.

She was nowhere near crying.

Gates was standing, and he towered. He said, "I'll tell you something, girl: I'm going to have my

way; I'm going to finish this job, and it won't be long."

"Dad," she pleaded, and looked at him bright-eyed and smiling. "This is all cockeyed. It's crazy. The police are looking for you."

"I'll break your neck if you tell them where I am."

"Dad, I'm ashamed. Doesn't that mean anything to you? I won't have any friends. Isn't there murder enough already?"

"What do you mean by that? Have I murdered someone?"

"Would you deliberately murder Gogh and Pratt and Avery?"

"I wouldn't be satisfied with murder," said Gates. "I'd think up a new kind of Chinese torture for Japs. Those guys are out and out vermin."

"Are you going to kill somebody?" she asked. Her lips were apart, and as red and shiny as though she had been drinking blood. She was aware of funny little things, like the pull of her stockings over her knees, the tenseness in her legs, the pull in the straps of her brassiere.

Her father cocked a quizzical eye at her, and never before had she realized how gaunt he was. His clothes were loose on his big construction-job frame; very likely he wasn't eating enough. She looked around, and there was evidence that he had been living on canned goods—sardines, salmon, corned beef.

"How did you locate me?" he asked.

"Dad, are you completely broke?" she asked miserably.

"Certainly not," he lied, curtly. "How'd you find me?"

"A hunch. This was your address when you first started in business, before you married mother.

You drove me down here to show it to me one time. Don't you remember?"

"So I did. I hope you weren't followed. Because I have a hunch that time is getting short."

"A detective followed me once, but I lost him. He's a very strange person, not like a detective at all. Corbett is his name, and they hired him to find you. Do you know him? No."

"They'd do something like that. Now they're worried."

"You're sure you don't need any money, Dad? I've got plenty of it."

"I know what you're thinking. When they started buying up stock, I cleaned myself out grabbing it back from the men myself. No, I just couldn't buy fast enough." Lies again.

Impulsively she dropped a fold of money on the floor and beat it out of the room before he could stop her. She jerked the door shut and was down the stairs so fast that her high heels were nearly her undoing.

Gates came to the door, started to yell at her, then resignedly returned to the room. Now he could buy a square meal, anyhow, when it was dark enough to go out. If only he hadn't been so damned proud, none of this would have happened. On the other hand, he respected good men. Now he knew that expert mechanics, draftsmen of the highest skill, could at the same time be the utterest boneheads. It was folly to trust any man on earth.

AGAINST the wall near the door Corbett was flattened as much as two hundred and twenty pounds can be spread out. He had followed

Daphne, and thus, being close behind, had seen her wonderful display of legs when she fell.

It had been easy to listen, and he had gotten away from the door just in time, after deciding that, after all, he was to locate Gates and nothing more. He didn't have to act. His only real concealment was shadow, and a sort of knack of mind which experienced and clever men possess. It is the knack of performing an unusual act on the street in such a manner that it is commonplace and passes unnoticed. In this case he was bent on remaining undiscovered, *assuming* success, turning his head away calmly as though to avoid any short-circuiting of thought-transference. Regardless of the outcome, he did not want any battle with Morton Gates.

So now he peeled his person off of an expanse of wall and departed the way he had come, with the velvet feet of a large, scenting cat.

"My car is stolen," he said, being a skeptic. But his car was still there when he walked around the corner. He got in, and just before he drove away he thought of a big tin of salmon in his refrigerator. It would be just the thing for his appetite. That, plus eight or a dozen slices of toast, of farm bread, spread with white, whipped butter. Sausages along with, perhaps.

When he arrived home he found a girl sitting on his porch, and she was smoking a cigarette. She sat on the steps; she was using her ankles, rocking her feet back and forth and acting as though it were her place and he was just a canvasser. Her knees were neat and silken and her skirt hung. The direction of his glance

was obvious, but she was immune to having her legs appraised. She was a dark girl, with the kind of creamy skin that doesn't tan. She was slim and comely, but suggested the type of woman found in decadent poetry. When she stood, her skirt hung in many folds and would swing with her slightest movement.

"Is the gentleman of the house in?" he asked cheerily.



He looked up sharply.
"You're a fool," he said.
"But you can stay."

"I'm Eloise Avery," she announced. "I want to see you for a few minutes, Corbett."

"Okay, Avery," he responded. "My humble abode is yours."

They entered, and he proceeded

straight to the kitchen, where he commenced ransacking the refrigerator for nutriment.

Being a forthright gal, she came to the point without delay. "Would you like to buy some Gates stock?"

"Have you some to sell?"

"Certainly. All my father's stock is in my name."

"Have you got it with you?"

"Right here in my bag." She produced it.

He stopped eating a piece of cauliflower and stared at the bunch of engraved certificates. Exceedingly pretty paper.

"Why do you want to sell that stuff?" he asked.

"What difference does that make?" She didn't like the glint in his eyes, and added, "Gogh and Pratt were killed in explosions, and a bomb blew in the front of my house. I think that if Gates got back control of his company my father wouldn't be in danger of his life any more."

ABC finished his piece of cauliflower.

"How much do you want for the stock?" he asked.

"Just what was paid for it."

"It may be worth nothing, and it may be worth a lot more," he suggested.

"Naturally. Like any stock."

GATES stock wasn't paying any dividends, hadn't been. But in time it most certainly would. Likely this girl was the spoiled little so-and-so he thought she was, and she was short of dough because her father was short after swinging the Gates deal with his cronies Pratt and Gogh. She was a spoiled and expensive gal,

unscrupulous, and she was either telling the truth or she just wanted money.

"All right, I'll buy it," he said. He fished out a check book, and filled it in with a sum at a hundred dollars a share. It didn't leave him with very much of a balance. The ownership of the stock was transferred. "For value received, I hereby sell, assign, and transfer unto..." etc. She filled in the blanks printed on the rear of the certificates, swiftly, in a print-clear backhand.

Then she asked for a drink.

"In the morning?" he asked.

"I've already had a glass of sherry."

"What to eat?"

"A lettuce sandwich. I don't care much for wine. Have you got something hard?"

After a look at her he got a bottle of bourbon from a cabinet. He set it on the table, along with mix. She didn't want ice, and she didn't use the mix, either, merely using a shot glass and water for a chaser.

ABC went ahead with his carnage at the refrigerator, paying her little attention. However, he was aware that she was in no hurry to go. She had crossed her legs and was watching him while he gorged at random. He sliced a head of lettuce like bread and spread the slices with runny cheese, ate two carrots the size of tent-pegs, a can of salmon, drank two tall glasses of milk, one large raw beet, a candle-length of liver sausage, and all the while spreading toasted soda crackers with butter. He'd drop a couple of crackers into the toaster and catch them dexterously when they hopped out, brown.

"I wish you'd call me," said

Eloise. "When you aren't too busy. We could go somewhere and have a good time." She made her voice meaningful.

"By all means," ABC agreed, paying no attention.

She watched him for a while longer, and then rose, gulped down her last drink and departed. In a soft voice which he didn't hear, she said, "I'll be damned. I don't believe it."

Corbett ate a red apple the size of a softball, and ate a few cheese crackers while he brewed himself a pot of tea. Afterward, he put the bottle of bourbon away, and cleaned up. And then he commenced hunting for Daphne Gates.

He did not make a wrong move. He went everywhere possible, and at the right times, where he knew she might be. She was not to be found. Certainly nothing had happened to her. It hadn't, yet, but it would, later.

CHAPTER VII

A Matter of Murder



LATE that night, using shielded illumination, Woddie Massey was working on the gunsight. He was alert, because every time he used a tool, echoes scampered around through the cavernous reaches of the floor behind him. He was always listening to the echoes, which were like soft clambering feet, multitudinous, and he knew a different sound when he heard one. One sound creeping in—and he would be aware of it.

He was using a fine file now, and very cautiously. The file whispered

against tough metal. He put the file in a box and picked up the curious piece which he had been working on. Over and over in his hands he turned it, squinting, and he nodded at the handiwork. There were other parts on the bench, and he assembled the piece, and had it all together before he happened to glance at the window.

There was a face in the window.

The face disappeared, but he glanced down, back at his work, as though he had not seen the face, or as though it didn't matter. He stared hard at a monkey wrench lying on the lathe-table. Then he washed his hands with gritty soap and went out.

He had to walk.

His stomach was burbling, and he stopped at a diner for hamburgers and a piece of coffee ring. Then he took a bus and rode for a couple of miles. When he got out he walked for five blocks and leaned against a tree for a while.

He was at 960 Summit Avenue, the Gates house, which was red brick and had conical spires. There were a couple of lights on. Woddie hunted around, found an open window and slipped into the house. It was so damned easy that he sat for a moment in surprise and comfort on a sofa. Further than that, he was so sure of himself that he lit a cigarette and smoked it down to a short butt. Then he heard water running.

He crushed the coal of the cigarette, rose and listened. This was a large, high-ceilinged living room, and the acoustics were excellent. In the dark he made his way through the room, and then there was light in a pale, dreamy yellow. Now he was in an old-fashioned hall. For a

moment he stood frowning and listening, and then he mounted the straight, rather steep staircase.

It was all old-fashioned—the rugs, furniture, woodwork, all the appointments. Even the plumbing, for that matter. The man Gates was old-fashioned, set in his ways and his likings.

Along the worn carpeting of an L hall stole Massey; he turned the corner, and approached an open, lighted doorway.

Daphne was in there, all right. That night, with time on her hands, she had gone snooping. First she had gone to Woddie's address and found him not at home. Then, playing private dick, she had gone to the plant. Not having keys, and knowing what floor he worked on, she had gone down to the flats, crossed the maze of tracks and climbed the stairs to the top, below street level. When she looked through the window she got a scare, because for an instant she thought she had been seen. But Massey went ahead with his work, and she went down the stairs fast and back to her car. When she reached home she undressed and went to the bathroom to soak herself in the tub.

IT WAS an old-fashioned, high tub stilted on ball and claw legs, and the plumbing was open. Overhead was a ring with a curtain drawn around to the wall, and from a pipe dangled a length of rubber tubing and faucet connection.

Reclining in the tub she was wriggling her toes under the bolt of water which was pounding out of the brass faucet. By now the level of water had mounted almost to the base of

her throat. Under the water, because of its turbulence, her body was a vague blur in continuous, fluid, shivering motion.

Her head jerked up and speechless she saw Woddie framed in the doorway. One long step took him into the room. Thereafter the happenings were grotesque, on the borderline between being laughable and grim.

First, she was galvanized into action and struggled to whip out of the tub, when she slipped and floundered, shocking a few quarts of water all over the room.

By that time Woddie had grabbed the knob to slam the door shut. So that he could do his work in confined quarters. He got one of the real surprises of his life, because the door did not behave. It simply came away. It was just there, not on its hinges; it hadn't been hung since Daphne could remember.

Recovering quickly from his astonishment, he now demonstrated his resourcefulness, and his strength. Picking up the fairly heavy door with both hands, he barged over and slammed it down on top of the tub.

Daphne saw it coming and let out the first sound either had made so far, a frantic, high scream. Then she ducked in order to avoid being brained.

The door covered the tub completely, and Woddie boarded it as though riding a raft. The drain was already closed, and was the kind operated via a standpipe outside the tub, sticking up from the tiled floor. He turned the water on full blast.

Underneath, Daphne screamed in terror a couple of times, muffledly, and then fought. He could feel her

struggling, but of course with all her strength she couldn't budge the door, with his weight on it, a fraction of an inch. Then she quieted, and he heard her dim, shaven voice pleading, "Let me out. Please. You don't have to do this. Please!"

He smiled with a kind of awful, base satisfaction, as though by committing this crime he were getting even for the beating administered by her father.

Underneath, she drummed on the door with both fists. He thought about her gorgeous young body, and her with no use for it from now on. . . . While the water rose she knocked intermittently, almost with resignation. She didn't even have the advantage of a mouse, which can gnaw off a leg caught in a trap.

Now she was holding her breath, for there was silence, then a frantic drumming with her fists. After that, nothing.

Water poured over the edge of the tub through the clearances of the door's paneling. He turned the water off and sat for a full three minutes. Water dripped from the edge of the tub, but he had stopped Daphne's mouth with water and she didn't make any move nor sound. Her loveliness was ended.

"This will make a fine accident," Woddie decided. "If she has any bruises they'd be from falling in the tub. Damned if I even had to touch her."

He forgot about turning the water on again, even forgot to lift the door and stand it against the wall again. For he had just thought about something horribly important.

Down at the plant he had left the lights on. Worse, he had left his

toolbox out and open, and the wonderful new gunsight on the bench.

Electrified, he got off the door. Not in a wild scramble because he was cold-blooded, but with deliberation, keeping calm until and after he found out what damage was done. He left the house by the front door, and thoughtfully left it unlocked.

HE SOON caught a cruising hack, and took it downtown to the theater district. Leaving the bright lights he went to Dawes Boulevard and then down to the flats. He sneaked across the tracks, mounted the staircase, and entered the plant via the window with the trick bars. That window was one of the slickest jobs he ever did, and he had done a lot of dandy jobs.

Everything was as he had left it. The gunsight was right there on the ledge, gleaming and perfect. The smell of oil and machines was in the air, a smell he loved. Standing around hugely, the machines themselves resembled crouched, brooding monsters.

From behind a lathe which looked like a couple of blocky anteaters touching noses, the hefty form of Corbett rose slowly like that of a plump monk rising from prayer.

"Hi," he said casually. "This is a gun in my hand, and I'm pointing it right at your gizzard."

Woddie jumped and twined around with the wrench in his grip. He said, "Oh, it's you."

"It's me." ABC approached slowly and smoothly, as though rolling on rubber wheels.

"What do you want?" Woddie asked.

"You, with a confession."

"I don't get you."

"Murder, my fine-fettled friend. Homicide and stuff."

You're out of your head!"

"Oh, there are a lot of things. Number one, you are an ex-convict."

"What makes you think I am?"

"Gates was in the habit of giving men a chance, and he hired exes who were capable men and gave them training. You certainly played a low-down, skunk trick on him, selling him out."

"So I looked you up. He kept a notebook on all of his employees. I found that book in his desk at his house, finding no one at home to talk to. I read up on you. Safecracker, eh? I'll bet you know all about handling nitroglycerine."

"Phooey," said Woddie contemptuously.

"Then what's that flask of nitroglycerine doing in your room at Flo Barron's?"

"Oh, you do a bit of burglary on the side, do you?"

"Well, you might call it breaking and entering at Gates' house, I suppose," ABC admitted with a shrug, "but Flo asked me to come in and wait. You know how those things are. We had a few drinks, and after a while I had a chance to look around. That lipstick of hers is sticky stuff, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," Woddie agreed, likewise fencing.

"And I found that trick gate of yours in the windowbars," continued ABC. "I couldn't get through, so naturally I procured a key to the main door."

"Naturally."

"How in hell did you ever hit on the idea of sucking an egg and load-

ing it with nitro?" Corbett asked admiringly.

Woddie grinned. "I find things out. Such as the way you eat eggs, and frying them yourself."

"Eggs Benedict are good, too," said ABC, grinning. "Well, let's go along, shall we?"

"Stay where you are," Woddie warned. "What kind of sap do you take me for?"

"Stay where I am?" the detective asked, puzzled. "Why, I've got a gun on you."

"What do you think I've got here?"

"It looks like a monkey wrench to me."

"Sure it does, but it isn't. The handle is rifled, and the chamber holds a forty-five slug. A dum-dum. It'll make a hole in you big enough to pitch a ball through."

ABC had lowered his gun in looking at the wrench.

"Now that I come to think of it," he said cheerfully, "I've noticed that wrench lying there, and your always taking it out but never using it. No wonder you never loan anybody any of your tools. Well, I ought to tell you I fixed that wrench."

"Oh? How come it's got the bullet in the chamber, then?"

"Would I take the bullet out?" Corbett asked, sparring. He was at a disadvantage now, for Woddie would be able to fire first. "You'd notice it, and then the play would be off. The logical thing for me to do would be substitute a blank."

"Yeah," Woddie sneered, "only a blank won't fit. The rifling is off-caliber. I rifled it that way, and made my own slugs."

ABC formed a cherubic, false



He picked up the heavy door and slammed it down over her, locking the tub like a coffin.

smile. "Look down the barrel and see whether it isn't plugged up," he suggested.

"Is that the best you can think of?" he jeered. "Drop the gun, copper."

The precision balance of the moment was gone. Corbett dropped the gun with a *clunk* on his foot, and danced around, his face grimaced with pain.

"Let's see," he proposed. "You can't knock me off here, because there'd be blood and pieces of meat all over the machinery. How are you going to work it?"

CHAPTER VIII

The Grim Game



MASTER of the situation now, Woddie perched on the edge of his machine. He ruminated. "How about marching you to the stair-well, conking you from behind, and dumping you over the rail?"

"Can you hoist two hundred and forty pounds?" he asked, exaggerating his weight somewhat. "And suppose I lit on my feet and only broke my legs?"

"A chain-hoist will get you over," said Woddie. "And I'm going to slug you so hard that you'll be a stiff before you start your trip downstairs."

They were playing a brutally grim game, tossing the conversational ball back and forth. The mechanic's ingenious gun was a single-shot pistol. If ABC was just stalling for time, Woddie could kill him, then snatch the detective's gun and shoot his way out.

ABC intercepted the thought and said, "I'm not stalling for time, pal. You've got that thing on me. All right. I want to know a few things before I go, so let's trade information."

The weirdness of the bargain didn't register with either one of them.

"What have you got?" Woddie enquired practically.

"Well, I know where Gates is."

"That's not so good," Woddie said judiciously. "I can get along without him."

"It's good enough, for a reason," ABC insisted.

"All right, I'll take your word for it. Go ahead."

ABC told him Gates' address. He said, "You're going to lose your scalp. He's got back control of the company."

"How's that?"

"I've got the controlling block of shares."

"You won't have them very long."

"I meant to say I had them. I had them transferred to Gates and they're in the mail now, along with a report on all the dope I've turned up so far. You see, you won't get anywhere."

"Who'd you mail the stuff to?"

"Uh-uh," Corbett refused. "It's your turn."

"All right, what do you want to know?"

"How did you kill Gogh and Pratt?"

Woddie listened for a long time, as though wondering about a dictaphone being rigged up. There was none, he was sure. Corbett was playing a lone hand, and losing it.

The mechanic admitted, "With nitro. I filled Pratt's inkbottle with the stuff, and emptied his fountain pen into the wastebasket. Gogh throws his false teeth around—he even pickles them on his desk here to give people the jitters—so I filled his water glass in his bedroom. When he clunked them in, the stuff went off. Very ticklish stuff, my friend."

"How about Avery?"

Woddie refused. "Nope. Your turn."

"You're wrong. The last item is bunched."

WODDIE conceded the point. "I couldn't get into that damned house. So I put a bottle on the ledge in the vines near the mailbox and made it tight to the door of the box. That bird never lets anyone touch the mail but himself." Guessing brilliantly he said, "Some damned bird must have roosted on the fish-line. All right, now where did you send the stock?"

"To Daphne Gates, by special messenger. To be delivered personally, otherwise to be held and called for in person. You can't get hold of it, Massey."

"You think I can't."

"You can't."

"I'll be right there to grab it. I'll have a girl friend to call for me to take it; I'll be her brother, see?"

"And where will Daphne be?"

"Haunting a house somewhere."

"What do you mean by that?"

"She's dead. Right now she's lying in the bathtub, drowned."

"Did you do that, too?"

"It's fixed to look like an accident," said Woddie. "Well, I guess I'll have to wait till morning now, before I turn on the water again. I'll be there for that messenger." He could work it that way. He would get Flo Barron drunk and take her to Gates' place. The messenger would have left a notice on the usual printed form, and he'd call the service to have the envelope redelivered for the usual additional fee. Then they would put on the little act. Because "personal" messages are always signed for by husbands for wives and brothers for sisters. It would work, all right.

"It's my turn," prompted ABC. "There's been murder enough. What started you off on the nitroglycerine jag?"

Woddie told him, narrating with the contained emotions of a man who has done enough time and enough thinking in prison.

First, he was a superb mechanic, but he was unscrupulous and also nagged by ambition. He wanted to finance himself and get going, resolved that the world was to be his orange eventually, so in his spare time he learned how to drill safes and crack them.

He got caught and served time.

When he got out he headed north and searched around until he came upon the Gates plant. Gates looked

him over, after Woddie boldly told him that he was an ex-con, and took him on.

IN PRISON, Woddie had worked in the power plant, and he had plenty of time to worry a few ideas to perfection. A couple of ideas were busts, and he lost a lot of time at Gates before he found out that those ideas wouldn't work. But there was nothing wrong with the gunsight.

To begin with, he had to have a shop to work in, on his own. If he asked permission of Gates he would have to tell what for. That wouldn't do. So he arranged his own time by fixing the barred window, to enable him to enter the plant and work at night. The light he used couldn't be seen, since the floor was below street level. And across the river was too far away.

The gunsight was perfect in design, but the design was in his mind, so that it couldn't be stolen. The motivation of all this was his selfishness, plus the fact that anything invented by any mechanic in the plant belonged to Gates. So Woddie wouldn't profit. What he didn't know was that Gates always turned over any proceeds to the inventor.

Avery and his gang found out that Woddie was an ex, but there were a number of onetime felons in the plant. However, Woddie's days were numbered and all his work lost.

"What happened?" ABC asked.

Woddie said satirically, "One night I locked up, and then I happened to think that there was a lot of money in the main office, and I could use a little more money."

"So I went back up the stairs and

through the barred window, and up to the 'front'. They were all in there—Avery, Gogh, Pratt, and the head engineer, Art Glover."

He listened in, and they were not only talking, but they had his gunsight, which they had taken from his toolbox. They passed it around, turning it over in their hands, and obviously they couldn't plumb the secret of it.

Lanky Glover protested, "I've got everything blueprinted so far, but it doesn't mean anything yet. There's a part missing, and how do you expect me to guess what it is? I never saw anything like this before." He might have guessed, but also he might be lying, faithful to Old Man Gates.

Then Woddie learned what the set-up was.

They were going to fire him when his contract was up, whether he finished the gunsight before that time or not. The time was pretty close. Practically up. Even if he manufactured the gadget on his own he'd get no money, because the work he had done in the plant belonged to the owners.

The fixed window would be a fine piece of evidence against him. As far as he was concerned, Avery and his piratical gang were just a bunch of smooth crooks, chiseling him out of a life of ease.

But they were keeping the information to themselves, obviously, and if they were destroyed the killings could be attributed to the uproar in labor.

And Woddie knew how to handle nitroglycerine.

Oh, they replaced the gunsight in his toolbox. He found it there next

morning, neatly lying on its bed of chamois in the special compartment.

HE HAD sold Gates out because he wanted money to start his own shop. He wanted to get rich. He had saved his money and bought stock in the company for a long while. When he saw that he had something in the gunsight, he was unconcerned about doublecrossing his employer. He wanted to get ahead.

He sold the stock he held to Avery, and that number of shares swung the controlling interest in the company. Avery and the other two skunks held more than fifty-one per cent of the stock. Promptly they voted Gates out of his own company.

Gates couldn't do anything, having sunk all of his money in improvements in the plant. He was liberal with Daphne, and could have borrowed from her and stemmed the trouble, but he was as proud as Samuel Hall. He kept his mouth shut.

There was something funny about the stock set-up. The company stock could be held by the purchaser only so long as he was employed at the plant. When he was discharged, pensioned, or resigned, automatically the stock had to be sold back to the company at par value plus whatever the owner could afford as a bonus. Thus, Gates himself had to turn in his stock at a nominal price.

However, such a transaction is impossible if one of the parties is absent, and Gates quietly made himself scarce. He went back to the room he had rented long ago when he was desperately poor and just started out on the adventure. He was not going

to get robbed. He was going to hang on until that stock went sky-high, as he knew it would.

He had in the plant the best machine tools made, and a few of the best men in the business. He had the government orders and was all toolled up. He was bankrupt and would be for a little time, but then the profits would be enormous.

It didn't matter, as to an individual, that he was sold out of his own company; what blackened his mind was that the man who sold him out, Woddie, knew what he was doing. The man he had befriended had destroyed the work of a lifetime.

The stock was worth a great deal, but Gates wasn't going to sell it; he was still going to play the game his own way. He'd stay poor, and in hiding, and starve grimly to the end.

For his part, Woddie had an invention that was worth an incalculable amount in dollars. He had a military device. War or no war, there were always guns.

He had more than enough money to patent the gadget if it belonged to him. It happened not to, because of his contract with the Gates Company. But he knew where he could get hold of stray machine tools, scattered around River City in machine shops. There wasn't enough money to buy that equipment.

What he planned to do was complete the sight as it now was, and resign. He had a location for a shop picked out. He'd submit the gun-sight to the Army, get a Government subsidy, install the extra machine tools he needed with the money, and go ahead on the order.

There would be all kinds of other

orders on the side. Lipstick containers and the like. Ornamental tacks. Lamp stems. He knew where the orders were waiting, and where the overlooked stockpiles of metal were. He had done a lot of looking around lazy River City.

Some of this Woddie said, and a lot of it ABC knew.

"All right," said Corbett. "That's the way it is."

"That's the way it is."

"I wasn't sure how this would come out, and I'm still a little bit worried, but I'm going now," Corbett announced.

"You certainly are," said Woddie. "All through?"

"All through. Everything's settled. The cops can check up on what I tell them."

"They never will."

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to turn my back on you and run like the devil for the stairs. How do you like that?"

"You'd better not try it. If you think I won't shoot you, you're nuts," Woddie warned.

"Here goes," said ABC. He whipped around and ran like a scorched goblin among the machines, and threw himself to the floor. Woddie fired. The sound of the explosion was like that of a cannon-cracker going off under a tin can. Fourth of July stuff.

ABC wasn't touched, though his knees were bruised. He got up and returned to the recumbent Massey.

He had been telling the truth. He knew about that pistol which was made in the form of a monkey wrench; and being something of a mechanic himself he had carefully plugged the barrel with soft lead.

When Massey fired, the wrench turned into shrapnel, blowing up and a piece of steel entered Woddie's right orb. One eye was open; the other was simply a wound, a piece of steel having been blown into his brain.

ABC picked himself up and returned. No doubt about it, Massey was dead. The detective cracked his ears, still somewhat deafened by the wrenching concussion and echoes. He retrieved his pistol and went, since there was no point in staying around. He could tell his story tomorrow.

IN HIS car, having let himself out through the boulevard door, Corbett waited long enough to light a cigarette. Apparently no one was around to notice nor hear the gunshot. He drove to Gates' address at 960 Summit Avenue. He rang the bell and tried the knob at the same time. The door was open and he pushed in.

He ran through, knowing the house now, and went upstairs as though he were a balloon ascending at a smooth, fast slant. He went around the L-shaped hall to the bathroom, and into it.

There it was—the door lying on top of the bathtub and covering it completely. The floor was wet. It was true, and she was dead there in the tub.

The mixed expression on ABC's countenance dissolved into suspicion and interest, and he listened. There was a whisper in the air, as rhythmic as breathing. The sound came from overhead. He looked up, and there it was. Breathing. A whistle that was just audible to a man with sharp

ears. It came from the shower head, and the holes in it made the sound like walking through dry leaves.

The door was jammed tight, under the faucet collars and against the walls. Corbett ripped it up, took it away and stood it against the wall near the doorway.

He looked down into the tub.

There was Daphne, lying on the bottom of the tub, under water, and she was breathing through the faucet connection at the end of the rubber tube leading to the shower-head. She opened her eyes under water, took the rubber ring away from her mouth and sat bolt upright. Her lipstick was smeared, and ABC burst out laughing.

She recognized him, clambered out of the tub with her hair hanging in rat-tails, and was wrapped in a big towel before he could say, "Great Scot! Look what we have here!" Then she embraced him with all her might.

"Everything's okay," he said. "Except me."

She kissed him on the mouth, and she did it in the wink of an eye.

He didn't know what to do, and felt numb all over in the presence of a precariously clad girl. He looked at the plumbing and said, with his head turned away, "You'd better get dressed."

"Why?"

"I'm hungry."

"Oh. All right." She dressed, having skipped out and left footprints in water on the floor. He looked at them.

About an hour later they were in the best restaurant in town, and grudgingly ABC admitted, "This is all right."

It was very, very early for breakfast, and they were the only persons in the establishment. The waiters were all together in a cocoon of anticipation, waiting for action.

Corbett's eyes were fixed on her lips as he looked at her steadily. He couldn't help it.

"I suppose you want half a dozen eggs, and bacon," she suggested.

There was a lot of work to do tomorrow. He had to go down to

Police Headquarters, and talk and talk.

That was all right, but he would never forget opening his refrigerator and by the barest margin not cracking an egg filled with nitroglycerine on the edge of a frying pan.

He said, "No eggs, now. I've lost my taste for them for the time being. "I'll have buckwheat cakes for a change. Double butter. Twelve."

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Self Defense



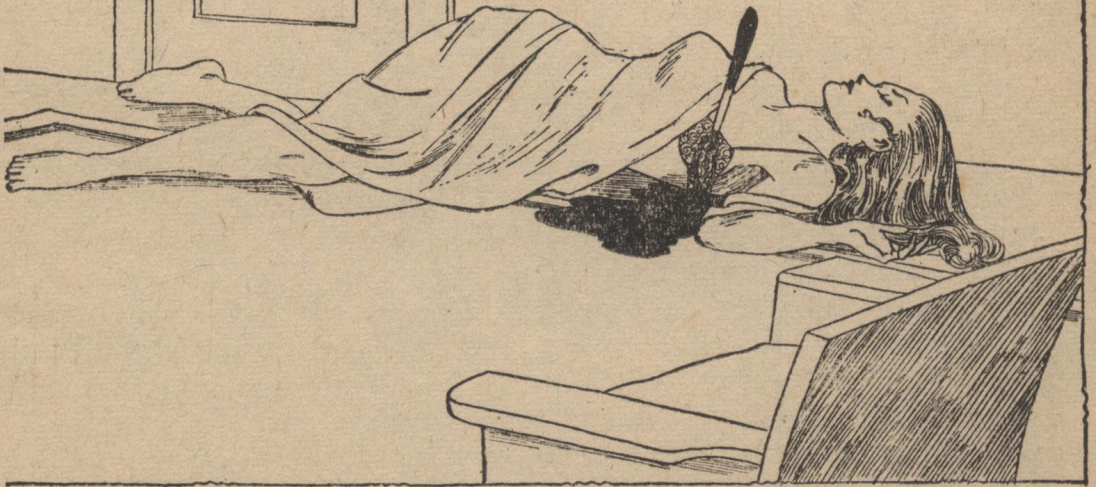
RYAN looked slightly annoyed. He glanced from me to Ruth in a meaning way. Maybe I'm funny. Here he'd come into the office of his chief competition with an air of great secrecy and impor-

tance, and I should have been wondering what the hell he wanted. Instead, I sat behind my desk and wondered just what made him so successful in the private investigating field.

I was to find out.

**By
LUKE
TERRY**

As his fingers tightened, my eyes
began to hurt, and my tongue
began to come out, slowly . . .



You've met Griffin and Ezell before. Here they are again in a murder situation that is more fatal than funny. If it hadn't been for Ruthie, the girl who knew all about men—including killers—the case might have ended differently

He wasn't big and he wasn't little. He was absolutely colorless, he was John Q. Public, the man on the street. Yet he'd broken more cases

in the Southwest than any private gumshoe in the district, and he'd had every damned thing sewed up tight—until Griffin & Ezell moved in on

him, that being Bud and me, of course.

He said, "Ezell, what I have to say can't very well be said in front of a woman. Can't I see you—?"

We had brought Ruth Myers with us when we came down from St. Louis. While she acted as secretary, steno, and file clerk, as a matter of fact, she was damned near the third member of the firm. She came away from the side of the desk where she had been standing, pulled out a chair, and sat down with a great flourish of well-filled nylon, got her pad and pencil ready, and smiled at Cal Bryan. She said, "I've seen the elephant and heard the owl, junior, I know all the facts of life. To be frank, I've had three husbands. Shoot."

Bryan grinned, eyed her with approval. "Okedoke, if that's how you want it. It's about Bud Griffin, your partner." Bud was the strong arm part of the firm. Me, Vic Ezell, I'm the legal end—and, I like to think, the brains. "He's walking on damned thin ice. He ought to leave women like Zoe Barbee alone."

Ruth broke the point of her pencil, snapped, "What business is that of yours, junior? And who is Zoe Barbee?"

Bryan looked apologetic. "Zoe Barbee? My God, don't you know? Two years ago she was the best known stripper in the business. Now she's running the Silver Slipper a few miles west of town. Griffin is out there every night and running a temperature over her, she's in town every day to see him as well."

So, I thought, that's what has kept Bud so busy the last couple of weeks. That explains the new clothes, the

toilet water, and the patronage of Tony the barber. I might have known a woman was at the bottom of it.

"Look," went on Bryan, "I'm not a bad guy. You fellows move in here with a fine reputation, you start taking away retainers from me, but do I get sore? I believe in living and letting live, there's enough here for all of us. So I'm going to tell you this—tell you about a phone call I got yesterday, and maybe you can repay the favor sometime or other."

HE TOLD it with a great deal of delicacy for a private dick. I got to thinking maybe that was what made him such a success, delicacy. It seems this party on the phone was a guy madly in love with Zoe Barbee, a guy who had been that way for months and months. He'd showered her with presents, given her plenty of money, only to get the brush-off when Bud Griffin, my partner came along. And the man on the phone wasn't one to take it sitting down.

I remember saying, "I think Griffin is old enough and big enough to take care of his own personal life, Bryan."

"Not when this guy is concerned, and not when dames like Zoe are concerned. The woman is a digger, all the way. She's taken the man on the phone, now she'll take Griffin. Only the man on the phone—"

"Aw, cut it out," snapped Ruth. "Just call him your client if you don't want to name him."

"All right, my client." Bryan beamed at her. "Believe it or not, the guy—and I'll reserve his name—has hired me to keep him from com-

mitting murder! Laugh that one off! I came to you because you're supposed to be brainy. I know Bud Griffin's temper; me, I'm a small man, I don't want any trouble with him."

He got up to leave, shrugging, smiling in that little apologetic way of his. "You'll tell him?"

I said, "Tell him what? To lay off Zoe Barbee or get himself in Dutch. You don't know Griffin—tell him that and he'll redouble his efforts. Tell him to be careful of someone, some jealous guy—who?"

"I can't reveal the name. This guy is a bigshot, he realizes he's playing chump to the Barbee dame and can't help himself, but he doesn't want it to get out. It would hurt his business."

He paused at the door. "There's no catch to this, Ezell. I'm earning a fee and I'm doing your firm a favor. So long, come over and hoist a couple with me, sometime." He grinned shyly. "And bring the gal friend. Bye."

"That," said Ruthie, "might as well have come out of a pulp detective story. That guy is nuts—somebody hiring him to prevent his murdering Griffin!"

I grinned and said, "Never mind, let's go on with our dictation."

So she came over and sat down on my lap and I kissed hell out of her. You know how those things go. Take out the first couple of mixed pickles from a jar and the rest come easy. I said mixed—anything can come next.

After awhile somebody said, "Am I interrupting?" And Bud Griffin, arrayed like a lily of the field was amongst us.

BUD GRIFFIN is tough, that is the only word for him. I freed him on a murder rap in St. Louis, which is how we got together. He beat a man to death with his bare fists, a man twenty pounds heavier and half a head taller. Why, doesn't matter in this. He knocked the guy down until he was tired of it, then kept picking him up and knocking him down again, and again and again. And the guy died.

No use to lie about it, I bought a juror and got him off on self defense. We'd been together ever since.

Bud stood maybe five ten and weighed around one seventy, though you wouldn't think it to look at him. He would have been a champ in the ring except for his temper. When he was stung, he was liable to break off a ringpost and go to work. He was a master of mayhem, Bud was, with an ungovernable temper. There have been a lot of times when I have been sore at Bud myself. He had a thin-lipped, wide mouth that was only a narrow black slot when he got sore. His eyes were a half-way shade between gray and blue. When they started taking on a gray tinge, it was time to move out of the vicinity—hurriedly. And they had a decided gray tinge right now. More so when I finished telling him about Cal Bryan. I told it kiddingly, like it was all a joke, which is the best way to handle Bud.

He snapped, "Don't laugh, Vic, there's not a damned thing funny about it." And he walked over to the window and began staring down into the street, talking over his shoulder.

"I don't suppose you ever seen

Zoe, Vic. You don't go in much for nightlife. She's—well—hell, she's beautiful. She's the only woman I ever saw in my life that I wanted. When I see another guy even look at her—" He raised his hands and made choking motions, to finish the sentence.

I looked at Ruthie, and she raised her brows at me.

"Go on, go on, say it," said Bud, wearily. "She's been a stripper, she dates back to burlesque, she's cheated and blackmailed and God only knows what else. So what? So I love her!"

He whirled from the window, his eyes gray as hell now. "What's she done that I haven't done, that you haven't done. Hell, you're a shyster lawyer, you're crooked as a snake. Ruthie's had a couple of husbands or so and, hell knows how many boy friends? She ain't divorced now, but you and her—"

I was getting a little hot myself.

"And me? God, maybe you don't know it, but I've killed three men. Not one, but three! So what am I leading up to? That Zoe's everything everybody says about her, she'll be the first to admit it. And what? Damn it, we love each other, that's all."

Women beat hell, don't they? Ruthie had tears in her eyes when she got up and walked over to him. She put both her hands on his shoulders, and she said, "Sure, sure, Bud, I know how you feel!"

He grinned, came over to the desk and tossed a letter on it. He said, "Just the same there's something damned screwy going on, and I'm going to see Bryan and find out about it."

Wisely, I put in, "Hell, he's just

got a client. Lay off him. We got to put up with him anyway." I picked up the letter.

"That," said Bud, "was delivered to my hotel yesterday. The clerk found it lying on the counter, and shoved it in my box. There'd been a phone call too, day before yesterday."

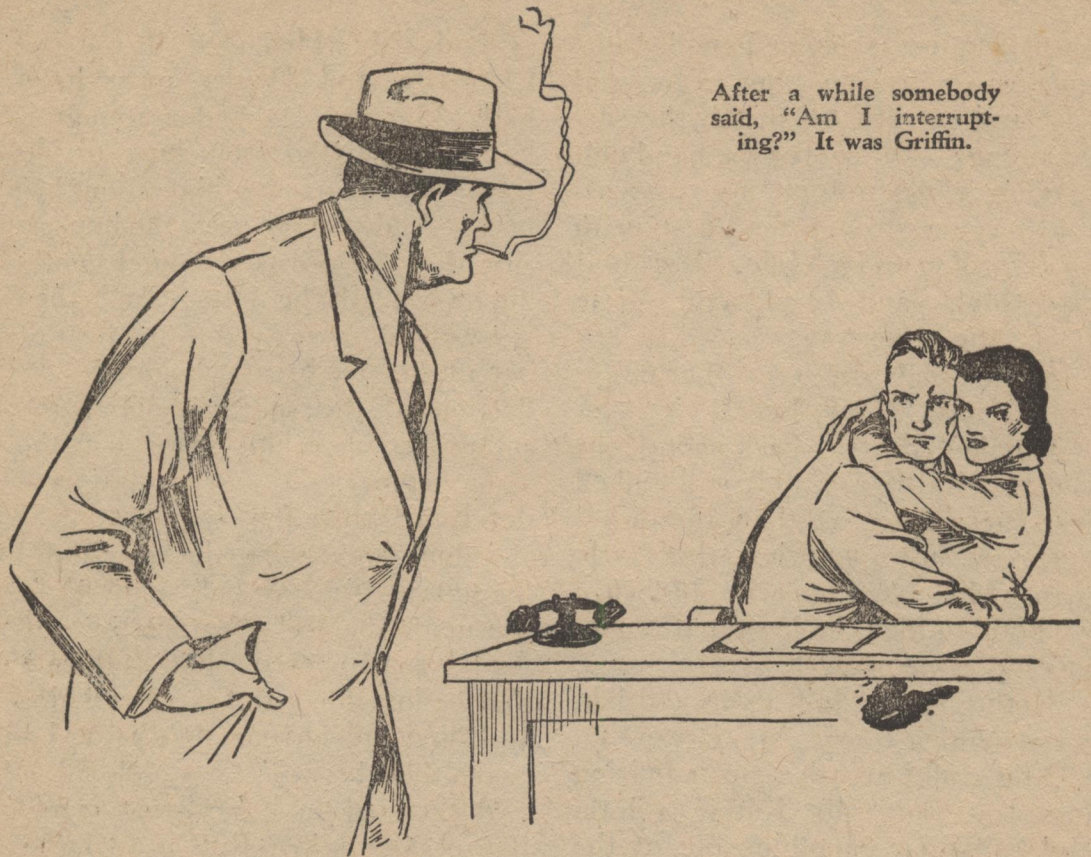
Ruthie said, "So let's start with it, the phone call, and have things in order."

HIS mouth got thin and his eyes faded a little. "Some guy with a hoarse voice told me to lay off Zoe. Said she was horsing me around, that another guy was really big papa and the other guy was jealous and tough. I asked who the other guy was and the voice said, 'Me!' Just like that and hung up. I didn't say anything to Zoe. Figured it to be just a troublemaker, a busybody. Then the letter."

It was on typewriter paper, but it was handwritten, masculine writing, broad and flourishing. It read:

"Chump: I tried to tell you the score on the phone but you were a wise guy. Ask Zoe who has paid her rent for the last year. Ask who pays it now, who dresses her, who feeds her. I'm trying to be reasonable about this, chump, but there are a lot of other ways I can be—tough, for one. Lay off Zoe. She's taking you, and you're too dumb to see it. Just mention Boots to her and see what she says."

I folded it up and tucked it into a desk drawer, but he squawked until he got it back. I should have



After a while somebody said, "Am I interrupting?" It was Griffin.

squawked louder, but how is a man to look ahead on a thing like that?

He said, "Look, I'm a jealous guy, I'm crazy about the woman. So last night I asked her, I asked her all the questions, I mentioned Boots and everything."

"What happened?" That was Ruthie.

"She never heard of anyone named Boots. She swears to God she's not taking a penny from anyone, not since she and I started to run around together, claims she's shooting square with me."

"And what did you do?"

"Hell, I love her. I believed her."

He got up and put his hat on the back of his head. "Somebody is trying to bust us up for some reason. Maybe it's somebody that hates her guts; maybe it's somebody that hates

mine. Anyway, they can't do it. I'm going out to her place now."

When he had gone, Ruthie said, "I'd hate to be the guy when Bud catches up with him. I'd hate worse to be a guy trying to move in."

"The dame probably lied to him," I said. "Hell, a man in love believes what he wants to believe. But the babe will fool around and get her pants in a crack if she monkeys with Bud Griffin."

So having a little business of our own we let it lie right there until that evening.

We went out to the Silver Slipper.

BELIEVE me, it was no joint. It was small, exclusive, and kept that way by a \$2.20 cover charge, plenty steep for this part of the country. It was a local band making the

music, but it was damned good, nothing jive or jitterbug, but sweet, and soft and colorful to match the surroundings. Whenever the band quit playing, a girl and guy in gypsy costumes came through the guests with an accordion and a fiddle. The food was high—and wonderful. The liquor the same way.

With the lobster thermidor, Ruthie said, "Hey, look."

Coming from the back part of the club was Cal Bryan. He still looked less like a detective than any dick I ever saw, just a colorless, drab little man. He looked our way, and when we both nodded, he hesitated a minute and came over.

Ruthie said, "Join us in a drink, or something to eat, Mr. Bryan?"

You could see the guy admiring her—and rightfully. Ruthie is dark, and built like something out of the Follies. The scarlet evening dress was a miracle—twice over. First, how the hell did she get into it, and second, how did she keep it up, what with it having no straps? So he sat down and ordered a drink.

"Come out often?" I asked.

"Why, no. I'm—well, it's business tonight." I didn't ask him what business it was. Hell, after all, so to speak, he was Griffin & Ezell's opposition. In a way, we'd been undermining him and cutting his throat ever since we got in town. And anyway, about then the lights went low and Zoe Barbee came out into the jealous glow of a baby spotlight.

I gasped, all right. I was thinking about Bud Griffin, and I could damned well see how Bud would fall for her. She was a blonde, brilliant, heart-breaking blonde. Her body was ageless, if I make myself clear.

A body like Helen of Troy and Cleopatra and Diedre must have had. Her dress looked as though it had been painted from knee to hip to throat, for it came high about her neck. And yet, she gave the impression that there was absolutely nothing on beneath the dress. And when she walked, or swayed to the beat of her music, her breast caught the reflection of the spot, trembled and shimmered, her hips swayed in the same manner, and—hell! No wonder Bud Griffin fell!

I don't know what she sang and it doesn't matter. I only know how she made me feel when she sang it. And I remembered what Bud said, that he loved her and she loved him, and he'd kill anyone that came between them!

Afterward the lights came on and Bryan shyly asked Ruthie to dance. While they made their way out onto the little floor, I went back to the dressing room and knocked.

"Who is it?"

"Vic Ezell." That didn't seem to register, so I added, "Bud's partner!" And that got me a come in.

SHE was dressing, and she paid no more attention to me, after saying hello, than if I'd have been a piece of furniture. I didn't get it for a few minutes, to be frank I thought she was making a play. Hell, she pulled off that long black dress. She wore something beneath it all right, a little above and a little below. She fixed her face while we talked of this and that, she pulled long silk stockings up on her shapely legs, and her face didn't change at all. Up close this way, you could see she was quite a bit older than

she'd looked out there on the floor. After a bit, us talking about this and that, she slipped into a suit, and started putting on a hat.

I said, "Going out?"

She looked surprised. "Why," she answered, "Bud couldn't come tonight. I'm going home, of course."

"He comes for you every night, doesn't he? What was wrong tonight?"

She said, "He had some business in Austin. He called and left word for me. I hadn't come out yet. Guess I was in between the apartment and the club. Why?"

I said, bluntly, "Boots," and then watched for a reaction.

By God, I got it. Her eyes began blazing, her red mouth twisted, and she advanced until her nose was about three inches from mine. "You little shrimp," she raged, "just what the hell is this Boots business? First Bud jumps me about it, then Cal Bryan comes in here and says that Boots is about washed up, that he's going to start getting tough unless I slow down with Bud. Now you! Damn you, I don't even know anybody named Boots!"

Sense? Sure not. What the hell was Bud doing in Austin? What was the Boots gag, the Cal Bryan gag? By God, client or no client, I figured I'd put the pressure on Bryan and find out what the thing amounted to.

But she was still raving. "Bud told me about you, the kind of guy you were, only he thinks you're tops because you got him off on a bad rap in St. Louis. I've looked you up, damn you, and I know you're a stinking little shyster. Don't come in here and try to give me the needle. You nor no one else can break Bud and

me up. It doesn't matter what I've been, or what he's been, we're going to make something of ourselves. I'm leveling with Bud! You know what I think?"

"Hell, how could I know?"

"Bud and I are getting a little dough together. We're going to blow this lousy town and this lousy country. He'll never be anything but a strongarm man and a killer as long as he sticks with you. You know damned well I'll make him quit you. You don't like it; you know how jealous he is of me, so you're planting the seeds. You and your Boots. Get the hell out of here now before I claw your eyes out! I don't know any Boots!"

Look, you won't believe it, but if I had to put her in one word right then, the word would have been, "Magnificent!" She was all of that. Sure, she'd been around, she'd found out the score long ago, but by God, it looked to me like she was so much in love with Bud Griffin that she'd kill to keep him. This damned sure wasn't any time to talk to her.

I made the door before I spoke. I said, "All right, Zoe. I'm a shyster; I've done some pretty crooked things because I like money. But you've got me wrong. I don't know anything about a guy named Boots, if it's a guy. Bud and I have been together a long time. I love the guy like you love him, I suppose, though you don't seem to believe it. If having you makes him any happier, I'm all for his having you. If he loves you, that's fine with me; you're tops in my book. Just remember that."

She looked at me levelly with those big blue eyes, for maybe thirty seconds. Then she smiled. She

stuck out her hand and came toward me. "I believe you, Vic," she said. And I shook hands with her. "Just believe one thing yourself," she went on, her fingers in mine. "I love that guy, I'll love him till I die."

RUTHIE and Bryan were sitting with their heads close together when I got back. Bryan bought a drink, insisted on taking the whole check, and after looking at his watch, said, "So long folks." And left.

Ruth said, "He's not a bad guy. But he wouldn't tell me who Boots was, though he admitted it was his client. He's been—"

"Buzzing Zoe Barbee, like me," I cut in. "Want to go?"

She shook her head no. And afterward I wished to God we had have left. For half an hour later Larsen and Peterson came in. They're from Headquarters, nice guys both of them. They waved at me, and while Larsen went on down the room, Peterson came over, but he wouldn't sit down—not then. He simply looked admiringly at Ruthie and said, "Come out with Griffin, Vic?" And I said I hadn't seen Griffin since around noon. He nodded, like he'd expected that, and followed Larsen.

"Now what the hell?" I wondered. But the orchestra broke into one of Ruth's favorite pieces and we got up to dance. When we went back to the table, Peterson was sitting there. So we sat down, too.

He said, "Where's Bud Griffin, Vic?"

"Austin, I heard, though I don't know why." I told him about Cal Bryan, told him about Bud's call to Zoe." I knew something was up.

He was all copper, all detective, and never laid an eye on Ruth.

"And you don't know what he went for? It wasn't agency business?"

Cautiously I said it could have been, though I didn't know. I asked him what was wrong and he said he'd tell me when he came back. He went over to the headwaiter and talked to him. And returning, he said, "Bud called the headwaiter, at least he talked to the headwaiter. Just said he'd get in touch with Zoe later." He snapped the next one. "You know Ben Whitmire, the gambler?"

I didn't.

"Did Bud?"

Get that, the verb was *did*, not *does*!

I said, "Who Bud knows in this town isn't any of my affair. For all I know he might play cards with the guy every night. Who's this Whitmire?"

Peterson said, "Just the guy that's been paying Zoe's rent, buying her pretties, and living with her."

I laughed, but not very merrily. I said, "I have reason to believe that Zoe and Bud are very much in love, Peterson. I think she's leveling with him. Why don't you ask her and verify it?"

"We're working at it. As far as her not taking Whitmire on, how about this?" *This* was a check for a grand. But it was made out to cash, which I pointed out.

Peterson shrugged. "But these are signed, friend Vic." *These* were four letters, which he spread fanwise, but wouldn't let me see. They were all addressed to Zoe Barbee, Silver Slipper, and every damned

one of them had come through the good old United States mail.

Larsen came over, his face worried, nodded to Ruthie and me without smiling. "They called. The babe has scrambled. Nightman on the switchboard says she got a call, and five minutes later came down with an overnight case. Now what the hell? And I questioned everybody here—she got out to the club well after eight."

Ruth said, "If you'll excuse an old lady's curiosity, just what is this all about?"

Peterson looked at Larsen, Larsen looked at Peterson. Peterson said, "Well, lady, it sort of looks like one of your bosses has been played for a chump. Zoe seems to have been eating her cake and having it too. Vic says she and Bud love each other, but she damned sure has been messing around with Ben Whitemire."

And when I said flatly that I didn't believe it, he invited me to go with him, saying we better leave Ruthie. I knew then what we'd find. And we found it all right.



HITMIRE lived in a family hotel out on the south side, the last place you'd ever suspect a gambler of living. There was a detective on duty in the lobby, a couple more in Whitemire's apartment. Two live men—and two dead men.

One lay half in and half out of the kitchen. Larsen pulled down the sheet to show him to me. He'd caught a slug right between the eyes, and his mouth was open, showing his gold teeth. I said, "Hey, Cal Bryan

won't like this! That guy's name is McNulty!"

Peterson said, "Yeah. He's worked for Bryan for a long time, strong arm stuff. We're trying to get in touch with Bryan now. Come on."

We walked into the bedroom and saw the second stiff lying on the floor. So, the first time I ever saw Ben Whitemire, he was dead as hell, shot in the very same place as McNulty—between the eyes. He was a big guy, with a lantern jaw, and must have been pretty good to look at when he was alive—but he wasn't pretty now.

I said, "Why hasn't the meat wagon picked them up?" I could see everything had been dusted for prints, knew the Homicide boys were through.

"Because I want to show the bodies to a couple of people," he answered grimly. "Zoe Barbee for one, Bud Griffin, for another."

My mouth dropped open. Bud Griffin! My God! Then he hit me right between the eyes. "Did this guy have a nickname?"

"Boots. Boots Whitemire."

God Almighty! And I'd acted vague about Bud, smart alecky even! There was no use to go into details, no one would believe such a set up. And besides I was looking where Peterson was pointing. A picture stood on the bureau. Why the hell people in love autograph photos I'll never know. It was a picture of Zoe Barbee, just her face—one of those arty pictures, looking mysterious and exotic. And across one corner it read, "To Daddy, from Zoe." A hell of a note.

"There were four more in the

drawer," he said softly. "Some of them pretty hot—no clothes. Would a dame give such to a guy she didn't know? And there's the little matter of this."

A negligee hung in the closet, the left breast bearing a Z-B monogram. But the worst was the lower drawer of that same bureau. Hell, it was full of negligees and panties and brassieres and all those little fripperies a woman uses. And every damned one of them had a Z-B on it!

Larsen came in and said, "Cal Bryan is here." So we went out to see what he had to say.

HE NEEDED a drink, and he was taking it. After he went in and saw Whitmire, he took another one. Then he sat down, collapsed is a better word, "Whitmire was a client of mine," he said, gulping. "He's from Chicago, you know, sort of the lone wolf type. Well, he came in my joint about three months ago and said he wanted a rough and tough bodyguard. I sent him McNulty. He's—I mean he was—a good man!"

I was thinking quickly. It was about three months ago that Bud Griffin began dressing up, taking a little care of his personal appearance. And I had the hideous thought—did Bud really kill this guy? I remembered how he'd looked standing at the window in the office, his fingers hooked and curved like claws, saying what he'd do to anyone that came between him and Zoe!

Bryan's voice was going on and on. "—know it sounds screwy but he said he wanted me personally, to keep him from killing Bud Griffin. That was a fee, and hell, money is

pretty scarce right now. Vic Ezell will tell you I went over and talked to him—I didn't want no trouble with Griffin, he's a damned bad man. And I went out to the Silver Slipper tonight and talked to Zoe. I wanted to earn my fee." Peterson nodded.

"And what did Ezell say? Never mind, Vic; let him answer."

Bryan looked at me. "Nothing. Said Bud Griffin knew what he was doing. The lady—" he said that word bitterly—"practically threw me out, said she didn't even know Whitmire."

I made a move then. I said, "Peterson, let me see some of Whitmire's handwriting, will you?"

He reached in his pocket and got one of the four love letters. I wasn't interested in the hotness and torridness of them, though by God, I'd be ashamed to write them! But I was interested in the writing. And the writing was the same bold, masculine stuff that had been in that letter of warning to Bud! It looked like Zoe was a liar by the clock, damn her!

"What do you want with that, Vic?"

I shrugged it off, got out of it by pointing at the dead men and asking what time it had happened. "Doc says between seven and seven-thirty. These apartments are soundproof, no one heard the shots." He paused for a moment, his eyes never leaving mine. "The call to the headwaiter at the Silver Slipper was around fifteen until eight. Zoe hadn't shown yet. What do you make of that?"

I winced. Hell, there was too much to make of it. But I said, "You're getting off on the wrong

"You little shrimp!" she said. "Get the hell out of here before I claw your eyes out!"



foot, Peterson. You're making this a jealousy kill. If Bud Griffin was going to wipe out this guy for fooling around with that scut, he'd have done it with his hands!"

"I like Bud myself, Vic. I'm in favor of the babe. She's always been rough and tough."

I guess I grew a little bitter, thinking how she'd taken Bud in, thinking how she'd taken me in. For I said hell yes, I was in favor of the babe, too. She had a good thing in Griffin and couldn't get rid of Whitmire!

Bryan said, "There's one thing you're overlooking. Robbery."

Peterson shook his head. "He had about three grand on him."

Bryan took off his glasses and cleaned the lenses. Dryly he said, "And night before last he played poker with a Mexican general and the governor of Neuvo Leon. He was winner almost fifty grand."

Peterson shot at me, "Was Griffin well fixed? Did he need dough?"

"Get that out of your head, damn it," I snapped. "We've done well here. We came south with dough and added to it. Ask Bryan!"

Peterson shrugged. "Why get hot? Put yourself in my place. It's the dame or Bud or a thief—"

"Or an old enemy. Maybe one of the Mexicali Roses didn't like the way he held his cards or parted his hair or something. Why does it have to be Bud or the woman?"

And patiently he explained. "Because she's hot for Bud; everybody knows that. Maybe she really wants to get rid of Whitmire, maybe she wants to hold both of them. Either she killed him because he was beefing too hard, or Bud killed him because he was jealous of him."

AND after awhile I got up and put on my hat and said I was going home. Peterson said okay, but to not try anything fancy, like covering Bud Griffin up or hell wouldn't be a foot away. And instead of going home I went to the office. I knew Ruth would be there waiting for the news.

She was, leaning back in my swivel chair with her feet up on the desk smoking a cigarette. A bottle and a water glass was by her side—I used it. It took about ten minutes to explain the whole damned situation.

Ruthie's been around; she can out-curse me. She did it, now, and it was all directed toward a certain blonde, name of Zoe. A blonde that played one guy off against another, a blonde that lied every time that she opened her red mouth!

"You think Bud went to Austin, and if so, why?"

She snapped: The babe had someone call him and get him out of town. Tonight was her night for a showdown with Whitmire, damn her. She didn't have brains enough to see she was getting Bud into it, too. I'll bet my hat that's the way it is." Her eyes got wide! "And what if he gets picked up on the way back to town? He'll have that letter on him that Whitmire wrote. It'll make it worse than ever to the cops, knowing how hot headed Bud is!

They'll figure he went up and had it out with Whitmire and called the club, to establish an alibi, then took out for—what the hell are we going to do?"

She had me there. Even another drink, a big one, didn't help it.

She said, "Call it hunch, woman's intuition if you want to, but I'm practically sure that's what happened." She got up, shrugged her hips down into her scarlet evening dress. "I'm going to—"

The phone rang. Eagerly I picked it up, said, "Yes?"

"Is—ah—what place, please?" I recognized the voice, I'd recognize the hoarse throatiness of it anywhere. Frantically I motioned for Ruth to grab the phone in the other room—we have two—and trace the call.

I said, "Griffin & Ezell. To whom did you wish to speak?"

"Is Mr. Griffin back, please?"

"Back from where?" I could see Ruthie in the other room arguing sternly with an operator. There was a moment's hesitation before the voice went on, cautiously.

"Is this Vic Ezell?"

"Yes. Who's speaking, please?" In the inner office I saw Ruth writing a number triumphantly, hanging up the phone.

"This is — never mind, never mind, I'll call back!" Wham, went the receiver.

Ruthie said, "Smith Tourist Camp, out on Broadway." And, as I got up and reached for my hat again, "What are you going to do?"

"Beat a lot of truth out of a two-timing dame," I said, and I meant it.

"I'll drop you by there. Me, I'm

still playing that woman's hunch. I'm going toward Austin, watching every damned car, and if I don't meet Bud I'm going to wait a few miles out of town. That letter from Whitmire will hang him."

It was foolish as hell, from my standpoint, or any standpoint. But I was glad she had the damned intuition, otherwise she'd have wanted to come along.

THE tourist court was one of those with an all night office where a guy could buy anything at all from liquor on up—provided he had the dough. The clerk was a shifty eyed little guy with a face the color of a gray blotter. He winked, said, "Yeah, she came in a couple of hours ago, came up and used the phone about fifteen minutes ago, too. You are going to catch hell for being late." He tossed a key out on the counter, No. 9, went on, "You need anything? Got some damned good rye."

I bought a quart of rye—to keep him quiet. Just a gentle form of blackmail. And hoofing down toward No. 9 I wondered if Bud was the guy she was expecting, the dirty little blonde louse!

I didn't use the key. The cabin was dark and I didn't know the score. I tapped with my fingernails, lightly, then a bit louder. A light came on, a voice called softly, "Who is it?"

"Bud!" A whisper covers a multitude of voices.

There was the sound of the key in the lock, the snap of the latch. And I hit the damned door with my shoulder, hit it hard, felt and heard it crash into her and heard the thud

of her body as she hit the floor. Then I was inside, closing the door behind me.

I'd bounced her against the bed, from where she'd crashed down on the floor. She was wearing a slip, and the slip was in her lap by then, and one long, lithe leg was doubled beneath her. She got up, dazed, her hand covering the big lump on her forehead, her eyes out of focus. I didn't say a word, just gave her time. And finally she snapped out of it. Her breast began to heave with indignation as she saw me.

But what she said was entirely irrelevant. She said, "I was lying down for a little rest while I waited."

"Waited for what, you damned two timer?" I set the whiskey on the table by the window.

My question was like a slap in the face. She got up off the bed and walked over close to me, her eyes hot and mad. "So you're his friend," She sneered. "The hell you are. But let me tell you this, shrimp, you can't stop us, you nor no one else!"

I backhanded her right across the mouth, and it wasn't an easy blow. She went back two or three steps, amazed, I supposed. The sudden jerk of her shoulder broke one of the straps of her slip, but she ignored it. For a minute I thought she was going to leap at me.

"Come on, damn you, try it," I taunted her. "I'm looking forward to it. I can't stop you from that, and damn, you better talk!"

She shrugged, sat down on the bed, wiped the blood off her lips with the back of her hand. "He'll be here before long and I wouldn't like to be in your shoes. You might as well know. We're getting married;

I'm taking him out of the lousy racket you have him in, you shyster. Doing your dirty work. We're starting all over, both of us."

I laughed long and hearty and it made her more and more angry.

"Laugh! But wait and see! I wasn't any more than home when he sent word for me to meet him here! Stick around, he'll keep his word. He said he'd show before midnight. Stick around, so he can beat the hell out of you!"

I said, "Yeah? And because you didn't want any trouble you went over and gunned out Whitmire and his bodyguard before going to the club and—"

"Who?"

"Don't give me that damned innocent act! I'm a detective, I'm no dumb flatfoot on the city force. There's only one truth you've told tonight, and that's the fact that you love Bud Griffin. All the rest that you told me back in your dressing room, everything you told Bryan—just a pack of lies. Even the things you've told Bud—outside of loving him—were lies! Bryan—"

"Leave that louse out of this. Him and his Boots! Him and his client!"

Suspiciously I said, "What do you mean, louse, Bryan? What—"

"Look," she said wearily, "you haven't let him convince you of that Boots hooley have you? Hell, Bryan hates my guts." She shrugged. "I brushed him off a year or so ago and he's never forgiven me! Now he knows I'm in love and he's trying—"

"Liar! You didn't know Boots Whitmire?"

"Never heard of him." She got up now and went to her purse for a cigarette. In that tight, shimmer-

ing slip of expensive satin she made a man's heart go pounding, even knowing what I knew about her.

"So," I sneered, "it's a game, you want it like that. Listen." And I told her about the picture and its inscription, I told her about the lingerie and negligees and all the intimate things in the bottom drawer of Whitmire's bureau.

"You're a liar," she said, quite calmly.

"Maybe I'm a liar about four passionate love letters found in your dressing room, and a check for a grand!"

"Check?"

BOY, I thought, what an actress! For she ground out the cigarette on the floor and walked over to me again. Blood was still trickling down the side of her mouth, dropping into the deep valley of her breast.

"Check?" she repeated. "I don't get you about the check. Letters, yes! Every decent looking woman in my line of work gets love letters. Every—" She paused, her eyes grew wide. "My God! They *were* signed 'Boots'! I remember now. I—"

I took her by both shoulders, burned up with her lying, I shook her until her blond hair flew in all directions, until the slip dropped completely and nearly tripped her when I released her. "You lousy liar," I snarled. "Maybe you remember killing Whitmire and his bodyguard McNulty! It had to be someone they knew, had to be someone they let in without suspicion. You shot Whitmire in the bedroom and got McNulty when he ran out of the kitchen!"

God! I'll never forget the look of her body, covered only in gauzy underthings! A body to set men crazy, the sort of body that had driven men to desperation for a hundred thousand years.

"Damn you," I raved on, "you were too dumb to see what this will do to Buddy. They'll pick him up—the man you love—he'll put two and two together and he'll try to take the rap for you! And all the time you've been fooling around with Whitmire! Lying to Bud. Going from Bud's arms to the arms of the poor, deluded guy you were bleeding—"

She leaped then, leaped at me like a tigress. The nails of her right hand clawed down across my face, taking skin and flesh with them. I could feel the warm blood, feel fingers wrapping into my hair, moved instinctively to dodge a knee thrust toward my groin. Then my own fist connected with her chin, with all the force I could muster. She went bouncing back onto the bed, caromed off it, and lay very still on the hardwood floor.

For a minute I leaned over her. Her breast was rising and falling, her breath whistling between her teeth.

Blood was almost blinding me. I reached down, picked up her slip and wiped the blood away. I leaned closer, looked at her underthings. My heart turned a flip. I held the torn slip up toward the light with a sinking of the heart. Something was wrong. These were the same expensive sort of undergarments that had been in Ben Whitmire's drawer. *But there were no embroidered monograms!*



MAYBE I stood there thirty seconds turning it over in my mind. I'm a pretty good psychologist—a man has to be to be a criminal lawyer. I know it was long enough for the blood to pour down into my eyes again. I remember walking through the room and into the kitchen, through the kitchen and into the bath. I turned on the water full force and began washing the blood away from my ringing head. I was pretty sick, too. For the first little cobweb of doubt was beginning to cloud my pretty theories.

You know how it is when a man is deep in thought. He'll do some familiar thing over and over and over. I must have done that. I wet the second towel, meaning to go out and wash off her face, to try and revive her, maybe with a little of the lousy rye I'd bought at the office.

I stopped in the kitchen door, however, conscious of something wrong. Then I saw the front door. It was open a full foot. And I walked on in, past the bed, and I looked down. Somehow I got to the whiskey. I upended the bottle and gurgled. She wouldn't need a drink ever again. There was a knife in her heart and a pool of crimson blood was already gathering beneath her.

I came to life then. Damn it, I hadn't killed her. And I hadn't been in the bath long enough for—I grabbed the gun out of my shoulder holster, leaped for the door. Everything was black toward the street, but it seemed to me I heard an engine starting and a car go roaring away. I went back into the cottage

and closed the door. The bottle of rye was handy and I used it; it was like so much water. I just stood staring down at her now, sorry for her, damning myself, damning life, damning everything in the world for such a mess.

I heard the car coming into the drive, caught the reflection of its lights, heard the gravel scrunching beneath its wheels. There was a tapping at the front door then, and, "Zoe! Zoe!"

I said, "Come in."

BUD GRIFFIN opened the door and came in. I was standing there with a gun in my right hand and a quart of rye in my left. He looked at me and his eyes went to Zoe. He sort of swayed back against the door and I set the bottle down. In a choked voice he said, "So it was you sending me on a wild goose chase! What in God's name did you hope to gain by this?" He looked back down at her and the most terrible sob I ever had the misfortune to hear came from his lips. I backed away from him until the wall stopped me, I raised the gun. "Bud, listen to me, Bud! I didn't do it, Bud! Listen!"

The eyes in his white face were so light gray as to be colorless, his mouth was a thin, lipless slot, his hands were up, curved for a throat, as they had been that morning in the office.

He choked, "—the only—thing—I ever—loved—"

I raised the gun. He was death and I knew it, death that could not be diverted. A step at a time he came on.

"I'll shoot you, Bud!" I remem-

ber saying that. But I couldn't force myself to pull that trigger! Not until he was right on me, not until the madness in his eyes made me want to scream like a woman. I remember thinking, he's killed three men, three men, I won't be four. And damn me, I closed my eyes and squeezed. The gun roared and leaped in my hand.

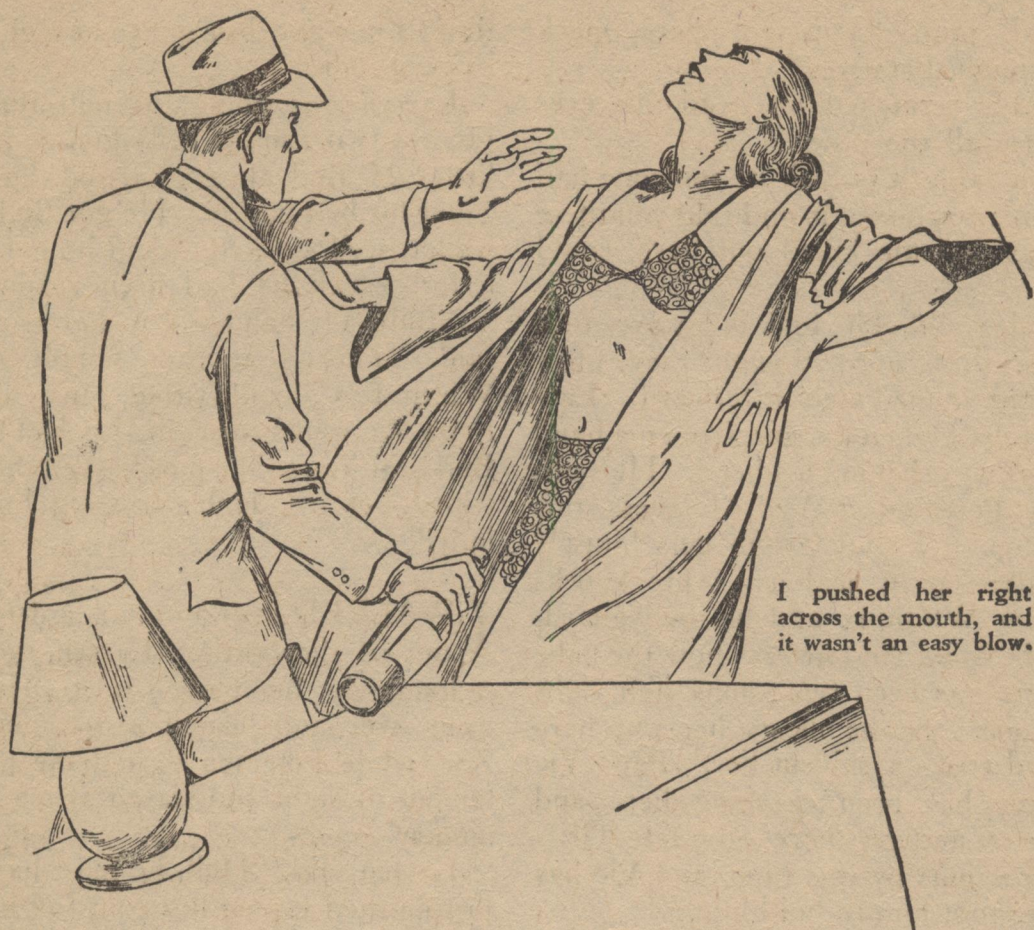
Then it was snatched away, and those fingers curled around my throat as relentless as ten steel traps. Inescapable traps. His breath was hot and heavy in my face. He pressed me back against the wall, my hands on his wrists. He raised me until my feet were off the floor, with superhuman strength. And all the time blood was pouring down into his face where I'd creased him. . . .

The room began to reel, my eyes began to burn and hurt, my tongue came out, slowly, slowly.

I never heard the car. The roaring in my ears was too great. But first we were alone, Bud and I, Bud and I and death! Then Ruthie was there. And the rye bottle was swinging, crashing against Bud's head. And the steel traps, ten of them, were relinquishing their pressure on my tortured throat.

THANK God the bottle didn't break! I remember saying mentally, "Hang on, hang on, hang on. You've got to hang on!" I was down, all right, but there was Ruthie to help me, to hold the bottle to my lips while I drank new life into my body.

Somehow I got up. She was babbling, "Thank God, my hunch was right! He passed me plenty fast and I had to turn around, but I was close enough behind him so that I



I pushed her right across the mouth, and it wasn't an easy blow.

saw him turn in here! If I hadn't—"

I was pretty wobbly, all right, but I hadn't lost my head. The liquor was what did it, for I was on the verge of collapse. I pushed her toward the door. "Get out of here," I managed. "The cops will come any minute. Get over to Zoe Barbee's apartment, and get every rag of underwear, lingerie, and whatnots that gal has in the place! Then go by Bud's and get a picture of Zoe and the biggest knife he has in his kitchen drawer, a butcher knife! Don't ask any questions, just get them and bring them here!"

Ruthie was smart. I told you that before. She didn't ask where Zoe lived. She'd find that out for herself. All I prayed for was that

she'd get back in time. And her car had roared out of the semicircular drive and was gone before I heard the whine of approaching sirens.

THE prowler car was first. And before one of the uniformed cops could beat it back to the office, the second car came roaring into the gravel drive to stop before No. 9. Larsen and Peterson were in it. I'd expected them, of course.

The prowler copper saluted and said something about the guy in the office turning in a call. He was there by then, bug-eyed, drooling at the mouth, and he said hell yes, he'd heard a shot and turned in a call to headquarters.

I said, "You got here quick enough, Peterson."

He scratched his head, his eyes busy all the time.

I said, "Couldn't be someone had already phoned in and told you there was a dame killed out here, could it?"

It could. The look in his eyes told me that, even though they grew stony immediately afterward. Larsen had taken the gun from my hand and was shaking his head. He said, to Peterson, "Well, I guess this blows it. Bud Griffin gets himself eaten up by jealousy. He knocks over Whitmire and his bodyguard, McNulty. And he sees how the babe here has been two-timing him right along. So he meets her out here and sticks a shiv in her. Papa Vic here has been checking here and there, and gets here—too late. Griffin is nuts by this time, and Vic has to shoot him to hold him."

Peterson didn't say a word. He just looked at me. I said, "You got about one hundred and ten percent of it wrong. Let me ask a question first—and then I'll talk. Did Whitmire have any records in his joint? Any handwriting samples, papers written in his own handwriting?"

Peterson said, "I got the four letters he mailed to Zoe, and the check he gave her. Does that answer it?"

"No diary, no nothing besides those in his handwriting?" I watched him closely.

"What the hell, the guy was a gambler. Gamblers are outside the law, they don't write much—except IOU's. To hell with that, start talking."

Time, time, I thought! Give me

time! I'm right, I've got to be right! I've got to be!

Larsen was going through Bud. He got two guns, a belly gun and a little .25 Bud always carried right under his belt buckle. He got Bud's wallet, well stocked. And he got a letter, which he had been reading carefully. He handed it to Peterson, said, "There's another sample of Whitmire's handwriting, in case Papa Vic wants to see it. Looks like Bud beat him to the punch. And then wiped out his double-crossing love lady."

I WALKED over and took a drink out of the bottle. Larsen eyed it longingly, but passed it up. He went over and leaned across poor Zoe, while Peterson tucked the letter out of sight and stared at me in inquiry.

Larsen said, "Hell, he must have just finished wiping his prints off the knife when you got him, hanh, Vic?"

I said, "Don't get so much wrong. Hell, if I'd have caught him, I'd have sent him on his way. I love that guy like a brother. Sure, I shot him. But not for the cops. I shot him for myself!"

Peterson said, "Let's get down to it, Vic. None of this looks good to me. You know where Zoe was all the time?"

I told him just what had happened. How Zoe had called the office looking for Bud, how I'd recognized the voice, how Ruthie had made the operator trace the call, and how I'd come on out.

"Where was Bud?"

I said, "In Austin, on a wild goose chase. That's all I know. When he snaps out of it he can talk, but you

better leave him out for a few minutes."

"Okay. You got here. I can check you know, on whether Ruth traced the call." I nodded. But before I could continue, he snapped, "Why'd you want her so bad? Bud was your partner, she was his gal."

"That was the reason. I knew Bud had that letter from Boots. I knew you half suspected him—maybe more—in the Whitmire kill. If you caught that letter on him, it would give him even more motive, everybody knowing how hot tempered Bud was. I wanted to see this girl—" I guess my voice shook a little, remembering, "—and tell her what I thought of her, to beat the truth out of her, because I figured she did the killing."

"Didn't she?"

"Hell, no. She wasn't even two-timing. She was leveling!" But how could I tell them I'd give my right arm to wipe out the things I'd done, the things I said? How could I convince a bunch of dumb coppers that here was a tramp, a woman that had been through the mill, finally falling for a guy so hard and so clean and so honestly that it hurt? They wouldn't understand, they'd think I was throwing a lot of bull, a guy with a reputation for hearts and flowers like Vic Ezell has.

"This whole damned thing is screwy, in a way, in another it makes a lot of sense. My God, can't you put a sheet over her?" Time, time, I needed time! Hurry, Ruthie. Come on, you killer! Larsen put a sheet over her. And it was a relief. Bud stirred on the floor.

I said, "She never saw that check before. The letters were sent to her,

sure. She thought they were just nut letters from some guy crazy about her. They tickled her vanity and she kept them, poor kid."

"How you going to explain the picture and her lingerie and the check? She *said* she never saw it before. She's the one that got it, Whitmire wrote it. Both of them are dead."

"Let me finish. Bud got a call to Austin. He'll tell us when he comes out of it. They were in love, hellishly. He called, all right, and gave a message to the headwaiter, because Zoe was in transit, between her apartment and the club. He told her he was going to be busy for awhile. But he gave her some sort of signal, too, something she'd understand. They must have had this layout fixed or something—hell, I don't know. Snap him out of it."

Bud sat up. He said through the thin slot of his mouth, "I've been listening, I called her all right. I didn't give her any message, no trick play. What do you mean?"

"She thought you were going to marry her tonight!"

He shook his head dully, keeping his gray eyes averted from the body. "This is my fault for being damned jealous. I got a call all right, from the guy that said he was Boots, whoever the hell that is."

Larsen snorted. Bud didn't notice.

"He said he wasn't sure, but she'd made a chump out of him and he didn't want to see her work it on another good man. And he said he'd prove it to me. Told me to make an excuse of some kind for not meeting her tonight and to go to San Marcus and take Room 455 in the Kyle Hotel. Said to leave my door open

and I'd see him and Zoe come in—he'd take 454, right across the hall. Said the minute that I had my back turned that was what she always did!" He buried his face in his hands.

SAN MARCUS! He hadn't been to Austin at all, but San Marcus is between here and Austin. It was only by phenomenal luck that Ruthie had caught him. If Boots had sent him in another direction, I'd have been a dead man right then!

I said, "So you called and told the headwaiter to tell her you were going to Austin on business?"

"Keep out of this, Vic. What about it, Griffin?"

He raised his head, and his eyes were haggard as those of a lost soul. He nodded. "I went up there, jealous hearted lug that I am, and I got me a bottle. I sat there and I sat there and then the phone rang, and it was—"

"Boots again," I put in wearily, disregarding Peterson. "Boots has had a busy day!"

Bud nodded. "He said that she wouldn't come to San Marcus, but he'd have her at Cottage No. 9, out here. This cottage. So I high-tailed it here. I—"

I cut in, "And in the meanwhile, she was shooting square, Bud. We were at the Silver Slipper. And she left early, went home."

"Then took a runout powder," snapped Larsen, and Peterson shut him up with a glare, waving for me—and Bud—to go on.

"She got a call," I snapped. "She told me that personally. We may never know what was said *and again we might*. Something that gave her

the idea Bud would meet her here, that they were going to get married tonight!"

Another car slid up, there came the sound of a slight argument. One of the uniformed men stuck his head in the door, said, "Hey, Lieutenant, Cal Bryan is here and—"

"Send him in," I said. Bryan came in, looking like John Q. Public, staring around owlishly through his glasses.

He said, "My God!" staring at the covered corpse. Then he glared at Bud. "Thank goodness you got him! Killed them both, hanh?" Larsen had to push Bud back in the chair.

Peterson was no dumb dick. He said, "How'd you know who the corpse was, if you do?"

Bryan took off his glasses and began wiping them with a handkerchief. "It's Zoe Barbee, isn't it? Whitmore told me he used to bring her out here every once in awhile, so I figured that's who it was. Double murder for jealousy. Tsk! Tsk!" He put his glasses on.

I said, "Hello, Boots."

He stared at me, he stared at Peterson and Larsen and Bud. But they were all staring at me.

I said, "You meant to time it all, didn't you? Must have been surprised when you found I was here. Good thing I went in the bath to wash my face, eh Boots?"

"Now what in the dickens," he said mildly to the room at large, "is the man talking about?"

I looked at Bud, and saw the danger signs. Bud is no fool. He was beginning to get the idea.

"You knew Bud's temper; you knew he went crazy mad. He was to

come in and find his woman shivved. The cops were to show up, if the thing went off nicely enough. Bud would fight, you know damned well he would, cops or no cops. And maybe he'd get shot to death, and the cops would find the woman had been shivved with a knife from Bud's kitchen—"

A bunch of mouths dropped open. I said, "Bud, take it on the chin. Your housekeeper will identify it anyway. Can you do it?"

HE DID it. But when they put the sheet back over her, he was a damned sick man. The knife came from his kitchen, all right. It had been a hunch on my part, but knowing with whom I was dealing gave me the courage to try it, and it worked out.

"—they'd consider everything closed, figure it was a double murder for jealousy. Even if Bud wasn't shot to death by the cops, all hell couldn't get the frame off his neck."

Larsen snapped, "What in the hell are you talking about? Phone calls and frames and whatnots."

Bryan said, "I'm a little befuddled myself! It's so—so—"

"You're the only one that isn't befuddled, Boots! You were the guy that made all the phone calls. Hell, Whitmire never knew Zoe at all. Damn you, you wrote those letters to her signed 'Boots'! You came around with a screwy story to me about Whitmire hiring you to prevent his murdering someone—Bud. You called Bud twice, you wrote him a letter, you sent him up to San Marcus and called him back here!"

Bryan looked at Peterson helplessly. Finally he said, dryly, "Grif-

fin is your partner. You'll fight for him naturally, but why *me*?"

Larsen said, "But there was the check, too. And—"

"Damn your thick skull," I raged, "the check was in the same handwriting. You never found a damned thing written in Whitmire's own hand. Get some canceled checks of his tomorrow; you'll find these letters and the check for a grand are merely clever forgeries!"

Bryan had an envelope out now, and his fountain pen. He wrote for a minute, handed it to Peterson. Peterson handed it to me. It said, "This is one of the most absurd things I ever heard of." And the script was small and precise and damned near effeminate.

But I stuck to my guns. "Keep that, Peterson! Turn it over to a handwriting expert tomorrow and—" Not that I had much hope.

THE cop stuck his head in the door again and said, "There's a dame here, Lieutenant—"

Sure, it was Ruth. She had a handbag full of underwear. I put them on the bed, took what was in poor Zoe's overnight bag and put them with it. Ruth said, "Bud hasn't got a picture of her, and his knife—"

Bud said, "I've got a picture of her. It's in a silver frame and it's signed. 'To Daddy' it says, 'from Zoe.' Just a picture of her head!"

There was silence for a minute while I turned back to the underwear.

Bryan said, "Then I'm supposed to have framed all this. I am supposed to have gotten the picture and the knife from Griffin's place. I'm supposed to have killed my own man

McNulty as well as Whitmire and—”

“That’s right. Don’t forget, it had to be somebody that knew them. McNulty was your man, you hired him out to Whitmire.”

“But I don’t understand! The lingerie—”

“That’s where you made a mistake. Maybe we’ll never find where you bought the lingerie. But you overstepped. You bought the finest you could, and to make sure everyone would call it Zoe’s, you had it monogrammed! And by God, here’s the rest of her stuff, all of it. And there’s not a damned Z-B on it! Hell, if you know women, you know they either monogram their lingerie or they don’t, and a dame like Zoe didn’t. She could afford the best, but she didn’t like monograms!”

Peterson spoke for the first time in a long while. “You think Bryan pulled all this because Griffin & Ezell were cutting in here in the Southwest? He had things pretty much his own way until—”

“You,” I sneered, “are supposed to be smart. When Bryan came in Whitmire’s apartment early tonight and we were talking about motives, he said right off the reel ‘Robbery!’ How the hell did he know Whitmire had been robbed; he had just got there. How? Because he robbed him of forty-seven grand himself and was smart enough to leave three!”

And that got Peterson. He clouded up and turned to Bryan.

Bryan didn’t look so much like John Q. Public now. He sneered, “Absurd! As a matter of fact, I’m getting my affairs together and preparing to retire!”

“With \$47,000 extra. Zoe brushed you off about a year ago, didn’t she? And it’s griped you ever since!”

“That has nothing to do with it,” he snapped. “Peterson, take the stuff to a handwriting expert like he said. I’ll give you all the samples of my own fist you want. By God, if I wrote that check or the Boots letters or the letter to Griffin, I’ll walk to the electric chair singing.”

FUNNY the things that come to a man. I stood there looking at him, and I thought what a hell of a fine detective he’d been for twenty years, what a smart little fox he was. And I said to myself: This guy wouldn’t take a step he couldn’t wipe out. And by God, wipe out was the words I wanted.

I said, “Peterson, have you wondered why poor McNulty, the body-guard was rung in on the kill? *Because he knew too much!* Get yourself some samples of his writing and compare with the Boots letters! Cal Bryan killed him to keep him still! Get his gun and—”

Curious how a guy will break, isn’t it. It isn’t that you finally pin him down. Ask any lawyer. It’s just that you keep hammering at him until his nerves can’t stand any more. It worked out that McNulty *had* written the letters, at Bryan’s suggestion, but if Bryan had kept his head, we couldn’t have proved a damned thing. The gun he reached for wasn’t even the kill gun! But he didn’t keep his head.

He jumped back against the wall and a gun was half out of his pocket when Bud Griffin hit him. The gun thudded to the floor, went skitter-

ing along the rug. Then Bud had his hands about the guy's throat, hammering his head against that wall. Larsen jumped and Peterson jumped and I jumped. Ruthie kept her head. *She jumped for the door and locked it.* Larsen was tearing at Bud's hands and Peterson was beating him on the neck with his fists. They all fell to the floor in a weaving mass, and still Bud Griffin hung on. Once when they rolled aside, I saw Larsen had a blackjack out smacking Bud's wrists.

And above it all, above the sound of the fight, and the hammering on the door, you could hear Bud crying, "—damn you—the only woman—the only thing—ever loved—damn you—"

Larsen kicked free, and reached for his gun.

Ruthie said, "Don't do it, Larsen." She picked up Bryan's gun and was holding it firm and steady, her face white, her eyes hot. And she snapped, "Get up, Peterson, or, so help me God, I'll shoot!" There was something about the way she said it made Peterson get up.

She waited while a man might have counted fifty, slowly, all the

time the outside coppers hammering that door. Never as long as I live will I ever forget Bud Griffin's agonized sobbing.

"—only thing—ever—loved—!"

And then she laid the gun down and went over to him. She touched him, her eyes filled with tears. She said, "Come on, Bud. That's plenty, Bud. She wouldn't want you to do it any longer. Zoe wouldn't. You've made it up for her, come on."

HELL, I don't know how it happened. Next thing I knew Ruthie was down in a chair and Bud had his head in her lap, sobbing and shaking like a little kid. Peterson was white faced as he looked at them, looked at the still form of Bryan, the sheet-covered Zoe, looked at me, and at Larsen.

He gulped. His eyes got sort of mean. He said, "If I ever saw a case of self defense, that was it!"

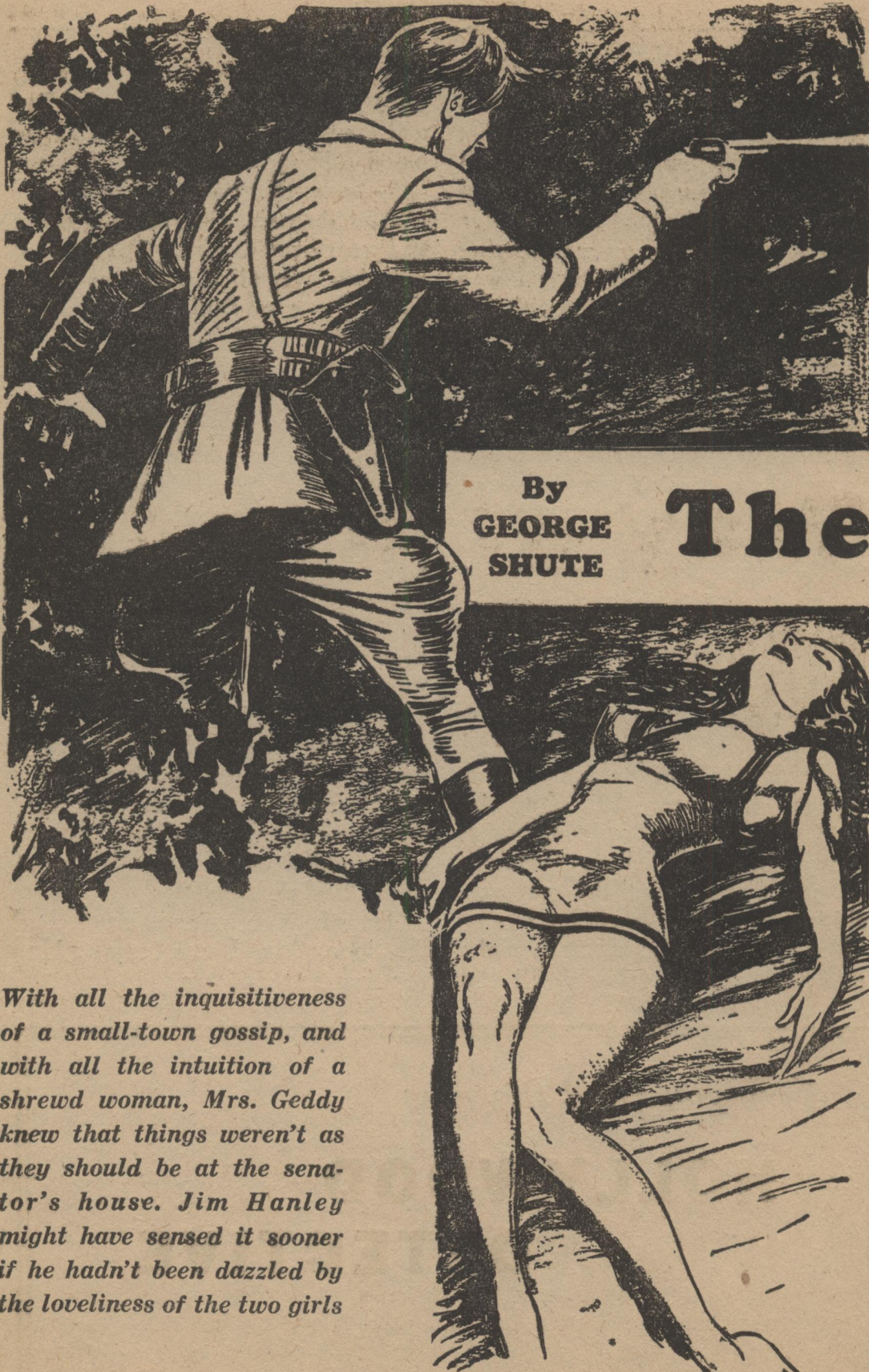
Larsen took off his hat and mopped his forehead with his sleeve. He nodded solemnly. "Damned right. Self defense."

Then he went over and unlocked the door. Me, I was busy looking for that bottle of rye.

Have you read the new

HOLLYWOOD DETECTIVE

?

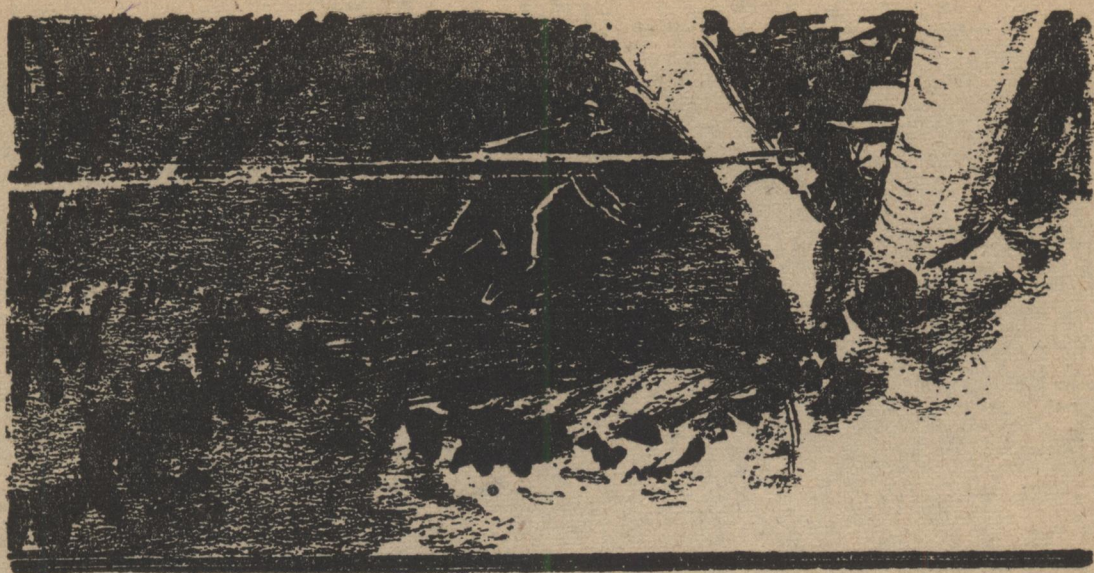
A high-contrast, black and white illustration. In the upper portion, a man is shown from the back and side, wearing a light-colored suit jacket and a dark belt. He is holding a handgun with both hands, aiming it towards the right. In the lower portion, a woman is lying on her back on the ground, her head tilted back and eyes closed. She is wearing a dark, sleeveless dress. The background is dark and textured, suggesting foliage or a night scene.

By
**GEORGE
SHUTE**

The

With all the inquisitiveness of a small-town gossip, and with all the intuition of a shrewd woman, Mrs. Geddy knew that things weren't as they should be at the senator's house. Jim Hanley might have sensed it sooner if he hadn't been dazzled by the loveliness of the two girls

Standing almost over her, he opened fire.



Way of Murder



RS. GEDDY, the housekeeper, said: "It's a scandal to the jay-birds."

Hanley swallowed the last of his eggs. Mrs. Geddy was a great fancier of Snuffy Smith and frequently used the hillbilly's comic strip jargon. "What is?" he asked mildly. He knew he'd get no rest until Mrs. Geddy had said what was on her mind. Burlo had a daily paper, one of the most progressive in Maine, but its reporters never could compete with Mrs. Geddy's sources of information.

"That French girl," Mrs. Geddy said, with a gesture of disapproval. "Her name's Justine Lamartine and she's staying at Senator Logan's."

Hanley sipped his coffee before he said: "So what? I understand Enid Logan used to do quite some entertaining before she started singing in night clubs. Perhaps it's one of her friends."

Mrs. Geddy sniffed. "Laws-a-mercy, Jim Hanley, I knew your pop very well, rest his soul, and I used to change your diapers till you got too big for them, and, believe me, *he* would have looked into this thing. It's scandalous, that's what it is. Your pop sure enforced law and order in *his* time."

Hanley grinned. Every time he disagreed with Mrs. Geddy, she brought his father into the picture. Hanley had never told Mrs. Geddy that it was his old man's idea that he get a cop's job in a big city. And Hanley had. In fact, until he came back to Burlo to assume the old man's job as chief of police, he had been a crack homicide man.

"I've heard all about those French girls," Mrs. Geddy continued severely. Hanley reached for the coffee pot. She slapped his hand. "Now see here, Jim, you've had two cups already; that's enough." Relenting, she said: "Well, half a cup then."

and smiled fondly at him. He was *her* boy and she had been just like a mother to him. None had appreciated the sentimental gesture Jim Hanley had made as well as she. It wasn't every person who'd throw up a promising career to come back to a small town to take over his father's job!

"You'd better look into things," she said darkly, accompanying Hanley to the door. "That girl has been there four days now. Unchaperoned."

The screen door was between Mrs. Geddy and Hanley now. The latter walked to his Ford, turned and said: "You're wrong, darling. Enid's maid came in yesterday. Your sources of information are doing you wrong."

"Why, Jim Hanley, you didn't tell—" Her voice upbraided him as the Ford rolled away, Hanley grinning broadly. He had just remembered what the station agent had told him yesterday. The agent was one of Hanley's sources. "What a whizzer, Jim, a real peach if I ever saw one! Some new maid Enid must have picked up in her travels. Looks Swedish to me."

HANLEY had never met Enid Logan, but he had heard quite a bit about her, both from Mrs. Geddy and the townspeople. There had been a good deal of argument between Enid and the senior senator when his daughter had taken to the cafe society canarying route. But of late the old man had seemed reconciled to it. Maybe it was because he had been too busy. The war had a lot to do with this. Logan's opinion carried a lot of weight on Capitol Hill,

and administration leaders were wondering what his stand would be on the war. He had announced his intention of making it clear in a radio address.

Rounding a curve, the car came in sight of Senator Logan's fabled retreat on a heavily wooded island in the middle of Lake Custer. It had been in the senator's family for generations and Logan always came up when he was working on important matters. Hanley had visited the island only once in his year as Burlo police chief. The senator seldom went into town and, since he was a flying enthusiast and Chairman of the Military Affairs Committee, military planes ferried him back and forth from Washington.

On the lake a few early-rising fishermen were trying to lure landlocked salmon, and Hanley after a cursory glance, concentrated on his driving. He slowed down suddenly as a flash of white caught his vision.

It was a girl in bathing suit and she was walking toward the water from the senator's house. The trees had been felled in front of the house, leaving the entrance plainly visible and affording a large pathway to the beach.

Hanley reached for the binoculars he kept in the glove compartment of his car. He whistled as he trained them on the dark-haired girl. Whew! There *was* something. She must be the French girl who had come up in the plane four days earlier with Logan. As Hanley watched, she broke into a run, white legs flashing in the sunlight, and plunged into the water. She was a good swimmer and a graceful one and Hanley felt his pulse jump as the girl turned on her

back, executing a back stroke and showing small, firm breasts against the tight-fitting bathing suit.

Regretfully, he stepped up the car and went on to his office. He would like to have stuck around and tried to scrape up an acquaintance. Justine Lamartine, the name was familiar.

ASEY PIKE, the night officer, was just going off duty when Hanley arrived at the office. The Burlo police force consisted of Asey, Jed Rand, and Hanley. Jed was going through the mail, opening it and separating reports and wanted posters. These latter would be put up in the post office during the day.

Hanley glanced through his regular mail, looked up when Jed whistled.

"Say, this here's a funny thing," Jed said. "They don't often do this." He handed over an envelope from the State police headquarters. "They must be pretty sure of this guy. Or he's big time."

Hanley looked over the message from the State police. It said that at a small town in the eastern part of Maine, a red sedan had collided with a State police car severely injuring two troopers. One of the troopers had recognized the driver of the hit-and-run car as Trigger Shultz, an old-time gunman.

Jed was leaning over Hanley's shoulder, pointing to a reward poster. "That's pretty old, isn't it?"

"At least three years," Hanley said. "But I had an idea Trigger Shultz was bumped off in a revenge killing." He remembered Shultz well. The gangster had been a frequent spectator at fights at Madison Square

Garden when Hanley was on the force and assigned to the sports arena on important nights. He then handed the poster back to Jed.

"Better stick it up in the post office, but I think the trooper made a mistake. Guys like Shultz never remain quiet this long unless they're dead!"

Jed shook his head. He hooked on his Sam Browne belt and went out of the office. Hanley returned to his correspondence.

Being police chief was no cinch job. There was plenty to do, particularly since Burlo had become popular with summer vacationists. The town even boasted a Summer theater. It was close to noon before Hanley finished his office work and went to the Mayor's house for lunch and a talk.

AT ONE o'clock he was back on Main Street. It was Saturday afternoon and Jed was directing traffic in front of the post office as Burlo did its weekly shopping. He waved at Hanley, then, suddenly, called out in alarm.

A bicyclist was pedaling furiously down Main Street. He swerved as a car drew away from the curb. But just then a blond girl who had started to step into the street walked right into the path of the bicycle. The cyclist pressed on the brake but only succeeded in making the vehicle skid into the girl.

Hanley dodged deftly through the traffic, but was unable to make more than an ineffectual effort at catching the girl. His hand slipped from her shoulder and, off-balance, he fell sideways. The girl gasped as Hanley's body fell across her. The letters

she had been carrying to the post-office were scattered at her feet. Jed ran over and picked them up.

For a moment, the girl had difficulty catching her breath. Hanley hauled her to her feet, not missing the flash of white, creamy thigh that showed as her dress swirled. The girl smoothed it down. Jed was bawling out the apologetic cyclist.

"Gosh, I'm sorry," Hanley said. "Did I hurt you?"

She managed a smile. "No, not much. I didn't see that bicycle in time, I guess. Oh, thank you." This to Jed who handed her the letters. "I hope you got them all. This is the senator's correspondence." Hanley noted the peculiarly husky timbre of the girl's voice as he walked across the street with her.

"You're not the girl I saw swimming this morning," Hanley said. "No, of course you're not. She was not blond."

His eyes rested appreciatively on the girl's golden hair. "I would have remembered you. Oh, I'm Jim Hanley. You're a stranger here?"

"Yes," the girl said. "I'm Elsa Baird. I'm Miss Logan's new maid. She sent me here ahead of her, on the plane. She's driving back from the Coast." She stopped, "Heavens what have you done to your shirt? Or did I do it?"

Hanley looked down at the blue stain on his khaki shirt. "It's that fountain pen of mine," he said ruefully. "It doesn't matter. Can I give you a lift back."

The Baird girl smiled.

"Thanks, but I've a couple of small errands to do. Besides it's such a lovely day, I won't mind walking back to the outboard."



OMEWARD bound, Hanley made up his mind to see the girl again; perhaps he'd drop into the senator's later and ask the senator's man of all work's advice on a new boat. Eben did some building jobs when the senator was away.

Driving along with the top of his car down and the scent of pine strong in his nostrils, Hanley felt at peace with the world. Crime was little known up here in Burlo. With the exception of a couple of town drunks who got into fights now and then, there really wasn't much violence.

Most of Hanley's activity was confined to keeping the local politicians happy and satisfied.

The lake gleamed in the sunlight. Through the clearing in the woodlands, Hanley saw the senator's house flash white across the water. He really hadn't been expecting the girl to be still swimming, so he was not disappointed. He slowed down to light his pipe.

It was while the engine was idling that he heard the shot!

It came from a spot ahead of him, where deep, heavy foliage lined both sides of the road.

Hanley got out of the car. It was not the hunting season, and the sound hadn't sounded like a shotgun blast. Just as he ran into the woods, a scream reached his ears.

And then another shot! Hanley caught the flash coming from behind a tree. At the same time he saw a girl run, then pitch forward.

Hanley snapped a shot at the tree. Bark chipped from the trunk. A figure scurried Indian fashion from

tree to tree when Hanley sent another shot at it.

He fell flat on the ground as a bullet whizzed by his head. Hanley sought cover. In the semi-darkness caused by the heavy-foliage, he thought he saw two figures darting away. He fired again, from kneeling position. Then, getting to his feet and dodging among the trees, he gave pursuit.

A motor started up. Quickly, Hanley raced to the road, just in time to see a dark red sedan roar off in a cloud of dust. It was impossible to distinguish the license plates.

For a moment Hanley debated chasing in his Ford. Then he remembered the girl falling and turned back to her.

She was lying face down. Brief investigation showed that the bullet had grazed her shoulder, causing a surface wound. The girl was the senator's visitor, and she still had her bathing suit on. Hanley ran down to the water's edge and wetted his handkerchief.

Her eyes were fear-filled as she came out of her faint and saw Hanley; for a moment, she did not appear to notice his uniform. Hanley's hand stifled the scream that started from her throat. "It's all right," he said. "You're safe. I'm a police officer."

Her body relaxed and the fright left her eyes. "Those men," she gasped. "The Gestapo. I came upon them when I was walking through the woods here after I swam from the house."

Hanley stared at her. What in hell was she talking about, the Gestapo? He wondered if she had fully recovered her senses. Suddenly, a

thought flashed into his mind. That red car! *Those men were the hit and run drivers for whom the police had sent out the alarm!* They must have gotten out of the car to rest and the girl had stumbled upon them. Now, temporarily unbalanced by her experience she had confused them with secret agents.

"I think I know who they are," Hanley said, grimly. "And as soon as I take you back to the house, I'll send out an alarm for them, Miss Lamartine."

The girl started. "You know me? And them?"

"I know you," Hanley said. "You are visiting with the senator. Those men are hit and run drivers."

The girl's face was puzzled. "No," she said. "You have made the mistake." Her accent was decidedly French. "I think perhaps they were looking for me."

Hanley decided to humor her. "Why?" he said. "Certainly they weren't going to stage a kidnapping. Or were they?"

The girl's shoulders trembled. "I do not know. But I have seen one of them before. In Paris, just before the occupation. My father and I fled. My father is with the Free French forces in London."

"General Lamartine?" Hanley asked. He suddenly remembered why the girl's name had sounded familiar. "So you're his daughter?"

THE girl nodded. Her body was still trembling and her fingers shook when she placed a hand on Hanley's arm. "Please," she said. "I must ask the favor. The senator should know nothing of this until tomorrow. I—I—can say I had the

accident with a bush." Her voice was pleading. "You will do this for me. Tomorrow I shall explain to the senator what happened." She braced herself on Hanley's arm to get to her feet.

"I think perhaps they will not return. Oh..."

She swayed. Hanley caught her in his arms. His pulses raced at contact with the softness of her body. "I—I am all right now," she said.

"Nothing doing," Hanley said. "We're getting you back to the senator's. We'll drive to my house and get a boat. You certainly don't expect to swim back."

The girl smiled weakly. "No—I—"

Hanley's ear caught the sound of an outboard motor starting. It was close by. "There's somebody with a boat," he said. "Come on." He picked the girl up.

Outside the wooded patch, Hanley saw the outboard. Its only occupant was Elsa, the Logan girl's maid. Hanley called to her.

She ran the boat to shore as Hanley came down and explained. "Miss Lamartine had a bad fall. This is sure lucky your happening along."

Hanley placed the girl in the boat. "Sure you don't want me to come along?"

She smiled wanly. "No, thank you." Her eyes pleaded with Hanley. "You will remember your promise?"

Elsa glanced at Hanley, who said: "Sure, I'll drop over and get you tomorrow and show you the town." Then, to Elsa, "See that she takes care of that cut."

Elsa smiled. "I will."

Hanley watched until the boat was

in mid-stream. Then he hurried back to his car.

AFTER dinner, when Mrs. Geddy had gone in to town for her Saturday night movie, Hanley, in the old fashioned Morris chair his father had loved pondered the girl's adventure. There was no doubt in his mind that the men who had tried to kill her were gunmen who had been afraid she had recognized them. Or might mention to the police that she had seen them.

The wall phone rang.

Getting up to answer, Hanley noticed through the window that fog was beginning to settle.

Jed's excited voice said:

"Chief? Listen—what do you think? That Shultz reward poster was swiped from the postoffice today! Yeah—swiped!"

"Only Shultz?" Hanley's forehead puckered. "You're sure?"

"I certainly am, chief. Tonight, when I went off duty, I stopped into the postoffice for the family mail." Jed's voice was worried. "What are we going to do, chief?"

"Don't worry," Hanley said. He was very curt.

Really disturbed, he hung up. No use letting Jed know what he actually thought. Jed had not yet connected up the red car Hanley had reported, with the missing poster.

Hanley bit his lip. So Shultz was really around, and being a wise guy about it! He and his henchman had probably been in town sometime during the day, while, all over the state, law enforcement officers were on the lookout for them.

The fog was growing thicker. Hanley hesitated whether to start

out now, or wait until it lifted.

Somebody made up his mind for him.

He wondered how long she had been standing there in the doorway, before she said: "Am I disturbing you?"

"Not at all," Hanley said hastily. "Come in, Miss Baird." He motioned her to a chair. She said:



Together they placed the trembling girl in the boat.

"Everyone calls me Elsa. But I forgot, I must first tell you the young lady thanks you. She sent me here to do so."

"She's all right?"

Elsa nodded. "Yes. It was a very strange injury she received. Did you see it happen?"

Hanley shook his head. "I saw her coming out of the bush," he said. "She was stunned; that's why you saw me carrying her." He shrugged.

"People sometimes knock themselves out running into tree branches."

The girl shivered. "This fog," she said, "Isn't it terrible? Cold and clammy."

She was wearing only a light, sleeveless dress, that clung tightly to her body, revealing firm, well-moulded breasts. Her eyes strayed around the room. "You live here alone?"

Hanley told her about Mrs. Geddy. "She never misses a Saturday night at the movies."

Elsa smiled. "I like them myself. But right now I'd like something to get me warm."

HANLEY was instantly apologetic. In a few moments they were drinking Scotch, and the girl's spirits brightened.

Tucking her legs beneath her, a movement that allowed Hanley a flash of white, alluring skin above the tan of her legs, Elsa seemed contented to stay awhile. Which was okay with Hanley. Hours passed before he looked at his watch. "It's getting late," he said: "Don't forget, you've got to get back across the lake."

The girl laughed. "I shall do that." Her eyes mocked Hanley. "You are afraid of your housekeeper, aren't you?"

Hanley grinned. If Elsa only knew.

"No," he lied stoutly. "I'm not. Besides, there's a good chance she won't come back in this fog. She has a sister in town and sometimes stays there."

"Well, that does it." The girl laughingly kicked off her shoes. "I'll take another drink, Mr. Hanley.

Oh, I forgot, Jim. The senator is a teetotaler, you know."

Hanley refilled the glasses. "You know," he said. "I've got an idea I've seen you some place before."

Had the girl's hand trembled? Hanley wasn't sure. She said: "I—I—don't know, unless you've been going around the country a lot. I've been with Miss Logan some time now, since she hired me in Chicago." A smile flitted across her face. "I've even been taken for Virginia Gilmore, the movie actress."

"I'd take you for her any day," Hanley said gallantly.

Elsa's eyes were languid. "You're cute," she said. "Very cute." Hanley liked the husky timbre of her voice, and he said so.

She was sitting close to Hanley now and he could smell the perfume she used in her hair. Hanley's pulse trembled as he read the invitation in the girl's eyes, felt her soft, warm arms steal around his neck as she drew him to her. The room spun as Hanley's lips pressed savagely against Elsa's and her felt her hard, firm bosom against his chest. Her body was rigid, but her lips were warm, eager, and insistent. She gasped in the embrace of Hanley's arms and her body went limp. . . .

Darkness descended upon Hanley as something crashed against the base of his skull.

The tall, thin man who had stolen unnoticed into the room pocketed the sap. Then he rolled Hanley to the floor.

"Come, Elsa," he said. "The captain is waiting. You have done well."

Hot, liquid fire burned Hanley's throat, raced down into his

stomach. He moved his hands but couldn't spread them the way he wanted to. Something was holding them. Irritated, he opened his eyes. A voice said: "Glory be—you're alive!"

Mrs. Geddy's white, frightened face came into focus. "Glory be—" she echoed. "Glory be." She got up and went into the kitchen. Hanley stared at his bound hands and feet.

Mrs. Geddy returned with the carving knife. "What happened, Jim?"

"Somebody slugged me," Hanley said. He had decided not to mention the girl. "I was sitting here having a drink, my back to the door."

Now that she knew he was alive, Mrs. Geddy relaxed. "Heavenly days," she said. "You gave me an awful fright. There's a bump on your head big as a conch. And you were colder than a mackerel." Her lips tightened. "All through that picture I had the funniest feeling that something was going to happen. And when I met Editor Evans after the picture and he told me something, I just knew—fog or no fog—that I should come back." Relief over Jim's escape seemed to have loosened her tongue considerably. "That picture was bad enough," she said, "all about that . . . that . . . Gypstapo and those Bundists. . . . The Government should do something about those people."

Bundists? . . . Bundists? . . . Hanley's mind struggled to bring into relief a faint picture. And then suddenly he had it. At Madison Square Garden two years ago.

The police commissioner had ordered an all-out for all detectives when the Bund had obtained per-

mission to stage a rally in the sports arena. There, Hanley had seen a striking brunette, acting as secretary to one of the Bund *Gauleiter's*. He had tried to kid with her and been rebuffed in a low, vibrant voice.

God, he should have remembered that voice! That couldn't change! Elsa Baird had changed her dark hair to golden, but her voice had remained the same! She was still a Nazi!

He struggled to his feet while Mrs. Geddy stared in amazement. He lurched toward his Sam Browne belt.

"Call Asey Pike and Jed," he told Mrs. Geddy. "And tell them to get over to Senator Logan's house as fast as they can."

Mrs. Geddy said: "Jim, there's something I came back to tell you. Editor Evans told me at the movies that he got a wirephoto today that showed Enid Logan in her dressing room with her maid. And the maid is colored! I remembered that myself then and I came back to tell you. Astrid has been with Enid for years. There's something funny about this blond girl."

Hanley bolted out the door. "You are telling me," he said bitterly. "Call those cops."

HE COULD barely see his hand in front of him when he went out. The fog had become very heavy and was still rolling in.

Hanley groaned as he reached the small wooden pier to which he moored his outboard. It was gone! They had even figured on that; although they had no way of knowing Mrs. Geddy would return. Bitterly, Hanley remembered how

cleverly the girl had pumped him about Mrs. Geddy.

For a moment he debated waiting for Asey and Jed. But they'd have trouble in the fog and it might be too late. The Lamartine girl, Hanley was sure, was going to be snatched. Or killed. And this fog was just perfect for the job.

Swimming was out of the question. A boat . . . hell, what was the matter with his thinking? He raced along the water's edge, suddenly remembering the rowboat that was always moored at the pier of his next door neighbor.

Hanley uttered a fervent prayer of thanks when he found the boat. He bent his back to the oars.

It was tough going in that fog, but at least he didn't have to worry about hitting anything. There'll be no one on the lake tonight.

Overhead, Hanley heard the roar of a plane engine. The ship seemed to be flying low. "He's lost," Hanley thought. "The fool ought to know better than to be flying through this."

Ten minutes later, Hanley beached the boat. Ahead of him, shining mistily, were lights in the senator's library windows. Hanley rushed toward them and stumbled. His hand went out, clutching, and came in contact with something soft and moist. It took him only an instant to know that he had found Eben, man-of-all-work at the Logan house.

Eben had been slugged. Or shot. Hanley lurched toward the house.

The front door was open and, as Hanley moved noiselessly through the hall, subdued voices came from the library. Hanley reached the

library door, and heard: "Shall we tie up the girl, *Herr* Captain?"

Hanley stepped into the light and said:

"Hoist them!"

One of the men had his back turned to Hanley and was shoving papers into a briefcase. Senator Logan was on the floor, blood matting his hair. The tall, thin man who had been holding a gun on Justine raised his hands. Justine, sitting in a chair, white-faced, had obviously struggled. Her clothes were in tatters, revealing flashes of white, satiny flesh.

Hanley started when the man at the briefcase turned. "Shultz!" Hanley gasped. "Trigger Shultz!"

He had gotten heavier, but it was Shultz all right. The same scar. The same low forehead. His hair was gray now.

For just an instant a flicker of surprise crossed his face. Then he said: "Well, Hanley, I thought we had taken care of you."

Hanley had difficulty believing his ears. This man was using polished, precise English; and yet he was Shultz, a tough hood who had spoken racket language! What had happened these past years?

SHULTZ was watching him narrowly. "Surprised, Hanley?" His eyes narrowed. "I must confess I was a little surprised myself when I found my old enemy had become a small town chief of police. Elsa was good enough to supply me with that information. Also with a reward poster that did not flatter."

Elsa! Hanley had forgotten about her. He stared dumbly as Shultz said: "You will not have to turn,

Mr. Hanley, to know Elsa is right behind you."

The gun pressed into Hanley's back. The thin man reached for his own gun. "Shall I shoot him now, *Herr* Captain? We must hurry."

Captain?

Shultz smiled at Hanley, as Elsa



picked the gun from the officer's hand. "Yes, Hanley. Captain Shultz now. You see, I returned to my native land when things got too hot for me here. There, I found a New Order and a new way of life. I now represent the law in my country, Hanley."

Hanley's eyes were on Justine. An oath burst from his lips. Shultz's face changed; his eyes narrowed.

Darkness descended on Hanley as the sap crashed against the base of his skull.

"Oranth," he said to the tall, thin man. "Shoot him!"

Later Hanley was unable to tell how it happened. But it seemed so clear then, so perfect in rhythm and movement. Justine had been moving his chair, almost imperceptibly, so that her foot could come in contact with a long cord, leading to a light alongside the senator's desk. Oranth stood by the lamp and now, Justine's foot darted out, and the lamp fell.

Oranth's gun went off; but the lamp had deflected his arm. A bullet crashed into the ceiling as Hanley ducked. He saw Justine flatten herself on the floor. Shultz leaped.

Hanley's arm swung around, caught Elsa about the waist. Before Oranth could move again, Hanley shoved Elsa at him. One of the guns fell from Elsa's hands.

Hanley, on hands and knees, brought his fist down hard on Shultz's clutching fingers when the Gestapo agent reached for the gun. Hanley got it, fired. Oranth, trying not to hit Shultz, moved around for position. The bullet caught him in the belly.

Justine was clawing at Elsa's face. The latter had no gun now. Hanley glimpsed just a flash of the fight as Shultz's feet lashed into his side. Hanley let go with a roundhouse left, the gun in his fist. It crashed against Shultz's temple and the man lay still.

Hanley's insides revolted. Shultz's feet had damn near kicked through him. The room spun. Somebody screamed.

It was Elsa, Hanley saw as his eyes focused again. She was cowering against the wall and Justine was

holding a gun on her. Hanley always thought she'd have shot the girl if a commotion hadn't been heard at the door then.

Asey and Jed rushed in with drawn guns. There was a State trooper with them.

ASEY grabbed Justine. "It's all right, Asey," Hanley said weakly. "She's one of us."

Jed was staring open-mouthed at Elsa. The trooper put his slicker around the girl's shoulders. "My God," he said. "Hanley, what happened here?"

Hanley stared at Justine, who was standing over the stricken senator. It was too much for him; a former hood turning out to be a Gestapo agent. "Ask her," he said wearily. "I'm a stranger here myself. All I know is that these muggs tried to grab her."

Justine shook her head. Logan was groaning.

"No," she said. "It is more than that. You see I came up here with the senator to go over some confidential papers of my country, which high officials, friends of my father and Free France, entrusted to me. With this information we hoped to make of the senator an ally. Somehow the Gestapo learned of this, also that the rest of the papers were to be flown here from Washington tonight."

Her eyes took in Hanley. "That is why I have asked you today not to mention what happened. I did not wish anything to alarm the senator. He will, I am sure, speak for our cause on the wireless the day after tomorrow." Justine's eyes blazed.

"Tonight, the Gestapo decided to

strike. This girl was to take care of you, I heard her say. But when the plane was late, it gave you time to get here. Otherwise they would have made the escape. And killed me."

Hanley was feeling better now. The sight of Shultz and Elsa handcuffed together helped. Oranth was dead.

"Call a doctor, Jed," Hanley said. "Eben's hurt, outside, and that knock on the senator's head had better be taken care of. I'll wait here for the doc. You and the boys take the prisoners into town."

Having called the doctor, Jed, Asey, and the troopers left. The sen-

ator was alive and groaning, but still unconscious.

Justine, sitting next to Hanley said: "I have so much to thank you for."

Hanley grinned. "You didn't do a bad job with that lamp cord. Or on Elsa, either." Admiringly, he said: "You sure proved that the French are hot-blooded fighters."

Justine smiled: "Mr. Hanley," she asked, "what is that American expression your Al Jolson uses? Oh yes, you ain't seen nothing yet."

Hanley was sure he hadn't. He intended to be around, though. A long, long time.

"Murder in the Making"

by **DALE BOYD!**

Don't miss it next month in

Private Detective Stories!

Don't Look



GEORGE CORAOPOLIS was big. His nose was hooked, his hair black and greasy, his eyes small and suspicious. He wore a pearl gray suit with the word "expensive" glared upon it, a pearl gray shirt with the collar flaps buttoned, and a purple tie. A handkerchief in his breast pocket matched the tie. He held out a huge hand and said, "Hello, Tom. What's the trouble tonight, huh?"

Duncan said, "I want to talk to you, George. About Larry Weston."

The small eyes squinted more suspiciously than ever. "What about him?"

"Couldn't we find a more comfortable place to talk?"

The Greek hesitated. His thick lips were pushed together, his eyes narrow. Then he was the expansive business man again. "Sure, Tom. Back this way." He led the way out of the rear of the bar into a dim corridor, and turned right toward the section of the building that he used as living quarters. In the other direction, Duncan knew, were complete gambling rooms that later tonight would be very busy.

THEY went around a bend in the corridor, past a curtain, through a couple of doors and into a living room where expense and good taste had been lavished in proportions of thirty to one, with expense in the majority. And stretched on a gold-brocaded sofa, barefooted, wearing green satin pajamas, was a woman who fitted the room exactly.

She was tall and full bodied. Her hair was red gold and hung thick about her shoulders. Her eyes were green, her mouth very red and sensuous. Duncan saw all that in one glimpse—and more besides. The pajamas were cut low in the front, exposing skin startlingly white against the green satin which didn't completely hide what it covered.

Duncan had caught glimpses of Mrs. Coraopolis before, but never such an unconventional one. She moved languidly when they entered, but when she saw Duncan, a sudden interested light came in her eyes. She saw what he was staring at, but made no move to end the display. Instead she curled her legs up under her with what looked like an invitation for him to sit on the vacated part of the sofa.

A few bones, a shred or two of flesh—and that was all that was left as these missing persons began to turn up! Duncan knew how dangerous the Greek's wife could be, and he wanted to protect Peggy, but the game he was playing was played for keeps with little choice in the matter!

NOW!

By HENRY
PHELPS

Coraopolis jerked his thumb toward a door on the far side of the room, "Get out!" he said.

She said, "Okay." Her voice was husky, sensual. She stood up and for an instant her eyes met Duncan's while Coraopolis was not watching. She measured him candidly, and appeared to like what she saw. Then she turned and went toward the door, and the liquid flow of curves, modeled by the green

satin, repeated the invitation that her eyes had spoken.

At the door she glanced back, at Coraopolis this time, a swift, hidden look that left Duncan with an impression of green fire and a mouth twisted in hatred. Then she was gone.

"Get out!" he said, and he was plenty mean and tough.



Coraopolis waved a big hand at the room. "How do you like, Tom? Pretty neat, huh? A drink?"

At the end of the sofa was a small chromium bar and built-in refrigerator. Duncan said he'd take scotch and soda and the Greek mixed a couple, saying, "Sit down. Comfortable enough, huh? Now what you want to see me about?"

"Larry Weston," Duncan said. "He disappeared two weeks ago. The company's hired me to find him."

"Sure. I read about it in the paper. They don't think he was kidnapped."

"There's been no demand for ransom. He walked out of his house to get a pack of cigarettes. He never got to the corner store and he never got back home. He vanished."

"Why come here?"

"He used to play here, hit the roulette and poker games hard." Duncan's voice was flat; his restless hands toyed with the glass, making the ice tinkle.

For a moment Coraopolis hesitated. He said, "Sure, he came here. Two, three times a week. Maybe more."

"How much did he owe you?"

"Owe me? Nothing. He was lucky, ahead of the game."

"He never borrowed from you?"

"Once, twice, I cashed a check for him. That's all. He won most time. Didn't owe me a thing."

"How about Paul Andrews?"

Coraopolis looked puzzled. "Who?"

"Andrews, Weston's business partner. Did he come here?"

"Oh," Coraopolis said. "A big man who hold his shoulder this

way?" He wriggled one shoulder slightly higher than the other. "One of these know-it-all fellows?"

"That's him."

"A few times with Mr. Weston. He lost maybe one, two dollars. Always tried to keep Mr. Weston from playing. Said my games were crooked, everything was crooked." He paused, grinned, said, "One, two times he bring a blonde. A honey. White hair. Plenty of this." His hands did some suggestive curving and he smacked his lips. "I like me some of that. Yeah."

Duncan's face set hard, and the Greek said, "You know her?"

"I know her." He could have added that he knew her damn' well. For a moment he stood there, thinking of last night: of the dance music drifting out onto the shadowed porch of the night club, of the darkness that clung to them so that Peggy Mathews' blonde hair was only a pale blur above her face, and he could sense more than actually see the curves of the skin-tight evening dress. They had danced through the open French windows, but outside, in the shadows, they stopped dancing. He had pulled her hard, fiercely against him. And she had come willingly enough, locking her arms behind his head and drawing it down until their lips were eager and hungry at each other's.

She had pulled away slightly, panting. "Not here," she whispered. "Right down this way. There's a little arbor and a settee and . . . and nobody comes there."

He'd gone, too hurriedly to ask questions then. But later he'd brushed his fingers through her blonde hair, feeling the silky cling-

ing of it, and he'd asked how she knew about this place. He could scarcely see her smile in the dark. "Mr. Andrews showed it to me."

"Yeah?" Duncan said. "And what else did he show you?" He was suddenly angry.

She said, "Tom!" Then she giggled, cuddled close and said, "If you are thinking what it sounds like you are thinking, I ought to slap you. I have to go out with Andrews sometimes because he's my boss. But that is all."

"Don't," Duncan had said.

Now he stood remembering that conversation. He was a lean, tall man who looked smaller than he really was. His hair was brownish, freshly cut, but always managed to seem shaggy. His face was homely, almost placid. A person had to observe carefully to notice the firm set of his jaw and mouth. He said, "Thanks, George. If you hear anything, let me know."

"Sure. Sure." Coraopolis sounded relieved. "Have another drink?"

"No, thanks." Duncan's blunt, nervous hands rolled the glass between them, set it on the table. He followed Coraopolis out of the room, through the ones beyond and into the dim corridor.

A curtain hung across this end of the hall. The Greek pushed through, took one step beyond, and stopped as though he'd run into a solid wall. He reeled back against Duncan. His face was yellow white, his eyes bulging. He tried to curse and the words never got out of his throat.

Duncan said, "What the hell?" He couldn't see over the big man's shoulder because of the curtain. He shoved it aside and stepped past.

Then he too stopped and his eyes got large with disbelief. The muscles of his throat contracted. "What the hell?" he said, hoarsely.

SOME five feet past the curtain the corridor made a right angle turn. Against this wall, directly ahead of them, was a skeleton. It rested on its knees, upright, complete except for one arm and some loose rib bones which were piled at its feet. The eyeless sockets stared up at Duncan. The jaw hung open in silent, deathly laughter.

Duncan felt a little sick. He had seen skeletons before, but they had left him without any emotional reaction. They were so long removed from life that he could not think of them as having ever lived and breathed and moved about within a human body. They were simply bones. This skeleton was different. In places the joints were held together by pieces of freshly twisted wire—but *others were held by shreds of raw muscle!*

Only a short while ago this thing had been a living human being!

Coraopolis made a gasping sound. His big finger was shaking as he pointed. "Look! Look there!"

Along the backbone were scattered pieces of torn flesh, and the bone itself was scratched as though tiny teeth had worked at it. "Great God!" Duncan said. "The flesh was *eaten* off this thing!"

His gaze revolted as he stared at the bones, searching for some broken or chipped one which would show how the person had been killed. But there was no sign. As well as he could tell, the man had not been shot or stabbed.

"Maybe," Coraopolis said huskily, "*maybe the thing ate him alive!*"

Steps clicked faintly along the far end of the corridor. From the bar out front came the murmur of voices and the dim whisper of an orchestra playing swing music. It sounded weird, out of place in this gloomy corridor where a skeleton crouched with strips of flesh and muscle still clinging to it.

"Who was it?" Duncan asked.

"I don't know. How would I know?"

"He's visiting you," Duncan said.

Coraopolis crouched beside the scarred bones. "How can I tell?" he complained. "How . . .?" He stopped, staring at the way the left leg was shaped, the bone swelling in a peculiar knob near the knee and warping to the left. "How tall do you think this guy was?" he asked.

"About five seven."

"Nick Sanchez! You remember the half-wit guy used to hang around? The one with the bent leg. For one, two weeks, he is gone, and—"

"How long?" Duncan said sharply.

"Coupla weeks. Yeah, that's it. I had a job for him and he didn't show up."

The idea that popped in Duncan's head was crazy. There wasn't any real foundation for it; just one of those wild hunches that all men in his business get sometimes. Sanchez had been a small-time, almost half-witted crook. Larry Weston was one of the city's prominent business men. And yet there was a connecting link. For Larry Weston had disappeared exactly two weeks before—at the same time that Sanchez vanished.

And now Sanchez' skeleton was here in the hallway, with the flesh eaten from it.

CHAPTER II

All Cops Are Crooked



THE room was small and hot and filthy. It smelled of decaying life, of canned food left open against the heat, of unwashed bodies. There was only one light, heavily shaded so that most of the room was in darkness. When Duncan stood silent, he could hear rats scuttering inside the walls.

The lack of air and the heat brought thick sweat on Duncan's body, but the old man in the arm-chair stayed wrapped in a blanket that was unbelievably dirty. In the gloom his face showed only as a hideous mask of wrinkles in which the eyes were deep sunken. His hands lay like forgotten dead things upon his lap.

"They left your son's skeleton in the one place it would be certain to be identified immediately," Duncan said. "Why?"

"He once worked for Mr. Coraopolis," the old man said. His voice was thin and cracked.

"But why should it have been brought there? Would anybody *want* it identified?"

"Mr. Coraopolis gave him work. Maybe he wanted to know." That was all Duncan had been able to get out of the fellow. Evidently senile, he appeared more dim-witted than his son.

Duncan got a pocketknife from his pocket, flipped it with nervous fingers, dropped it into his pocket

again. "And you never heard him mention a man named Weston?"

"I don't remember," Sanchez whined. "Nick wouldn't talk to me much, but I know. . . ." He stopped, peering craftily at Duncan.

"What?"

"I can't tell—unless. . . ." He smacked his thin lips.

"All right," Duncan said. He got five dollars from his wallet and the old man snatched at it. "What is it you know?"

"The work Nick did for Mr. Coraopolis. It was agin' the law. Jest what it was Nick wouldn't never say. But it wa'n't legally right. I know that."

Duncan said, "Hell!" Everybody knew George Coraopolis was in more business than liquor and gambling. Government men had twice investigated him on narcotic charges. There had been other indictments, but few convictions. And now, questioning the old man got Duncan no closer to the truth.

He made a nervous tour of the room, picked a short broken pencil from the ancient dresser and began to juggle it. "Somebody wanted your son's body identified. They wouldn't take the risk of putting it in Coraopolis' house otherwise." He stopped, said sharply, "Did Nick carry any insurance?"

"Yeah. Ten thousand dollars." Sanchez worked his lips on the words as though they tasted good. "Ten thousand dollars. He got it once when he made a lot of money."

Duncan flipped the pencil in the air, snatched at it, tossed it on the dresser again. There was a broad black smear across his thumb and he took the time to wipe it off before

he spoke. He said, "Who gets the insurance?"

"I do," the old man said. "Ten thousand dollars!" He sat grinning foolishly until all at once he seemed to realize what Duncan had meant. Fear twisted his face. "I didn't—I—He was my own son! My Nick! I wouldn't kill. . . ."

"Okay," Duncan said. "I didn't think you had."

"I ain't been out this room in two years," the old man wailed. "I couldn'ta . . ."

DUNCAN said he believed him, and left. He went by Coraopolis' place and checked on the old man's story. Nobody knew him though they had heard Nick Sanchez speak of him. He was almost blind and never went out of the room. A year or two before Nick had suddenly got some money, nobody knew how. It was then he'd boasted about taking out the insurance.

One more lead shot to hell, Duncan thought. It had been a wild idea in the first place, connecting Sanchez with Larry Weston. But wild ideas were better than none, and now he was left flat. As far as he or the police could learn, Weston had simply walked out of his home and into nothingness.

IT WAS ten p.m. when Duncan got back to his office. Luke Blake, who looked like a movie director's idea of a private detective, was sitting with both feet on his desk, the gooseneck lamp turned so that the light was flung across his legs perpendicular to the wall. His hands were twisted peculiarly in front of him. He didn't look up when Dun-

can came in but kept studying the shadow his hands threw upon the wall. Duncan said, "Hello."

Blake said, "Hey! Look quick! I got it! How's that for a bulldog?"

"Lousy."

"You're just jealous. Look at this one. It's a guy with a cigarette in his mouth." Blake twisted his hands in a different fashion and the shadow on the wall changed shape.

Duncan told him to keep practicing and maybe he'd get it yet. Then he asked what Blake had learned, and Blake said, "Nothing." He figured, he added, that Weston had met a blonde and left his old woman in the lurch. "I took a squint at the Mrs. He couldn't get fifty cents for her at a fire sale. With all the smooth skins round this town a guy would have to go off with something now and then. Now take me last night. I'm standing—"

Duncan said, "You've told me twice," and headed for the door to the inner office.

Blake said, "Hey! I forgot. This sourpuss Andrews guy is in there waiting for you and he's hot in the neck. And something else; that whiteheaded gal of yours telephoned. She's coming over, but said she'd wait until old Big Shot got outa here. Maybe she sees enough of that guy during working hours."

"Maybe." He knew Andrews had been making a play for Peggy lately. Andrews was the sort of man who fancies himself good at everything, especially women. But if he kept on with Peggy, Duncan would tell him where to stop. The detective pushed through the door into his private office where Paul Andrews was waiting.

ANDREWS was Rugged Individualism with Capitals. He was the big business man who could not make a mistake. Larger than Duncan, he was heavy-jawed, aggressive.

He smoked cigars, clamping hard on them with his teeth. "Well," he demanded as Duncan entered, "what have you found out about Mr. Weston?"

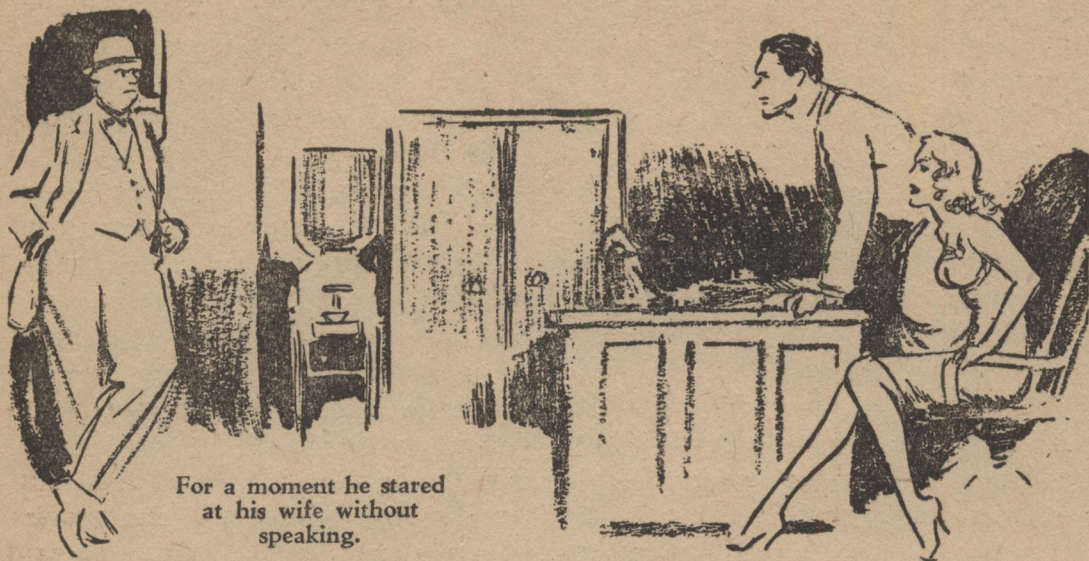
Duncan got a cigarette out of his pocket, revolved it with careful fingers, stuck it in his mouth. His right hand made a futile brushing gesture at his hair. "I'll tell you," he said thoughtfully. "I haven't learned a damn' thing."

"What I expected!" Andrews pushed forward in his chair, his right shoulder slightly higher than his left, the result of an automobile accident and operation a few years before. "I never wanted to hire you, Mr. Duncan. I told the firm it was a waste of money to get a private detective. Four-flushers, all of them! As incompetent as the regular police!"

There was a change in Duncan's face that a smarter man would have noticed. The smoke oozed slowly between his lips. He said, "Yes?"

"The stockholders demanded that I employ you," Andrews went on. "They weren't satisfied with the efforts of the regular police—not that anybody could blame them. A little money can buy off any cop. They were all crooked, private detectives as well."

Duncan leaned forward, quite slowly. "If you came here to say anything," he told Andrews quietly, "this should help you get to the point." With his open hand he



For a moment he stared
at his wife without
speaking.

slapped the man hard across the cheek.

Andrews lunged erect, his face gone livid. For one moment he crouched as though he were going to spring across the desk at Duncan. The sound of his breathing was loud, animal-like in the room.

"Get control of yourself," Duncan said. "I haven't hurt you—yet."

Rage shook the big man and he swallowed to get his voice steady. "I came for something," he grated. "I've got a lead on Larry Weston. I'll find him myself. I'll have you laughed out of this town—have your license revoked."

HE WALKED to the door, flung it open. With his hand on the knob he turned. "I came here to tell you what I had learned. That would have been foolish. They'd have bought you for a few drinks and some gambling. Now I'll find Weston myself." The door slammed shut behind him.

The sound was still in the room when the phone jangled. Duncan

lifted the receiver and an obviously disguised voice said, "I want to speak to Tom Duncan."

"Speaking," Duncan said. The voice was so muffled he couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman.

"You're interested in Larry Weston," the voice said. "I can give you a tip on that."

"Yeah?" Duncan said. "Just a minute."

He put the phone down, crossed the room with two fast silent strides and jerked open the door. Blake said, "Hey, look at this hula gal I made. Howya like the way she bulges, huh?"

Duncan slapped a telephone from the desk into Blake's hand, said, "Find the number I'm talking to." Then he was back inside his office again, asking what was that about Larry Weston.

"I know where you can get the dope on him and a damn' big case," the voice said. "Go out to 357 Ybor Road. You can get through the back door into the kitchen but you better make it in a hurry. Just keep quiet

and listen. You may have to wait a few minutes. And you take somebody along that knows shorthand."

"It sounds screwy," Duncan said. "What's the trap?"

"There's not any trap. You'll be safe. They wouldn't do anything if they caught you there. But take somebody that knows shorthand. There'll be a lot of talking."

"Who's talking now?"

"That doesn't matter. If you want to find Larry Weston, do what I tell you. I *know* he's there." The receiver clicked.

Duncan was still standing at the desk, his face hard with thought when Blake came in. "A dial phone," the assistant said. "I couldn't get it. Look here, Tom. I got this hula gal down pat. Watch her twitch."

"You can't take shorthand notes in shadows can you?"

"Naw. I don't believe nobody can do that. What would you want with shorthand anyhow?"

"Nothing. Except the person on the phone told me I'd find Weston at 357 Ybor Road, and said I'd better take along somebody who knew shorthand. It sounds crazy, but they insisted on it."

"Well you've got your secretary—both charming and efficient, if I do admit it myself." The girl was in the room before either of the men saw her.

PEGGY MATHEWS had blonde hair that was almost platinum. She swore it was natural, and Duncan swore it wasn't, but she said she should know best. Her face had a turned up nose, a good sun-tan, and a pair of very brown eyes. Her figure had everything. She was small,

but it was all there and in the correct places. When she draped one leg over the desk top, there was a sudden flash of sungold flesh that made Luke Blake gasp.

Duncan said, "Scram," and shut the door in Blake's face. He turned to the girl then. She was swinging one slim, tapered leg, letting the shoe heel tap against the desk. The stocking was rolled, the dress pulled up above the knee.

"Any exhibition?" he asked, and raised an eyebrow.

"Do you mind? You've never seemed to before."

"It gets my mind off my work," he said. "And I've got work to do now. If you'll hang around for a while, maybe I'll be back."

She slid off the desk and swayed toward him, putting her hands on his arm. "The secretary goes with you. I've got my notebook in the car."

He pried her loose and said she wouldn't do. "Why won't I?" she asked. "Nobody in Garden City can take dictation faster."

"Maybe. But not this time."

"Why?" There was sudden fear in her eyes and she had him with both hands by the coat. "Why can't I go, Tom?"

He hadn't meant to, there wasn't time to waste, but all at once he was kissing her. She pushed, throbbing and ardent against him, and he could feel fire run through his veins. "Why can't I go?" she whispered.

It was a fairly long ride to 357 Ybor Road and there were a few secluded spots that were good for courting. He had a vision of tree-shadowed moonlight and Peggy's upturned face, her hair tangled in his fingers, her lips hot against his. All

his body was fighting against his mind now to make him take her with him.

But he said, "I've got to hurry. You can't. . . ."

She jerked away and the terror was large in her eyes. "It's because you are going to get in some kind of trouble! I know you are! It's dangerous. . . ."

He didn't tell her that it sounded like a trap, a perfect set-up to get himself killed. He said, "There won't be any trouble. I asked a few questions before I agreed to go. The guy told me that."

"Then I'm going along with you," she said firmly.

"No."

"But I want to tell you what I learned today. I was checking the books at Weston & Andrews, and I found where Mr. Weston copped nearly fifty thousand dollars last year.

"It was obvious. I should have noticed it before."

"Give me the details later," Duncan said.

"I've got to hurry." He kissed her once more and came close to saying to hell with Larry Weston and Ybor Road. But he got control of himself and went out, pointing. Blake grinned after him wisely and cynically.

There was no reason anybody should want to kill him, he told himself.

Lord knows he didn't have anything in this case so far. There was no reason to set a trap for him—though this did smell like one. But maybe the tip was on the up and up. Anyway, he had no choice but to take the chance.

CHAPTER III

The Dark Room of Death



YBOR ROAD begins at the far edge of the Spanish district, wanders past dingy looking cigar factories into blocks of small frame houses, most of them in need of paint.

To all appearances 357 was tenantless. The windows stood blind. Grass was rank in the front yard. Papers and tin cans were scattered about. On each side of the house was a vacant lot, the nearest neighbor being some sixty yards away.

Tom Duncan drove past and into the next block and stopped. In the dark of his car he took the .38 police special from its shoulder holster, rolled the cylinder to check his cartridges, put the gun in his pocket. Then he got out of his car and went down the side street to the alley.

A shoulder-high fence surrounded the back yard of 357. Duncan stood close beside it for minutes, straining eyes and ears against the quiet darkness. There were no lights. A wind stirred in the grass and faded. Off to the right somewhere a radio was playing, the music faint and dim in the distance.

Duncan felt along the fence, found a gate and pulled it open. The hinges made a rusty, flesh-crawling sound and he jerked back, crouched for long moments. Somewhere a dog barked.

He went across the yard fast. The back door was closed, but when he put his left hand on the knob it turned easily. Duncan pulled his gun free. He let the door swing open and flattened himself beside it.

Nothing happened.

A flashlight was in his left coat pocket and he took it out and whirled the beam across the room in one swift survey. A wooden table, a straight chair, a sink and stove. Dust. Not much place for anybody to hide. Duncan slipped through and let the door close behind him.

After the first moment he heard it, a dim hissing sound. He spun and saw a single green eye that stared at him from across the room. It was long and narrow. It was like a perpendicular slit of green fire a foot and a half from the floor.

The breath clabbered in Duncan's lungs. Something began to close tight on his throat and he didn't know at first that it was terror. His finger jerked against the trigger and stopped. Across the room the green eye showed motionless and unwavering.

Duncan thumbed his flashlight and then the air went sharply out of his lungs and his muscles got watery with relief. He felt foolish, looking at a natural gas hot-water heater, the flame of which glowed through a slot in the door.

The flash went off and darkness struck again. He waited. The voice on the phone had told him he might have to wait. It wasn't long. Even as the flash clicked into darkness he heard the rusty hinges of the alley gates screech. Duncan slid away from the door, silent on rubber heels, his left shoulder close against the wall. His right hand gripping the gun was rock-steady, the left one nervous, revolving the flashlight.

Whoever was in the backyard moved quietly. There was no sound at all until he caught the faint click

of shoes on the steps by the door. The person paused there for a long while.

Then the door swung open, a woman came through, and the door closed again.

There had been only a glimpse of her against the lighter darkness of the night. He couldn't be certain. He waited, muscles taut. A voice whispered, "Tom?"

He stepped forward, groped until he touched her, and a short cry broke from her mouth. "Damn you!" he said with his lips close to her ear. "Why'd you come here?"

SHE got control of herself quickly and he could fancy her grinning in the dark. "I came along to take those notes. I've got my pencil. And you ought to be more careful where you put your hands. If you could only see it, I'm blushing."

"Get out of here."

"No."

"Get out." He put one arm around her shoulders, began to feel for the doorknob.

She whispered, "You try to put me out and I'll scream. You don't want that, do you?"

He said, "Damn," and was quiet. He knew her too well to argue. Then with his mouth still close to her ear he asked how she'd found the place.

"I heard you tell Luke Blake the address. You drive slow. I was here ahead of you and followed you down the alley."

He said, "Damn," again, and several other things under his breath, and then they waited in the dark, silent. Across the room the gas heater continued its hissing. The yellow-green eyes watched them.

It seemed to Duncan that he waited for hours. In reality it was less than three minutes, less than four full minutes since he had first stepped through that door. He had the impression of sliding gradually off into space. The darkness began to revolve slowly, then faster. He felt sick at his stomach.

Peggy Mathews whispered, "Tom, I—I feel—queer. . . ."

He was looking at the heater. He saw the flame that seemed to move round and round him with the darkness; he heard the dim hiss of its burning. And slowly the truth came into his brain. Natural gas, adjusted to burn with an improper amount of air, creates carbon monoxide. And carbon monoxide clabbers, congeals the blood.

He said, "The gas—breathing—" He was pawing along the wall trying to find the door. His flashlight was dropped, forgotten, and only instinct made him cling to the gun. Ages passed while he fumbled in the dark. He was lost. He didn't know where the door was. And then his hand touched the knob and he twisted.

The door did not move. It was locked!

He snatched at it, hanging to it furiously as though to keep himself from falling off into space. He had been holding his breath for so long that he thought his lungs were bursting. There was a great roaring under his skull and he hardly realized that he had pushed the muzzle of his gun against the lock and was shooting. Then somehow the door was open and he was staggering through, pulling Peggy with him.

They both went down on all fours in the yard. Duncan had to force

himself to breathe, a sort of mental artificial respiration. It was a quarter of an hour before he could sit up and by that time Peggy was completely recovered. Duncan wondered if the shots had been heard in neighboring houses. Probably, but along Ybor Road persons mind strictly their own business.

He was able to stand up finally. The girl put her hands on his arms, bracing him. "How are you now?"

"I reckon I better thank you for coming after all," he said. "If it hadn't been for the extra air that came in with you, and your mention of feeling queer, I'd have just stayed there. Another minute would have finished me."

"You're feeling all right now?"

"Okay. And thanks." He pulled her to him and put his thanks on her lips.

After a moment she gasped and said, "You must be all right. You're acting natural again."

He went back into the room, holding his breath this time, and cut off the heater. He found the flashlight and with it examined the door that he'd blown open. "Look here," he said. "It's a regular spring lock, but backwards. It locks from the inside rather than the out."

HER eyes were big against the darkness. "It was a trap. They wanted you to get locked in there and die. Who?"

"I don't know," he said. "But I'm going to try to find out." Then all at once the lips had pulled back from his teeth and there was fear in his eyes. Whoever had sent him here, had insisted that he bring along a person to take shorthand.

Had they known about Peggy? Had they planned to murder her also? Why in God's name would anyone want to kill her?

He didn't have much hope of finding anything in the house, but he wasn't overlooking any bets. Most of the gas had cleared out now. He examined the kitchen from the doorway, using his flash. Then he and Peggy went through into the next room, reshutting the door behind them. His swinging flashbeam showed a light bulb in the center of the room, and he clicked it on.

Peggy screamed. She reeled backward and struck against him. "There! Look there!" Even as he spun he got a glimpse of her face, white and terrible, her hands over dilated eyes that stared through spread fingers. Then he was gaping at the thing across the room from him.

There was no furniture except a single wooden table and a straight chair. Sitting in the chair, bony arms sprawled out across the table, empty eye sockets leering at him, was a skeleton. Raw strips of flesh clung to it—flesh torn in strings as though it had been eaten from the bones!

"Don't look," Duncan told the girl. He turned her around, then forced stiff legs nearer the table.

This skeleton might well have been that of Nick Sanchez except for the bad leg and the size of the bones. They were decidedly larger. But the same new-wound pieces of wire held them together where the remnants of muscle failed. There were the same marks that might have been made by small teeth—the same irrevocable evidence that what sat here now as a grinning pile of bones

had been a human being a short while ago!

The words he had heard over the telephone dinned into Duncan's brain: *If you want to find Larry Weston, do what I tell you. I know he's there.*

So this was the end of the case, he thought. He had been hired to find Larry Weston and he had found him.

But was it the end? The person who left the skeleton here had deliberately tried to murder Duncan. Others had tried before. But this person had tried also to kill Peggy. Why? He didn't know. But if they had tried once, they would try again. The next time they might win.

There wouldn't be another time if Tom Duncan could help it.

CHAPTER IV

The Girl with the Green Eyes



HE next morning Duncan did some telephoning and learned definitely that the skeleton was that of Larry Weston, identified by dental work only recently done. Weston had left his wife much property as well as forty thousand in insurance; but none of the insurance had been taken out in the last twelve years and there was no indication that Mrs. Weston had wanted to do away with her husband; she wasn't, as Blake had said, the sort of woman who was likely to get another one.

"We don't have any actual proof that the man was murdered," Lieutenant Powell told Duncan. "All we've got is the skeleton. Doc Hargan says Weston wasn't shot or stabbed; he's pretty sure of that.



Had they planned to murder her, too? For all his wondering, he could never know.

There's not enough flesh left to tell about poison, or gas, or what. We'll play hell proving anything—except that it's Weston."

Duncan learned one other thing by calling the offices of the Probate Court—that 357 Ybor Road belonged to George Coraopolis and was supposedly vacant.

"I think I'll go see George again," he said.

Luke Blake was behind his desk, his face squinted in a knot of furious concentration, his hands amazingly tangled in front of him to throw a shapeless shadow upon the wall. "I almost got it," he said. "This is gonna be good. A rabbit with puppies. Or kittens. Or what the hell do rabbits have?"

"Dumb bunnies," Duncan said. He started for the door and the phone rang.

It was Peggy Mathews. Her voice was throaty with excitement. "I thought you'd want to know. *Mr. Andrews has disappeared!*"

Duncan's fingers tightened nervously on the phone. "Disappeared? When?"

"Last night, right after he left you."

"How do you know?"

"He didn't come to the office this morning. I called his home and Mrs. Andrews said he hasn't been there since early last night."

"Thanks," Duncan said. He hooked the receiver and put the phone slowly back on the desk. He got a penknife out of his pocket and began unconsciously to juggle it. His face was drawn hard, the eyes narrow.

Last night Andrews had claimed to have a lead on Larry Weston's

disappearance. He wouldn't tell what the lead was. "They'd buy you off for a few drinks and some gambling," he'd said. And George Coraopolis ran a bar and gambling house!

Duncan's right hand came up to adjust the gun that made a slight bulge near the left breast of his white linen coat. He headed out the door, his left hand still juggling the penknife. Luke Blake didn't look up. He was trying to sculpture his rabbits out of shadow.

The doors of George Coraopolis' place were locked, but through them he could see a cleanup man back of the bar. He knocked, kept knocking until the man came to the door. Duncan pointed at the key on the inside and made a gesture as if turning it. The man shook his head and said something that wasn't audible.

In the dim rear of the bar a figure moved and the man at the door looked around. He argued a moment, then turned and unlocked the door. "She said come in, guy."

Duncan went in. His eyes a little more accustomed to the gloom he could see the girl at a table near the rear, the only other person in the place. She was George Coraopolis' wife.

DUNCAN told the bartender to tell George he wanted to see him, then strolled back to the table where Mrs. Coraopolis sat and took a chair opposite her. "Thanks for telling him to let me in," he said.

"Any company's welcome. I don't get much of it." There was a bottle of scotch and one of seltzer on the table. The scotch was a third empty and where it had gone showed in the woman's green eyes. There was

something animal about those eyes—about her whole face and the feline sensuousness of her body. The red hair was pushed back of her ears to fall thick around throat and shoulders. She wore light silk pajamas. Duncan took a good look and his heart began to slam hard against his ribs. She was that sort of woman. A man couldn't look at her without getting ideas.

He said, "It's a little early to be at the bottle, isn't it?"

"I got nothing else to do. Get a glass and some ice—and help yourself." She said the last phrase as though she might mean he was welcome to more than whiskey.

He didn't want to appear hurried, and yet there wasn't time to waste. Coraopolis might come at any minute. He said, "It's too hot to walk, even to the bar. I'll take a sip of yours." He did, and as he took the glass his hand touched hers for an instant. Something like an electrical current ran through him.

He said, "I never see you around here at night. More of you would be good for the business."

She smiled, and then, abruptly, her face twisted in anger. "I'm never around at night!" The green eyes were like flame. "I stay shut up in the back whenever there's anybody out here. That damned Greek—"

"Maybe there's some way a man could get back there?" he said.

She eyed him for a moment. "Maybe," she said. "It would be damned risky."

He looked over her figure, taking in everything that was visible and all that was hinted at, and he decided a trip would be worth the risk.

He was about to tell her so when the faint sound of steps coming from the back of the building jerked him to the business in hand. He said casually but fast, "Did George have Paul Andrews over here last night?"

"Who?"

"Paul Andrews."

"I don't know him."

"He's blond. About my height and a little heavier. Carries one shoulder considerably higher than the other."

Recollection flooded her face. "I remember. He and George came back in the living room about ten-thirty last night. George made me go out. He always does." She said the last words fiercely.

A door in the rear opened and Coraopolis and the bartender came through. "Over there," the bartender said. Coraopolis crossed to the table where his wife sat with Duncan.

He said, "Hello, Tom." He stared down at his wife for a moment without speaking, then pushed out a big hand and took the glass away from her. Duncan saw his fingers dig into the girl's hand and knew they must have hurt. Coraopolis said, "Get out."

She stood up. She was breathing hard, her bosom rising and falling against the silk. Slowly she pushed back her chair, turned and went through the door where Coraopolis had entered.

Duncan stood up. He said, "Where's Paul Andrews?"

The light wasn't good in the rear of the bar, but he thought the Greek paled slightly. "How would I know, Tom?"

"He came here last night."

"A lotsa folks come here. Maybe I don't see them all."

"You saw Andrews. He came looking for you."

"Musta changed his mind. I did not see him."

Duncan had the penknife out of his pocket again and was playing with it with his left hand. He said, "It won't do, George. I *know* he was here. I *knew* you saw him."

For a moment they watched one another, the Greek's small suspicious eyes looking abnormally little behind the great hooked nose. Then he said, "So what?"

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. He asked me where Larry Weston disappeared to. I don't know that. Then he leave."

"Maybe a lot of people saw him leave," Duncan said. "A lot of people who work for you. But nobody else ever saw him after he left here."

"Huh?" Coraopolis looked genuinely surprised. And then he looked frightened.

Watching him, Duncan couldn't tell whether it was an act or not. "How do you know, huh?"

"He didn't go home last night, and he hasn't been to his office."

"Listen, Tom. I am your friend, see? I read in the paper that you find Mr. Weston. That's what they hire you for. You are through with the case. Why don't you lay off?"

"I'm not through," Duncan said. "I was hired by the stockholders in Weston & Andrews, Incorporated. They'll want Andrews found now. I'm still on the job."

Coraopolis made a gesture with his big hands that might have meant anything. "Well?"

Duncan said it deliberately, slowly.

He said it with his eyes fixed on Coraopolis' face. He said, "I turned off the gas at 357 Ybor Road."

The Greek's face didn't change except for a slight contraction of the muscles. At first there was no expression on it at all, then after five seconds he looked puzzled. "Huh?"

"You left the gas on," Duncan said.

"I don't know what you talk about. What gas? The paper don't say about any gas."

"You own the place?"

"Sure. I got lotsa houses. This one is vacant so somebody puts the skeleton there. I don't know why they pick on me. And I don't know about any gas."

"All right," Duncan said. "But somebody tried to murder me out there last night. I don't murder easy, George. Something may happen to the guy who tries it." He kept his voice flat and quiet. His eyes were steady on those of Coraopolis and when the big man didn't speak, Duncan turned and went between the stacked chairs and tables, through the front door, and into the hot glare of morning sunlight.

His roadster was parked in front. He got in, drove to the corner and was turning right when he saw Mrs. Coraopolis waving at him. He stopped.

She had been running; her bosom rose and fell with her heavy breathing. She still wore the pajamas, but had slipped a cotton dress on over them. It didn't help much toward hiding her figure. "I heard you talking," she panted. "George didn't tell you the truth. Last night he and Andrews got in a terrible argument, then a fight. George went out and

came back with a couple of bouncers and later I heard them go out the back. They must have taken Mr. Andrews with them because I watched the front and he never came out that way." She said it all in one rush of words, hanging to the car door.

Duncan said, "You are sure? You are sure it was Andrews and he didn't leave by the front?"

"I know. I heard George call his name." Her gaze flashed up the street and she said, "I slipped out the back to tell you. I've got to go." For a moment those promising green eyes were on his. "There are two back doors," she said. "One of them—the one on the left—lets into my room." Then she had whirled away from the car, running again.

CHAPTER V

Death in Deep Water



GEORGE CORAOPOLIS' place had a glass window filled with bottles and a large cardboard poster that showed a pretty blonde-and-telephone saying she wanted some beer. Duncan drove past, turned left at the next corner, and parked halfway down the block.

He got out of his car, lit a cigarette, and was drawing deeply on it when Luke Blake appeared out of the darkness across the street. Duncan said, "Anything happen?"

"Na. For two days we been watching this guy and the farthest he's been is the corner picture show."

"We'll just keep watchin'," Duncan said. Coraopolis was tied up in this business somewhere, and tail-

ing him was the only way to find out how. Besides, the watching had proved highly pleasant for Duncan. He'd remembered about that left-hand rear door, and made use of it. He was willing to keep watching for no end of nights. Red hair was supposed to go with temperament, but Mrs. Coraopolis was sometimes a jump ahead.

Blake was standing in a doorway with light from a store window flowing over him. "Look," he said. "I got it now. I can make the rabbit walk." He began to twist his hands in strange convulsions.

"Go home and sleep," Duncan told him. He flipped his cigarette into the gutter and started across the street. No time until after one to be ducking up the alley, so he turned left toward the corner.

It was three minutes of midnight when the car rolled out of the alley into Gilman Street and started south. Under the street light Duncan got a flash of sleek black hair and a hooked nose; then he was running toward his own roadster, keeping close against the wall.

CORAOPOLIS had a block and a half start, but Duncan had little trouble following. They went south along Gilman for six blocks, swung into Dexter, and then south again on Bayshore Drive. Here the houses began to drop away, and after another mile there was nothing except occasional passing headlights, scattered glimpses of the bay with its darkness mellowed by the glow of an old moon, the thick blackness of swamp. Coraopolis' tail light was a red dot in the distance.

All at once the dot was gone.

Duncan drove on until he found the dirt road turning off to the right. He went past it, stopped, and walked back.

The bay couldn't be more than a half mile in that direction. It would be safer walking.

On the sand road darkness shut in tight around him. Occasional clumps of scrub pine rose to right or left and through them moonlight sifted in pallid splotches; but usually black bayou water held the road on either side and out of it rose massed mangrove and seagrape through which no light could penetrate. In the sand his feet made a soft, steady crunching.

Fear began to take possession of Duncan. He tried to throw it off and couldn't. He had the weird impression that the darkness was tightening around him, strangling him; it was a sort of claustrophobia, as though the blackness was some actual material thing which closed in upon him and choked him.

A lot of crazy ideas began to revolve through his brain. He wondered if what was ahead could see in the dark. He thought of the skeletons, of the marks of teeth on the bone, the flesh which had apparently been eaten away. What had done that? No human being, but some kind of animal. And animals could see in the dark!

Abruptly he came on the automobile. There were no lights burning and he almost stumbled against it. He crouched, listening until the beating of his heart echoed against his eardrums. But there was no sound except the whisper of wind in the mangroves, the whine of mosquitoes.

A quick examination showed the

car was empty. He rounded it, went thirty feet down the road, around a bend, and all at once he could see the black arm of a bayou with a white gold path across it from the moon. Off to the right a fish jumped and he caught the silver flash of breaking water.

Some thirty feet of ground widened into a little clearing between him and the bayou's edge, but at the far side of the clearing brush hedged his view. He paused, and it was then he heard the tread of feet on planking. He went forward three steps and to the right, moving cautiously until his gaze found an opening in the mangrove and sea-oats.

A rickety pier led out into the water from a point some twenty yards to his left. Where it touched the shore was a small cabin that he had not seen before and could make out only as a darker blot against the sky; but moonlight fell soft across the pier so that he could see it plainly, and also the man who walked along it. The man was George Coraopolis.

Coraopolis moved carefully, but with no attempt at silence. He gave the impression of knowing that he was watched, but of being ready for whatever happened. He kept his right hand in his coat pocket.

Duncan thought he heard an automobile somewhere far behind him. He twisted, but could see nothing except the black wall of trees. The sound of the car faded and once more he turned to watch the man on the pier.

He blinked, incredulous. His eye muscles tightened with strain. But it was no fault of his eyes. The man on the pier had vanished! There

was no place for him to go except into the water, and yet he had completely disappeared.

DUNCAN waited, expecting to see a boat slide out of the darkness under the dock. None came. There was no sound of a man swimming. George Coraopolis had disappeared as completely as though he had dissolved into the thin moonlight.

Once more a feeling of terror, of something eerie and almost supernatural, came over Duncan. He was thinking again of the skeletons, of there being no mark upon them to show how the men had died. And all at once he was remembering what Coraopolis had said as he looked at the skeleton of Nick Sanchez: *perhaps what ate their flesh off, ate them alive!*

"I'm never around at night any more," she said, and there was something in her eyes that he couldn't read.



It may have been his own fear that made Duncan do what he next did. He walked swiftly, quietly, to the end of the pier and stared out carefully on it.

The planking was old and rotten. His shoes made soft padding noises that echoed hollowly above the water. The pilings were giving way

in places so that the pier swayed slightly under his weight.

And then he was more than half-way out, at the point where Coraopolis had disappeared.

It happened suddenly and without warning. The plank he stepped on looked like any other. It gave way with a whole section as large as a

trapdoor and his body shot downward into darkness.

There was only a split second before he struck the water and went under.

But in that last instant, just as the water closed over his eyes, he caught a glimpse of a thing like some huge circular spider web overhead, falling. Then he was under the water.

He went down five or six feet, checked himself with beating arms and legs, and started up. Something touched his head, his hands, his face. It tightened around him. It covered him from head to foot. Sluggishly, heavily, it pulled him toward the bottom.

He knew instantly what had happened.

A circular net, such as fishermen sometimes use for mullet, had been flung over him. The threads held him helpless.

The lead weights at the bottom tugged him down!

For moments he struggled insanely.

Terror burst into his brain with a myriad of pictures. He thought of the skeletons and the flesh eaten from them. He remembered the legend that drowning was a pleasant death, and a furious crazy laughter jarred in his throat: the idea of any death being pleasant when you see it crawling at you and fight against it and go mad waiting for its fingers to squeeze the last pain out of you. He thought of Peggy Mathews and the last time he'd kissed her. He wouldn't kiss her again.

He was going to die! There was no doubt about it.

CHAPTER VI

One Last Skeleton



SOME remnant of sanity returned to him. He fought with his mind to crowd out the wild pictures, to force himself to reason. There was still a chance; slight, but a chance.

He let his body go lax and the weights pulled him down to where his feet touched bottom. By bending over he got some slack in the net.

He was still blindly holding his revolver and now he managed to slip it into his coat pocket. And by keeping the net as slack as possible he got his other hand into his trouser pocket and got the penknife out.

It was sharp. It sliced through the cords of the net where he managed to touch them, but others still clung to him and hampered his movements. The air in his lungs seemed to have swollen a hundred times its size and was trying to blow his chest apart. He let breath slide from his nostrils. It seemed suddenly that all the air was gone. His lungs were a vacuum and all the terrific force of the sea crushed in upon him. His ribs creaked under the strain.

Then he was free and swimming under water. Every muscle in him ached; every impulse was to go straight to the top, but he forced himself to stay under for another four seconds and swim. He had no sense of direction. That part was left to chance.

There was a pop-pop-pop sound that changed tone as his head broke the surface. He swung about, dizzy, lungs hurting. And he saw the mo-

torboat in the darkness under the pier. The motor was already going. A piling blocked his view of the person in the stern.

The man in the boat must have heard him break the surface, or pulling on the net found that it was empty, for the boat began to move. Duncan got the revolver out of his pocket. He didn't know whether it would shoot or not. The first try clicked.

Flame lashed out from the boat and a bullet slapped the water beside his face. He squeezed the trigger again and his gun cracked. Trying to see if he'd hit he forgot to keep his legs moving and his head went under. When he got to the surface again, the boat was a dark blot on the bayou, scudding away.

Duncan got the gun back in his coat pocket before he rolled onto his back and lay for minutes fighting for breath; then he swam slowly, sometimes on his side, sometimes on his back, toward the shore.

He did not think consciously; he was too tired to think. But one thing seemed clear enough. George Corapolis had ducked through that trap door into a boat hidden underneath. He must have known that he was followed, waited until Duncan came out and fell through, then flung the net over him.

The skeleton of a drowned man would give no evidence of how he had died.

Duncan's moving hand touched shore and he staggered erect, reeled up the narrow beach toward the wall of mangroves.

A VOICE beyond the trees said, "Hold it, Mister. And keep

your hands up." It was a woman speaking, and she sounded afraid.

Duncan said, "Who—?"

There was sudden movement in the brush and a girl came running toward him. Her hair glittered silver-white as she came from the shadow into the moonglow. Her face was drawn with the rouge making dark splotches on it. She had a .25 automatic in her hand. She said, "Tom! Tom!" and then she had flung herself against Duncan and had her arms around him.

He held her fiercely, remembering the vision under water when he thought he'd never touch her again. His hands trembled and shook against her, holding her body flat against his from knees to shoulders. And then he bent his head and was kissing her, hard lips crushing hers back against her teeth.

He let her go after a moment. She said, "Whew! Does a swim always affect you that way?"

He laughed, a little shakily. "Not always. But I'll toss you in if you think you'll get the same reaction."

"You don't need to toss me in. You've got me soaking wet already." But she didn't seem to mind.

He held her at arm's length and looked at her. The water draining from his own clothes had soaked through hers, making them cling to her body. To him she had never looked so lovely as she did there in the pallid moonlight.

The danger and strain of the last half hour set in with a weird and furious reaction. He had brushed against death, but now he was alive. Maybe he wouldn't continue to live long, but he knew now what death meant and he wouldn't waste any of

the time left to live. He pulled the girl against him, reeled with her into the shadows. They swayed, and then they were sitting under the mangroves, clinging to one another.

"Tom!" she whispered. "Tom, what happened out there?"

"Nothing! We're safe now!" His whole body trembled and all at once she was responding, holding herself fiercely against him. Her mouth found his, clung to it. "Tom!" she said, and it was almost a whimper now. "Oh, Tom."

LATER it occurred to him that she had no business being here. "What in the devil brought you?" he asked.

"My car. You asked me to come, didn't you?"

"Me? When?"

"Tonight. Somebody called and said you wanted me to come out here, alone. To walk right out to the end of the pier and wait for you. I got here just in time to see you fall through—only I didn't know it was you."

"Who called you?"

She shook her head. "I didn't even know whether it was a man or woman. I couldn't tell. Why do you reckon they wanted me?"

"I don't know," he said.

But one thing was clear enough: Coraopolis wanted to kill Peggy as well as Duncan. Why, he had no idea. The Greek might believe that he (Duncan) had learned something, and want him out of the way for that reason. But why murder Peggy? It was true that she had discovered Larry Weston's theft, but if she hadn't, someone else would have. It was clear enough to

anyone going over the books. The curious thing was that it hadn't been discovered before. And anyway, Weston was dead, his skeleton positively identified.

Peggy had a flashlight with her, and using it Duncan searched the pier and the shack beside it. He didn't know what he expected to find. On the pier there was nothing. In the shack was a rotting fishnet, some huge crabtraps—and a skeleton!

It lay in the corner, half disjointed. In the glare of the flash the bones were eerie, white and shimmering. Standing close, Duncan could see that one shoulder blade was queerly chipped so that it seemed to be higher than the other.

He had never liked Paul Andrews. He had come close to hating the man. But looking at those bones Duncan could feel no rancor, only a cold and ghastly horror. It wasn't death that affected him so violently; it was the grisly form it took. Three days before Andrews had been big and healthy, alive. Now he was a clutter of damp bones with threads of torn flesh hanging to them.

IT WAS later that same night that Duncan and Lieutenant Powell and eight detectives called for George Coraopolis. He wasn't at home. His wife and his employees said they didn't know where he was. He had received a telephone call and left around midnight, they said. The police waited.

But George Coraopolis didn't come back. The dragnet went out. Every cop in the city was on the lookout. Get Coraopolis! There would be no politics to help him this time. The word spread throughout

the state, through the South and the whole country. Raids fell suddenly on criminal hideouts. But there was no sign of George Coraopolis.

Then, exactly two weeks after he disappeared, Coraopolis came back. He appeared unexpectedly in the alley behind his own place of business. A cop, making his regular tour, saw something white and shiny against the alley wall. He flashed his light on it—and then he was running pale-faced for the nearest phone.

Coraopolis was back: a skeleton held together by new-bound wire and little strips of muscle.

The identification was not absolute, but it was practically so. Certainly they were the bones of a man the exact size of Coraopolis, and a dentist felt almost positive that a gold crown on one tooth was work which he had done for the Greek. That was enough to convince the police.

Finding Coraopolis, however, didn't settle Duncan's problem. For the last two weeks he had scarcely slept.

Day and night either he or Luke Blake had been close to Peggy. And nothing had happened. There had been no sign that she lived with the dark shroud of death close above her. It was this very quiet which tore hardest at Duncan's nerves. If he had only known what to expect, how to go about protecting her. . . .

SHE was with him in his office when Lieutenant Powell phoned that Coraopolis had been found. "Two weeks to the day," the lieutenant said. "The same time his partner, Weston, was gone. Only one difference. Coraopolis was

slugged before he was killed—knocked unconscious probably."

It was that which started Duncan thinking. And slowly the pieces of the pattern began to fall into place. He remembered the time that each person had been gone before his skeleton turned up. He remembered a certain black streak across his finger left by a pencil he had tossed up and down. And he remembered the things he had found in the shack beside the bayou.

"Great God!" he said suddenly. "Suppose . . ."

Peggy asked, "Suppose what?"

He was thumbing through a phone book and didn't answer. It took him ten seconds to find the number and dial the office of a large insurance company. He was almost certain the place would be closed. It was, but luckily somebody was working late.

The person couldn't answer his question, but gave him a home address and he called it. There was a short delay.

Finally he got the right man on the wire and asked if the insurance on Nick Sanchez had been paid to his father.

"Why, yes. It was paid late this very afternoon." The agent sounded apologetic. "We were a bit late, but under the circumstances that couldn't be avoided. We wanted to be positive of the identification, you understand. We had to get the doctor who examined him and the doctor was out of town. He's just returned."

"You paid it to the old man in person?"

"This afternoon."

Duncan said, "Thanks." He

heeled back his chair and jumped for the door.

Peggy grabbed at him. "What's the rush?"

"I got an idea."

She held on and went out the door with him. "If you've got one of those," she said, "you'll need somebody to look after you. I'm coming."

He hesitated. Perhaps he was already too late, but certainly there wasn't any time to waste. He was afraid to leave Peggy alone, afraid to take her with him. Then he grinned tightly, said, "Okay. You've managed to get in on all the hot spots so far. You might as well be in at the finish." He turned back into his office, made a quick telephone call, and they went out together.

CHAPTER VII

Killer Uncovered



IT WAS the second floor of a tenement house. The hall was narrow and hot and dim. It smelled, a weird blending of a thousand odors, and most of them were bad. Duncan took his gun from under his coat, gestured with his left hand for Peggy to keep back and out of the way. He tried a door-knob with his left hand. The door was locked.

He knocked. There were five seconds of electric silence before a thin voice said, "Who is it?"

Duncan tried to disguise his voice. "The Mutual Insurance. There was one paper we forgot to get signed this afternoon."

Again the quiet before the voice

said, "Just a minute." Uncertain steps crossed the room. The door swung open. In the deep gloom Duncan could scarcely see the wrinkled, filthy face, the blanket wrapping the hunched old man.

Duncan went over the sill fast, his right hand and gun in front of him. The gun muzzle stuck the old man in the belly and pushed him back. He gave a sort of pig-like squeal.

"Can it," Duncan said. "That old man stuff doesn't go any more."

He circled, keeping his gun steady. He was grinning now. He said, "It's a swell job of make-up. With that gag about being half blind and the light hurting your eyes it almost worked. It's too dark in here to tell you are wearing a wig and that those wrinkles don't belong to you."

The man still did not speak. It was stifling in the room. The hot, dirty odors wormed through Duncan's nostrils. He said, "When I was here before I picked up a pencil and juggled it. It was a make-up pencil and left a big stripe on my finger, but I didn't think of make-up. You did though. You thought maybe I knew what it was and you tried to kill me by getting me into a room full of gas."

The man didn't speak. Duncan said, "Isn't it true?"

Behind Duncan a voice said, "What if it is? You won't be telling anybody." He started to turn and the voice said, "Drop the gun!"

The person meant business and Duncan knew it. He let the gun thump on the floor. He turned.

Mrs. Coraopolis had stepped from behind a curtain across the room. She had evidently been dressing—or undressing. The whole get-

up was very enticing and with her red-gold hair free about her face and shoulders she looked like a magazine illustration. And the gun in her hand was as steady as if it had been painted there. It centered squarely on Duncan's belly.

There had been times when Duncan was glad to see this woman, but now when he looked at the glint in her green eyes and the rock-steady gun, he wasn't glad. She meant to kill him and he knew it.

His mouth got dry and the sweat on his body wasn't altogether from the heat of the room. His spine felt cold and feathery. He had trouble keeping his voice steady when he said, "Why, hello, Chickie. I thought maybe I'd find you here. Were you dressing to go somewhere? Or"—he let his gaze rove over her figure—"are you just trying to keep cool?"

The old man said, "Damn him. Let him have it, Chick."

DUNCAN'S voice was too loud. "It won't work. You put a bullet through me and it'll show on the skeleton. You can't get away with it like you did with the others you killed."

"They won't find you like they did the others," the man said. "That's one crab-trap I'll leave on the bottom. Let him have it, Chickie."

She said, "The noise? . . ."

"Nobody in this place will pay any attention. Go ahead."

"All right," she said. Her finger began to tighten on the trigger. Her face was white under its make-up. She tensed forward.

The door opened suddenly and was full of men with guns. A voice shouted, "Drop it!" and then Lieu-

tenant Powell had crossed the room and caught the gun out of Mrs. Coraopolis' hand. Other cops were around the man in the blanket. Peggy came running through the door and got her arms around Duncan.

"I thought the lieutenant wouldn't ever come in. I believe he wanted her to shoot you."

"That's an idea," Powell said. "But what I really wanted was for you to get that confession down in shorthand. The way shysters work these days a case can't be too airtight." He let his gaze rest on Chickie Coraopolis a long time, so long that he began to get a flush in his cheeks and his Adam's apple bobbed twice. "If I had known what I was missing, I don't think I'd have waited."

She glared at him. She said, "Look, damn you, if that will do you any good!"

Powell looked, and then he could not take it any longer. He turned to Duncan, said, "Now who's this guy we've got? You didn't have time to explain over the phone."

"The world's finest business man and detective. The man who knows all. Mr. Paul Andrews."

"Andrews! He's dead!"

"The identification wasn't absolute. There was nothing to judge by except the shoulder."

"No, but . . ."

"Wipe off the make-up," Duncan said. "See for yourself."

THEY talked, both of them, so that the next day Duncan could explain to Peggy even the details he hadn't known the night before. "Andrews was the one who had

stolen from the firm," he said. "It was bound to come out, so he planned to get Weston out of the way and alter the books to look as though Weston had done the stealing. He wanted you out of the way because he was afraid you'd get wise to the fact that the books had been changed some time *after Weston's* disappearance."

Her brown eyes widened in amazement. "Damn!" she said. "I should have known that. I just thought I'd made a mistake the time before."

"Women in business!" Duncan said, and snorted.

She flared at him. "At least they are honest. They—"

"Keep quiet," he said, and tucked his arm around her in a way that gave her something else to think about. "Andrews wasn't satisfied with putting Weston out of the way. He'd run up some debts and had a few other troubles that were likely to pop loose. He wanted to get out himself, and he wanted to take the Greek's wife with him."

"Wife!" Peggy said. "I'll get that red-haired hussy—"

Duncan said, "Tush, tush. Anyway, the lady—"

"Lady! Why, that—that . . ."

"Shame," Duncan said. "She's as accomplished a lady as I know, and . . ."

"Accomplished! At what?" Her brown eyes flamed at him and she said, "Why are you so attached to her? You spent a lot of time at night watching Coraopolis' place. Were you watching him—or her?"

"How can you think such things?" Duncan asked. And added, "As I was going to say, the lady was willing to go off with Andrews. But

they hated to leave the Coraopolis fortune behind. She *was* married to him, and she would get it, but due to the crooked ways he had come by it, and the various tax-dodging names it was under, there'd be quite a bit of litigation first. Probably a year or more. They needed something to live on in the meanwhile. That's where poor old Nick Sanchez fits in."

"Where?"

"Andrews played the market heavily. About three years ago he took some tough losses, and just about that time he ran into Sanchez who was more or less half witted. It wasn't hard to convince him of the benefits of being insured for ten thousand, and also of Andrews posing, for the benefit of the insurance company, as Sanchez' father. He planned to knock the idiot off then, but his stocks took an upturn; so he saved Sanchez for a rainy day. It rained on Sanchez about five weeks ago."

"But how did he kill them?"

"Knockout drops, then chloroform. After they were dead, he'd put them in big crab-traps, leave them two weeks and the crabs would turn them into skeletons. That's what tripped him. I saw the crab-traps in that shack, remembered that everybody had been gone for two weeks before they turned up again, except Andrews. He was only gone for two days. Crabs couldn't eat a man that quickly."

"Yes. But—his own skeleton?"

"He'd been looking for a man his size with the same shoulder for over a year. He found him in New Orleans. A derelict that nobody missed."

"That about clears it up," she said, "except for who did the telephoning to me and you."

"The redhead. You saw her speak to Andrews once and they were afraid you'd remember, after she'd told me she didn't know him. I got suspicious because she claimed not to know his name, then told me she heard her husband call it and did remember."

"I remember seeing them now," Peggy said. "It was when I went to that gambling place with him. But I didn't know who she was."

"She suggested you going out to Ybor Road with me. At that time Andrews hadn't planned on doing away with you, but she had. She didn't like the attention he was paying you."

"Did you?" she asked, and grinned.

Duncan said, "It didn't bother me. I think he planned on giving you more attention before killing you. He knew you were due soon after Coraopolis (they'd lured Cory out somehow for the purpose of knocking him off); so to keep the Greek from splashing water and

frightening you, he let him drop into the boat and slugged him. But he didn't know I was coming and when I turned up, he was afraid to slug me and have two men in his boat who might get conscious. If I had been you, I think he would have kept me in the boat for awhile before making the next helping of crab bait."

"You mean he would have—?"

Duncan said, "Yeah. How you could go around with that sort of guy.

"A megalomaniac who thought he knew more than the rest of the world. A police-hater who wanted to show them up. He sprinkled the skeletons around to be spectacular and cause the police trouble. He won't cause any more trouble, not but once."

"When?" she asked.

He told her. "Just a few minutes after midnight on a Friday morning. That's when they cart the boys off to the chair in this state."

She said she wouldn't regret not going around with Andrews if Duncan would make sure she didn't miss anything. He said he would, and set out to prove it.

**Hollywood's most famous
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In Strictest



JOHN CONNOLLY, the Mayor of Taunton—christened "Spike," by his associates for his ability to do just that to the hopes and ambitions of political opponents—faced the newly appointed Commissioner of Police, Hank McCann, and the Chief of Detectives, Ken Lord, across the polished mahogany top of his mayoral desk. He slapped a folded copy of the *Times-Herald* with the back of his manicured hand.

EDITORIAL

The Reign of gangster terror in Taunton must end! The Times-Herald calls upon Mayor Connolly and the Commissioner of Police to bring the culprits to justice! In the last seven weeks nine robberies and three murders have been committed! Who is the Master Mind behind this band of desperadoes? Who is "Renzo"? Taunton demands to know!

"Well, what are we going to do about it, gentlemen?" His tone dripped sarcasm. "You seem content to let this gang run the city! Well, I'm not! I was elected mayor of

Taunton on a platform of public protection! I appointed you, McCann, because I felt certain the handling of police matters would be safe in your hands. I—"

"You didn't appoint me, Mr. Connolly," Ken Lord interjected softly. "I was a hold-over from the old administration."

Connolly shot him a withering glance. He knew what Lord was referring to. McCann, fat-faced and florid, had earned his eight thousand a year post merely because he was able to swing the entire North Side district into the Connolly camp.

"Well, it doesn't matter," Connolly shot. "I expect each of you to perform your duty." He pounded an emphatic fist on the desk. "This gang must be wiped out and Renzo, whoever he is, dragged out into the open. If you can't do it, I'll get men who can!"

Ken Lord's eyes brightened. "Do you really mean that, Mr. Connolly?" There was no mistaking the doubt in his voice. "You want Renzo brought in?"

Connolly's face colored. "If you are insinuating—"

"Not at all. All I want is official sanction. Renzo or any other killer can be brought in. They got Dillin-

He was her lover, yet she had never seen him without his mask. Only Ken Lord—and that after his badge had been stripped from him—dreamed the real truth about Renzo's identity

Secrecy

By **RALPH
CARLE**

ger and Floyd and Nelson. I can get Renzo."

The Police Commissioner licked his fat lips. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Mayor," he puffed pompously, "I'll have that gang rounded up at three o'clock this afternoon." His

"I swear I don't know who he is!" she stammered.



pig eyes took on a light of mystery. "I've got a tip that Renzo's gang is planning a break on the Taunton Trust at five minutes to three *to-day!*" He beamed and patted his curved paunch. "My men'll be on the spot to welcome them with machine guns!"

"Fine!" Connolly boomed. His almost handsome face was wreathed in smiles. "That's the sort of action we want!"

THE uniformed cop regularly assigned to a post outside the Taunton Trust Company was so engrossed with the figure of a smartly dressed

girl as she stepped into the bank that he failed to notice the trio of men who had entered a split second before her.

The red-headed teller at Window No. 3 spotted the orchidaceous blonde as she undulated in the direction of his barred cubicle. He licked his lips approvingly, smoothed down his hair.

"Good afternoon," he said pleasantly. Her eyes were blue, her hair was almost flaxen, and her lips were swollen cherries, curved and sensual.

She flashed a disarming smile, fumbled in her bag. The next moment someone coughed loudly. The smile vanished from her face, her right hand shot up, and the red-headed teller was looking into the muzzle of a vicious, snub-nosed automatic.

Working like an oiled machine, her three male henchmen lined a handful of depositors and the bank personnel up against a marble wall. At the open vaults the gun-girl filled two of the bank's own cash bags with stacks of currency.

It was all done with silent precision. Even the special guards were caught unawares. However, the young cop in harness outside the bank, aching for a close-up of the blonde, sauntered in at the precise moment when a clean get-away was in the offing. He took in the situation at a glance, drew his service revolver, and boomed a shot at the trio of male gun toters. The lead went wild, biting into the marble.

The next instant his blue uniform became a target for a withering spatter of bullets. He dropped like an empty sack, rolled over and died.

But the brief exchange of leaded compliments gave the two bank

guards a chance to draw. They dove behind a wide pillar, blasted a twin challenge at the holdup men. Both shots went wide of their marks, splintering the etched glass of the Note Teller's cage. The mobsters fell back, pumping death-dealing hail at the marble pillar. One bullet ricocheted and dug into a woman's throat.

Blood spouted like a miniature geyser from a black hole in her larynx. She slumped down, a mingled expression of surprise and horror blanketing her face.

From the vault cage the blonde's "baby gat" barked petulantly, contrasting strangely with the thundering echoes of her companions' guns. But the lead messenger it winged was more effective. One of the guards spun like a whirling dervish and dropped to his knees. His hand clutched at a wound in his side.

As though enraged, his companion came out into the open. The three men and the girl were at the entrance now, scant steps from the open doors of a waiting car. The guard took careful aim and fired. One of the robbers stopped dead in his tracks. His arms flew into the air and his hips arched. He took one uncertain step toward the door, then dropped like a plummet. Another tongue of flame leaped from the guard's gun, but the two men and the girl were already out on the street. A high-powered motor roared, gears meshed, and the get-away car zoomed down the street to take the next corner on two screeching wheels.

Ken Lord elbowed his way through the mob at the Taunton Trust Company. He knelt down beside the body of the dead gang-

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ster, rolled him over on his back. The face, pale and still in death, was criss-crossed with wrinkled knife scars.

"Smoke' Ladroni," he muttered.

Minutes later the puffing, overheated Commissioner of Police waddled into the bank.

"I had my men all set to surround the place at two-thirty!" he panted. Drops of perspiration oozed from his fat double chin.

Ken Lord looked up at the open face of the bank clock. His lips were set in a hard, grim line.

"They beat you by an hour, Commissioner," he said. "It's one-thirty now."

A KEY grated in the lock of Mollie Murdock's apartment door. The blonde gun-moll glanced up from a movie magazine, but made no effort to draw the spread folds of a pea-green velvet negligee about her half-clad figure.

The door opened and a man slipped into the room. The wide brim of a black hat was pulled down over his eyes. He wheeled, slammed the door shut and faced Mollie. The hat came off in a sweeping gesture, revealing a flesh-colored mask over his eyes and nose.

"Renzo!"

The Master Mind smiled. He was across the room, seated on the couch, in a moment. The fingers of his left hand dropped on Mollie's silk-covered knee.

"Nice work, baby," he said. "A little too bad they got Ladroni. Couldn't be helped I suppose."

She turned her slim body with feline grace. Her lips parted and her breath came in hurried gasps. "No, it couldn't," she replied. "One of the guards winged him as we were

lamming. Butch and The Dude and me couldn't wait to see whether he cashed in. We—" Her blue eyes dilated and the tip of a pink tongue dampened her lips.

Renzo leaned over, slipping his arms under her arched back. His mouth found the wet warmth of her lips, tasted their nectared softness as they parted to receive his caress. Moments later he drew away.

"Why—why don't you take the mask off, Renzo?" she breathed. "It's no fun kissing and loving a man you don't know."

He laughed softly, but the lines about his mouth were drawn. "You'll find out soon enough, baby. A few more big hauls like today's, and you and I'll hit out for parts unknown." His eyes, behind the mask, glittered.

"When?" she panted.

Above the sound of her breathing came the sound of a key grating in the lock. Renzo stiffened, shot his right hand to his hip pocket. He was off the couch, backed up against the wall as the door opened. Mollie drew the negligee tight around her vibrant body. Her face drained of color as The Dude stepped into the room.

RENZO relaxed his tension but a sneering frown curled his lips. He glanced at the girl recumbent on the couch.

"Why don't you give the Marine Corps keys to this apartment?" he spat.

Jack Leonard—dubbed "The Dude" for his meticulous mode of dressing—faced Renzo calmly. "Lay off the wise cracks, Renzo," he advised. "We got other business to take care of." He reached into an inner pocket and tossed a tape-bound

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stack of bills on the table. "You know what you can do with that, don't you?"

The Master Mind colored. His eyes darted from the money to The Dude's face. He found voice.

"What's the matter with it?"

The Dude flipped a cigarette from a silver case, lit it nonchalantly. "Plenty! We got one hundred and twenty thousand on that haul today. Where the hell do you get the nerve to slip Butch Mollie and me fifteen grand apiece?"

Renzo's hand fell on his hip. "Half of one twenty is sixty thousand. Four into sixty gives you fifteen thousand each." His voice was plainly contemptuous. "Didn't they teach you any arithmetic in school, or didn't you ever see the inside of a school?"

The Dude's fists clenched. "Oh, yeah? Where the hell does the four come in?"

"Mollie, Butch, Ladroni and yourself. Very simple."

"Ladroni ain't using no dough where he's headed. We ought to get twenty grand apiece. And what's more, I'm getting fed up with you grabbin' off half of the dough and splittin' the rest. We carry the rods and you collect the heavy sugar."

Renzo hissed out an oath. "Is that so? Why, you big dumb galoot, if it wasn't for me you'd crab every job you do. None of you know how to keep your mouths shut. Why do you think I switched the time on that break today? Because McCann was on to it, that's why? Somebody spilled his guts!"

The veins on The Dude's neck became whipcords. "I'll spill more guts, too," he thundered, "if I don't get my right cut. I want a full slice of every haul or—"

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An automatic in Renzo's hand spat flame as The Dude lunged forward. The bullet plowed into the gangster's stomach, doubling him up like a pretzel. A moan escaped his lips and bubbles of blood frothed at the corners of his mouth. Mollie leaped from the couch, hurling herself at Renzo, but not before the gun belched again and a second shot tore into The Dude's chest. Wheeling, the Master Mind brought the butt of the weapon down on Mollie's head. She sagged, dropping together with the lifeless body of The Dude. As they hit the floor tramping feet pounded in the corridor outside the apartment and the head of an axe crashed through the door. Renzo grabbed for his hat, jammed it down on his head and threw a window open. Crouching, he scurried back and flattened himself against the wall next to the door. The axe splintered through it again, the force of the blow ripping out the lock and swinging the door back.

KEN LORD was the first man in the room. The moment he stepped across the threshold Renzo's gun butt cracked on his skull. The detective saw black, crumpled. Renzo leaped over his falling body and blazed away at the massed plainclothesmen in the doorway. Two of them fell with lead in their groins. Renzo scrambled through the window, poising on the fire escape to empty his gun into the dark hall. As he swung down the iron steps, Ken Lord recovered consciousness. Instinctively he came up on one arm and winged a shot at the open window. The bullet pinged against the rusty iron. Renzo dropped from sight.

By some miraculous legerdemain,

the Master Mind mobster slipped through a cordon of police surrounding the block. An hour later, when Ken returned to the scene of the gun battle, the body of Jack Leonard had been removed, and Mollie Murdock was stretched out on the couch. The detective motioned a uniformed cop outside.

For long moments he studied the recumbent figure of the gun-girl, not unaffected by her slim, graceful beauty. Her eyes were closed, but the movement of her white hands over her breast indicated she had regained consciousness. The columnar perfection of one molded limb was visible through the parted negligee. Ken moved to the couch, tapped her nude shoulder.

"Well, sister, do you talk?"

She stirred and opened her eyes. They were bloodshot from the blow on her head, but Ken could well appreciate their violet-blue brilliance.

"I—I don't know a thing. I—I was entertaining a friend when he—he came in."

"Who came in?"

She recoiled at the bite of his voice. "That—that man!"

Ken dropped on the couch beside her. His fingers curled about her arm. "Now, listen, Mollie, you'd better come clean or it'll go hard

with you. Who killed The Dude and who laid you out?"

She started at the sound of her own name. Ken caught the expression of astonishment.

"Yes, I know your name like I know my own. It's a bad habit giving your name and address to mugs who are liable to get killed during bank robberies." His grip tightened on her soft flesh. "And furthermore, I can pin that Taunton Trust job on you in a minute. Seven witnesses gave me a description that fits you like a glove. It's either taking the rap for murder—the cop and a woman died—or playing ball with me. Now, which will it be?"

She hesitated and her lips trembled.

"I know this much," Ken added, attempting to prompt her. "You're Renzo's girl. Now, who is Renzo? Did he kill The Dude?"

Mollie moaned softly as his fingers bit into her arm. "I—I don't know! I don't know what you're talking about! I was just entertaining Jack—Jack Leonard. A—a man came in. He was wearing a mask. He shot twice at Jack and then hit me with the gun. That's all I remember."

Ken rose. "All right. If that's the way you play ball, I'm satis-

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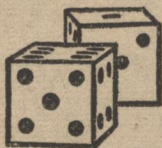
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fied!" He stepped to the battered door, but she was off the couch in an instant, her hand holding his arm. The velvet negligee draped uselessly from her shoulders.

"I'll—I'll play ball," she whispered. "I'll do whatever you say." Ken squelched a poignant desire to take her in his arms.

"Fine," he said. "Just answer one question for me and I'll promise to get you off. Who is Renzo?"

Her shoulders drooped. "I—I knew you were going to ask me that. I don't know!"

"You're lying!"

Her eyes hazed. "No! I swear to you that I don't know. He—he always wears a mask!"

Ken gripped her shoulders, forced them back. "You mean to tell me you don't know who the man that makes love to you is?"

"No! I swear I don't! He—he promised to tell me . . . soon. He said we were going away."

There was something in her voice, something in the melting softness of her eyes that forced Ken to believe her. He dropped his hands.

"You're going to jail," he said, "but I'm playing a hunch. I'm holding you on suspicion until what I expect to happen does. Then, if you're a smart girl—" His fingers closed about her curved upper arm, but this time their touch was gentle.

Taunton Times-Herald

April 3

RENZO GANG PLUNDERS TAUNTON TRUST

Two men and a woman were killed and another man mortally wounded in the holdup of the Taunton Trust Company at one-

thirty P. M. yesterday afternoon. In the intervening fifteen hours, the police, under Commissioner Matt McCann, have made no progress, despite complete identifications by eyewitnesses. The killings and robbery have all the earmarks of the "Renzo" gang work. A mass meeting under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce will be held at six o'clock this evening to protest against the impotency of the police to deal with crime in Taunton. The victims of the pitched battle were . . .

MAYOR CONNOLLY paced his office like a mad man. His voice, raised in anger, echoed through the high-ceilinged corridors of the City Hall. Matt McCann trembled like a leaf under the barrage of imprecations. Ken Lord was cool and self-possessed.

"I—I had the tip it was going to be pulled at three o'clock, Mr. Mayor," McCann interspersed timorously. His fat jowls quivered like gelatine.

Connolly wheeled. "I don't give a good damn what you had!" he swore. "The fact remains that the bank was looted and two innocent people were killed! How much longer is this going to keep up?" He brought his fist down on the desk, winced in pain as it struck. Ken's eyes brightened. "As for you, Lord," the Mayor continued, "I herewith instruct Commissioner McCann to request your immediate resignation from the force. You will kindly turn over your shield to him."

Not a word was spoken as Ken snapped the hook on his gold badge and dropped it into McCann's pudgy hand.

"You may go now, Lord. A check

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for a full month's pay will be mailed you." The Police Commissioner made as though to follow Ken out of the room, but Connolly called him back. "You'd better stay, McCann. We've got to pick another man at once."

Ken Lord waited for McCann in the corridor. The Commissioner's flabby face was running with perspiration.

"I'm sorry, Lord," he said sincerely. "You just had to be the goat, I guess." They walked out into the street. "Eddie Boyd is taking your place." He stepped into a waiting police car. "Sorry, but I got to rush along. That dame you put in the coop has got to be released. We haven't got a thing on her."

Ken shaped his lips to reply, but a restraining thought stilled him. He waved to McCann as the car sped away.

Both the Mayor and the florid Commissioner of Police would have been surprised to see their lately deposed Chief of Detectives trailing Mollie Murdock from the City Prison and slipping into her apartment a few moments after she entered it. But, an hour later, when Ken slipped out via the fire escape, his cheeks were glowing and his eyes had taken on a new light.

FIVE minutes after Ken left Mollie picked up the phone. When the call was completed, she settled herself on the couch, arranged the folds of the velvet negligee so as to best reveal an enticing display of her lush curves.

It was fully a half hour before a key grated in the lock, the door opened, and Renzo, masked as be-

fore, came into the room. He tossed his hat on the table and dropped beside Mollie.

"I'm sorry as hell I had to knock you out, baby," he said, "but it was the only way. I didn't want anyone to think you had a hand in finishing that rat, Andrews. You still love me, don't you?"

In answer she twined her bare arms about his neck and drew his head down to the softness of her cheek. Renzo's lips found warm curves.

"One more job, honey, and we'll beat it," he whispered. "Just think of all the fun we'll have. I've got a cool half-million in cash cached away. The next job will be worth another quarter of a million. Then we'll skip."

AT THE Police Headquarters Ken Lord found Matt McCann out. Taking the bull by the horns he gathered the seven members of the detective squad around him in the homicide room.

"I'm out, as you've probably heard, boys," he began, "but I'm willing to bet a dollar to a doughnut I can get this Renzo within an hour. Of course, none of you has the right to go out on a call with me now without the Commissioner's sanction." He paused, eyed each of the men. "But the Renzo gang got Mulligan and Dempsey and they were your buddies. That counts more than any official red tape in my mind. What's the verdict?"

There was no need for discussion. Equipped with sawed-off shotguns and a machine-gun they loaded into two cars. Ken gave them explicit instructions, led the way in the first car.

For the first time since the advent of the crime wave, Ken was at ease. He smiled grimly.

BACK at Mollie's apartment Renzo was almost mad with unappeased emotion. Cleverly Mollie held him off, giving him only the exciting fervor of her lips at intervals. Her watch arm was about his neck and she glanced at it constantly. Finally, when the hour hand reached four and the minute hand hovered over twelve, she crushed him in a quick embrace and cradled his head on her shoulder.

Her fingers ran through his curly hair and over his brow. Suddenly they snapped under the flesh-colored mask, took hold and ripped it from his face.

Renzo leaped to his feet. A gun flashed in his hand. Mollie jerked upright, looked at him. She screamed and her eyes popped. The next instant heavy fists were pounding on the door. He snarled like a trapped wolf. He aimed the gun at Mollie's breast, tensed his finger on the trigger, hesitated.

"Answer it!" he whispered huskily. "Tell them nobody's here." He backed to a closet. "If you don't, I'll plug you if it's the last thing I do." The closet door closed softly behind him. Mollie rose and crossed the room. Her pale, nervous fingers threw the latch. The door opened and Ken Lord stepped inside.

"You here alone?" he barked.

Mollie gulped. Her face was ashen pale. "Yes. There's nobody else here." Her left hand came to her breast. She turned slightly so that her back faced the closet. Ken watched the movement of her forefinger as it pointed in that direction.

He nodded, "Okay, sorry to dis-

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(Continued on page 127)

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turb you." He had one foot over the threshold when he leaped aside and a plainclothes man bearing a machine-gun dashed into the room. The breech of the deadly instrument clicked. There was a momentary pause. Then the small room thundered with the *rat-tat-tat* of bullets plowing through the closet door. Ten . . . twenty . . . thirty . . . the door was a sieve when the roar stopped. Acrid smoke hung like a blanket over the room.

Ken stepped forward, turned the knob and threw the door open. The seven detectives gasped as the bloody body of the Casanova of Crime, the mysterious Renzo, *Mayor John Connolly*, tumbled into the room!

"IN THE first place," Ken explained to the flabbergasted Matt McCann, after that dignitary had arrived on the scene, "Connolly and I were the only ones in the mayor's office when you broke the news that the Taunton Trust was being robbed at three o'clock. It was robbed at one-thirty, so somebody changed the hour after they found out you knew. I knew I didn't, so it narrowed it down to either you or the mayor." He paused for breath. "Secondly, I was almost positive I winged Renzo when he escaped from this room yesterday. Therefore, when I saw Connolly wince as he banged his fist on the desk this morning I was damned sure he had been shot in the arm." He turned to Mollie. "Of course, this little lady sewed the whole thing up for me." His face darkened. "And in that connection, Matt, I wish you'd go easy on her. I have—well—a little personal interest."

"Go easy? What do you mean go easy?" He dug into his pocket, pro-

duced an official-looking document. "Do you think I ordered her released from jail. Hell, no. It was Connolly's work and here's an unconditional release he gave me. It's signed by everyone from the district attorney down. I couldn't hold her if I wanted to!"

Ken's face brightened. He had his arms about Mollie's soft figure in an instant. His lips darted to her mouth.

Matt McCann blushed furiously. "I don't want to interrupt any little business you two have got to attend to," he blubbered, "but I think you'd better take my badge, Lord." He dropped the commissioner's insignia in Ken's pocket. "I never did like this job and the new mayor'll probably appoint you anyway!" He puffed out of the room.

Ken placed his lips close to Mollie's ear. "How would you like to be a cop's wife?" he whispered.

Her breast swelled against him with frantic exultation.

"Try me," she panted.

CLASSIFIED (Continued from page 125)

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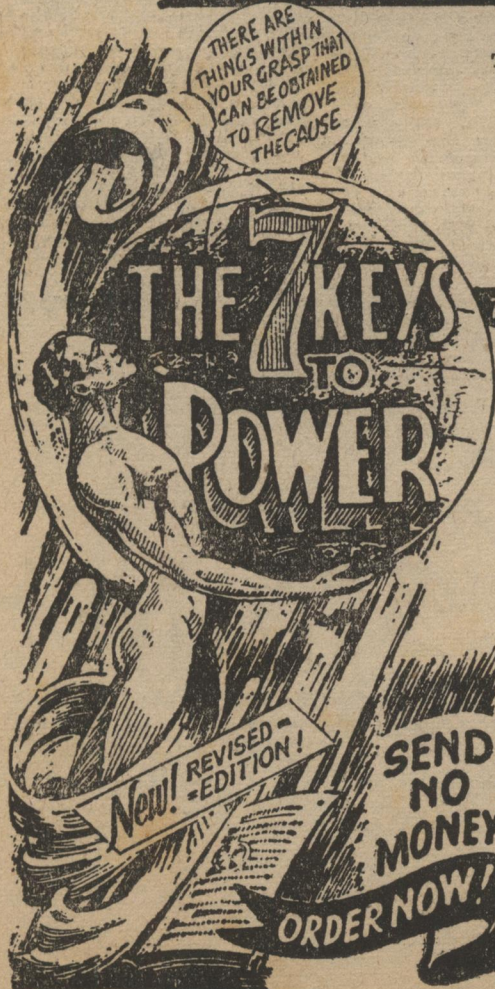
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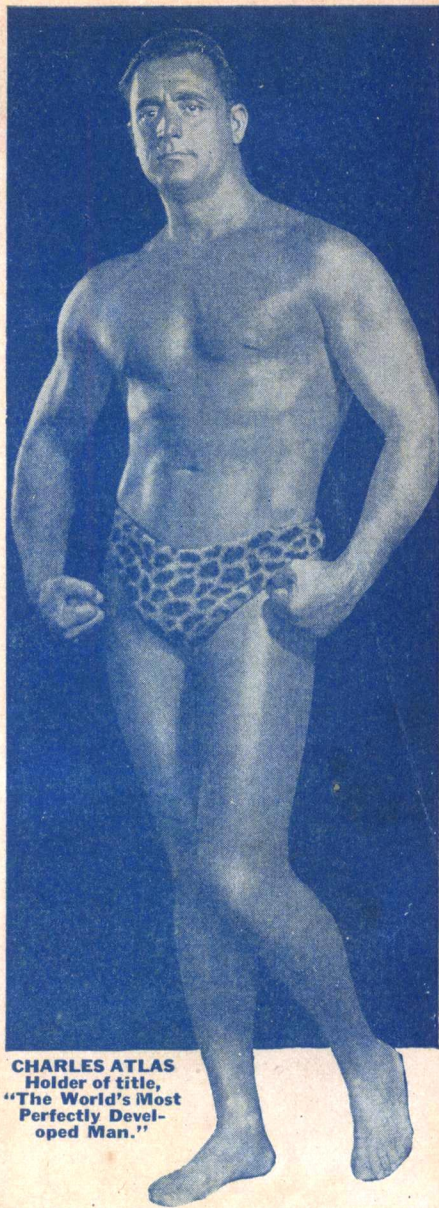
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