May 15¢

PRIVATE DETECTIVE STORIES

IND

A SPEED MAGAZINE

MURDER WEARS A HIGH HAT

by Geo. A. McDonald

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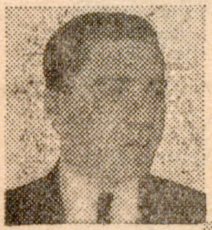

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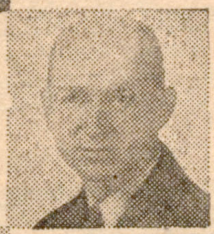

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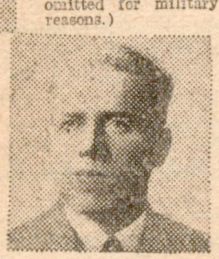

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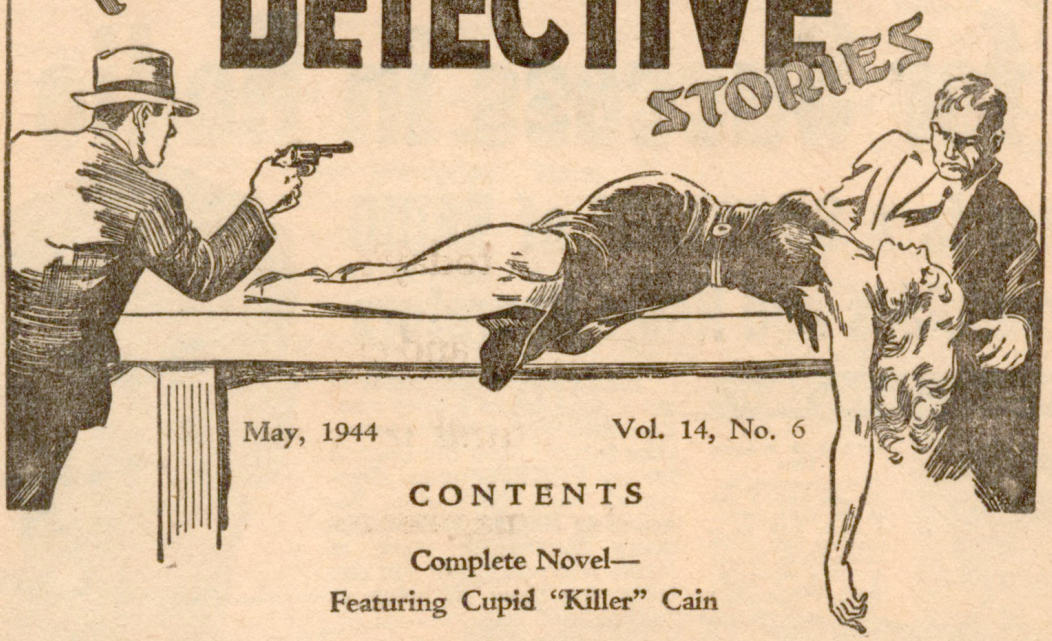
PRIVATE DETECTIVE STORIES



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CONTENTS

Complete Novel—
Featuring Cupid "Killer" Cain

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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By GEORGE A. McDONALD

AT FIRST I thought it was a simple case, one that any flatfoot from the Bureau of Missing Persons could handle. That was before high-hatted murderers, blond vampires, and half-pint killers began to louse things up so badly that the grim threat of Mr. X nearly came true.

The little gray man didn't look worried when he handed me the assignment. I should have taken warning from that. My boss, who is the anonymous trouble-shooter for most of the big boys around Capitol Hill, is always calmest when things are the worst. He even smiled a little when he said:

"Cain, you've got to locate Maurice Nevel inside of twenty-four hours, or hell will be popping!"

I gave my sunset locks the fingernail test and settled my two hundred pounds back in the only oversized chair in the

He bounced off the bar and folded like an accordion.

Murder Wears a High Hat

Maurice Nevel was a mystery man in wartime Washington, and now he had disappeared in circumstances that roused questions. Obviously, Cupid Cain was the man for the case. And to Cain it looked like the work of a woman who was dead!

tiny office. For a minute I thought the little gray man was giving me the needle.

MAURICE NEVEL was something of a mystery man around Washington. In the few days he'd been in the capital, grapevine rumors had named him as being everything from a special envoy to arrange an exchange of prisoners for Rudolph Hess up or down to the pretender who wanted the throne of Austria, comes the peace. He was a big, blond, handsome lad who had clicked well with the feminine half of the diplomatic circle.

"Hell, Chief," I griped. "I don't go in for keyhole-peeping. That big hunk of beauty is probably week-ending with some dizzy dame who's filling his ear with international secrets."

"That's what we're afraid of," Mr. X said cheerfully. "Only it may be the dizzy dame's ear that is receiving the secrets."

He gave me a sardonic stare and little goose pimples lifted betwen my shoulder blades.

"Not Madame Sable, Chief!" I groaned. "The Navy didn't lie when it reported sinking that submarine in which Rosa Sarenza was trying to escape, after that holocaust up in Maine."

"Madame Sale is at the bottom of the Atlantic, we hope," he said. "There are other dangerous women around Washington."

"This ought to be a job for the Missing Bureau boys," I declared. "They can throw out a drag-net and—"

"Cupid Cain will be one of their jobs, if he don't find Nevel before noon tomorrow," Mr. X said grimly. "He may be on the list of missing persons, even if he does find him. Get going, little man!"

I stuck around long enough to learn that Nevel had last been seen getting into a taxi around 5.00 P.M. the previous day in front of the International Club where he was living. Dressed in a top hat and afternoon clothes, he had evidently been bound for one of the cocktail parties or diplomatic soirees. There had been three or four on tap about the same hour, though the Russian embassy affair probably topped the social list.

The doorman at the International Club put most of our admirals to shame. But he had a sharp pair of eyes and he used them. He remembered Nevel leaving the club. He had asked the blond Adonis if he wanted him to call a taxi. Just then a cab had pulled up at the curb and two gents, also in toppers and striped pants got out and waved to him. Evidently they were all headed for the same affair. Nevel got in the cab with them and drove off. The doorman didn't know whether he'd come back later or not. The doorman went off duty at 1.00 A.M.

"Did you notice anything funny about Nevel getting into the cab?" I asked. "Did he hesitate or pause at all?"

The doorman gave me a funny look. His red face got redder, and he asked: "Are you an insurance dick?"

I flashed my identification card. It looked like a F.B.I. card, but it wasn't. Then he said:

There was a bit of ice on the sidewalk last night. Maybe the porters were careless in cleaning off that slush. Mr. Nevel must have slipped on it, for the other two gentlemen had to grab his arms and help him into the cab. I was afraid maybe he bumped his head on the cab, and that he'd raise hell with the management. But nothing was said, so I just skipped it." He'd been around Washington too long to ask any questions and I wasn't dishing out any free information.

I asked him if he would recognize the two high hats who helped Nevel. He hadn't seen their faces, come to think of it. And when they helped Nevel in, one of them made a funny move as though he was lifting the blond lad in by the collar of his afternoon coat. I sucked in my breath on that one. A quick, deft

swing of a blackjack might look that way to a casual observer. I was pretty sure the snatch had been put on Maurice Nevel right then.

A couple more questions showed that Nevel wasn't carrying a briefcase or portfolio. The doorman remembered the buff gloves he held in his right hand. Then I started the leg work. Someone else in the block might have seen Nevel boarding the cab.

THE International Club was in the fringe that lays between the old residential district and the theater and night club belt. There were a few stores, an apartment house, and a movie theater in the block. On the opposite corner was a newsstand. Kids are pretty alert. I figured the kid on the corner might have seen something.

Halfway down the block, I felt bony fingers clawing at my arm. A harsh voice that was trying to be wheedling croaked:

"Help a poor old lady, mister?"

I glanced down, and my skin crawled a little. Rheumy eyes were leering viciously out of the most repulsive face I'd ever seen. Lousy Lil was a character in the theatrical belt. Evidently she had read about Broadway Rose, the dame who got jailed regularly in New York for extorting money from theater-goers by making a nuisance of herself until they slipped her a bill to get rid of her. Broadway Rose was a Ziegfeld beauty compared with Lousy Lil.

Her hair was a dirty, scraggly gray, and the teeth she displayed in her ugly grin were brown husks and stumps interspersed with blanks. The whole lower part of her face was covered with a blue-red birthmark that spread from one jaw bone across her nose and chin and down over the other cheek to the jaw line. Her clothes stank and so did her breath. The scrawny hand on my sleeve hadn't been washed in weeks.

I knew that if I refused her a handout, she would berate me with profane descriptions, of all my ancestors, trailing me until a patrolman came into view. I didn't have time to argue. It was cheaper and quicker to pay off. I hoped that the bill I fingered out of my pocket was a single and not a five-spot. Even at the top price, it would have been cheap. She went along the street, mouthing prayers for my salvation, and patting my broad back. I heaved a sigh of relief when she muttered a final benediction and scuttled back to tackle another prospect.

I TRIED a couple of the stores along the block without success. One old lady told me pointedly she had something more to do than to watch who got in and out of taxicabs. The look she gave me hinted her opinion that a big hulk like me could find something better to do also.

The kid at the newsstand didn't question my line about being an insurance adjuster. His dark, bright eyes were sharply alert under an unkempt mass of black hair. He wore a red plaid mackinaw with a hockey cap to match. It wasn't particularly cold, but the collar of his coat was up. Most of Washington's population had migrated there. I figured the kid had come from a warm climate originally. He might have been Italian or Spanish, but it didn't show in his accent.

He said he'd seen the cab pulling away after Nevel got in. The three high hats in one cab had stuck in his memory. Yes, he'd seen one of the guys skid, but he figured he'd taken on a couple too many at the club bar. The kid had seen plenty of rum-dums stagger out of there.

It wasn't until I hinted at the possibility of the blond guy getting sapped that the kid clammed up. He'd just stepped around me to peddle a paper as I dropped the hint. When he came back, his face had that hardness and age that

experience can give a kid who's been around a lot. He stared at me with blank, black eyes said:

"That insurance gag is baloney, mister. You're some kind of a dick. I'm no stoolie, so scram, roundheel!"

There was a lot of hate in the kid's voice. Something about him seemed familiar after he got mad. Maybe I had tangled with his old man or an older brother who looked like the kid. I knew there was no use offering him a tip. He'd probably throw it back in my puss.

I started along the block on that side, made two fruitless inquiries. Heading for the third store, I thought I heard a mosquito buzz by my ear. That was screwy. Mosquitos in Washington in January just ain't. Then something stung against the bone in back of my ear.

There were a couple of pedestrians close by. They thought I had a fainting fit, I guess. For suddenly everything had gone black and the sidewalk came up to hit me in the puss.

I was out only for a couple seconds. I pushed myself to my knees, probed at the back of my ear, and found a lump there the size of a bantam's egg. The skin didn't seem to be broken but my skull ached like hell. One gent tried to help me up. I chased him off with a curse. He was sure I was nuts, as I crawled around on my knees, searching the cracks in the cement sidewalk.

Then I picked up a tiny bit of lead, saw that it was shaped like an exceedingly minature hourglass. Rage seethed in my brain as I lifted my six foot, two hundred pound bulk. Cupid Cain, the tough private shamus, tabbed by the underworld in most of the big towns in the country as "Killer" Cain, had been flattened by a Benjamin air gun. Fortunately the range had been too long to be fully effective. There were parts of the skull where that tiny little pellet could have smashed through at a short range.

My eyes whipped along the sidewalk. Two weasels were sliding out of the tobacco store I'd just left, but I couldn't tab them as gunsels that I knew. The news kid on the corner was busy picking up a bundle of papers a delivery truck had just tossed off. I couldn't run around frisking every one in sight for a Benjamin air gun. I had to swallow my pride and ease my flattened ego with blistering curses.

I BEGAN to get a hint of what Mr. X had meant. Someone didn't like the inquiries I was making about the disappearance of Maurice Nevel—but definitely. I took it that the airgun shot was by way of indicating a larger sized chunk of lead might follow. But I don't scare easily. I do a pretty good job at throwing lead myself. That was one of the qualifications that had recommended me to Mr. X. Stubbornness that went with my red hair kept me ringing doorbells along that block. But my eyes were swiveling alertly and my hand was never far from the Magnum .357 in my shoulder holster as I entered and came out of doorways.

An old Italian who had a little fruit-stand almost opposite the International Club gave me the first lead. He hadn't noticed the blond man getting into the taxi, because he was waiting on a customer at his outside stand. But as the taxi was pulling away and his customer left he'd seen a man in a silk hat and tails picking up something in the gutter. The old Italian wasn't sure, but he thought it was the feller who went around with an illuminated shirt-front, advertising a restaurant. No one else would be wearing full dress clothes at five o'clock in the afternoon.

I knew the lad he meant. Silk Hat Harry was a familiar sight around Washington Streets. Dressed in a silk hat and tails, he looked like a slightly passe rounder until he pressed the battery con-

"Who did this job?" I growled. "What are you scared of?"

tact in his pocket. Then his dress shirt lighted up, flashing "Eat at Phil's Oyster House on the Water Front."

I was lucky enough to flag a cruising checker. I rode down to Water Street, found Phil Cannelli in the office of his oyster bar. Phil knew me as a private shamus. He didn't know my Government connection; very few people in Washington knew about that hook-up. He showed no surprise when I asked him how I could get in touch with Silk Hat Harry. Private peeps have to line up connections in all walks of life. I guess he figured Harry might do a little stooling for me.

He told me Harry didn't usually show up to get his dress clothes out of the locker at the Oyster Bar until after four o'clock. He gave me the name of the

third-rate hotel where Harry lived. Then he said I'd be more likely to find him over at Kipper's joint near the Canal. Harry usually took on a couple snorts before reporting for duty at night.

CHAPTER II

Funny Medicine

KNEW Kipper's place. In the pre-war days it had been the hangout for all the panhandlers, petty con men, and grifters in town. Kipper used to shove out alky and smoke at five, ten, and fifteen a shot. After Washington got crowded, some of the upper crust had discovered the joint. Now it was one of the spots where slumming parties visited. The bums who hung out there didn't mind. The visiting slummers were often good for a few free drinks.

There were four or five visitors along the bar when I pushed in the swinging door. The tables were pretty well filled with derelicts. A couple of legless panhandlers had been lifted onto chairs; their dollies on which they trundled around the streets, were beside them. There were a few blind beggars of both sexes and a sprinking of thin-faced lads who ran daily races with the cops for hawking wares on street corners.

Silk Hat Harry was at the end of the bar. I pushed up beside him, figured he must be in the dough. He was drinking bourbon instead of the usual rot-gut he could afford on the three bucks Phil gave him each night.

He knew me because I'd bought bits of information from him now and then. His checkered suit and the mangy Homberg didn't go with his white hair and ruddy complexion. He looked like a taller, leaner copy of W. C. Fields, even to the bulbous red nose. He gulped down the bourbon, gave me a wide, toothy grin, waiting for me to buy him another. I did and I ordered Scotch for myself. When they were poured, I asked:

"How much was there in that poke you lifted yesterday afternoon, Harry?"

The white-haired grifter set his glass down firmly. His watery blue eyes were indignant.

"So help me, Hannah! I haven't lifted a poke in years," he said. "I wouldn't lie to you, Killer. If your client said I frisked him, he's a blankety-blank liar."

"The guy who got in the cab wasn't my client," I told him. "In fact, I'd like to get hold of the louse. Wasn't there anything in his billfold that would tip me off where he hangs out? I'm not interested in anything else about him."

Some of the color went out of the old boozer's cheeks. He tried to stall; said he didn't know what I was talking about. I got a little nasty. Harry knew my reputation, some of it greatly exaggerated. He got scared. Finally he said:

"Hell, Killer! I didn't finger the guy's leather. When the cab pulled away, I saw a silk dicer in the gutter. I grabbed it, thinking I'd get a tip for handing it back to him. The cab didn't stop. It was a high-grade topper, made by one of the big joints in Europe. I figured I could use it myself. So I crushed it and shoved it inside my vest. That's the gospel truth,"

He was so scared, I figured he was telling the truth. I couldn't see much about a silk hat to get excited over, but I asked:

"Where's the hat now? Got it at your locker?"

"Yeah!" he said too quickly. "That's where it is. The dicer I've been wearing is pretty well shot. I was going to wear the new one tonight. But if you want it, I'll bring it down to your office in the morning. You still got your sign out down on F Street, ain't you?"

I nodded, then I asked:

What did the two yokels look like who got in the cab with the guy who lost his hat?"

"They were twins," he said. "Both of them were big guys, with black hair and dark complexions. I thought I was seeing double at first, they looked so much alike."

"No one that you knew?" I pressed. "They weren't gunsels, were they?"

The color drained out of his cheeks again, leaving them a pasty gray. He gulped down the rest of his drink, dragged the back of his hand across his loose lips. Then he said shakily:

"I know most of the trigger men in this town, Cain. These guys were toffs. They weren't gunsels. That I'll swear to on a stack of Bibles. What's the pitch on those guys?"

I FELT someone crowd against my elbow. There had been a couple of visiting tourists next to me at the bar, but I had paid no attention to them. They had been in some kind of argument about where to go next. The woman had set her glass on the bar, just as I turned when she bumped me. She grabbed for the glass, hit the edge, and tipped it. I didn't get my arm up quite fast enough. Some of the liquor hit my coat sleeve.

"Oh—I'm sorry, Mr. Cain," the woman cried.

I sized her up fast, I'd never seen her before. She had the type of face and figure a guy would remember. Ash blond hair that was natural, and the blue eyes and pink and white skin that go with it. Her face was a little too broad and her cheek-bones too high for real beauty, but she was a good-looker just the same. I figured she was a Slav, or maybe Polish. The guy with her strengthened the impression. His hair was light brown and his face was nearly square. He had the shoulders of a Notre Dame guard, and I'd bet he had the name to go with it. She called him Stanley but his mother had christened him Stanislaus, I'd lay even money.

"It's nothing, Miss—Miss—" I said, as she started mopping at my sleeve with a little bit of cambric.

"Miss Novotny—Maria Novotny," she interpolated quickly. "I didn't mean to call you by name, because I've never met you. I've seen your name in the newspapers with your picture."

That sounded like horsefeathers to me. Neither my picture nor my name had appeared in any of the local papers. Those things wouldn't help the kind of jobs I did for Mr. X.

"Of course, that was in New York," she added almost reading my thoughts. That made it possible. I had gotten a little play in the tabloids on a couple cases in the big town. I still didn't get the pitch. I'm no Sinatra. Girls never swoon or tear my clothes off. Yet this babe was making passes with her eyes that lifted my blood pressure.

Her boy friend didn't like the play. No laundry could ever clean the look he handed me as he edged around her. He tried to crowd me out of the picture.

"Don't waste your breath on this fat pig, Maria," he sneered.

I'm allergic to slighting references to my avoirdupois. I guess I showed it. He grinned coldly as I asked if he'd like a punch in the snoot. His eyes warned me, just as he threw a left at my chin.

I can move fast when I have to, and I sideslipped the punch. In the same motion I hooked a left under his ribs that doubled him right into the path of the right that crossed after it.

He bounced off the bar and then folded like an accordion. I was afraid he'd cracked his skull on the footrail of the bar. The Novotny chick's eyes were wide with startled fear. Her jaw was loose. She wanted to scream but couldn't find her voice. Grifters and bums made a circle around the unconscious Polack. They growled among themselves like a wolf pack waiting for the kill. I heard a stri-

dent voice keening: "Killer Cain has murdered another man! Cain has killed again!"

Looney Lil elbowed through the crowd, stared at the man on the floor, went out into the street screaming that I'd murdered him. I felt better when I saw the big lug's eyes blink open. Looney Lil's shrieks would bring the cops. The majority of the capitol police had me tabbed as a high-priced gunman. They hated my guts and would welcome an opportunity to slap me in the gow. I decided to drag Silk Hat Harry out of Kippers and question him elsewhere.

When I looked around, his spot at the bar was vacant. Silk Hat had taken a powder during the excitement. Dark thoughts shuttled through my brain as I glared at Marie Novotny. The blond girl was on her knees in the sawdust beside her still punch-drunk Polish knight-errant. The whole deal smelled like a frame-up to let Silk Hat Harry make a getaway. I was sorry I hadn't smacked the square-headed punk a little harder. There wasn't time to question the blond vampire. As it was, I just made it around the next corner when a prowl car shrieked to a stop in front of Kipper's joint.

SINCE it was too early for Silk Hat to report for duty at the Oyster Bar, there was a chance he had gone home. I couldn't get a taxi and I had to walk seven blocks to the hotel where Phil, the oyster-man, said his sandwich man lived.

The pimply-faced 4-F at the desk told me Harry was stashed in Room 372. I walked the three flights, rather than trust myself in the rackety little self-service cage.

There was no answer when I hammered on the panel at 372. I heard feet moving inside. I rapped again; told Silk Hat if he didn't open up, I'd take the door down.

Harry looked as if the screaming meemies had overtaken him. His skin looked like wet ashes and he was shaking like St. Vitus in person. I pushed past him into the shabby room and I saw the reason for his fear. The stash looked as if a tornado had swept through it.

Every bureau drawer had been emptied. Furniture had been torn apart and the upholstery slashed. The threadbare rug was rolled up against the wall. Even the bed was dismantled and the mattress had been ripped and searched.

I pushed the quaking rummy down onto the bed springs, asked:

"Come clean, Harry, and I'll help you. What did you have cached here? Something you got from that guy in the cab?"

His slack lips had difficulty framing words, but he managed to gasp:

"There was nothing here, Cupid! So help me, there wasn't. I didn't get a thing except that topper I told you about, and that wasn't here."

"Who did this job?" I growled. "Who in hell are you so scared of? And why?"

He started to shake his head, but the look in my eyes changed his mind. I had a hunch Harry had blundered into something. I intended to find out what it was. He started to talk, then clammed up. His eyes suddenly started to bulge as he stared past me toward the single window in the room. Too late, the thought registered in my brain that the window looked out on a fire-escape. Silk Hat Harry's face was frozen in a grotesque mask of fear.

Instinct made me drop to the floor as I spun about. The sound of splintering glass filled my ears as my Magnum snapped out of its holster. There was a gurgling sound that echoed the crash of the gun outside.

I caught a blur of a dark, crouched figure jerking away from the window. It was gone before my finger could tighten on the trigger. I heaved up to a crouch, dove across the room. I cursed the window latch that was stuck fast. I had to

hammer it loose with my gun butt. I threw the window up, flattened along the wall beyond it. I saw a moving figure at the bottom of the fire-escape. It dropped into the blackness of the alley below. There was no sense wasting lead on a shadow. I holstered my Magnum with a bitter curse.

Silk Hat Harry was done for. A slug had torn through one of his lungs. I

They alternated by knocking me silly and throwing water on me.

caught him as he was coming off the bed, writhing in his death agony.

"Who did it, Harry?" I shouted in his ear.

Blood bubbled in his throat. His eyes darkened in pain. He tried to speak. From the gurgling sounds I could pick only two that resembled words. They sounded like "Joe's—tub—" Then he stiffened in my arms and went limp. Silk Hat Harry was dead!

BITTER rage burned in my brain. I was sure the old rummy had been blasted down by the very rats I was hunting. I knew the kind of foe I was fighting now. Clever, ruthless, and wise to every angle. So far, I'd been a step behind the parade. I'd better get ahead of it, or I would be occupying a slab in the morgue beside Silk Hat Harry.

I was in a tough spot. I didn't know what kind of a bleat the Polack had made to the cops at Kippers. Most of the lice that infested the place hated cops and private dicks alike. They would swear to any kind of charge against me. On top of that I could be tied up with Harry's murder.

When the Capitol cops checked, they would learn Phil had given me Harry's address. They would want nothing better than to hang a murder rap on me. I couldn't holler to Mr. X for help. We had that kind of agreement. Few people on Capitol Hill knew of the existence of the little gray man. Our department was valuable, only because it was anonymous. When I went out on a job, I was on my own. If I finished it—that was swell. If I slipped up—that was my hard luck. Sounds hard—but too many Congressmen would lift the roof off the House, if they found the name of a notorious gun-thrower like Cupid Cain on the Government pay-rolls.

It looked as if I'd better hole up somewhere until I could clean up Silk Hat Harry's murder along with the rest of the case. I figured I'd have time to get a bag with some toilet articles and a clean shirt at my hotel apartment before the cops picked up my trail.

Henry, the colored lad who runs the switchboard, told me a boy had come in with the medicine I had ordered. He knew my apartment number, so Henry let him go upstairs. He had just come on duty and didn't know whether I was in or not.

The kid came down in a couple minutes, said I wasn't home. He wouldn't leave the medicine because there was dope in it, Henry told me.

My scalp began to prickle. I hadn't ordered any kind of medicine. I'm healthy as a truck horse. Henry couldn't describe the boy. He was small and dark and had a white hat and coat with the label of a drug store a couple blocks away on the cap. He wore a tan overcoat over his white jacket. The collar was turned up so he didn't get a good look at the kid's face.

I unlocked the door of my second-floor apartment, pushed it open with my foot, then went in bent low, almost to the floor. I crouched in the living room, while my eyes raked every window and exit. My Magnum was in my fist as I cautiously explored the bedroom, bath and kitchenette. There wasn't a sign of a visitor.. Every window was double-locked, just as I had left them.

I examined the clothes closet, and the drawers of my chiffonier but if they had been searched it was by an expert who didn't leave a trace. Even the few papers on my kneehole desk were in exactly the position I remembered leaving them. I felt silly as hell, thought I was fighting with ghosts.

But the uneasiness stayed with me, even while I went to the closet for a Gladstone, and started tossing my shaving kit and toilet articles in it. I grabbed some pajamas, socks and underwear, and bent over to push them in the bag. Then I heard a

tiny sound. I looked up, heard the hum of a buzzing mosquito. Something hit my forehead, right beside the temple. Pain exploded in my skull. Then I catapulted down into a bottomless pit of blackness.

CHAPTER III

A Murder Charge

HEN I came to, my head was still aching. It felt as if the pellet from the air-gun that had laid me low had blasted right through my temple. My eyes had difficulty in focusing. I thought I was seeing double.

Then I saw that there really were two dark-haired men in front of me. I tried to lift my hand to feel my forehead. I was lashed hand and foot, sprawled in my own Cogswell chair. I stared at the duplicate features of the black-eyed twins. Then I said:

"Did you boys wear your top hats? Or do you use those only for kidnaping jobs?" These were the husky, black-haired lads who had put the snatch on Maurice Nevel.

One of them spoke. He had a harsh, guttural accent. The accent and the swarthy complexion tabbed him as a Uhlan, a black German like Max Schmelling. I took in their powerful torsos and thick necks, and something clicked in my brain. The left-hand twin said:

"He's awake and wondering how we got here, Franz."

"We won't tell him, Fritz," his brother said. They both thought that was funny as hell. I started stalling for time, waiting for my brain to dispel the fog that airgun shot had brought. I started thinking out loud.

"The kid with the prescription got in with a skeleton key. He unlocked the window by the fire-escape, then beat it downstairs again. He met you ginzos in the alley in back. You lifted him up to the fire-escape. He came in through the window and locked it. Then he hid under the kneehole desk until he had a chance to drop me with an airgun. He flashed you punks the signal and told you it was safe for you to come up and tie me up. Then the kid faded, to make it look like a mystery act. Rats like you are lucky to have a kid do all the dirty work for you."

"He's smart, Fritz," one of the twins grated viciously. "He should be smart enough to tell us what we want to know."

Fritz had a Luger trained on my heart. It had a Maxim silencer over the muzzle. He knew he could slap a slug in my heart and beat it down the fire-escape. No one would ever know the twins had visited me. Hair lifted at the back of my scalp. I remembered Mr. X's grim prophesy. It wouldn't be long in proving true.

Then rage and disgust seethed in my brain. I was a hell of a secret operative. This gang had made me look like a mail-order dick from the very start. There was a keen brain behind this outfit, one that had figured all the answers before the questions were asked. These muscle-bound hoodlums hadn't invented the trap that had caught me. If I didn't know that Madame Sable was dead—this was the kind of game the sultry, exotic Rosa Sarenza would play. But the alluring, black-haired adventuress, who possessed the cleverest criminal brain in both continents, had gone to the bottom of the Atlantic.

The twin without the gun moved close to me. He wrapped his fingers into a fist that looked like a catcher's mitt. He asked tonelessly:

"Where are the papers you got from that electric sign man?"

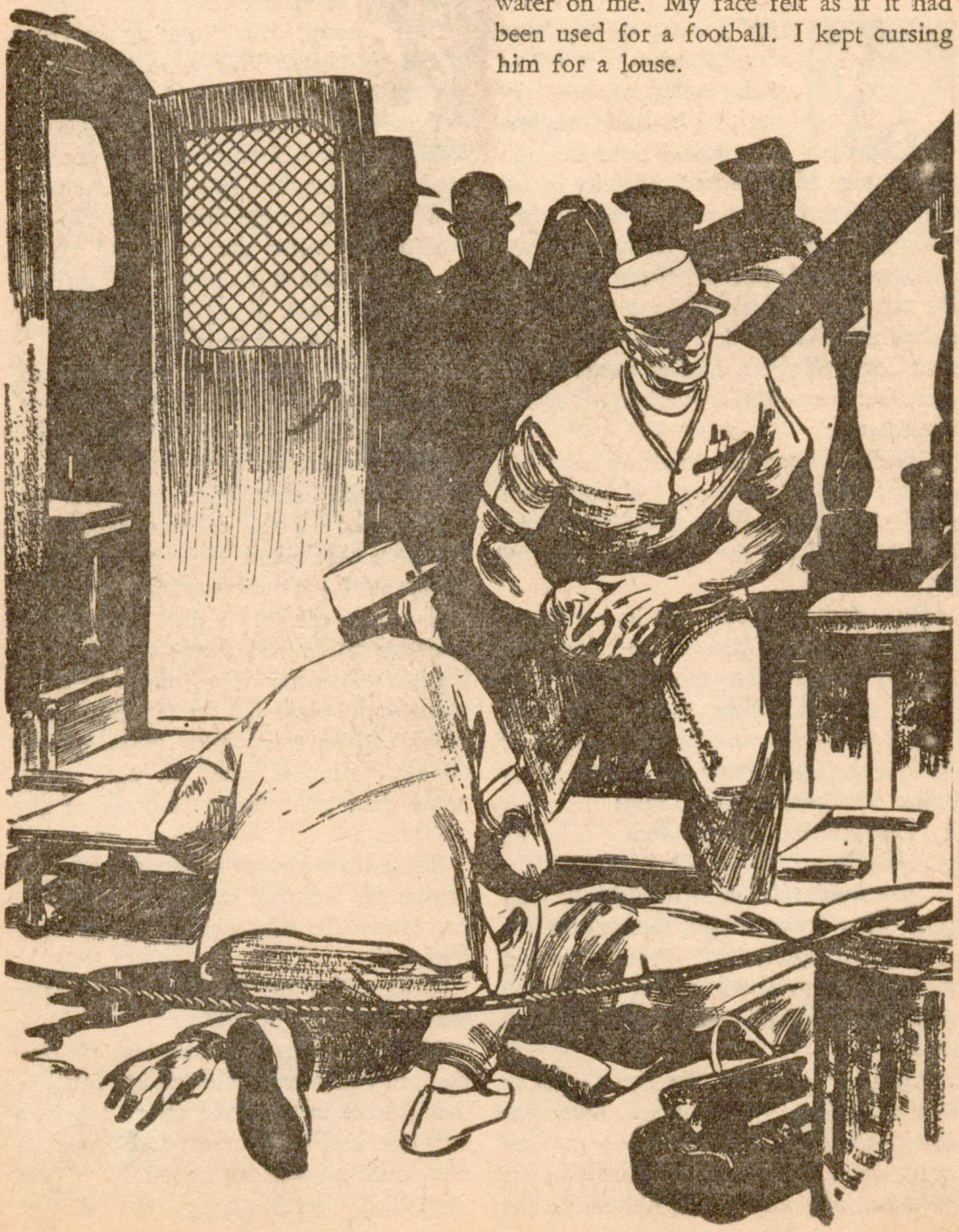
My brain began to function. If they thought I had some valuable information, they'd have to keep me alive. I had to stall, and wait for some kind of break. Or else create a break for myself.

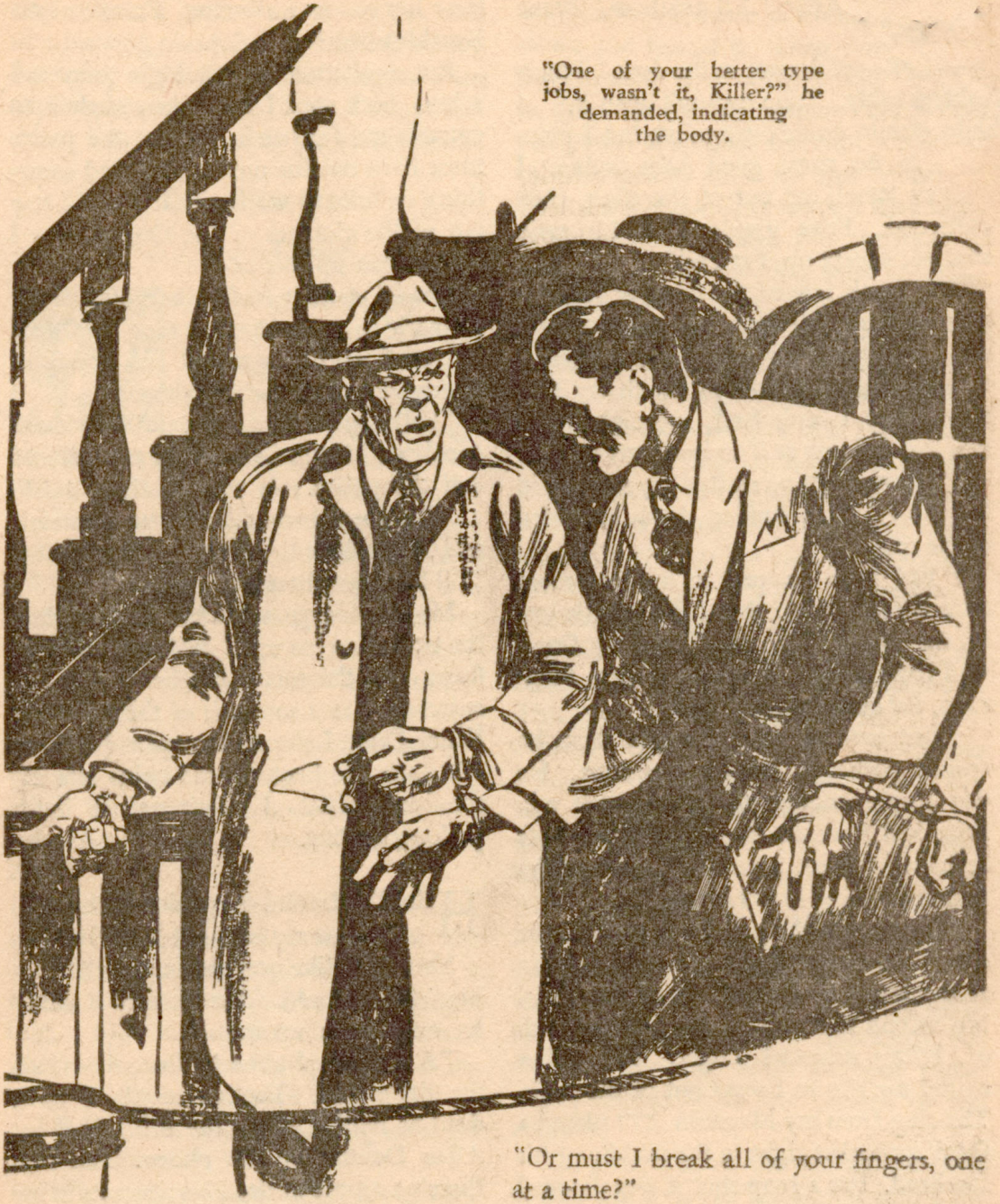
"I didn't get anything from Silk Hat

Harry, except the breeze from the bullet that murdered him," I sneered.

Franz hooked my cheek with a pile-driver wallop that nearly spilled me out of the chair. I saw red; tried to climb out of the chair. Fritz lifted the Luger a little, while Franz busted my lips with his left. I went back in the chair and the blood from my lips tasted salty in my mouth. I told the dirty swine what I thought of them and all their countrymen.

Again that clublike fist crashed into my face. I tried to snarl more epithets, but the next blow rocked me to sleep. I lost time after a while. Franz alternated between knocking me silly and pouring water on me. My face felt as if it had been used for a football. I kept cursing him for a louse.





"One of your better type jobs, wasn't it, Killer?" he demanded, indicating the body.

Finally Fritz growled: You waste time, Franz. Show him how the Gestapo wrings secrets from stubborn fools." Franz batted me again, and I went back to Never-Never Land. When I swam back to consciousness, my hands were free. My little playmate held my right wrist with his left hand. He grasped the little finger of the imprisoned hand with his big right paw.

"Now will you talk, fool?" he grated. "Or must I break all of your fingers, one at a time?"

Strange as it sounds, I'd been praying for a break like this to get my hands free. I had to play it right. It was my only chance to keep on living.

I made a feeble pass at the torturer"s chin as he bent my finger back. The pain was excruciating. I stood it as long as I could. Then I groaned: "Okay, you win! I'll get you the papers, you lousy swine!"

"Where are they? I'll get them," Franz gloated.

"In a secret drawer in the desk," I muttered weakly. "You couldn't open it."

My brain was clearing fast, but I managed to do some good ham acting. I pushed myself up out of the chair, then collapsed. Fritz giggled but his twin snarled: Hurry up, Fat Pig!"

The insult fanned the flame of rage inside my skull. My brain and muscles were co-ordinating fairly well now. I made a second effort to get out of the chair. This time when I sank back, my right hand was thrust down as if to break my fall.

I groaned again, shifted my weight in the chair. Then sudden death exploded in the room!

I had been trapped in a hotel room once before. After that I did a little upholstery work. The cushion of my Cogswell chair always contained a spare Magnum, for emergencies like this.

Franz saw me slide the gun from its special pocket in the chair cushion. He was stupid enough to try to jump me. Fritz had lowered the Luger when they thought I folded. I had to do some of the fastest shooting in my career.

My first shot slapped Franz right in the chest. His rush halted and he was folding at the knees as I dove out of the chair. My second shot echoed the metallic click of Fritz's silenced Luger. His bullet seared my ribs as I went out of the chair. The slug from my Magnum .357 placed a third eye-socket right in the middle of his forehead. For a snap-shot it was damned good.

For a moment I was sorry that I had killed them both. But it was my life against both of theirs. I had to shoot to kill.

My head spun as I got to my feet; staggered to the bathroom. I doused my face under the cold water. The mirror showed me that adhesive tape would patch most of the gashes. Time alone would reduce the lumps and bumps Franz's iron knuckles had left.

But exultation drowned the pain and aches. Each step I had taken seemed to enmesh me further in the net the police must have out for me. Now I had something definite to work on. If I could stay out of the clutches of the Capitol cops I could clean up this case.

I had a clammy feeling in the pit of my stomach as my telephone rang. I sighed in relief as I recognized the drawl of Henry down at the switchboard.

"Folks on yo'r floor declares they heard gunshots, Mistuh Cain. They say I should call the police. Is you all right, suh?"

"Tell them I was cleaning an automatic and it exploded, Henry," I instructed. "I'll be down there in a minute."

My shoulder gun had been lifted when the twins tied me up. I couldn't find it on them or in the room. Maybe the kid had snatched it as a souvenir of the notorious Killer Cain. I shoved the spare Magnum I had used to blast out the twins into my shoulder holster. I didn't wait to finish packing the bag.

HENRY showed the whites of his eyes as he saw my battered face.

You look like you met up with trouble," he ventured. "How come? I didn't let no visitors up there."

"A couple of gunsels dropped in, via the fire-escape. They're up there now, dead as hell! Call up the F.B.I. and get Allan Douthit on the phone. Tell him there's a couple of dead Nazi agents in my room. They used to work in a traveling circus under the names of Franz and Fritz Fredericks. Have him check their passports, if any. I'll get in touch with him in an hour or so." I started out, then added:

"If Maguire and his Capitol cops come here looking for me, tell them I'm out working on a case for the F.B.I. That will slow them up."

I spent nearly an hour trying to locate

Bill Blower, one of my contacts who used to be a spieler at Huber's Flea Circus on Forty-second Street. I finally ran him to earth in Kipper's joint, where I should have looked first. Some of the grifters were still there who had been present when I had put the slug on the blond Polack.

I saw Lousy Lil at a corner table. She looked stinko. I sized her up from the booth where I was buying Blower a drink. The old witch really was slopped over with panther juice. I remarked about it to Bill.

"Lousy must have an angel," he grinned. "She always did hit the hootch, but never got so drunk that she couldn't go out to put the arm on the yokels in the mazda belt. Lately she's been hitting it harder. Sometimes a kid comes in to get her; her brat, I suppose. If he don't come for her, one of the bouncers drags her upstairs to sleep it off. Kip don't like her passing out down here. It's bad for the slummers, he thinks."

"Where does she live now?"

"She's still at the Cosmo, over on Water Street, I guess." He grinned and jerked his head, as one of Kip's strong-arm guys picked up the drunken woman, hung her over his shoulder like an old sack, and started up the stairs. Her birth-marked face looked more like a gargoyle's mask than ever in its drunken stupor.

Bill Blower sampled the Scotch and soda I bought him, let it roll down his throat with a fond sigh. I knew he was working some kind of confidence racket that wasn't paying much. That wasn't my affair. I had saved Blower's life once, when a coked-up gunsel thought Bill was a stool for the Capitol cops. He was grateful, but I had to handle him carefully. He'd never spill a word that he thought would put what he termed a "good guy" in bad with the law. He drained some more of the Scotch, said:

"What's the pitch, Cupid?"

"You were barker for a traveling circus that came over from Europe four or five years ago, weren't you?" I asked.

"Yeah. We made all the whistle stops in the prairie," he said. "We got stranded and the sheriff took over out in Minnesota."

"Didn't the layout have a couple of strong-arm guys, who did an acrobat turn. They were twins. Germans, I think." He nodded and I saw his eyes get a little darker.

"What became of them?" I asked flatly.

He twisted his empty glass in silence. It wasn't a bid for another drink, but I called the waiter anyway. Then he said:

"You know me, Cain. I'm no canary and I don't sing for the coppers. But Franz and Fritz Fredericks were always Nazis at heart. Their passports expired and they got some of the bundists out there to help them get East. I haven't seen them, but I heard some talk around here about them being bodyguards or gunsels for some big-shot. No one knows who it is. A couple punks got curious and the river police dragged them out of the basin. That's all I can tell you. Don't ask me to dig up anything else. Whatever they are mixed up in is poison for anyone to try to nose out."

My pulse started hammering faster. Blower wasn't yellow. If he was scared, it meant that some underworld grapevine had broadcast a sinister message of warning to nosey parkers. I asked:

"Wasn't there a midget with that show, who called himself Captain Tiny? He was a crack pistol shot. What became of him?"

"He was a vicious little rat," Blower remembered. "I don't know where he did wind up. I think he was a Heinie, too. I'll stir around and see if I can pick up anything on him. A couple of Americans who were in the troupe are around town now."

"Don't bother, Bill," I told him. "I've got an idea where Little Poison is.

Thanks, chum. I'll send back another drink on my way out."

I STOPPED by the bar to pay my bill and to buy the drink for Blower. I had just taken my change when the door banged open and Captain Maguire of the Capitol police walked in. Behind him was his stooge, Sergeant Dolburn. If there are two guys in the nation who hate me more than that pair, I haven't met them.

Maguire's lean face cracked wide open in a ghoulish grin as he saw me. He rasped: "Is this my lucky day—or is it? I come in here to question some witnesses about you putting the slug on a guy, and here you are, waiting to go to the clink—on a murder charge!"

Dolburn had his Police Positive out of its holster. His square, ugly face invited me to make a break, so that he could blast me. I shook my head sadly. My lips curled in a smile that didn't come from my heart.

"Don't you ever get tired trying to hang every unsolved killing in town on me, Maguire?" I asked gently. My eyes tried to probe his weather-beaten face. I didn't know whether or not he had beaten the F.B.I. boys to my hotel apartment and found the Nazi twins there.

"You hung this one on yourself, Killer," he clipped. "Come on and I'll show you a sight that's going to push you right into the hot seat. To make sure you don't act up, I'll have Dolburn give you a little of our best jewelry."

Bitterness was scalding my brain and Dolburn clamped handcuffs on me. Another free hour and I would be well on the way to solving Silk Hat Harry's murder and perhaps to rescuing Maurice Nevel from his kidnapers. I couldn't argue my way out of this jam. Nor could I call on Mr. X for help. He would have denied all knowledge of my activities. I had success almost within grasp, only to have it dissipated by this horse-faced flatfoot.

I was sullenly silent as I got into the squad car. I sat beside Maguire in the rear seat. Dolburn was on the other side of me, with his gun in his lap and murder in his cold, blue eyes. Maguire told the driver: Back down Water Street."

The morgue and Police Headquarters were in the other direction. I figured they were headed for Silk Hat Harry's stash. That was the kill Maguire was going to try to hang on me.

I got a jolt when we drove a couple blocks, then turned into a side street. I saw a small crowd backed up against a tenement building. A couple of white-coated figures were bending over a figure in the narrow street. The stiff wagon was parked along the curb, and some uniform cops kept the avid thrill seekers back away from the corpse on the pavement. I could hear a threatening growl from the mob as they saw me get out of the car with Maguire and Dolburn. The handcuffs tabbed me as the murderer. Some bright soul yelled: "There's the killer. Let's lynch him." I'd seen mob psychology before. Cold chills ran up and down my spine. One of Maguire's men located the would-be lyncher. The threat of his club silenced the blood-thirsty spectators.

Maguire led me up to the body, pointed and said:

"One of your better-type jobs, wasn't it, Killer?"

All of my two hundred pounds of flesh crawled. Lying in a sprawled heap in the street was Stanley, the blond Polack I had slugged. A bullet had entered the back of his head and blown away most of the front of his skull. It looked like a big caliber bullethole. Icy fingers probed at my spine as I said:

"Nuts, Maguire! You can't saddle me with this murder. I didn't gun this guy out!"

"That's just your story, Killer," he said

cheerfully. I know you tangled up with him over some dame down in Kippers. He made some threats after you sloughed him. You told him to keep out of your way or you'd ride him to hell on a shutter. And this is the answer."

"Where did you get all this information?" I asked bleakly.

"From a little bird who tipped us off right after you did the blasting," Maguire gloated. "That's how I happened to get down to Kippers so fast. Too fast for you to fix an alibi, wasn't I?"

Disgust and despair pressed down on my brain like a leaden weight. Once again I'd been outsmarted. The mob I was going to take, had hung a frame on me that was going to be hard to beat. It looked as if I was headed straight for the electric chair.

CHAPTER IV

The Face Behind the Mask

MAGUIRE had me over a barrel. He shoved me deeper in the trap when he showed me a flattened chunk of lead that had been dug out of the wood of a door frame across the street, right in line with Stanley's body. I could see it was a slug from a Magnum. It couldn't be matched with the bore of a particular gun. But the Magnum I was carrying had been fired twice recently. A jury don't laugh off circumstantial evidence like that.

I was too despondent to talk as Maguire led me back to the squad car. He was promising me a pleasant time in the Headquarters' sweat box. I had an idea what his powerhouse boys would do to me, and it wasn't pleasant. I heard a husky voice jeer:

"Try and beat this rap, Killer."

For a minute my heart stood still. I thought I was listening to a voice from the grave. That throaty, low-pitched voice couldn't belong to anyone but Madame Sable. Damn it, I was getting stir-crazy even before Maguire had me behind the bars. Madame Sable was dead. She couldn't be jeering at me.

My eyes raked the crowd feverishly as I climbed into the car. There were a half-dozen women there. I knew Madame Sable was an expert at disguise. But it couldn't be. Then I thought I glimpsed a curvaceous figure in a rose, tweed suit. Blond hair beneath a perky little hat failed to hide the profile of Marie Novotny, the wench who had tried to charm me back at Kippers. I glimpsed her for a second, then she was gone. My brain whirled like a squirrel cage. I swore to myself. No amount of make-up could give Rosa Sarenza's Eurasian features that Slavic cast. Whosoever she might be, Maria Novotny wasn't Madame Sable.

Maguire booked me on suspicion of murder. The sergeant at the desk took my pedigree with a wooden face, just as though he didn't know my history as well as I knew it myself.

They were fingerprinting me when there was a small riot in the outer room. A second later a red-faced patrolman came in with Maria Novotny trailing him. Maguire barked a curse, but the girl paid him no heed.

"You can't charge this man with Stanley Wotzick's murder," she said calmly. "I know he didn't kill him."

"Who are you?" Maguire asked. His voice showed that he knew who she was and didn't like the knowledge.

Maria Novotny, secretary to the aide to the Polish Embassy," she said. She took her passport and identification papers from her handbag. "I was Stanley's fiancée. I was with him when he and Mr. Cain fought. The fault was all Stanley's."

Maguire's lantern jaw sagged. He said: "Lady! Don't you want this gunsel to burn for knocking off your boy-friend?"

"He couldn't have murdered Stanley,"

she lied steadily. "I met Cain shortly after that argument. Until a half-hour ago, we were together at my apartment." She saw the leers on the faces of the cops. Her blue eyes flashed. Mr. Cain was there as a private investigator," she said. "He had agreed to do some confidential work for me. It was while he was with me that Stanley was shot."

Maguire was wavering. He knew what diplomatic amnesty meant, and didn't want to get his tail burned. The blond girl saw him weakening.

"Call up the embassy," she directed. Ask for Mr. Kompur, the aide. He'll identify me and he'll tell you I was authorized to hire Mr. Cain on a confidential job for the Polish Government in Exile."

Maguire went into his own office. He was gone a couple of minutes. When he came out, his face was red and muscles were ridged along his jaw. He growled: "I think it's a lot of malarkey, Cain. But the embassy backs up this girl's statements. I've got to turn you loose, but don't think you are beating this rap so easily. I'm going to find out what the real score is. I'll hang that lousy red scalp of yours on the wall for this murder. Don't think I'm kidding."

I didn't think so. In fact, I didn't know what I was thinking. The play was too deep for me at the moment. But I wore a dead pan until we got out of Headquarters and into a cab. Inside the taxi, I asked her:

"Where do we go from here, duchess?"

She leaned forward, gave an address in the Northwest region. She said:

"That's where my apartment is. You know—you were there this afternoon."

"Listen, my chickadee," I growled. "I'm grateful and all that—but I've got more important things on my mind right now. How about dropping me off here? You go home like a good little girl, and I'll call you tomorrow and thank you."

Don't be a fool, Cain," she snapped. "You're coming with me, or I'll have the cab drive back to Headquarters. I'll tell them you had threatened to murder me, if I didn't give you an alibi."

WHAT can you do with a dame like that? I always said girls were poison to me. This went to prove it further. I tried to get the pitch but she dug me with her elbow and slanted her eyes at the taxi driver. We talked about shows and books until we reached her apartment house.

Her apartment convinced me that embassy secretaries were highly paid. It was furnished expensively and located in a good district. She motioned me to a comfortable chair and went into the kitchenette. A minute later she was back with a bottle of Scotch and the necessary accessories. While she was fixing a highball, I asked:

"What's the score, Maria? You needled your blond chum into taking a swing at me earlier tonight. Now you do a good job convincing Captain Maguire that I didn't murder him. What does it add up to?"

"I was with Stanley when he was murdered," she said calmly. "He was shot down by a small man in a taxicab. I ran into a doorway or I would have been murdered also. I knew you weren't the man in the cab. I didn't tell the police that, because I want to find the murderer myself."

"What does that make me?" I asked.

"Maurice Nevel has some information my country wants badly," she said flatly. "The people that murdered Stanley kidnaped Nevel." Her pleasant young face was hard now. I could see she was no amateur at the secret service racket. She was trying to do the same job for the Polish Government in Exile that I was doing for the United States.

"At first I thought you were one of the kidnapers. No one in Washington seems

to know who does hire you. When the police captain said someone had tipped them off that you were the murderer, I knew you must be dangerous to the kidnapers. You're trying to locate Nevel. I want to see the papers he was carrying. You can name your own price. My country will pay it."

"Who was Maurice Nevel?" I asked. I had a good idea now who he was, but I wanted to check on her information.

"We both know the answer to that one," she said. "Will you work for me?"

I finished my drink and stood up. She was a nice Jill and I hated to give her the brush-off.

"I'm sorry, duchess, but I work for only one client at a time. I never work for girls if I can help it. I always wind up behind the eight-ball when I get tangled up with a skirt."

Her firm little jaw stuck out as she started walking toward me. She had taken off the jacket of her tweed suit. The silk blouse she wore accentuated her luscious curves.

"They call you a ruthless detective and a professional killer," she said softly. "But I think you are afraid of women." She stood close. The faint fragrance of her perfume and the scent of her ash-blond hair were exciting. She touched the adhesive tape along my jaw, brushed my puffed lips with gentle fingers. They beat you pretty badly, didn't they, Killer Cain?" she asked.

I said: "Not so much, gorgeous."

Suddenly her fingers locked behind my neck. She pulled my head down and her mouth pressed hard against my bruised lips. I didn't feel the pain. She stepped back and said:

"That wasn't just cheap bribery, Cain. I love a man who won't admit he's beaten. I want to work with you. When you find Nevel, just let me talk to him. Our countries are allies, even though the Nazis are now occupying Poland. I've got to see Maurice Nevel. The lives of millions of my countrymen depend on it."

I was licked hands down. For a tough dick, I'm an awful pushover for a flock of curves all wrapped up in a bundle like Maria Novotny. I tried to salve my conscience by saying at least I'd have her under my eye and if she was pulling a fast one, I'd spot it quicker that way.

"That sounds reasonable," I agreed. "I've got to have some help. Can I use your phone?"

SHE lifted the hoop-skirted doll off the hand-set. I called the Department of Justice, got Allan Douthit on the wire. Allan was J. Edgar Hoover's ace in Washington. He was one of the few persons in the city who knew my tie-up wth Mr. X.

"Did you find the little present I left in my hotel apartment?" I asked.

"That I did, Cupid," he answered. "Too bad they were dead. We've wanted those rats for a couple sabotage jobs in the Middle West. Who were they working for in Washington?"

"I'm going to find out right away," I told him. "I thought you might be interested."

He said he was and he agreed to meet me in fifteen minutes at a corner near the flophouse where Bill Blower had told me Lousy Lil kipped. He brought one of his boys along, just in case.

Douthit's identification card brought the clerk out from behind the desk before he had a chance to signal upstairs, even if he had been so inclined. He said he thought Lil was in her room on the third floor. We took the clerk along, just to make sure there wasn't a tip-off on our visit.

Maria Novotny rapped at the door. My scalp started to tingle when a hoarse, raspy voice called: "Who is it?"

"Housekeeper," Maria said sullenly. "Clean towels."

The door opened and we crowded in

fast. Lousy Lil stared at us from a shabby Morris chair. There was no expression in her birth-marked ugly face. Her eyes were bright and hard, beneath the bedraggled wisps of gray hair that hung dankly over her forehead. She didn't look as if she had been stupified with liquor an hour or two before.

The black-haired newsboy who had been with her had opened the door. When we crowded in, he flattened against the wall near the corner. He still wore the plaid mackinaw, and his hands were in the pockets that slanted in on each side of the coat.

I asked the disfigured creature in the chair:

"Where have you got Maurice Nevel, Rosa? The racket's all over. Fritz and Franz are dead. Witnesses saw Captain Thumb, or whatever he calls himself now, murder the lad from the Polish Embassy. The real Lousy Lil is dead drunk and under guard down at Kipper's place."

She didn't say anything. But her ugly face twisted into the most fiendish mask of hatred I've ever seen. She wore colored eye-ball lenses to disguise the flashing dark eyes of Madame Sable. Even through the lenses, I could see the murderous rage.

I saw a door leading to an adjoining room. I told Douthit: "He must be in there. I suppose she rented an extra room recently." The hotel clerk nodded, said: "She wanted a room for her son." He dipped his chin at the dark-haired kid.

DOUTHIT and the other agent started across the room. Then hell broke loose. I saw the dark-haired shrimp jerking his hand from his pocket. I beat him to the draw by a split second. My bullet smashed through his shoulder just as his automatic slammed a slug past my ear. He went back against the wall, then buckled and slid to the floor, screaming epithets at me in German.

In the same second Rosa Sarenza jerked the Magnum that had disappeared from my room when the twins nailed me. Maria Novotny was nearest to the desperate adventuress. She threw herself at Rosa Sarenza, alias Lousy Lil. I shouted a warning. I couldn't shoot past her. Rosa had lined her sight on me. The blond Polish agent threw herself right into the path of the bullet I was supposed to get. She moaned a little, then fell forward, pinning Madame Sable into the chair with the weight of her body.

Douthit and Graham, the other special agent, pulled Maria's body away. Graham rapped the kill-crazy adventuress over the ear with the barrel of his gun. She went back limp. The gunsight caught in the straggly gray wig, jerked it off. Rosa Sarenza's smooth black hair had been clipped beneath it.

I said, "Keep an eye on the little rat in the corner. He can shoot with either hand." Douthit went over, picked up the gun he had dropped. He frisked him, found the Benjamin air pistol holstered in the left-hand mackinaw pocket. He said: "This kid is a walking arsenal."

I was trying to stop the flow of blood from Maria Novotny's chest but I knew it was useless. Her eyes opened, she whispered: "Help — my — people — C a i n." Then she died. I ripped furious curses at Madame Sable, who was regaining consciousness. The G-man had manacled her.

I looked at Allan Douthit. Then I said bitterly:

"Kid, hell! Wash out that black hair dye and remove the make-up he's wearing, and you'll have Captain Thumb, the midget pistol expert. He's another of the Nazis running around this country without a passport. He was supposed to knock Nevel unconscious with that air gun, so the twins could kidnap him. Nevel slipped on a bit of ice and the air gun pellet knocked his hat off, instead of stunning him. One of the twins had to blackjack him. Then a street sandwich man

picked up the hat and hell was popping. Little Poison was detailed to get the hat from Harry. I butted in unexpectedly and the little gunsel killed Harry."

Douthit whistled softly. Then his eyes opened wider as I walked over to the chair, hooked a fingernail under one edge of the ugly, purple blemish that spread across Rosa Sarenza's face. I pulled the whole birthmark off, just like a strip of adhesive tape.

"A smart woman who was disfigured like that thought of the idea of making a cosmetic that would cover birthmarks," I said. "Madame Sable inverted the idea. She invented a false birthmark as a simple disguise. Nevel was probably only one of the fish she hoped to catch in her net. Disguised as a well-known character like Lousy Lil, she could go anywhere without arousing suspicion. She had a chance to watch the diplomats come and go and saw couriers and messengers on their rounds. She had set up an organization to snatch official secrets right here in Washington under the very nose of the Government. I still can't believe she's alive. She was reliably reported to have gone down with a Nazi submarine off the Atlantic Coast."

"You fools never thought that I might double back and land in this country," the dark-eyed adventuress snarled. "I was working on this organization in Washington, when that submarine was sunk," she gloated. "And I'll get free again, to make a fool of you again. If this damned Polack hadn't gotten in the way, you'd be in hell right now, Cain. I'm going to see that you get there one of these days soon."

"Like hell you will," Douthit said grimly.

GRAHAM went in to the next room where Maurice Nevel was lashed hand and foot on a cheap iron bed. The blond man's face put mine to shame. Beneath the coating of coagulated blood nearly every square inch of the flesh was bruised or lacerated. Three of the fingers of his left hand had been broken and no attempt had been made to reset them. The heavenly twins had really worked on him.

When he could walk again, he came into the room. Graham had to hold him, to keep him from strangling the dark-haired adventuress in the chair. He blasted her with a string of Russian phrases but she only stared at him with contemptuous eyes.

"If Russia uses as simple fools in the battlefield as she does in her diplomatic service," she grated, "it is no wonder that Hitler has half of your country and has killed half of your army."

It took both Douthit and Graham to keep the blond Russian from murdering her. Then Nevel saw Maria Novotny's body on the floor. His bruised face twisted emotionally. He said: "She was a brave woman, but a foolish one. She would have known in a few weeks, when the heads of the Allies meet in Iran, that her country will again be free."

He looked at me and continued: I suppose you know now, that I had brought to your State Department an outline of some of the points our Premier wanted to discuss. This fiend from hell wished to get that information for Hitler. She nearly succeeded."

I nodded: "I take it you were carrying a copy—in a false crown in your hat."

"That's right," he said. "Have you found my hat yet?"

"I think so," I told him. "The Federal Agents can handle the details here. We'll go get the tall topper that has cost three lives. Murder was certainly wearing a high hat on this job."

Douhit had sent Graham down to telephone for an ambulance for Maria's body and the prisoners. I was glad I didn't have the job of putting Rosa Sarenza behind the bars. After all, she had once

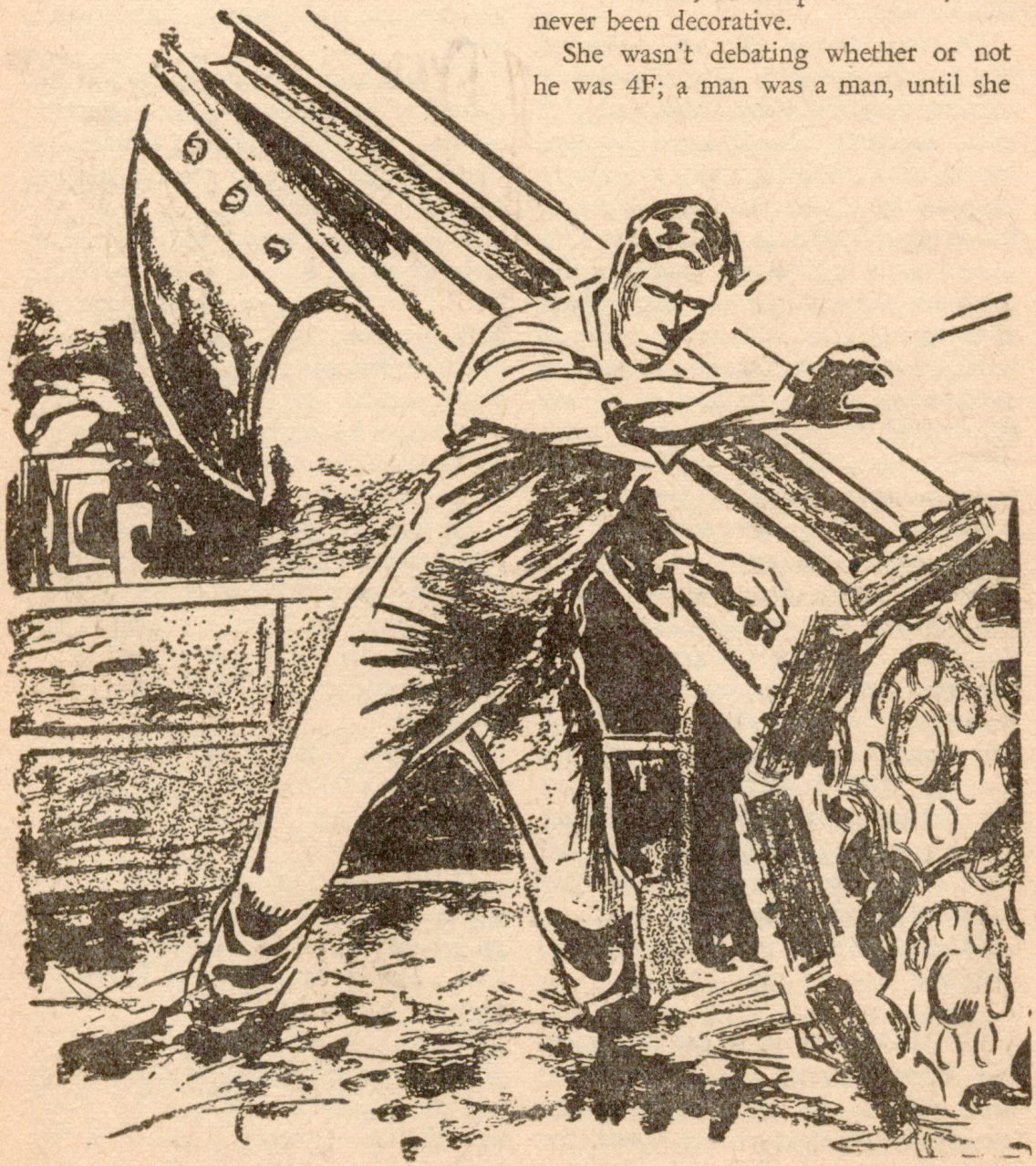
(*Continued on page* 111)

BRUNETTE

A FLASHILY-DRESSED gal eyed Jeff Dargan as he hoofed it from the repair shop toward the all-night restaurant, the one remaining bright spot on San Ramon's main stem. That he wore blue denim pants and a leather jerkin made no more difference to her than that he was tall but not handsome.

His nose was somewhat off center. A pinkish scar, reaching from a prominent cheekbone to tug at one corner of his mouth, gave a grim and sardonic twist to a face which, at its pre-war best, had never been decorative.

She wasn't debating whether or not he was 4F; a man was a man, until she



BEAUTICIAN

Seeing his boss in town with a good-looking gal, was no skin off Dargan's back. In any case, Dargan wasn't being paid for being a detective. But when murder crowded in, with Dargan in the middle, the whole picture changed

He threw the can like a grenade, and it connected.

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

saw and hailed a snappy lad in uniform. Dargan grinned at the soldier, wishing him good luck. For Dargan, the war was over; for the other, judging from his lack of campaign badges, it hadn't started.

Dargan remembered how his father, coming back from France, had joined the Legion, and how fellow legionnaires had come to the house to drink home brew, and talk A.E.F. jargon, about Mademoiselle from Armentieres, and *fini la guerre.* Funny old buzzards, harping on a war that was over; so he had thought, but now he understood.

Dargan was hardly aware of the damage shell fragments had done his leg. He could do a good day's work, he felt swell; nothing like the farm for recuperation, but he was living in a vacuum, being neither in the war, nor out of it.

In a few months he might be equal to a job in war production. He could not picture himself opening his agency, and being a private dick again; the cases which his clients used to bring him, the efforts he'd exerted in their behalf, seemed equally meaningless and unimportant.

"Coffee," he said to the blonde behind the counter, and might have said more but for the reflection in the mirror, which gave him a clear view of the booth behind him, and of the occupants.

Both were striking, and intensely interested in each other, though the clatter of dishes, and the deep voices of truck drivers blotted out the conversation. The girl, dark and lovely, worked at the Ramon Beauty Shoppe; advertising on the hoof; he'd called her the day he saw her looking out the window. And now, unhandicapped by a starched white uniform, she really built up.

THE man was Curt Wiley, Dargan's boss, though for the past few days Dargan had been giving Fred Leverton, Wiley's neighbor, a hand. There was a patch of *'dobe* which had to be plowed without delay: one day, a syrupy muck, two days later, stone hard.

If Wiley wanted romance, that was his business, though in that strait-laced community, some twenty miles from San Ramon, the word didn't exist. Usually, he wore overalls when he came to town, so it was odd, seeing him in store clothes, which made him look a dozen years younger than his fifty plus. Nearly three times the girl's age, he held her interest, and she wasn't a tramp; not that baby.

Dargan felt a jab of envy. She was more than just sweet to look at. There was something about her expression which made him wish that someone like her had been awaiting his return from Africa. He wished he could hear her voice, and he tried to imagine it, low and caressing.

Take it away, Wiley! The old devil would appeal to women, regardless of their age. The farm hadn't bent him. He was scarcely gray, and though sun-tanned his face had few lines except the network about his biting blue eyes, and strong mouth. Sharp wit, high temper, no patience at all: Wiley loomed up among his neighbors like an eagle among capons. He'd predicted the war, they now grudgingly admitted, in the face of farm-grown ridicule. And the first night at supper, Wiley had told Dargan more about North Africa than Dargan had picked up during months on the scene.

He finished his mug of mud, slid a dime to the girl at the register, and headed back for the shop. Come to think of it, Wiley wasn't so reckless, chinning with the girl friend in a restaurant booth. At that hour, the town was shut down, except for the truck drivers' hangouts.

ONCE Dargan got the tractor loaded, and put San Ramon behind him, he understood why he had been disturbed by so narrowly missing an encounter with

the boss. Wiley must have seen him, and if any of the neighbors heard about the brunette beautician, the yarn would build up like a siren. And Dargan reasoned, "He'll say I squawked, no matter who starts it."

He liked the hard-bitten farmer. Something about Wiley's voice and manner was so nearly military as to ease Dargan's transition from army to civilian life; and to quit thinking and feeling like a soldier was harder than learning not to dive for the nearest furrow when a tractor backfired. Anyway, he didn't slop coffee on his chin any more, and his cheeks had quit twitching. Bit by bit.

But he did jerk badly when a tire let go. Then he found that the spare was flat, and the jack was missing.

Dargan curled up on the bumpy seat cushion, and settled down for a snooze. It wasn't the protruding springs nor the chill which awakened him; it was the silence. And since there was no hitching a ride, not on a side road, he jumped to the ground. "Pick 'em up, and put 'em down!"

After an hour or more of hoofing, during which time he divided his thoughts between Wiley and the brunette beautician and what the neighborhood would say when the news spread, he began to wonder if the car which had whisked past shortly before the blowout had been Curt Wiley's, taking him home to uncork a yarn about a lodge meeting, or whatever the alibi was in the valley.

It was after three when he passed the Wiley farmhouse. Oscar, a blend of collie-bull-and-hound, had been poisoned the week before, so there was no barking. Wiley's brother-in-law, Jim Parr, lived three hundred yards down the line; he had no pooch. Half a mile further was Leverton's squatty white house, almost hidden by umbrella trees and a hedge.

Dargan catfooted down the drive, and to the screened back porch, one end of which had been partitioned and curtained off for the farmhand whose place he was temporarily taking.

It was close to five when Mrs. Leverton's stirring around in the kitchen awakened Dargan. The farmer was saying, "Let him sleep as long as he can."

Then the jangle of the phone, one-two-three; it was repeated. The lid of a frying pan clattered to the floor. There was hardly a click when Mrs. Leverton eased the receiver from the hook. She was listening in on a four-party line, an old rural custom, particularly since at that hour, a call could mean only an emergency.

"What is it, Ada?"

She didn't answer. Leverton's boots made the floor creak. The tension had now gripped Dargan. He kicked the covers aside, and reached for his shoes. He'd turned in, full pack, to make the most of his sleeping time.

"Emma Wiley—phoning Brian—Curt's dead—robbed—"

"What's that?"

"Shot—dead—in bed—while Emma—was fixing—breakfast."

"Aw, you're crazy?" Leverton bawled, and snatched the receiver.

Dargan, barging through the kitchen, saw the red-faced farmer become tense as he listened. He thrust his neck out turtlewise; his eyes bulged more than ever as he listened to what Emma Wiley was telling her son, Brian, who had a farm a few miles down the road.

Leverton stood there, gulping and blinking for a moment, before hooking up the receiver. "Jeff," he fairly shouted, "a bandit shot-gunned Curt Wiley—"

"I got that the first time."

"Never mind breakfast, Ada, let's look into this!"

As Leverton ground the sedan's starter, Dargan told about the truck. They were swinging out of the drive when he got

around to saying, "It was so late when I came in, I didn't want to wake you and get the keys to the Chevvie and go back."

CHAPTER II

Prints of a Tire

IM PARR and his wife, being the nearest neighbors, got to the Wiley place ahead of Dargan and the Levertons. And that made it a first-class madhouse: Ada Leverton joined Mabelle Parr in trying to comfort the widow who, after having put through a call to her son, had let go and was just short of hysteria.

Parr, Wiley's brother-in-law, was a big, squarish, pie-faced man who seemed stunned to the verge of stupor. He stood there, not knowing whether to approach his weeping sister, or let the women tend to that. Leverton bawled, "Where is he, Jim?"

That shook Parr out of his woodenness. He gestured, and tramped heavily from the kitchen. Dargan, following, noted that the gunpowder scent became thinner, until, stepping into the bedroom, there was no smell at all.

A window, held open by a neatly whittled piece of packing case, admitted enough breeze to make the curtains flutter. These were on hinged rods, swung clear of the sash. The shade was half-drawn.

There were twin beds. Curt Wiley lay sprawled, almost on his face, on the one nearest the window. The covers, half kicked aside, were blood-soaked, and so were the sheets. A moment of silence, during which Dargan noted the rouge smudge on Wiley's cheek; the blurred print of a woman's mouth. That made him think of the brunette beautician, and his thought kept him busy until Leverton nudged him vigorously.

He meant, "Take off your hat." He and Parr had uncovered. Dargan hastily followed suit. As a dick and as a soldier, he had seen too much of death to think of ceremony. He muttered an apology, and reached for Wiley's gnarled hand, then said, "No wonder she called her son instead of a doctor, not a sign of a pulse."

Parr had stepped to the other side of the bed. "Wouldn't be."

The others followed. When Dargan saw the wound in the back, he agreed. It was not much larger than a silver dollar. Coming from close range, the shot had spread very little, entering not far above the hip, and driving up at a sharp angle, rather than blowing through the man.

Parr went on, "Emma said he told her he was finished, to never mind the doctor, call their boy instead."

"Something about robbery, too," Leverton added. "We heard."

Dargan glanced at the old-fashioned dresser where Wiley's big gold watch sat among combs and brushes and pin trays. There weren't any cosmetics, except for a box of powder. Emma Wiley was old-fashioned, as well as strait-laced; she fitted in this valley where the only modern touches were plumbing, electric lights, tractors, and refrigerators. Make-up was in the same category as drinking, swearing, or hunting rabbits on Sunday.

"Man could've bellied over the sill and grabbed for the hip pocket," Leverton observed, indicating the gray suit on the back of the chair, near the bedside.

Parr fumbled in the pockets. "Sure enough, no wallet."

But there was a savings deposit book, which he examined, making the most of a chance to find out how his brother-in-law had been fixed. He whistled as he read the total, and then, "Gosh, no wonder—he drew out five hundred yesterday."

Leverton said, "Someone musta known it and followed him from San Ramon."

AND for the second time in less than six hours, a mirror gave Dargan information. In the streaked glass of the dresser, he caught the pointed glance which Parr and Leverton exchanged. He didn't like it a bit. He knew that the farmers referred to him as "that shell-shocked soldier"; he remembered all too many cases where some punk had tried to square up a murder by pleading shell shock from World War I. "Looks like to me," he told himself, "I am getting a case to crack for my health."

Back in the kitchen, he heard Mrs. Wiley giving out her story. The plump, gray-haired widow now had a blue robe over her nightgown, and she was coherent. "Curt got in awfully late, so I didn't wake him when I got up, usual time, four-thirty, to get breakfast," she was telling Mabelle Parr and Ada Leverton. "I'd hardly fixed the percolator when I heard a shot, and Curt groaned, and cried out, 'Ma!' And then, 'Get my gun, he's getting away!' "

She went on to tell how she'd snatched the double-barreled Ithaca from its place in the broom-locker, and raced into the bedroom, to find Wiley, a tangle of gory covers, and no robber. He'd not recognized his assailant.

"That's the meat of it," Dargan said, "so let's call the sheriff, and then look for footprints outside the window."

The two farmers went with Dargan. They found a box, such as fruit growers use for taking their produce to the cannery, up-ended beneath the open window. It was stenciled, "WILEY." Skirting the flower-bed in which the box had been planted was a walk whose gravel surface would not record prints. Close at hand lay the screen which had been unclamped and lifted from the sash. Parr remarked, "Whoever it was, he knew his way around, getting that box and fixing things up, and waiting for Emma to get out of the room."

Logical, but for once logic did not make Dargan happy, for he had worked for Wiley for some weeks, long enough to know the lay of the land.

A shotgun blast made the three fairly jump out of their hides. Women screamed. Dargan led the race to the kitchen. Emma Wiley, her plump face white and twitching, still clutched her husband's double-barreled gun. "She was showing us," Mabelle Parr gasped, "how she picked it up and ran when Curt called to her."

"Anyone hurt?" Parr demanded. "Emma, you idiot!"

He snatched the weapon, and removed the remaining cartridge.

BY THE time the panic had subsided, and there was talk of trying to pick up the killer's trail, assuming he had cut across the ploughed ground beyond the garden, Brian Wiley arrived. He was handsome like his father, keen-eyed and angular-faced, tight-mouthed from fighting the shock he had got over the phone. With a nod to his neighbors, he hurried into the house to see his mother.

The sheriff was taking his time. Parr and Leverton and Dargan, moving in an arc, cut a trail which led across the ploughed ground. The tracks were not clear enough ever to serve as identification. Halfway to the road, they found a wallet of tooled leather.

"Don't touch it, it may have fingerprints!" Dargan cautioned.

"Look here, son," Parr retorted, "this ain't your party."

He picked it up by the edges and opened it. "Curt's driver's license," Leverton observed. "But no money."

"Wait a second!" Dargan cut in. "I saw something—"

Parr shook it out: a United States 25-cent note, issued back in the seventies. Wiley, displaying the obsolete currency, had often said, with mock seriousness,

"Can't spend it, but it grows a new crop."

Apparently the robber had not accepted Wiley's whimsy about money breeding money.

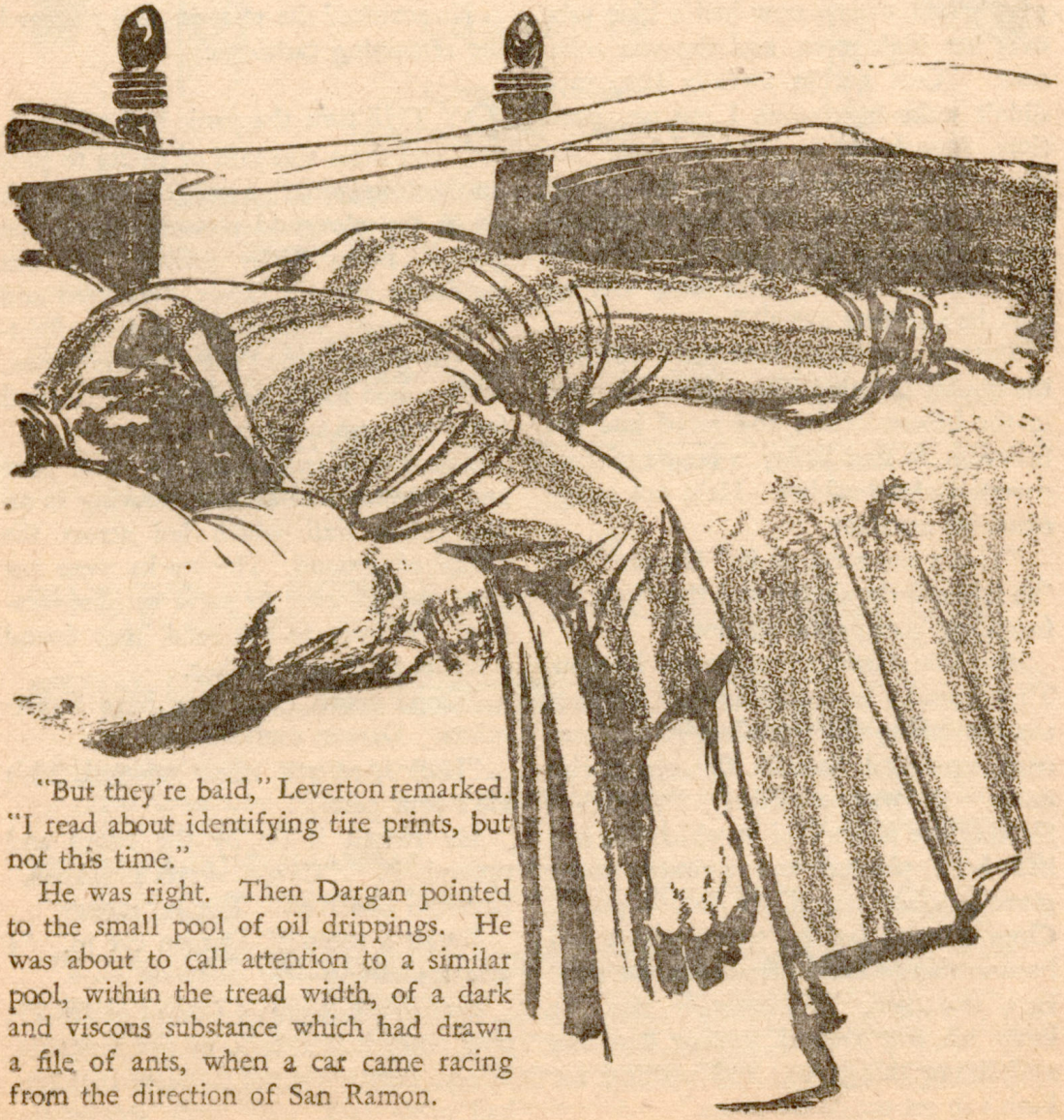
They followed the trail to the road. The shoulder was hard, so that there was no telling which way the man had gone. But a dozen yards in the direction of the junction of the driveway with the road, there was a soft stretch; it clearly showed the tracks of the tires. A car had parked. That was plain from the marks left by the spinning of the wheel when it took off again.

The sheriff was finally arriving.

But Dargan had to make the most of every trifle; since he had walked from the stalled truck, this evidence of parking might keep him out of a nasty jam. "Hey," he called, as Parr and Leverton hailed the sheriff, and turned to the house, "Get this!"

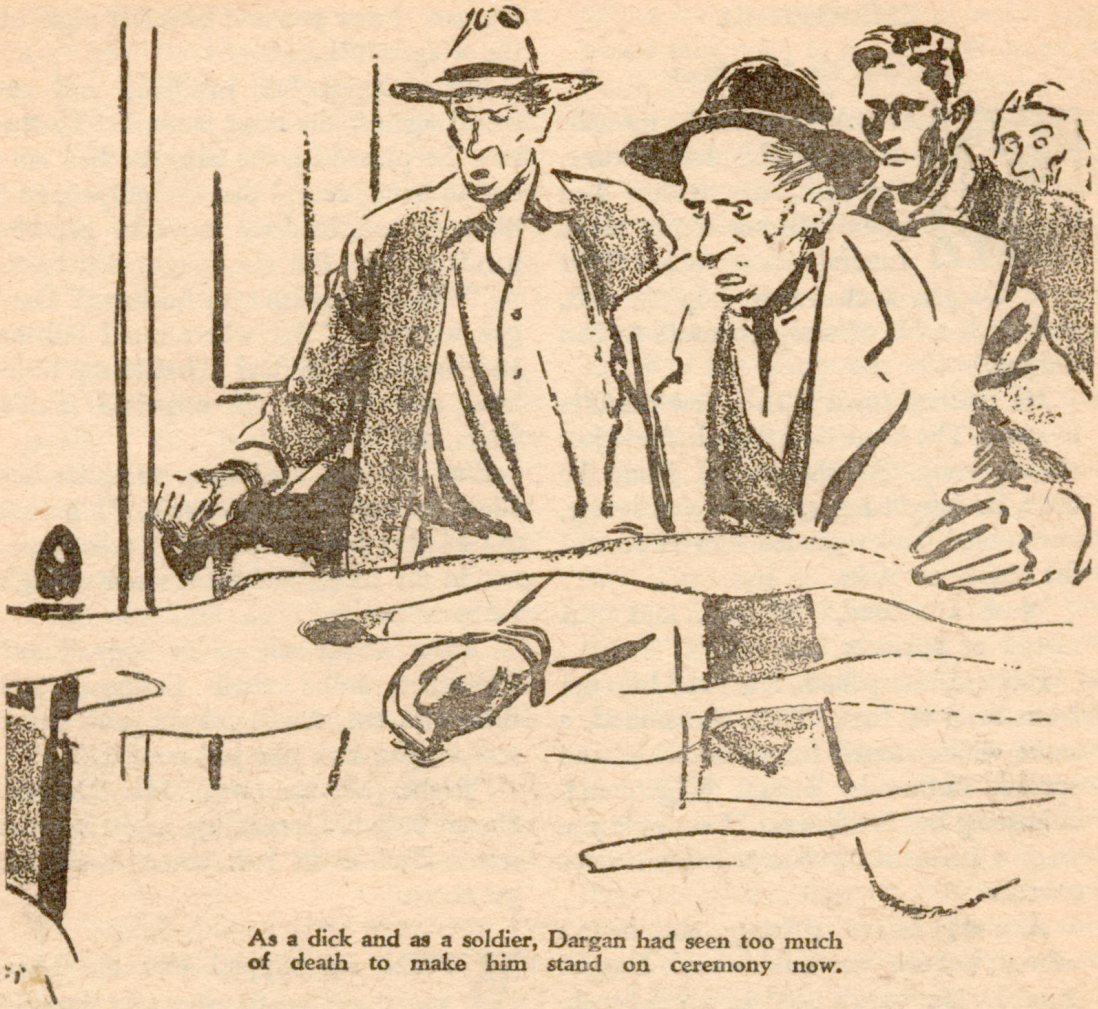
Voice and gesture compelled their attention. He went on, "Car parked here had a leaky can of molasses in the trunk. Taste it and see."

He dipped his fingertip, and set the example. Parr snorted, "Might be ant poison." Leverton joined in the guffaw



"But they're bald," Leverton remarked. "I read about identifying tire prints, but not this time."

He was right. Then Dargan pointed to the small pool of oil drippings. He was about to call attention to a similar pool, within the tread width, of a dark and viscous substance which had drawn a file of ants, when a car came racing from the direction of San Ramon.



As a dick and as a soldier, Dargan had seen too much of death to make him stand on ceremony now.

when Dargan began to spit and grimace.

Leverton scoffed, "Footprints don't lead to the car nohow, ain't any connection betwixt it and him. You been listening to too much of that radio stuff."

DARGAN answered a lot of questions about his late drive from San Ramon. When asked if he had seen Curt Wiley while waiting for the tractor, he said no, and with full knowledge of the risk he ran in making a false statement which might be checked up; but he was willing to gamble. He liked Mrs. Wiley; the old lady had been especially kind to him, and he did not want to be led into telling about the brunette beautician. A murder was bad enough, without adding to it on account of Curt Wiley's charming companion. In a place and among people more modern, he'd have said:

"Sure I saw him. I didn't speak to him, he was with a gal, and so what?"

At the end of the round robin, Leverton told Dargan to go back to his original job since he, Leverton, could struggle along somehow, whereas Mrs. Wiley would need a hand on the farm. That was logical; but when Dargan went to get his suitcase, he saw that it had been frisked, thoroughly. A deputy had been looking for the missing five hundred, or a reasonable portion thereof. This was in addition to having Dargan turn his pockets inside out, in the Wiley tank house, where neighbors had been questioned, one at a time.

CHAPTER III

The Girl He Had Seen

DARGAN cleared up the chores at the double time. By then, the widow had gone with her son to make funeral arrangements. That gave Dargan a chance to hop the bus, and catch a bit of sleep en route to San Ramon.

He reached town with a few minutes to spare. The brunette beautician was just closing shop. As she turned from the door, he caught her eyes; she was lovely, untroubled, and regarded him as part of the scene, no more, no less.

"Just a second," Dargan said, "A matter of business, not fun."

Her eyes sharpened. She sized him up, from head to foot. Then she smiled, a smile which started from the inside, and spread, instant by instant heightening, animating her loveliness. "I suppose you want a permanent? Sorry, I don't work overtime."

A cool, serene ribbing; she hadn't moved, but she was miles away. Dargan gulped. He wasn't used to a gal brushing him off so deftly, indifferently, not bothering to tell him to scram.

"I mean business. About Curt Wiley."

"Isn't that monotonous? For me, I mean."

"Get your nose out of the clouds, sister! I'm not on the make. Curt Wiley's dead—" He paused, watched her expression change. "Shot in the back, early this morning. You mean you've not heard?"

San Ramon had an evening paper, but she'd probably not seen it. And when his words really registered, he knew that she wasn't faking incredulity and shock.

"What—Curt—Wiley shot? How serious? Where is he?"

He made a gesture of finality. "Undertaker, I guess. I'm the hired hand. Jeff Dargan. I saw you and him last night at the Wagon Wheel."

She dropped her handbag, and recoiled against the door jamb, but by the time he picked up the bag, she had herself in hand; except that she gulped, and blinked, and made a move to get her handkerchief. But she fought that back.

"Who you are isn't my business," Dargan went on. "But where can I talk to you about Mr. Wiley? That is my business, and I'd not be surprised if it's yours, too."

She nodded. He began to share her silent misery. Then she said, "I live at the El Rey Hotel. We can't talk there, not in my room, and there's not enough lobby to notice."

"How about the chop suey joint? Chinamen mind their business, and there's booths. And I can get you a drink sent in, you look like you need it."

"Right, all the way, Mr. Dargan. Hurry before I crack up, right on the street. But don't talk about it till we get there."

WHEN she slipped into the blue-curtained booth, she told Dargan that she was Zelma Traynor, and that she'd come down from Oregon some three months previous.

"You picked a hell of spot, to light, and you certainly went out of your way to pick on Curt Wiley, though for his age, he was a grand fellow and you could've done worse, even if he's got a son older'n you are!"

"I know all about that. And about his wife. And about farmers transplanted from the Bible-belt! But what happened?"

He told her, after the Chinaman took an order for two chop sueys and brought in a couple of shots from next door. Zelma needed both drinks. "And you need a good cry," Dargan said, "only hang on till I get you home. That miss-

ing five hundred bucks is bad stuff. Sure, I am on the spot, like I told you. I lied about not seeing you and him, and maybe I'm not getting away with it. In a burg this size, the cops can cover every inch, and some must've seen you and him, irregardless of what time it was when you took time out for coffee. Where'd you two go?"

She gave him an odd look, almost answered, then changed the line: "Why did you poke your chin out, lying that way?"

"Because Mrs. Wiley has enough grief already. Because Curt Wiley reminded me of an officer I liked a lot, and I figured his business was his business. Or do you follow me?"

Zelma nodded. "I think I do. And I'm grateful. On his account. But don't worry about being hounded on suspicion of having robbed him. He wasn't robbed of five hundred."

"How do you know?"

She opened her handbag, and brought out a new bank deposit book with a single entry of five hundred dollars.

"This is where I put the money he drew. This morning."

"You're a chump, showing it to me."

"I think you're square. I showed you so you'll believe me when I say that if they do clamp down on you, I'll tell my side of it. And I don't think Mr. Wiley flashed a roll, do you think he was the type?"

"Mmm . . . no."

"You came to warn me, or to help yourself, or—are you playing detective?"

There was no mockery in that last. He answered, "All three."

Silence. A long silence. Dargan watched Zelma finger her fork. Then, "Jim Parr came up to my room after Mr. Wiley left me—*in the lobby.* And read me the riot act. And I had to take it. And since he trailed us, he may have seen you."

"Sore, account of his sister?"

"I'm no good, breaking up a family. What could I say?"

Dargan eyed her. "Everything points that way, but you don't look it and you don't sound it."

"I'm not, really. Believe it or not."

"LISTEN, baby. Before I got so much Heinie scrap iron flung into me, I was a private dick. I have tangled with enough stinking wenches and no good tramps to teach me the answer. I got no business believing you, but damn' if I don't take your word. Only, what *is* the score?"

"If Jim Parr had known about the money Mr. Wiley drew, and had planned to rob him, and kill him to keep from being recognized, he'd not have been fool enough to trail us around, and come up to my room—though the clerk was snoring at the desk—and call me a Triple-A bum, would he?"

"Heck, no! But if he got boiling enough when you ran him out, and kept on getting sorer driving home, he might have reached the point of settling his brother-in-law to keep his sister from being humiliated by a scandal. Being a widow is lots nicer than being a laughed-at middle-aged woman, or what do you think?"

"I'm not middle-aged yet," she said, somberly, "but I say, yes."

Something in her tone implied that she'd been laughed at. He couldn't escape that feeling, absurd as it seemed. Zelma wore an engagement ring that had set someone back a grand. Dargan, following an impulse, caught her hand, twisted the ring. "Let me see it."

She drew her hand away, then removed the ring.

"CN. to Z.T., 1-12-44." he read, and then, "Not *C.W.*"

"No, not Curt Wiley. Do you see where I'll be if Jim Parr starts talking?"

"CN. lives where?"

"San Ramon."

"Oh, good lord!"

Dargan got up and grabbed his hat. "I'm getting out before I go nuts. If I put the screws on Parr, you're sunk."

"Maybe I am anyway." She reached for her coat, and as Dargan took it, Zelma went on, "Don't pull your punches. Whoever did it, get him."

He started to follow her to the door, but she said, "Stay here and eat, I bet you're hungry—I've got to get home—before—"

She choked, straightened up, and click-clacked to the street, head too high. But she'd make it to her room.

Dargan ate both bowls of chop suey. He wasn't civilian enough to let a gripe or a tight spot crab his appetite. And then he headed for the bus which shuttled between San Ramon and Palo Verde.

CHAPTER IV

Part of the Truth

DARGAN got off at the cross roads a quarter of a mile from his destination, and started hoofing. There were no lights either in the Wiley place, nor at Parr's.

Dargan, soldier-in-vacuum, had become Dargan the investigator. For the first time since his discharge from the army, he felt alive and alert, but he knew that he had to clinch this case, or his new grip on himself would melt. His hunch was so hot that he could hardly trust it.

Old times again, he told himself, as he approached Parr's farmhouse. He had the inside track on the cops. They wouldn't know about Zelma, unless they'd combed San Ramon. The family would never mention her. Not these clannish, strait-laced farmer, who kept their dirty linen carefully locked up, who kept their resentments behind their poker faces. Luck and Zelma had handed it to him on a silver platter.

No headwork, he admitted; only confirmation of that faint rouge smudge on the dead man's cheek. Yet luck is something. The best dick, the best general, the best fighter is sunk without it.

The sheriff must have taken note of the molasses leakage and the evidence of a parked car, but that would be the end of it. Dargan crept past the hedge, skirted the house, and made for the garage. If Parr had washed the trunk of his sedan, and in all probability he had, since he had been present when Dargan showed the traces to him and Leverton, that in itself would be a wedge; negative, yet useful.

The car was in a tool shed, which it shared with a tractor and implements, some twenty yards from the back porch. Dargan moved with all the skill he had got in the service. And as he reached his goal, he instinctively came on the alert for booby traps.

He had a flashlight from Wiley's kitchen.

Inch by inch, he fingered the concrete slab, its dirt and grease. This was a matter of training. He was shocked when he touched a taut string, stretched ankle high. So a snooper had been expected! The molasses had drawn flies!

Dargan rolled, at the first contact, even before he heard the muffled rattle of a tin can. Lights blazed. He lunged over the string, just as a shotgun bellowed from the porch.

Pellets bit in deep. Only his swiftness had pulled him from the center and to the very edge of the pattern. The full charge, at that close range, would have knocked him down, seriously if not fatally wounded. But for the moment, he had won cover.

"Come out of there, or I'll give you the other barrel!"

In African tight spots, he'd heard the

"Look, Sheriff!" Dargan said.

equivalent of that command, and he fought it out instead of surrendering. So he darted ahead, sheltered momentarily by the car, and made for the far side of the tractor.

"Come out!" Parr yelled.

Inside the house, his wife was screaming. A door slammed.

Dargan snatched and heaved, grenade-wise, a small can in which a pair of two-inch paint brushes were soaking. The gun blazed at his momentary exposure. Stray pellets rattled. The missile, however, connected, splashing water and oil scum and turpentine residue in Parr's face. Dargan followed through. The half-blinded man swung at him with the empty gun. Dargan ducked, tramped

down on his instep, and at the same time, chopped with the edge of his hand against Parr's Adam's apple.

That laid the man open for a finishing punch. Dargan folded him like a towel. He yelled at the woman in the nightgown, "Take it easy, Mrs. Parr, your husband made a mistake."

Then came pounding footsteps. Boggs, the grinning deputy, charged in, pistol drawn and star twinkling. "What in hell? How come you slipped me? What'd you do it for?"

"Ask this gent why he set up a deadfall to gun me out. I'm looking for molasses drippings. Sheriff, look here."

Without waiting for an answer, Dargan opened the turtle back. The deck had been hosed clean.

DARGAN explained part of his routine. Parr sat up, and was able to cut in, toward the last, "I was laying for tool thieves, and it wasn't a gun trap, I hollered before I fired."

"Did you holler before you shot Curt Wiley?" Dargan demanded. "You parked over there. You can't wash all the molasses out."

The deputy lit a cigarette. He had holstered his gun, and now enjoyed the spectacle. Having lurked to surprise Dargan in the act of digging up concealed plunder, this was relief from a dreary task.

Parr exploded at the question. "Why'd I kill Curt? His land is all willed to his son, there wasn't any insurance, so I couldn't swindle my sister out of any. And look here, Boggs—" He turned on the deputy. "This man's a liar—"

But Boggs cut in, "I bet you did park in front of your brother-in-law's place. And we happen to know you were in San Ramon till pretty late that night. Probably later'n Dargan. The both of you better come to town with me. Trespassing, and assault with intent to kill."

Parr drove ahead; Dargan followed with Boggs.

"Look here, I didn't get around to the five hundred bucks."

Boggs' chronic grin took on a sharper twist. "We got around to that, all right, all right. You saw Wiley at the Wagon Wheel, but you said you didn't. How come?"

Dargan ignored the question. "That wallet in the ploughed patch. It had an 1874 two bit paper bill in it, nothing else. Now suppose you're a stranger and you climb into a guy's window and gun him out, and you know exactly where he packs his wallet, and you hear his wife running from the kitchen, and you jump out the window and run across ploughed ground, how much time do you have to gut a wallet in the first place. Much less pick out the good paper and leave the lucky piece you wouldn't dare be caught with?"

Boggs took a cigarette, jabbed the dash lighter, and screwed his face into new shapes from the strain of guiding the light and keeping the car on the road. "Son," he said, with a deliberation which was oddly in contrast to his set-piece grin, "maybe someone'll answer that, it is really worth answering."

Dargan, before he got to San Ramon's jug, began to suspect that Boggs was neither funny nor bungling; that Boggs did the work, while the sheriff furnished the front.

"How about bail?"

"Save your money. Won't be in long enough."

IN THE morning, Dargan and Parr met at the district attorney's office. It was all routine hoo-raw, going in circles. And then Zelma stepped into the office.

She cut the D. A. short, and tore into Parr. "All right, you Bible-belt hypocrite, so you went and did it, when you saw I wouldn't scare out?"

Parr retorted hotly, and slashed the brunette beautician's morals to shreds. "You dumb-heads," he concluded, covering the entire field, "does it sound reasonable I'd shoot my own sister's husband for a woman like this? It's just as crazy as the idea that I'd do it to rob him of five hundred—"

Zelma cut in, "Of course you didn't rob him of five hundred, he'd given me the money, and how do you like that? This is just for the record, you probably knew he didn't have the money, so you faked the robbery."

She turned on the D. A. "Do you follow me? I've caught up with all the news, I know the answers."

Boggs said to Dargan, almost gaily, "Bet you told her things, and she told you things. Pretty smart, pretending you thought it was robbery. Oh, well."

Then Zelma blew up. Her voice cracked. "You dirty-minded tramps, you've done so much damage, I needn't hold out—"

She hid her face with her hands. Dargan saw that she no longer wore a diamond ring. Then, half under control again, she looked up, and told them all, "Curt Wiley was my father!"

That nailed them.

Even the stenographer gaped. Zelma repeated the statement. The D.A. gulped. "Ah—Miss Traynor—um—I'm sure you are much younger—than Brian Wiley—Mr. Wiley's son—I can't understand—he was an only child."

Zelma laughed, triumphantly. "That's the payoff! Get it on the record, he's dead, it can't hurt him, but it'll make them all squirm. He took a trip to Oregon, once. Stayed a while. He did all he could for mother and me. And finally he sent for me when mother died. To set me up in business in San Ramon. Down payment on the shop. He couldn't name me in his will."

When the noise settled down, the D.A. said, "That still doesn't show who killed Curt Wiley. Granted that Mr. Parr did park as alleged, certainly the time can't be established. And we have Mrs. Wiley's clear statement that it happened at about 4:45, and there is every indication that Mr. and Mrs. Parr were preparing breakfast in their own home. And Mr. Parr's gun had neither been fired nor cleaned. Neither he nor his wife heard the shot. Witnesses state how surprised she was."

He got up from behind his desk.

Boggs said to Dargan, "Well, I guess trespassing doesn't amount to much, and maybe Mr. Parr has been missing tools, and you can't blame a man for getting hot-headed, and you seem okay after the doc picked six number fives from your hide."

Dargan had a word with Zelma before he went to the bus.

"What happened to the ring?" he asked bluntly.

"I gave it back. Too much of a stench about town, about me and my own father."

"But now—after all—you're cleared—you weren't his—"

She laughed. "Not his girl friend, but what I am just won't click in this town. Not believing in bigamy, dad couldn't very well marry my mother."

"So your boy friend took his ring back? Makes him a jerk, if you ask me. Well, so long, I was trying to nail Parr without hurting you."

"I blasted it out and crabbed things? Jeff, I hope you can pin it on him, or whoever it was. I'll be happy, then."

Dargan was happy, too, for a moment; there was more than a plea in Zelma's splendid eyes. Then he started, shook his head. "Look here—you spilled the beans about that dough to clear me, huh?"

She shrugged. "You're a conceited bum, aren't you? After all, if you're in the jug, you can't crack the case."

But the twinkle of eye and smile belied her pretense of calculation, and he walked on air toward the bus.

CHAPTER V

Paper-stuffed Dummy

ND all the way to Wiley's, Dargan pondered on the one hitch; the time of the killing. Mabelle Parr had sounded and looked convincing, if ever a woman had, when she said that she'd not heard the shot. You can hear a twelve-gauge for nearly half a mile on a still night, and the Parr place was no more than an eighth of a mile from Wiley's, with nothing intervening, neither groves nor buildings.

Zelma attended her father's funeral; head high, she ignored the stares of relatives and neighbors and of the widow. She avoided Dargan, who went somewhat because it was fitting for the hired man to do so, and very much because he had liked the hard-bitten farmer. Wiley had risked a lot to do the best he could for his left-handed daughter; Dargan felt that his instinctive respect hadn't been misplaced.

"Officer and gentleman at heart," he put it.

For all the shock of murder and neighborhood scandal, Mrs. Wiley could have modeled for the old-fashioned mother. Plump, kindly, gray-haired, and baking colossal pies; and she said to Dargan, "Jeff, it's such a comfort having you here, almost like my own boy coming back home."

Dargan was embarrassed. "That run-in with Mr. Parr—well, I couldn't help it, I had to, even though he is your brother."

"Don't you fret about that. Jim won't nurse grudges. You were just being—" She took off her glasses, and dabbed her eyes with her blue-checked apron. "Being loyal to my old man. Curt liked you, though he'd never let you suspect it."

"I hope I don't have trouble with Mr. Parr," Dargan repeated, and headed from the kitchen.

He still had plans for Jim Parr, and the widow's motherly ways were embarrassing.

A FEW days later, after the farm settled down to its old routine, and Parr had even come over to team up with the hired man, and give his sister some advice, Mrs. Wiley said to Dargan, "Jeff, I declare I heard someone prowling late last night. Wasn't you, was it?"

He answered, truthfully, "No, Mrs. Wiley. And I didn't hear a thing. Figure it'd be chicken thieves?"

"Worse," she said, somberly. "The sheriff means well, but I'm afraid they'll never find out who settled for poor Curt."

"I sleep pretty sound," he told her, and this time, it wasn't quite the truth. "Might rig up strings and an old cowbell. Booby trap, we called 'em in Africa."

"It's kind of scary in the house," the widow went on. "Why don't you move in out of the bunkroom in the granary?"

"Anything you say. If it'd put you at ease."

"I'm moving to the spare room," she said. "I can't stand that room where poor Curt—"

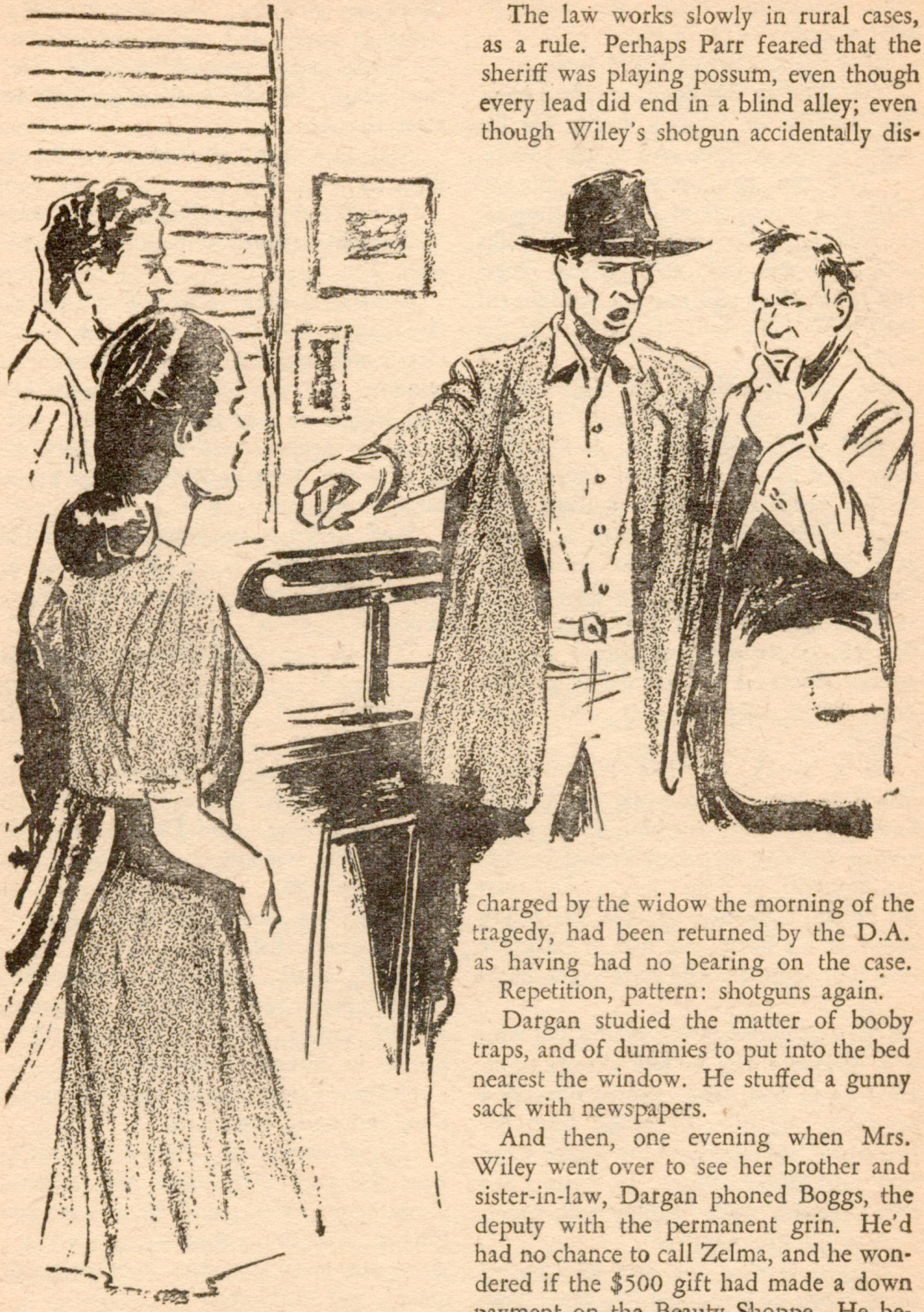
"I can understand that."

He waited for her to go on; he looked away, not wanting to see the grief which twisted her pleasant face.

"But you're a soldier, you wouldn't feel that way. It's all been cleaned up, like nothing'd ever happened."

And so it was arranged.

Dargan wondered if Jim Parr had given his sister that idea. Maybe Parr did have ideas, though moving a man from granary to the farmhouse didn't make sense. Still, farmers are habit minded. Look at the way shotguns had featured.



"Does it sound reasonable that I'd kill my sister's husband for a woman like this?"

The law works slowly in rural cases, as a rule. Perhaps Parr feared that the sheriff was playing possum, even though every lead did end in a blind alley; even though Wiley's shotgun accidentally discharged by the widow the morning of the tragedy, had been returned by the D.A. as having had no bearing on the case.

Repetition, pattern: shotguns again.

Dargan studied the matter of booby traps, and of dummies to put into the bed nearest the window. He stuffed a gunny sack with newspapers.

And then, one evening when Mrs. Wiley went over to see her brother and sister-in-law, Dargan phoned Boggs, the deputy with the permanent grin. He'd had no chance to call Zelma, and he wondered if the $500 gift had made a down payment on the Beauty Shoppe. He began to worry about other suitors. Where the socially prominent young hay, grain, and coal-dealer couldn't put up with Zel-

ma's background, there were nice guys who wouldn't be so fussy.

That night, Dargan stayed awake.

The window was open, as it had been, the morning of Wiley's death. He listened to the crickets, and to the silence.

"You can have your fresh plowed earth and the smell of growing things," he told himself, "and your solid folks rooted in the soil, and getting crusty and super-pious and nursing grudges till they blow their tops. To hell with the sticks."

He was a civilian. He was himself again. And the work of a private dick seemed worth while again. If not that, then he'd be an industrial investigator in war production plants, nailing saboteurs, whether foreign agents, or crackpots with personal grudges against the management. He'd nail the thieves who sneaked valuable tools and gauges from the job; in some places, they'd actually created shortages and hampered production, those kleptomaniacs and home tinkers.

In a word, he felt rehabilitated. Whether from farm work, or Zelma's having gone to bat for him, or the sheer zest of working on varied themes involving shotguns, he didn't know. And then his fancies tightened up. He was riding ahead of his horse. He had to crack the case before he'd really have come back.

A BIT of gravel ticked against the windowpane. But he had already tightened up, he had already sensed someone's approach. Silently, he rolled from the bed which had once been the widow's and took Curt Wiley's Ithaca. In Wiley's bed was a dummy stuffed solidly with paper.

A soft scraping outside.

Dargan leveled the gun and blazed away, when he was about two yards from the dummy. Then he snapped on the lights.

Mrs. Wiley screamed, a shriek which shook the shingles. She was scurrying about in panic, and small wonder, for the house had shuddered from the confined blast. Windows rattled perceptibly after the roar.

And then lights flashed from Parr's place.

"It's all right," he yelled to the widow. "I thought I heard something. It's all right."

A man was running from Parr's place. A woman followed him. They were clearly silhouetted by the light from their window. He was hitching up pants he had pulled on over his night shirt, and trying to keep a hold on his shotgun, all as he ran. Mabelle Parr stumbled after him, her robe flapping.

Then darkness swallowed them until they came within range of the Wiley's lights. "Sis, what on earth?" Parr yelled.

"I'm all right; Jeff thought he heard something."

"Thank God," Parr exclaimed, and from his heart.

He lowered the gun. Just then, a man popped up from the shadows: Boggs, grinning as ever. And Dargan wormed through the window, to join him. He had Wiley's gun.

"That's one shot you heard, eh, Parr?" Dargan demanded.

Relief, wrath, perplexity twisted the farmer's broad face. "What kind of game is this? Emma, what's going on?" This last as he turned on his sister.

Mabelle Parr was gasping from exertion, and could not speak.

Dargan explained, "Mrs. Parr didn't hear the shot that killed Mr. Wiley. Even being awake, and in a screened kitchen. But this awoke her out of her sleep, she looks like she's been sleeping sound, and so do you."

"All right!"

Dargan went on, "That was because when I fired a charge of number fives

into the dummy I put in Mr. Wiley's bed, I left the window open, just like it was *when the murder was reported.*

"But with the windows and everything shut, the sound wouldn't've carried."

Boggs said, "He's dead right, I been trying it, there's a big difference. What Jeff means is, the window was shut when Curt Wiley was smoked out. It wasn't done by a man poking a gun in the window, it was done by someone in the house that could grab his gun from the kitchen right when and where Mrs. Wiley was fixing breakfast."

THE motherly widow looked pale, sick, terrified.

Dargan didn't like his work; sometimes a dick can't. He said, "Either you lied, Mrs. Wiley, when you told what happened, or your brother and his wife lied when they said they didn't hear a shot. It must've been an inside job. No thief could have sifted the good money out, and left that pocket piece, while running.

"And to kill the smell of burned powder, you pulled that accidental discharge, right in front of witnesses. That kept the lawmen from making any point of examining the gun to see if it'd been fired that night."

Parr's wife plainly showed surprise and horror as she eyed first her sister-in-law and then her husband.

Dargan hammered on, "When I felt Mr. Wiley's hand, it was cooler'n it possibly could've become in half an hour, even with a breeze blowing in on him, the breeze also accounting for why there wasn't the powder smell there should've been. And by the time the law was called, body temperature wouldn't tell much. And I bet someone wiped off that lipstick smudge I noticed. And no wonder Mrs. Wiley was afraid to stay alone in the house after she'd killed her husband."

Boggs said, "Good figuring, Mr Parr. He wasn't killed at 4:45 like it looked. I bet it was pretty quick after you left San Ramon."

Mrs. Wiley couldn't let her brother take the rap. She had had too much of a shock. Dargan turned away. Let the law look and listen. He didn't feel happy about his work. Not until he reflected, on his way back to San Ramon, that for all her being the sweet old lady and devoted wife and mother, she'd proved as dangerous as any other type.

Even if Zelma had actually been Wiley's last fling at romance, he couldn't possibly have got away with turning out his wife, not in that neighborhood. The old lady hadn't been defending her rights. Vanity and convention had pulled the trigger.

As it turned out, Jim Parr, driving home, had heard the blast which finished his brother-in-law. He'd been near enough to hear. He'd parked, seen his sister's work, and figuring that since the dead couldn't be restored, he might as well protect the living. So he had coached her, and then he went home to wait for the "news," some three hours later.

Dargan heard all this. He said to Boggs, "It's your case, chum. You tell everyone that you coached me, I'll back it."

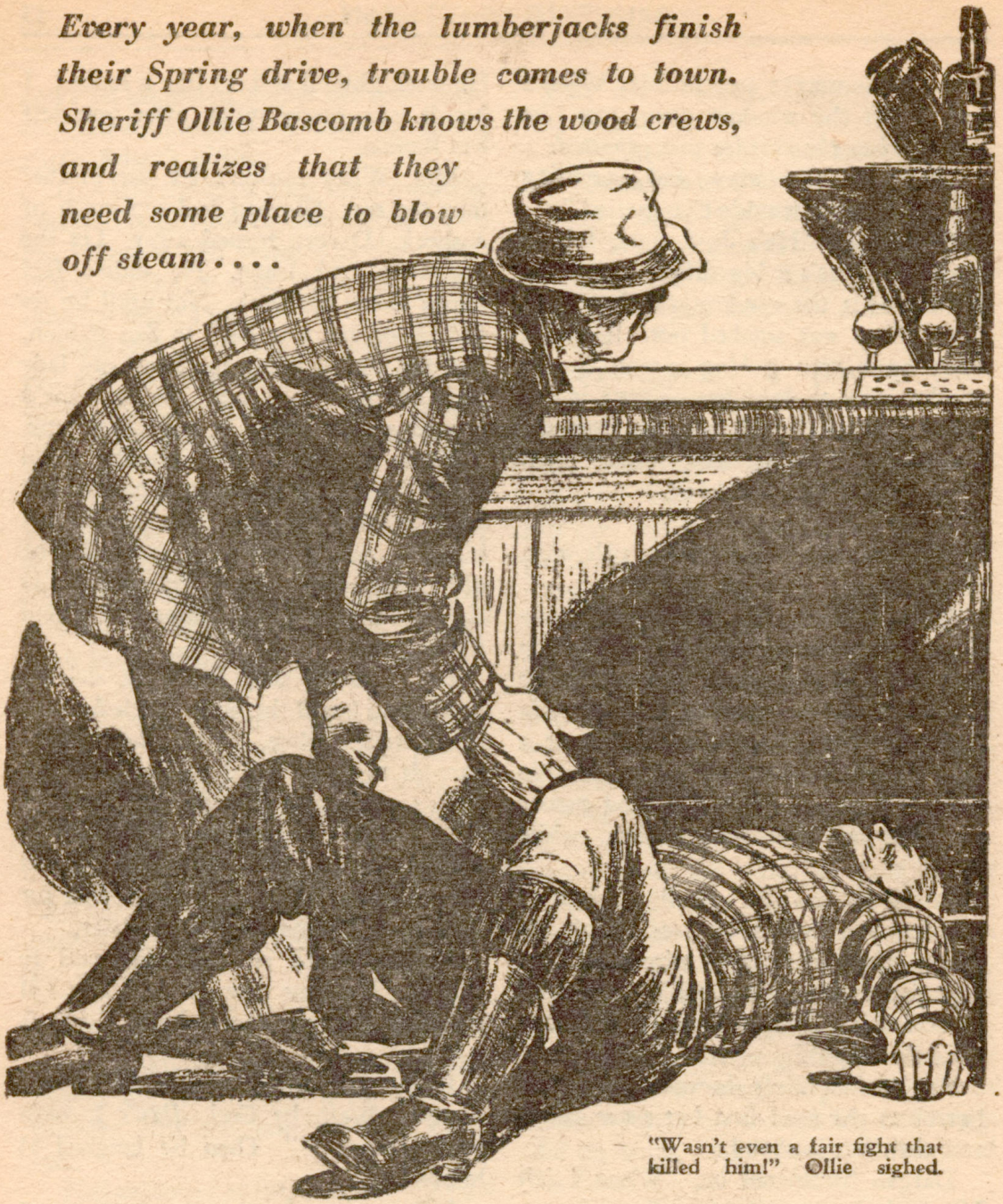
Boggs grimmaced a grin of injured dignity. Well, by God, *didn't* I coach you? *Didn't* I?" Then he laughed at himself.

"Okay, okay, I got to see a gal about a beauty shoppe."

"Haw! Won't it be a hot one if she's bought it! Maybe you can be her manager. Boy, you got a face for it, it's pretty near as good as mine for advertising."

Dargan agreed, heartily. He was ready to agree to anything, particularly if he could talk Zelma into quitting the shoppe and making a full-time job of giving him facials.

Every year, when the lumberjacks finish their Spring drive, trouble comes to town. Sheriff Ollie Bascomb knows the wood crews, and realizes that they need some place to blow off steam....



"Wasn't even a fair fight that killed him!" Ollie sighed.

OLLIE GETS HIS EVIDENCE

By HAROLD de POLO

OLLIE BASCOMB, coming down the steps of the county courthouse and jail in the back of which he had his comfortable living quarters, put his hand on his companion's shoulder when they reached the sidewalk:

"Mighty sorry to hear 'bout everything, Clint. Mighty glad you come an' told me, howsomever. Doc Appleby can't be wrong, I got to admit. I'll be doin' the best I can."

"Thanks, Ollie."

"Be seein' you later up to the tavern. Got to hustle me over to Town Meetin'

right now. Be there five-ten minutes. Hanker to see a few o' the boys I ain't spoke to yet when they come in from their farms. Want to tell 'em to vote proper on a motion I'm makin' to 'propriate a few hundred dollar for a feller that was burned out an' had dummed little insurance. That's w'y I can't go with you."

"Sure, Ollie, sure," nodded old Clint Engles. "Awful glad I had that talk with you. Be tarnation gladder 'n ever to have you up to the tavern t'night, too. Lookin' for trouble, like I told you. That low-down half-breed Henri Boileau—"

"Ah, there, sheriff; ah, there, Engles. Just the men I wanted to see," cut in Lester Heald, coming out of the Derby Hotel.

"I want to caution *you*, Engles, to keep your drunken lumberjacks under control when that Saltash Valley outfit finish their drive and surge up to the bar like swine before a swill pail. I—"

"Judas Priest, Lester, but that sure is a' elegant an' noble phrase for the pro'-bition folk to use," drawled Ollie.

"I can most usually handle my Sapphire Match crew, *Mr.* Heald," said Engles dryly.

But Heald, the teller of the Derby National Bank, took on a more sanctimonious and severe air as he drew his scrawny length to its full height. He had twice been beaten at the primaries by Ollie when he had attempted to run against him, and he was the sheriff's most implacable political enemy. He shook an admonitory finger and said, looking sternly at Ollie:

"As for *you* sheriff—and likewise speaking of prohibition—I am warning you that I am making a motion, this evening, to prohibit the sale of all alcoholic beverages, over a bar or in a package store, during the yearly spring drive when these lumberjacks overrun this fair town. I believe that I will have every reputable business man on my side."

A SMALL group of men standing before a store a couple of rods off pricked up their ears. Ollie sighed in grave admiration and said in a quiet voice that nevertheless carried:

"You allus was a slick talker, Lester. Yep, you allus took the el'cution prize when we was to school t'gether."

"I have always fought for the best interests of our town," said Lester righteously.

"Me? I cal'late I ain't so public-spirited," confessed Ollie sadly. "*I* were only figurin' on makin' a motion to give Sam Whitby some money to help him build again. . . . Me? Shucks, no, I never *were* no orator. I been too busy holdin' down this sheriff job for thutty-odd year."

"Disgraceful, trying to saddle the town with another financial burden," said Heald, shaking his head and walking off to the town hall.

"Mean sort o' varmint, ain't he?" remarked Clint.

Ollie looked a bit quizzically at his lifelong friend. Clint was in his middle seventies, some score of years older than the sheriff, but they had known each other since the latter had been knee high to a grasshopper. Clint was the oldest active woods boss in Maine. He was lean and wiry and he didn't weigh much over a hundred and twenty-five, with a wispy white mustache and piercing black eyes, but it was conceded that he could manage a bunch of men better than anyone else in the business.

Maybe, Ollie told himself, this was because he loved his work. Maybe, on top of that, it was because he had lost his wife when his daughter and only child had been born. She herself, after some half-dozen years of marriage, had been left a widow with four young children to bring up. Clint had always labored hard to support them with his not-too-lavish wages, a faithful grandfather.

"Yep, he's a mite ornery, Clint," said

Ollie. "Don't you go to worry none. He ain't goin' to carry that motion. He—"

But Ollie cut himself off, suddenly, and blushed, as he saw the amused smile on Clint's face. Now it was the woods boss, with his smile breaking into a gentle laugh, who put his hand on the other's shoulder:

"Forgettin' this is my last drive, ain't you?"

"It— it were a good un', by crimus," said Ollie, hurriedly and almost a trifle gruffly. "You beat that Saltash Valley outfit gettin' your logs down to the river, didn't you? An' didn't they begin cuttin' 'afore you did an' didn't you git out more lumber? Sure you did. . . . S'long. Most seven now, an' I got to git me over to the hall an' see my motion's the fu'st un' brung up. Got to talk to the boys an' have Doc Appleby talk to the womenfolk. Be seein' you to the tavern soon. . . . Now don't you go to tangle personal with that Boileau half-breed, Clint," he called back as he waddled off down the street.

IT TOOK Ollie a trifle more than the five-ten minute period he had mentioned to see that his motion was carried to grant Sam Whitby three hundred dollars to assist in rebuilding his house and barn. It took him closer to twenty minutes. Then; after arranging with the moderator to have Doc Applby vote for him by proxy if any other important motion came up, he hustled back to the courthouse and climbed into his coupe of decidedly aged vintage. It had a perfect engine under the hood, however, and he made the scant mile up to Saltash Tavern on the outskirts of town in record time.

He stepped into the long, low-ceilinged barroom and saw, with relief, that Henri Boileau and his gang of men had not arrived. Probably they were still up at the Saltash Corners bridge, getting the last of their logs over the riffles just above it before they got into flowing water that would take them to the sawmill down at South Derby. Ollie, as he greeted Clint again and then waved amiably at the woods crew, told the bartender to set 'em up for everyone. Before and during and after prohibition he had always done this, had always closed his eyes to the law in the belief that a lumberjack was more apt not to make trouble if he thought the sheriff of the county was welcoming him. The hearty cheer he got proved he was doubtlessly right.

Ollie, as he sipped his drink, wished that more Denby people had made a practice of welcoming the woods crews when they came in to celebrate after their Spring drive. Men cooped up in the woods all Winter, working as hard as all Sal Brookes and the Devil, wanted to let off steam when they were finally let loose. That steam might not be so violent, Ollie felt, if townsfolk didn't so plainly show their dislike of having the men come into their bailiwick. It sent them in with a chip on their shoulder. Ollie had never had any trouble with this Sapphire Match crew, almost all of whom he had known for years, because he had always tried to be the first one to greet them and set up a round.

If only that dummed Boileau weren't coming in tonight; if only the Canuck half-breed had been about a week later.

But he wasn't a week late and he was coming into town tonight, as was shown a few minutes later when Boileau came lunging through the door with his gang of men:

"Set heem up the dreenk for my *garçons,* barman," ordered the woods boss boisterously.

"Fu'st drink's allus on the sheriff o' this here town, Boileau," said Ollie affably. "Line up an' name your poison, fellers."

The half-breed Canuck, a big man with immense shoulders and a heavy chest,

looked at Ollie with insolent eyes. He had cut timber in the section once before, back of Upper Saltash Lake three seasons ago. He had a reputation as a hard man, but he had not previously come into conflict with the sheriff. He turned his back on Ollie and put his elbows on the bar;

"Henri Boileau *hall*-ways buy first dreenk for his *garçons*."

Ollie, short and squat and rotund, with a round face and china-blue eyes, pulled off the battered black felt hat he always wore and rubbed a hand across his utterly bald head. Then he stroked his jaw with his right hand, and said in a slow and amused drawl:

"Not in this town, Boileau, like I said. You should ought to remember that from three year ago. Bought the fu'st round then, seems as though I recall I did. You was glad to take it. You hadn't been beat by a better man gettin' your logs to the river, that time. Nope, you wasn't like a naughty little boy that's mad cause he's lost a game. . . . Name your poison like I said, fellers."

IF OLLIE had been looking to draw Boileau's fire away from Engles and onto himself he didn't succeed. The Sapphire Match men tensed, waiting. The Saltash Valley outfit turned to their boss, obviously waiting for instructions. Boileau, edging around, gazed at the sheriff whose mild voice and good-natured face so frequently had the faculty of making other men do his bidding. He said, with a booming and forced laugh as he clapped his hands together: "*Hall*-right, M'seau Shereeff, we dreenk weeth you first."

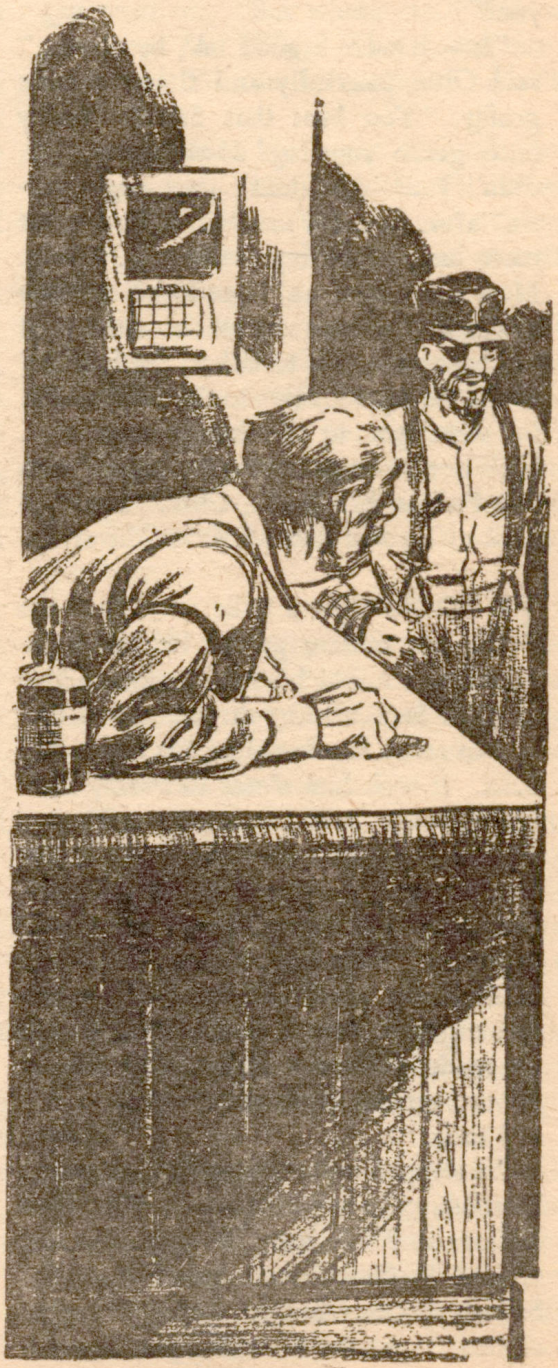
As the two crews lined up at the bar and the bartender began pouring drinks, the tension seemed to lift. Clint, getting next to Ollie, said in a whisper:

"Thanks, Ollie. You stopped a ruckus at the start. It could be a tough one. Don't want none o' my men hurt, if I can help it—on my last drive."

"No un' *will* be, can I help it, Clint," replied Ollie. "I'll stay for the party, no matter how long she lasts."

But Ollie wasn't to be there for the start of the big jamboree, as he presently discovered. A car stopped at the tavern entrance and Bert Wells, his deputy, called out excitedly:

"Sheriff—hey, sheriff. Come out and



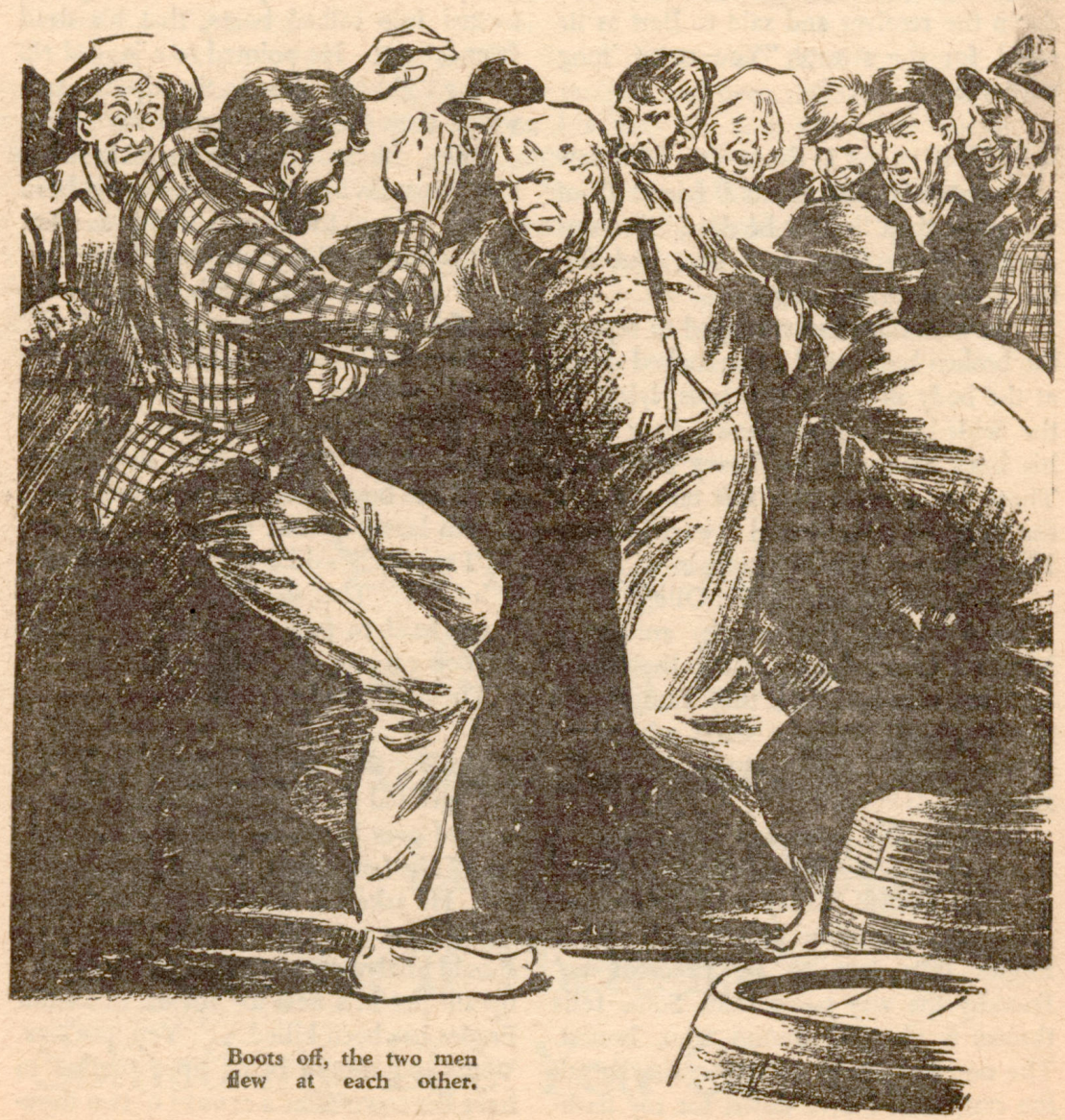
hustle back to the jail with me, will you? I need help and I can't get it. Everyone's at Town Meeting. Those two prisoners broke open their cell door and have barricaded themselves in the washroom. They're crazy."

"Go in after 'em with a gun," said Ollie as he went to the doorway. "I got business here."

"I might have to shoot one of them, and I know you don't like killing if it can be helped. One of them's got a knife."

"Be right with you, Bert," said Ollie with a sigh. Then, turning toward the bar, and looking at Boileau: "I know all you boys 'll be merry an' peaceful whilst I'm gone. Till I git back, leastaways. I'll be back right soon an' we'll have another snort. . . . Take it easy, Clint."

It didn't take them two minutes to get down to the jail, and it didn't take Ollie even ten, once he got there, to subdue the prisoners. He just crashed into the washroom, knocked down the man with the knife, and then took the pair by the back of their coat-collars and dragged them to another cell. As he did so, he heard the telephone ringing with that peculiar insistence that usually means something im-



Boots off, the two men flew at each other.

portant. He locked the door and raced over to the instrument. It was the bartender up at Saltash Tavern, and his words came in panicky tones:

"Hell's bust loose since you left, sheriff. I come upstairs to 'phone. All the lights is out. I see with my flashlight that Clint Engles is hurt real bad. Looks —gosh, it looks like he might be dead. I—you better hurry, sheriff, I—"

"You go down an' git some light on. Take a lamp if you got no extry bulbs. Tell everyone there, from me, that any man or men that leaves 'fore I git there 'll be held for murder." He slammed down the receiver and said to Bert as he raced for the street: "You come 'long with me."

WHEN he got to the tavern, Ollie saw instantly that his old friend Clint was more than "might be dead." He was dead. Killed. Ollie bent over and felt the pulse to make sure.

The bartender had managed to replace the broken bulbs, and Ollie looked down at the body of the woods boss, lying on the wide-board, glass-strewn floor with his head alongside the heavy brass rail. There was a cut on his left temple, and the flesh and bone around it were bruised. His face was twisted in pain.

"What happened?" asked Ollie.

None of the lumberjacks answered. Most of them were nursing their own cuts and bruises, and they hung their heads sullenly. Boileau stood with arms akimbo, glaring stonily at the sheriff. He shrugged.

"The trouble come fast like it always does, sheriff," said the bartender. "I dunno. One Saltash Valley fella says somethin' to a Sapphire Match fella. Clint Engles tells 'em to be peaceful an' friendly the way you'd said. Some fella throws a glass—I dunno who, honest. The one light goes out, then they break the rest, then I dive down for my flashlight when I hear the fightin' start. I tried to go to the telephone at the end of the room, there, to get hold of you. Someone hit me an' I went on my knees. I crawled over fast to the door to get upstairs an' call you from there, like I did. As I turned around to go upstairs the light from my flash fell on old Clint. I—he *looked* dead, like I told you. That's all I know, I swear."

Ollie, nodding his head, was still looking down at the body of Clint Engles. He took off his hat and sighed, a bitter smile coming to his lips. He was gazing at the heavy red-an'-black plaid woolen pants, tucked into calked boots, that his dead friend wore. He pointed to a jagged rip on the right leg, close to the hip, beneath which even the underdrawers were torn.

"Yep, someun' kicked him an' knocked him down. When he fell, he hit his head on the rail an' the blow killed him. Man over seventy couldn't even be killed in fair fight! That's a nice doin's, men. That's givin' lumberjacks a great name, ain't it?"

"I couldn't help it, sheriff, it wasn't my fault," protested the bartender. "It was just like I said. I come down after you told me to an' I put in them new lights. I told the boys what you said about none of 'em leavin'. None of 'em has. I—"

"I see that," said Ollie gravely, rubbing at his jaw. "That shouldn' ought to make it too hard to find the murd'rer, should it? You got any idee, Boileau?"

The half-breed shrugged again.

OLLIE, still gazing at the floor, remained silent for a minute. Then he walked over to the telephone, at one corner of the long room, and called the town hall. He asked to speak to Doc Appleby.

"We got to work fast, Doc. Want you should shelve every other motion comin' up an' put in a new un' for us. . . . Clint Engles has been killed. . . . Yep, pos'tive. Want you should bring up a motion to have the town offer a reward o' two thou-

san' dollar for the arrest *an'* conviction, dead or alive, of the murdr'er. . . . Huh? That's right. I want it done fast, howsomever; I want it done right off. Call me here to the tavern when you git it passed. Git hold o' Sam Whitby an' have him circulate 'mongst the farmers that helped us put over that motion to help Sam. Git hold o' all our fishin' an' huntin' fre'ns an' all o' Clint's, too. Even git hold o' Lester an' the reform gang. You can make 'em think it'll help clean up the town, like they call it. . . . Yep. But work *fast,* Doc, an' call me fast as you can, don't forget. G' bye."

His deputy and the two logging crews were looking at him in some surprise, and the bartender whistled:

"Gosh, *you* sure work fast, sheriff."

"Sometimes a feller's got to, in a case o' this sort. . . . You men jest stand aroun' an' wait, like I got to. I don't want none o' you even *movin'*. . . . Hey that goes for you, Boileau. Savvy?"

The Canuck grunted, disdainfully, and shrugged again.

Doc Appleby was as fast a worker on the operation Ollie had given him to perform as he was on handling a serious accident case on a human body. He was just as efficient, too. In less than twenty minutes he called up:

"All right, Ollie. Derby's offering two thousand dollars reward for the arrest and conviction of the murderer of Clint Engles."

"Thanks, Doc. I'll have to move Clint's body behin' the bar till you git here after meetin' for a 'ficial med'cal examination. That all right? . . . Thanks. . . . Huh? Yep, I need plenty o' room."

As he replaced the receiver, he walked back to the further end of the bar, away from Boileau, where his deputy was standing with eyes that were still vastly puzzled:

"You an' one o' the boys put Clint behin' the bar, Bert. . . . You Saltash Valley men line up at that wall, you Sapphire Match 'uns at this 'un. . . . Git a broom an' sweep up the floor, someun'. . . . An' now, Boileau, take off your boots."

"Quel?" gasped the other, blinking. "W'ot—w'ot you mean?"

"What I said. Take off your boots."

"Because w'y?" asked the half-breed woodsman after a minute, his eyes looking hard.

"One reason be I don't hanker to git kicked with a calked boot, you might say," drawled the sheriff. As he did so, he dragged out his old .45 Colt revolver that had been handed down to him from his maternal uncle, who was said to have used it with telling effect on the Western frontier. Ollie, since his possession of it, was likewise rumored to have become excessively adept in using it. " 'Nother reason be, Boileau, that I'm orderin' you, as sheriff o' this here county, to *take* 'em off."

Henri Boileau, looking at that blue-steel muzzle that must have seemed large and deadly, shrugged again and sat down on the floor and removed his boots:

"Wo't now?"

"Go git 'em an' hold 'em, Bert, an' don't let no un' else touch 'em," said Ollie, putting his gun on the floor and sitting down beside it and taking off his own shoes. "Now, Bert," he added, getting to his feet and passing his deputy the Colt, "you keep this gun ready for action an' blast the fu'st man that tries to pull any dirty work—an' blast to kill."

"My— my God, what's happenin' *now?*" cried the bartender.

Ollie, before replying, dug into his other pocket, yanked out a pair of handcuffs, and stuck them into the rear pocket of his pants. Then, slowly, he took off the ancient and frayed canvas shooting jacket that he had made famous by wearing in Summer and Winter, in Spring and Fall. He tossed this at Bert to hold, too:

"What's happenin' now? A *fair* fight, I cal'late to make it. Took my own shoes off, didn' I?" he grinned. Then he looked at Henri Boileau and said grimly: "Git ready an' stick up your mitts."

THE big half-breed, his eyes narrowing, looked speculatively at the sheriff. He didn't say a word. Slowly, he began to remove his mackinaw. When he had pulled an arm from one sleeve, and was about to remove the other, he suddenly flung the garment from him and made a flying leap at his opponent.

Ollie, who wasn't exactly ignorant of rough-and-tumble woods fighting, wasn't caught without warning. He ducked, stepped to the side, and crashed his right fist into the pit of Boileau's stomach, just under the wishbone. With an explosive "oof" the Canuck grabbed for his middle and pitched forward onto the floor:

Boileau started to get to his feet. While still on one knee, he made another dive for Ollie. He was, obviously, used to this type of scrapping, where he could get a man in his powerful arms and crush him into insensibility. Once more, though, the sheriff didn't fall for it. He pulled aside and gave the other the heel of his palm, on the jaw, as he lurched by him:

"Stand up an' *try* to fight like a man," he derided.

Boileau did get up, at that. There was insane rage on his face as he heard the Sapphire Match men laugh, and he went for Ollie flailing his long arms and big fists. He didn't have any science, but he had a lot of strength and he was working like a tornado.

Ollie did happen to have a little science. He had something else. He was called the greatest birdin' an' troutin' fool in the whul' State O' Maine, and his years of tramping through the woods, of wading streams, had given him as tough a set of muscles as you could ask for. For all his seemingly awkward build, his ordinarily slow movements, he was as fast in the pinch as any youngster in the pink of condition. He went right in to meet Boileau, who towered above him eight or nine inches, and again he sank his right into the pit of his adversary's stomach. He took a glancing wallop on the jaw that cut his skin, another on the shoulder, but he got another pained "oof" out of the Canuck and he saw that his eyes rolled as he backed away:

"Softenin' you up, Boileau. I'll do a' artistic job on you when I git you real winded."

IF OLLIE had been calculating to get Boileau's goat with his remarks, apparently he had succeeded. The half-breed let loose a string of unintelligble curses and went roaring at the sheriff. Ollie didn't have space enough to get away. Boileau got his arms around him and they fell to the floor.

The Canuck, woods fashion, tried to gouge Ollie's left eye with his thumb, at the same time trying to sink his teeth into his right arm. Ollie reached up and got hold of the wrist whose fingers were at his eye. He tightened up his arm muscles and let the Canuck think he was gong to be able to bite through his shirt and into his flesh. Then, as he felt the other relax, he came up with his knee—again to the pit of the stomach—and yanked his arm free. Simultaneously, he swung with everything he had for Boileau's mouth. As the Canuck groaned, and spat out two teeth, Ollie socked him behind the ear and slid out from under as the woods boss slumped over to the side:

"Got you softened up proper, Boileau," grinned the sheriff, getting nimbly to his feet. "You got one more chance o' bein' licked like a *man*. Stand up an' take it."

Henri Boileau did stand up. He did it cumbersomely, and he was bending over a little when he tried to pull himself

erect. There was a slightly glazed light of uncertainty, astonishment, in his eyes, and his lips curled away from his bloody teeth as cheers and cries came from the Sapphire Match crowd.

Ollie Bascomb, then, really got down to business. He'd been a passable boxer, in high school here in Derby, and he hadn't forgotten everything about it. He ignored the half-breed's stomach, in this session, and concentrated on his face. He went for his eyes, and his eyes only. He took a few hefty blows himself—one on the nose that made blood spurt—but he closed one of Boileau's eyes at the same time. Then he went for the other one, although the half-breed was now trying desperately, wildly, to protect it, his stomach unguarded.

Still Ollie didn't go for that open wishbone. He hit the Canuck on the left forearm, and when he dropped his fist the sheriff raked his knuckles across the remaining good eye. He cut the lid and the outer corner of it badly, and as Boileau shook his head like an enraged animal, Ollie again sank his fist into the wishbone. He put every last ounce of power he had in his body behind the blow, and the half-breed pitched down to the floor like a felled ox. Instantly, Ollie was on top of him, jerking his outstretched arms around to his back. When he had them there, he pulled the handcuffs from his hip pocket and snapped them over the Canuck's wrists. Then, pulling just a mite himself, he got up and said in a labored drawl: "Dummed sorry I had to be so rough with him, fellers. Howsomever, I figured he needed some mussin' up for the lowdown way he killed my ol' fr'en' Clint. . . . Yep, he's the murd'rer, folks, like I've got proof. . . . Now I got to call Doc."

DOC APPLEBY didn't come alone. Lester Heald came with him, and immediately started, in high-faluting language, to decry this disgrace that had come to Derby. This time, very peremptorily, Ollie had to shut him up so that Doc, in his capacity as medical examiner, could come to a decision in peace.

His verdict, of course, was that Clint Engles had been felled by a kick on the groin, by some person unknown, and in the resulting fall had struck his temple on the brass rail and been killed.

"Ain't by a person unknowed, Doc," said Ollie. "That's why I had Boileau take off his boots 'afore I give him a little trimmin'. On them calks on the bottom o' that there right boot, that Bert's holdin', you'll find red-an'-black wool threads from Clint's pants. I see 'em stickin' out on the sole when I fu'st come in. Yep, that's what'll send him up for life, an' that's what'll give me that two thousan' dollar reward."

"I'll be damned," said Bert Wells, turning up the boots he held and looking at the right one. "True enough, all right."

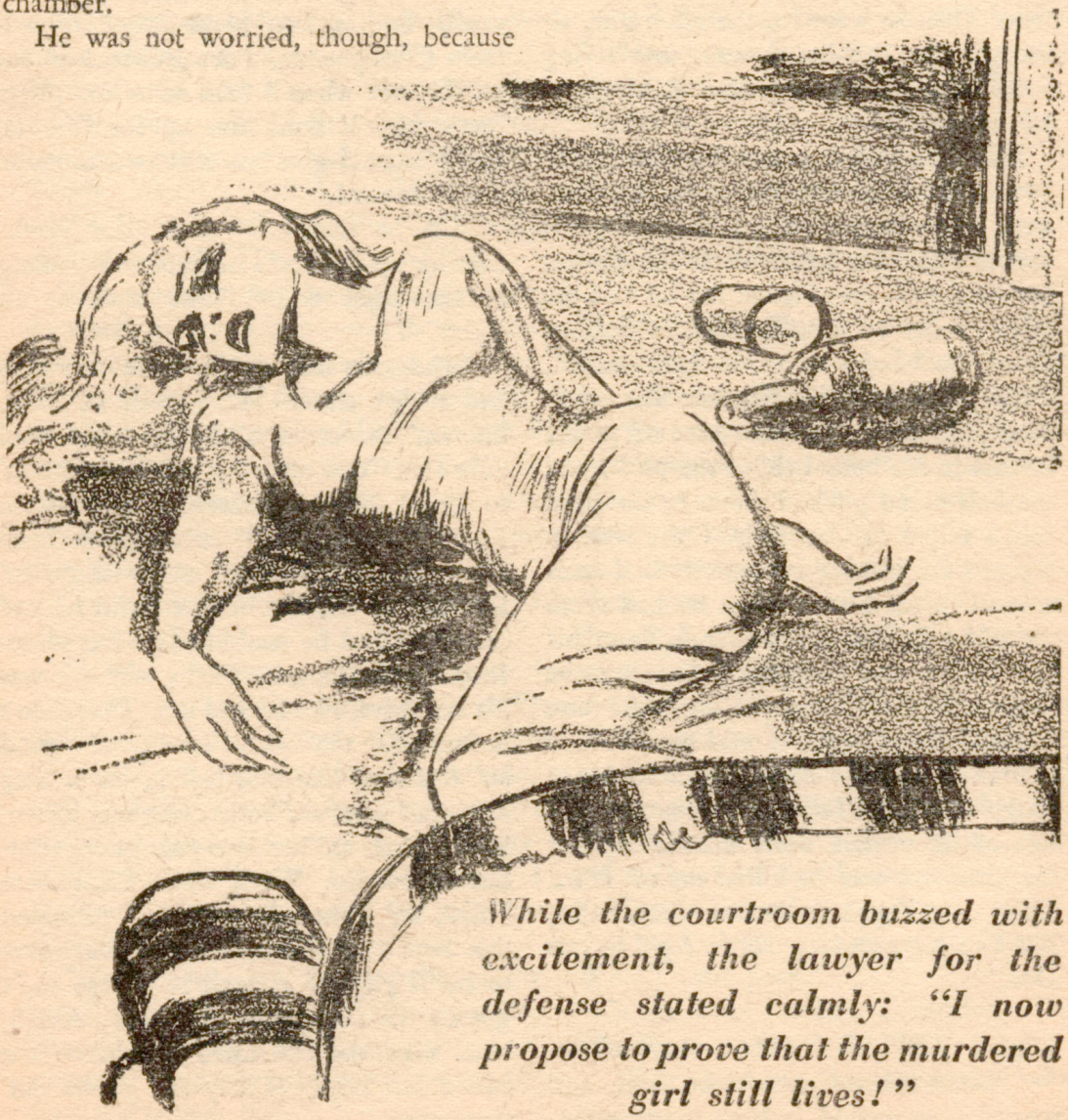
"That reward?" said Ollie musingly and with a smile. "Had to do it, folks, knowin' the town o' Derby could well afford it. You see, I'd jest been talkin' to Clint, 'afore he come to the tavern. Seems he jest had a' examination from Doc—he'd been ailin' all winter—an' Doc had to tell him real truthful he had cancer so bad he couldn't live but three-four months longer. That's why this was his last drive, like he told me. That didn't bother Clint too much—he'd lived a good an' full life, like they call it, an' a long un'—but what *did* bother him was leavin' his daughter an' her four youngsters without no money. Well, when Clint were killed, an' I thought o' that, I reckoned this here two thousan' I'm turnin' over to her'll pay off a small mortgage she's got on their home an' give her enough, with what she can earn, to educate the two oldest boys till they can go workin' themselves."

Special Effect

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

THE killer sat quietly, looking very handsome and bored. Five days, now, his trial had been going on. It reminded him of a dozen courtroom movie scenes he had starred in, the only difference being that this was real; his life was actually at stake. Unless a miracle happened, he was headed for the gas chamber.

He was not worried, though, because he knew a miracle was going to happen. In fact, he reflected, it was nearly time for his attorney to spring the big surprise. The clock on the wall behind the judge's bench indicated a few minutes to four in the afternoon, and shadows were lengthening across the jury box and the jam-packed spectators' section. Pretty soon it would be adjournment time and



While the courtroom buzzed with excitement, the lawyer for the defense stated calmly: "I now propose to prove that the murdered girl still lives!"

"I was drunk when I did it," he admitted. "Naturally I had to dispose of the body."

the whole ridiculous farce would be extended through another day, which would mean one more night in jail. The killer didn't want that. He wanted his freedom now.

He frowned at his lawyer. "Come on, Griffith," his lips moved imperceptibly. "Let's get it finished. I'm fed up."

Bernie Griffith nodded. He was one of the cleverest criminal mouthpieces in Hollywood, a small, swart man whose dapper clothes bespoke the enormous fees he collected. He earned those fees, however. Not once in his career had a homicide client been convicted. When you hired Bernie Griffith, you were just the same as turned loose.

Now, in response to the killer's frown, Griffith made an impressive, sweeping gesture, "Your Honor, and ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I wish at this time to introduce new evidence," he said in a theatrical tone. "Evidence which will prove that the State's case is a tissue of absurdities, mistakes, and utter errors."

A hush fell upon the courtroom.

GRIFFITH paused just long enough for the hush to take effect. He was a master of timing. "Let us consider these charges," he went on. "Here we have a man, Loren Ambler—" he pointed to the killer "—one of the most famous names in motion pictures, a star of the first magnitude, an actor known and respected in every city, every village where Vitafilm Productions are exhibited. Today he stands before you, accused of murder; placed in jeopardy for a crime which he did not commit."

The jurors hunched forward, listening.

"The prosecution claims that my client, in a moment of mad jealousy, slew a young contract actress named Dorothy DuVelle, subsequently attempting to conceal his crime by partially dismembering and then burning her body. Charred bones have been offered in evidence, purporting to be the *corpus delicti*. You have heard the testimony of so-called anthropological and dental experts identifying these fragments as being the last earthly remains of the missing DuVelle girl."

The killer scowled at his lawyer. What the hell was the idea of re-hashing all this stuff? A defense attorney was supposed to refute damaging evidence, not emphasize it.

Griffith, oblivious to his client's frown, continued talking. "This entire case is predicated upon the assumption that Dorothy DuVelle is dead, and that Loren Ambler killed her. Let me repeat that Mr. Ambler is on trial for the murder of Miss DuVelle. It is important that you remember this, *for I now propose to prove that Dorothy DuVelle is not dead.*"

Excitement stirred the courtroom. The judge banged his gavel for silence. "Produce your evidence, Mr. Griffith."

"Thank you, Your Honor. That's exactly what I intend to do." The attorney gestured toward the rear of the room, and a motion picture technician came forward with a portable projection apparatus, a reel of film in a flat round can, and a miniature white screen. "The evidence is right here, if I have the court's permission to display it."

The judge looked puzzled. "What is to be the nature of your display, Mr. Griffith?"

"A newsreel, Your Honor. An extremely recent newsreel, taken in Seattle only four days ago—since this trial started. Or rather, I should say a portion of a newsreel. A clipping from the weekly Vitafilm *Review of Events.*"

"Objection!" the deputy prosecutor in charge of the case got up on his feet. "I fail to see how—"

The judge waved him down. "Overruled. Proceed, Mr. Griffith. Do you want the courtroom darkened?"

"It would help. Thank you. And now,

as we prepare to project this bit of film, I should like to explain my reasons. Last night I happened to drop into a theater in Westwood, where, before the regular feature was shown, I saw the latest Vitafilm *Review*. You may well imagine my complete astonishment when there came a scene from a certain Seattle shipyard; the launching of a new destroyer. The cameraman had—"

AGAIN the prosecutor bounded upright. "Is this a murder trial or a demonstration of new American naval strength?" he asked sarcastically.

"A murder trial, by all means," Griffith answered politely. "At least it might be, Your Honor," he added, facing the bench, "if my worthy legal adversary would stop interrupting."

The judge brandished his gavel. "Proceed. There will be no more interruptions, I promise you. The court reporter will enter in his official record the fact that I have reprimanded the deputy prosecutor. Now go ahead. You said something about a cameraman, I believe?"

"Yes. He apparently used a telephoto lens to get a close-up of the crowds attending the launching ceremony. When I saw this shot last night in the theater, I recognized someone in the very forefront of that crowd. With your permission, I shall now project the same scene so that Your Honor and the members of the jury can see what I saw. I might add that Vitafilm Studios kindly loaned me this copy of the newsreel in order that I could offer it as evidence."

The killer grinned in the darkened courtroom. This was more like it, he told himself. *Come on, miracle!*

As if in response to his unspoken words, the projection machine began to whir and the miniature screen glowed with sudden brilliance; a rectangular whiteness that abruptly became movement in sharp clarity. First there was an overall view of the shipbuilding yards, the scene then panning to the destroyer about to be launched. The camera then turned toward the throngs watching the ceremony, and a young blonde girl could be observed pressing forward in obvious excitement. Her features, clear-cut and lovely as a cameo, appeared with the sharpness of a studio close-up.

"There!" Bernie Griffith said triumphantly. "Your Honor, and ladies and gentlemen of the jury, there is the missing Dorothy DuVelle—*alive as of four days ago when that ship was launched!* And if she was alive on that date, my client certainly couldn't have murdered her three weeks previously!"

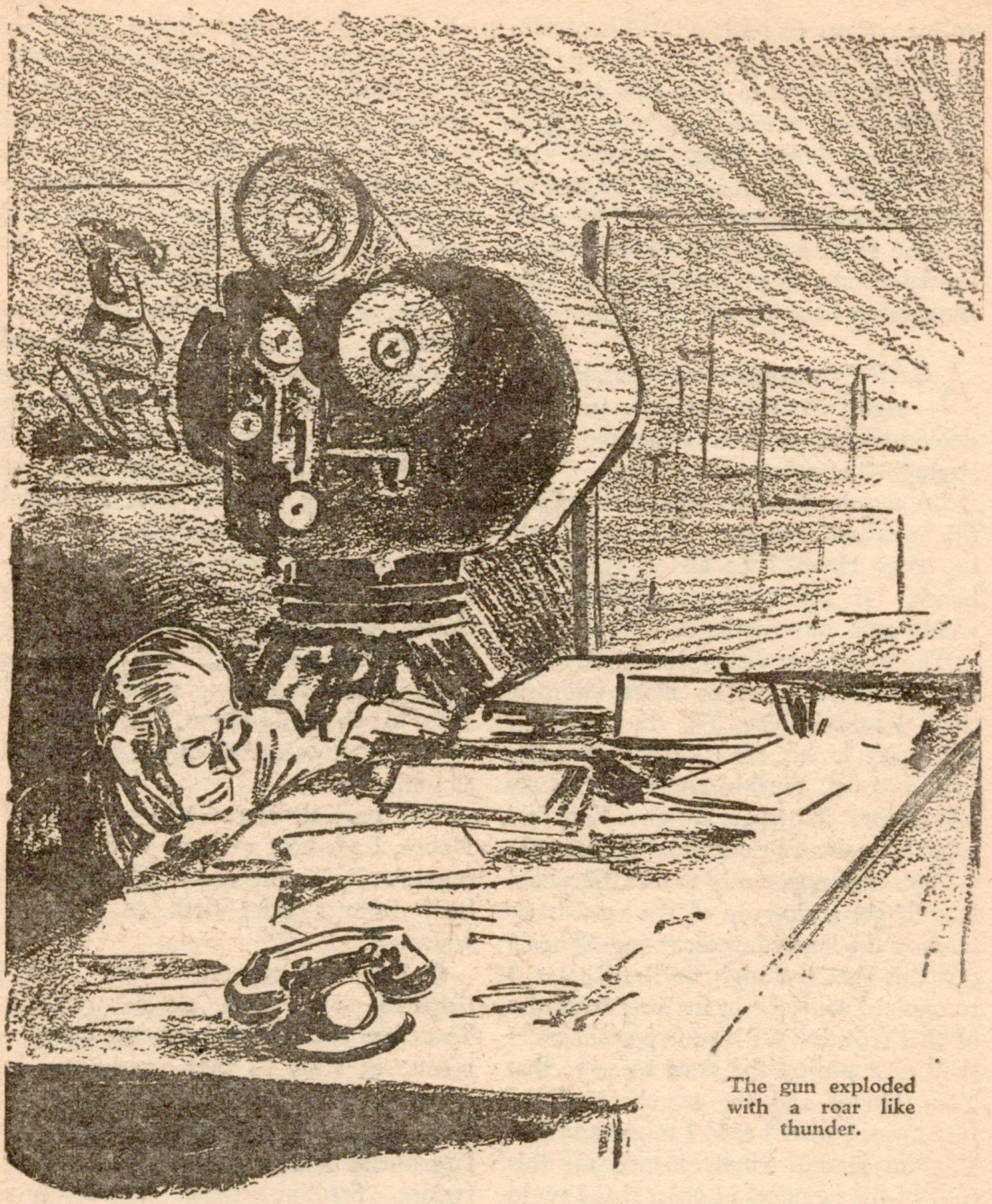
The newsreel faded out. The courtroom's Venetian blinds were once more slatted horizontally to admit the afternoon's waning sunlight. And at the same instant, the prosecuting attorney leaped from his chair. "I object," he yelled.

"On what grounds?" the judge peered at him.

"On grounds of common sense! Your Honor, I ask how we, here in this room, can identify or pretend to identify anybody from a brief flash on a movie screen—"

Griffith, also, was on his feet. "I anticipated some such absurd rebuttal. Therefore I had blowups made; enlargements, or stills as they are known in movie parlance. I offer them in evidence, Your Honor. Here they are; positive enlargements taken from those newsreel frames. Scrutinize them. Let the jury examine them. Compare them, if you please, with these other studio portraits of the missing Dorothy DuVelle, taken recently by a Vitafilm photographer before she vanished. Such a comparison is all I ask. It will prove beyond any shadow of doubt that Miss DuVelle is the girl in the newsreel.

"For some reason known only to herself she has left Hollywood, abandoned



The gun exploded with a roar like thunder.

her screen career, and gone to Seattle. She may be no longer in Seattle, for that matter. But I submit that I have amply demonstrated the fact of her being alive as recently as four days ago."

"Nonsense!" the prosecutor said bitterly. "You've demonstrated nothing, except possibly a few feet of doctored reel and some faked enlargements!"

Griffith smiled beningly. "If this is a doctored reel, then I must have doctored hundreds of others. That same news picture is now being shown in theaters all over the country, exactly as you saw it here. You can find that out for yourself if you care to go to a few movies this week."

"Just a moment," the judge said in a grim voice. "Mr. Prosecutor, do I understand you to make a formal accusation

of chicanery against Mr. Griffith and his client? Let me remind you that such an accusation is actionable unless you stand ready and able to prove it."

The prosecuting attorney reddened uncomfortably. "Well, I—er, that is—I withdraw the remark, Your Honor. I apologize for it. But I still maintain that a newsreel shot is too insubstantial to be accepted as identification evidence."

"Isn't that for the jury to determine?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

Bernie Griffith grinned. "I'm willing to stipulate that the newsreel shot, per se, is insubstantial. I do not submit it as positive identification. I offer it as showing reasonable doubt. I believe the picture is genuinely Dorothy DuVelle. On that assumption, I say that it is doubtful that she's dead. If she is not dead, my

client cannot be guilty of murdering her."

"But the bones—the *corpus delicti*—"

"Quite obviously the body of some other girl, some unknown, unidentified corpse. And I remind you again that my client is on trial for the murder of Miss DuVelle, not for the murder of an unidentified person. The defense rests." Griffith sat down.

Within an hour the jury had returned its verdict: Not Guilty.

IT TOOK Loren Ambler almost another hour to get out of the courtroom. The crowds pressed around him, shaking his hand, asking for his autograph. Newspaper extras were already being hawked on the streets outside, their eight column banner headlines proclaiming SCREEN STAR ACQUITTED! LOREN AMBLER FREED OF DEATH CHARGE! ALLEGED VICTIM STILL ALIVE!

This publicity, Ambler reflected, would be worth plenty to him—and to Vitafilm. From now on he'd be a bigger star than ever; people would flock to see any movie in which he appeared. Maybe he could even wangle a new contract from the studio at a healthy boost in salary. He grinned sourly at Bernie Griffith when they finally gained the sidewalk.

"Nice going, mouthpiece," he said. "I owe you a lot."

Griffith chuckled. "A guy named Leonard Smith is the party you're really indebted to. I've already told you how he called on me day before yesterday and said he would have the newsreel proof of your innocence within forty-eight hours—although I'm damned if I see how he could have had the information that far in advance."

"He probably saw a rush print of the reel," Ambler explained it plausibly enough. "Being a studio employee he'd naturally have access to news footage before the release date."

"Sure, except that he isn't in the newsreel department. He told me he works in special effects, whatever that means." Then the lawyer shrugged. "Not that it matters. I did my part by going to a theater and spotting the scene Smith mentioned. After that, it was no trick to borrow the reel for a courtroom climax. The point is, you're free and I've won another case."

Ambler hailed a taxi. "Yes. Now I've got to find this Leonard Smith and pay him for his help."

"He didn't mention wanting any pay," Griffith said.

"All right. At least I can thank him." Ambler got into the cab and told its driver to take him to the Vitafilm lot. "Make it snappy," he added.

Twenty minutes later he walked into the studio's technical lab building, went to the special effects department and located the man who had saved his life.

LEONARD SMITH sat at a paper-littered desk in a small room too barren and cheerless to be called an office. He was surrounded by film equipment—microphones, miniature sets, glass transparencies of clouds and seascapes, a movieola for inspecting motion picture reels without the necessity of projecting them onto a screen. He looked up when the killer entered. "Hello, Mr. Ambler," he said diffidently.

Loren Ambler was curiously conscious of the contrast between his own stalwart handsomeness and the meek, nondescript appearance of this man named Smith. "Hello," he answered. "You—ahem, you're Leonard Smith, are you?"

"Yes. Yes, of course I am."

"Okay. Let's get down to business. What's your price?"

Smith looked mildly astounded. "My price?"

"You heard me. For faking that newsreel."

"Oh, that," Smith smiled wistfully and stirred the papers on his desk. "Then you realized I'd faked it, eh?"

"Certainly. How much do you want?"

"I didn't do it for money," Smith said. He added in a sober tone: "It was quite a job."

"How did you work it?"

"A special effect. That's my trade, you know. First I managed to obtain the developed negative of that launching scene from the latest newsreel."

"Stole it?"

Smith smiled. "Let's say I borrowed it. I had just one night in which to tamper with it and return it to its proper department for multiple positive printing and national release. I had to do a fast job."

"Fast," the killer agreed. "And also damned good." He stared at the special effects expert. "What technique did you use?"

"A standard one. I had previously procured an early Vitafilm test reel of Miss DuVelle, made when she was first placed under contract to the studio. That test reel, plus the newsreel scene, gave me what I needed. I took the newsreel negative and masked out one of the spectators at the launching. I then reproduced the shipyard shot with a blank space where that spectator had been. You follow me?"

Loren Ambler nodded. "Sure. Go on."

"Well, I then superimposed the early test movie of Dorothy DuVelle upon the blank spot in the newsreel footage, fitting her image carefully into the space. Re-photographing the scene gave me a negative in which Miss DuVelle seemed to be witnessing the launching of the destroyer. I returned this altered film to the newsreel department. Nobody there suspected what had been done. They made their positive prints and shipped them out to theaters all through the country—and meantime I tipped off your lawyer that he would find evidence in that newsreel which would result in your acquittal."

"Damned clever," Ambler said. "But why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you do it? Why did you want to save me from the gas chamber? After all, you and I are strangers."

Leonard Smith looked grave. "I had an excellent reason. As a matter of fact, you've just given me what I hoped to get."

"What do you mean? What have I given you?"

"Your confession of guilt," Smith said.

The killer scowled. "Now wait a minute. I—"

"Look. You were on trial, but the only evidence against you was a *corpus delicti* consisting of charred bones and mutilated fragments. These had been identified as the body of Miss DuVelle; but you had Bernie Griffith defending you, one of the smartest criminal attorneys in the west. It was entirely possible that a lawyer of his caliber might get you off with a life sentence or even less, particularly since you'd apparently convinced him of your innocence. If he honestly believed you hadn't killed Miss DuVelle, I know he'd move heaven and earth to keep you from the lethal chamber."

AMBLER'S brow furrowed. "What are you driving at?" he demanded.

"It's very simple," Smith said quietly through a dry smile. His eyes looked wistful. "You see, I was in love with Dorothy DuVelle. I'm the one who arranged for her to get her first test here at Vitafilm; the test that brought her a contract. Understand, I never told her I loved her. She was much too good for a nobody like me."

"I don't get this. I don't get any part of it."

Smith sighed. "I'm trying to explain

it. When she was killed, I wanted her murderer punished. By punishment I mean death, not just a term in prison. If you were really the one who murdered her, I couldn't stand the thought of Bernie Griffith getting you off with a few years in San Quentin. You deserved a worse sentence than that. On the other hand, if you were innocent, I wanted to help you go free."

"Okay. You helped to get me acquitted. I'm innocent."

"No. You're guilty, Mr. Ambler. Guilty as hell."

Ambler stiffened. "How do you figure?"

"My special effect scheme has given me the answer. It's an easy matter of simple logic. The newsreel saved you; right?"

"Sure it saved me. So what?"

"So this," Smith said levelly. "If you weren't guilty, you would have assumed that newsreel to be genuine. If you had not killed Dorothy, you would think she was still alive—as indicated by the launching scene from Seattle."

"Well?"

"But instead, you came here to my office just now and told me you knew the newsreel was faked. How were you aware that it was a phony scene, a process shot, a special effect?"

Ambler licked his lips nervously. "Why, I—I—"

"You knew it was faked because you knew Dorothy DuVelle was actually dead. Being dead, she couldn't have appeared in a news shot. And how could you know she was dead, unless you're the man who murdered her?"

"That's pretty clever," Ambler said harshly.

Smith nodded. "I think so. I think I contrived it very cleverly indeed. By coming to me and admitting you knew the reel was doctored, you confessed the murder."

"All right. So I killed her. So what?" the actor's voice was sullenly challenging. "I was drunk at the time. She and I had a date. I made a pass at her. She put up a struggle, and somehow I—well, I guess I choked her too hard. The next thing I knew, I was sober and she was dead. Naturally I—I had to dispose of the body—"

"I always thought it must have happened something like that. I had a hunch," Smith said.

"And what are you going to do about it?"

Smith pushed a pile of papers from his desk to the floor—thereby revealing an electric button and a .38 revolver. "Remember when I fiddled with those papers a while ago?" he asked. "I did it right after you came in and began talking."

"Yes. What of it?"

"I pressed this switch under the papers. It cut in a sound track and a live microphone—another little special effect of mine. I've got a record of your confession, Mr. Ambler. In your own voice."

THE killer laughed. "Do you think you can railroad me with a thing like that? You're screwy, cousin. I know enough law to keep me from worrying over your sound track gadget."

"Really?" Smith sounded unimpressed.

"You're damned right. A man can't be placed twice in jeopardy for the same crime. I've been acquitted of Dorothy DuVelle's murder. No matter what evidence you dig up from now on, nobody can arrest me or put me on trial again for that job. Not even my own confession could make that happen."

Smith drew a deep breath, weary, patient, resigned. "You're very shrewd, Mr. Ambler. Perhaps I can't send you to the lethal chamber on the basis of this sound track. But I can make the confes-

sion public, which will end your career in pictures. The Hays office will bar you from the screen."

"Well, by God!" Loren Ambler said. "I hadn't thought of that. Hm-m-m." He grabbed for the gun on the desk. "I think you'd better give me the sound track, Smith. Right now."

"And if I refuse?"

"I'll plug you and take it anyway. Nobody saw me coming in here to visit you. It'll go down as an unsolved kill. Let's have the record, chum. Now."

Smith squared his slight shoulders. "No."

"I warn you, I'll shoot."

"Go ahead. Help yourself. The girl I loved is dead, murdered. You killed her. You may as well kill me too."

Ambler's finger tightened on the trigger. "You're asking for it, you sap." He fired straight at Smith's heart.

Curiously enough, though, the gun spat no bullet from its ugly muzzle. Instead, it exploded with a roar that filled the small office with thunder. Leonard Smith, at the last split instant, had hurled himself under his desk for protection from this hideous blast; and now, as the echoes faded, he poked his head cautiously forward to survey the damage.

A little later he phoned the police. "Loren Ambler is dead here at the Vitafilm lot," he announced mildly. "I got a sound track of him confessing the murder of Dorothy DuVelle. He tried to take it away from me. He threatened me with a gun. He pulled its trigger. It exploded and killed him. Yes, I have all the evidence right here for you, including his corpse and the broken pieces of the pistol."

Smith did not see fit to explain that the weapon had been deliberately placed on his desk so that the killer would grab it.

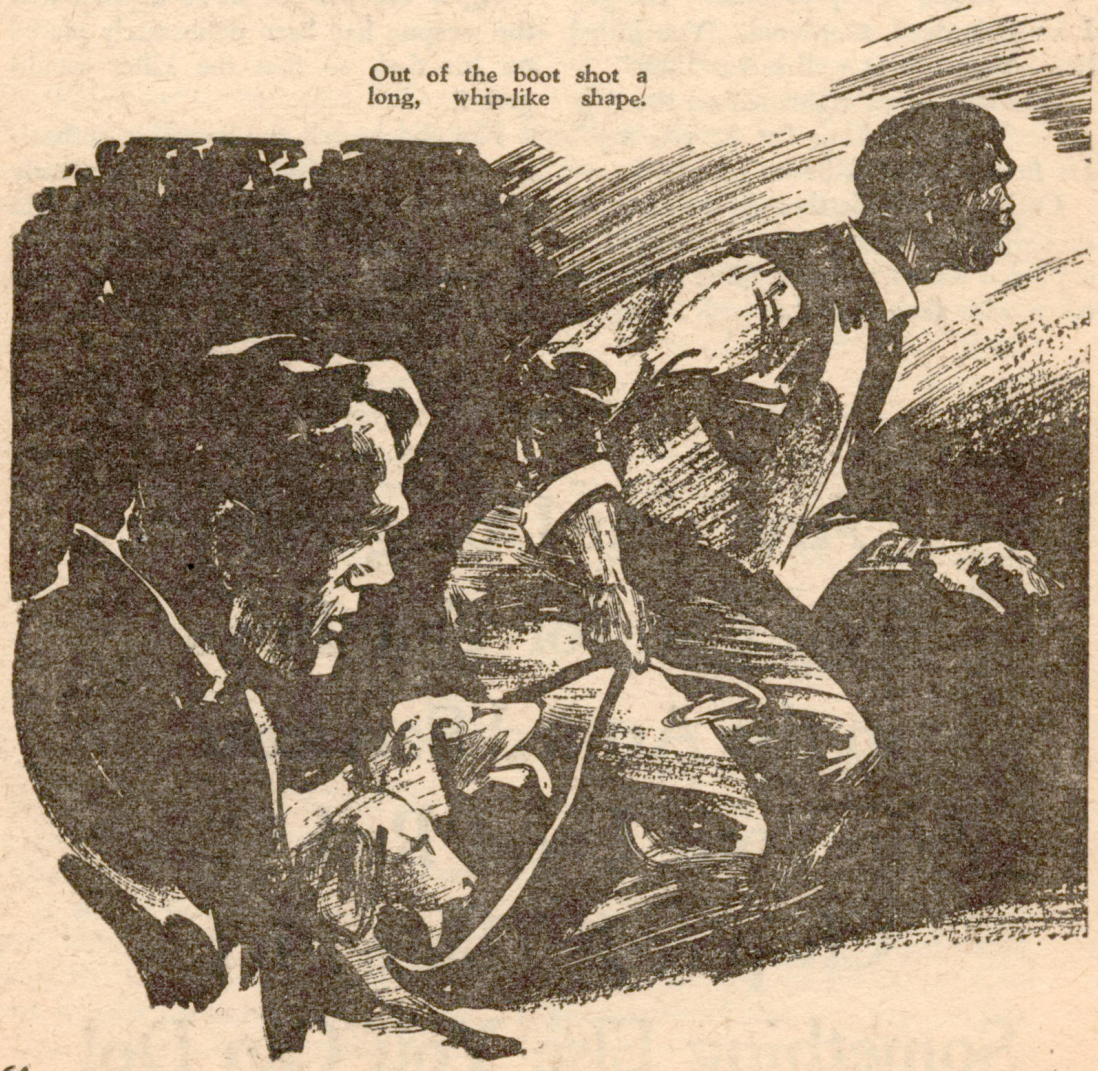
Nor did he tell the homicide authorities that he, Smith, had previously tampered with the gun so that it would explode in the murderer's fist. After all, there were some special effects you preferred to keep secret.

CURSE of the

IF THERE was one word that Dr. Gabriel disliked, it was the adjective "physic." The little man would go red in the face when any of his clients made use of that expression. "Madam," he would shout—of course his clients were almost exclusively women—"I do not admit that adjective into my vocabulary. It covers a multitude of follies, like 'dermatitis' and 'telepathy.' I am an unorthodox practitioner, still in good standing, attempting to use psychology in the examination of some of the obscurer phases of mental aberrations and psychoses."

But when I took him to task he would modify his standpoint. "I know, Speer," he would admit. "But I can't afford to bring the American Medical Society down on me, if I am to do any good in the world. Call me a ghost-seer if you like, but say it to yourself. I've got to work under cover of the great A. M. S., which is father and mother to me, and my insurance against a hard workaday world."

There were startling discoveries made



Out of the boot shot a long, whip-like shape!

TREMAINES

By HUGH SPEER

"Never, until the end of time, shall the eldest son of a Tremaine live to inherit his father's possessions, but always he shall die, as soon as he attains the age of manhood." That was the curse Dr. Gabriel, ghost-seer, psychic detective, was asked to avert

by us during those two years after he had, very cautiously, admitted me to full participation in his work. There was humor, too, and there was pathos. Of all our cases, I remember best that of the Tremaines, because of the dramatic and unexpected finale.

It was, of course, the mother, who came to Gabriel's office in the dingy building on Lexington Avenue. She was closeted with Gabriel for more than an hour, and, as she passed the open door of my office, I saw her face twisted with grief, and the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Little, rotund Gabriel was sitting at his desk, his fingertips together; he turned his head as I entered, and motioned to me to sit down.

"Unusual case?" I asked him.

"Most unusual, and most interesting. I've been trying to find a case like this one all my working life. This is the first that has come my way, though the story is as old as that of civilized man.

"That woman hasn't told me everything, though," he added. "Damn them, you never get the whole truth out of them! No, I don't know yet just what she's keeping back. I may know more about it when we get down to Maryland."

SOME time in the early eighteenth century Roger Tremaine's ancestors had built the straggling old house on Chesapeake Bay, just above tidewater. There had been an extensive plantation once, tilled by slaves, but now the scrub oak grew close up to the house. The whole countryside, which had been decimated in one of the yellow fever epidemics, was deserted.

Tremaine had inherited a little money from the maternal side, and the old house from the agnatic. He had just enough to live without working, and so he had never worked in his life, except for his army service, but he hadn't enough to enable him to repair the old mansion, or to put in plumbing, and he didn't seem to care about modern conveniences. He fished, he loafed, and he let his two sons grow up any way they pleased.

He had fought in the first world war, attained the rank of lieutenant-colonel, and received three medals for bravery. He might have stayed in the army, and risen to high rank. But he went back to the tidewater house on the Chesapeake, and lolled through life, happy in doing nothing in particular, and doing it with all the grace of a southern gentleman of the old school.

Of the two sons, Billy, the elder was a boy of singular charm. At twenty, he might have been some eighteenth century figure, graceful, dignified, and universally beloved. He had won high honors at his college, and he had a chance to go to West Point—under some special age dispensation, as I understood.

The second son, Milward, was all that Billy wasn't, and nothing that Billy was. Dark-browed, surly, requested to leave three private schools, he loafed about the place, and there was no love lost between him and his father.

So much Gabriel and I learned quickly, after our arrival at the Tremaine place. We ate by the light of an enormous oil lamp, suspended overhead by silver chains. The food was excellent, there was an old, devoted Negro serving-man; it was very picturesque, with the feathered mahogany furniture, and the tattered oriental rugs. Billy was there, with Roger and his wife, Millicent, but Milward wasn't, and Roger was considerably disconcerted by his absence.

I could guess a great deal more than the Tremaines told us. Of course Gabriel had already informed me what the problem was, and it hadn't made much of an impression on me.

"You don't mean to say you really believe that superstition?" I asked him.

We were sitting alone in a drawing-room, with furniture done in faded yellow tapestry. The Tremaines had excused themselves, and I could see they wanted to postpone all further explanations.

"YOU don't believe," I said again, "in this superstition of the sacrifice of the first-born?"

"You've read your Bible? The sacrifice of the first-born was the last plague inflicted upon the Egyptians, and the reason why Pharaoh decided to let the Children of Israel go."

"Admitted," I answered. "But a legend, doctor. Come, hardly a clergyman is seriously required to accept that story."

"A legend if you like. Nevertheless, it does correspond to a certain sacrificial principle in Nature. She isn't kind, you know. She sacrifices millions of organisms in her search for perfection. Every doctor knows—you know that the first-born child comes into this world under peculiar difficulties and dangers.

"Now, Speer, let us suppose that this same cruel plan of Nature follows the first-born after he has successfully negotiated the entrance into phenomenal life. Let us suppose there is a principle that pursues the first-born with the same sort of fury that the Greeks depicted in their dramas. Suppose there is something conscious and malevolent that claims the sacrifice of the first-born son?"

"Dr. Gabriel," I answered, "you were telling me that you had been looking for such a case, and that the story was as old as that of civilized man. Had you anything besides the Biblical legend in mind?"

"Yes, I was thinking of the sovereigns of England. Are you a historian? Let us start with the Tudors. Henry VIII was a second son; his elder brother, Arthur, died. Henry's eldest son, the Duke of Richmond, died.

"Come to the next male sovereign. Charles I was a second son. His elder brother, Henry, died.

"Among the Georges, George III was a grandson. His father, Frederick, the heir to the throne, was killed by a tennis-ball.

"There the curse seemed to lapse, for nearly a century, but George V was a second son. His elder brother, Edward, died.

"Speer, I've heard of other cases, but never met one until now. For every eldest son of the Tremaine family had died between the ages of twenty and twenty-one, since the family settled on these Maryland shores a hundred and fifty years ago.

"There is a tradition that some curse was put upon the Tremaines by a gypsy woman who had a justifiable grievance against the earliest of the family to cross the ocean. I don't know whether this woman was able in some way to guide a malevolent force of Nature, or whether it's all rigmarole. I'm here to find out, if I can. Billy will be twenty-one in a few days, and the parents are living in utter torment."

VOICES outside interrupted our conversation. I heard a man's voice, a girl's voice, and then the voices of Roger and Millicent Tremaine. The girl's voice was raised to a pitch of high excitement. And then they came pouring in—the Tremaines, and Billy, and the man and girl.

Roger said, in a high-pitched, unnatural voice: "Gentlemen, I want you to meet Mr. Curtis, a neighbor and an old family friend. And Miss Lydia Drake, another neighbor."

The girl was a beauty. About twenty years of age, dark-haired, dark-eyed, wearing a sweater that set off the perfection of her figure. She linked her arm through Billy's, and drew him toward

us, and her eyes were flashing, and her voice was a fine tremolo as she said:

"I know all about this, Dr. Gabriel. I know why you have come here. You are trying to find out if Billy has got to die. Well, he's not going to die, just because I love him, and he loves me. It's all an absurd superstition, I tell you. Just because his father's elder brother died when he was twenty, and his grandfather's elder brother died when he was twenty-one, is no reason why Billy is going to die. So you gentlemen are on a wild-goose chase, and you'd best go back where you come!"

Then the tears welled into her eyes, and suddenly she seemed on the point of falling, only Billy was holding her.

Before he could raise the gun, she had snatched it from him.

"You've got to save him," she wept. "I can't let Billy die. Save him, won't you, Dr. Gabriel?" she pleaded. "Don't you understand the terror under which we're living? I knew you were here, and I made Mr. Curtis bring me. You've got to save Billy from this curse. He's living here, waiting for death. They want him at West Point, and he can't go, because he's just got to stay here, waiting for death.

"He can't go swimming, or fishing, because he may be snatched by the ocean.

He can't ride, because his horse might throw him. He can't shoot, because his gun might explode. He has to live like an invalid, not because he wants to, but because we're all afraid for him. How long must this go on? Oh, how I wish he were the younger!"

THERE was something in this frank declaration that ought to have been shocking, but Lydia Drake's complete honesty saved it from seeming so. I looked furtively from face to face. There, in Roger Tremaine's shamed expression, I read his own answer to the girl's challenge. He loved Billy, his elder son, so much better than Milward, that he wished with all his heart Milward were the elder of the two.

And, furtive as my glance was, it was less so than the look on Millicent Tremaine's face. I recalled what Gabriel had said about her not having told him everything. I wondered if she, too, wished that Milward were the older boy. Mothers do have their preferences among their children, though they will hardly admit it, even to themselves.

Curtis, the neighbor, was looking down, and I saw his clasped fingers working. Little Dr. Gabriel sat silent, studying the group. And then Billy broke out, with cheerful tones:

"I say, folks, isn't this carrying matters a little far?" he asked. "I'm glad to have Dr. Gabriel and Dr. Speer here, of course, but as for my predicted doom, why should I have to die a dozen times before it comes off? It's all nonsense, you know, dad, and from now on I'm going to live a normal he-man's life. I'm going to West Point next week, and that's the start of my reformation. What do you think about it, darling?"

"I think you're right, Billy," cried the girl. "I think we're all a parcel of fools to let a stupid superstition get us down. It's only because I know Roger and Millicent are afraid of it that I've let myself go sometimes. What do you think, Dr. Gabriel? Come, give us your frank opinion. It was Millicent here who went to you, in spite of all I could say. So you can be frank with me, because I don't believe a word of that nonsense."

"You are asking me for a diagnosis," parried Gabriel, "and that is the one thing a doctor doesn't like to give. I am not convinced there is a curse, but, if there should be one, I am here to try to destroy it. And my opinion is that it is not worth Mr. William's time to try to avoid it. He'd best go about as if he'd never heard of such a thing."

"Now I'm beginning to have confidence in your judgment, doctor," smiled Lydia.

Roger Tremaine said: "My elder brother scratched his hand on a pin, that had been left in a pair of new gloves. He was twenty years and ten months. He died of tetanus."

A door slammed, a voice bawled, a man came tramping along the hall. He looked about Billy's age. He was wearing hunting clothes, and jack-boots reaching to his knees, and he carried a gun under his arm.

"Hello, folks," he called, "still busy plotting what sort of death Bill's got to die? Lemme finish him off now!"

He aimed the gun, leering, vacuous, and evidently half-drunk. Before he had it at his shoulder, Lydia had snatched it from him, and flung it on the floor. "Get out of here, you drunken fool!" she cried. "Are you trying to kill Billy?"

"I would if I could get away with it. Then I'd make up to you, Lydia. You'd fall for me, because I'm the only fellow of your age around here. Don't look like that. It wasn't loaded. Sh'pose I'd tramp the woods with a loaded gun?"

He kicked it into a corner, and stood leering at us. "Don't know these gentlemen's names," he said, "but I guess

they're the psychic experts you went to see, mom."

I could see little Gabriel's jowl swell and redden, like a turkey's wattles, at the word.

"You ought to get some hunting. It's fine, now the undergrowth is dying down. Lots of coon and possum down by the swamps. Snakes, too. That's why I wear these boots. Big, ugly copperheads. Billy used to be a great hunter once, but his mom won't let him hunt any more. Afraid one of those copperheads will get him. Well, something's got to get him. You're not giving Billy a fair chance, mom."

Nobody answered him. Lydia, white with anger, had sat down on the sofa beside Billy, and slipped her hand into his. Roger Tremaine and his wife, Millicent, seemed helpless in the presence of this drunken fool of theirs. Curtis was still looking down, and he began to crack his fingers. I heard the joints snap, one after another.

Milward grinned, picked up his gun, and left the room.

MUCH later that night Gabriel and I sat with Roger Tremaine in his library. It was a large room at the rear of the old house, warmed by an oil stove, which smelled abominably, and barely sufficed to keep the cold from creeping in. Outside, the rain was pattering on the glass.

It was one of those old libraries that smell of dust and decay. Most of the books were leather-bound, and nearly all must have been there for about two hundred years. I had read the titles of some of them—Pope, Addison, and the authors of Queen Anne's period.

Roger Tremaine said: "You've asked me for a family history, Dr. Gabriel. I believe our family is mentioned in several books, but there is no reference to . . .

"Well, since my wife brought you down here, I suppose I ought not to conceal anything. As a matter of fact, there's nothing to conceal. The curse is supposed to have been laid upon us by a gypsy girl—"

"I've read about it," answered Gabriel. "There's a little book about the old Southern families, written about the year 1824, and printed privately—"

"I never heard of it."

"It's in the collection of a friend of mine who is a genealogist. You see, Mr. Tremaine, I made a point of gathering whatever information I could. However, beyond the allegation of gypsy blood in the family, I could gather little."

"There is not a drop of gypsy blood in the Tremaine family," answered Roger, rather testily. "But, since you have gathered certain facts about us, I'll show you a diary, written by an ancestor of mine long before the Revolution."

He crossed the room and unlocked a cabinet. From this he withdrew a box of japaned tin, and out of this he took a little book bound in frayed brown leather. He brought it to Gabriel and myself. The writing was brown with age, but the paper had lasted, and the diary was easily discernible.

"The writer was Leonard Tremaine," said Roger. "The date, you'll see, is 1747. Leonard seems to have been one of the earliest psycho-analysts, to judge from the way he has expressed his feelings and emotions.

THE story was a commonplace one, and might have been repeated a thousand times, but it was decorated with the sentimental frills that writers of that date seemed to consider an essential part of the literary art. Thus there were pages in which Leonard Tremaine ranted about the "Egyptian" girl, and his descriptions of her beauty would not have been amiss in many a magazine of the present day.

"My last hope has vanished," he wrote—with a singular mixture of passion and cold-blooded calculation. "My father has informed me that, unless I conclude the present attachment, he will send me forth penniless, and never recognize me as his son again. The land, with the slaves, should be worth eight thousand pound, and it would all come to me. Oh unkind heaven, that has chastised me so! I must see Betta, and advise her that all that has been between us must now lie entombed in memory.

"My father says that he will pay her a hundred pound not to shew her face here again."

Here, unfortunately, several pages seems to have been torn from the diary, possibly by Leonard himself. When he came into evidence again, his sentiments had changed completely.

"Oh happy Me," he wrote, in reckless defiance of grammar—"Oh happy Me to have been blessed with a parent so noble, so understanding, and so magnanimous. My father tells me that I shall inherit all his estate, which he appraises at more than ten thousand pound. As for that witch, should she appear again in these parts, she shall be whipped by the common hangman through the streets.

"But I dared not tell my father of that horrible curse she laid on me. Although I am sure that no curse, uttered by such a villainous creature can affect the life or happiness of a righteous man, nevertheless the memory of her manner, the spectacle of her fury, and, I confess, the recollection of her charms, fill me with a sense of indescribable sadness."

Roger Tremaine turned the page. On the next, framed in a border of ink-drawn roses, was the curse:

"So long as the Tremaines shall remain on earth, the curse of the Atsigan shall rest upon them. The curse that was laid on our forefather, Pharaoh, shall rest upon them. The curse of the people of Ron shall rest upon them Never, until the end of time, shall the eldest son of a Tremaine live to inherit his father's possessions, but always he shall die, as soon as he attains the age of manhood.

"And this curse shall last for ever and for ever, undiminished, until such time may come as the wife of a Tremaine shall prove faithless to him, and then the curse shall be raised, and it shall pass away."

"Nice, pleasant young woman she must have been," I said.

THERE was no response to my rather fatuous remark. Roger Tremaine put the manuscript away, and came back. "I love my elder son," he said with simple pathos. "More than Milward, as you have seen. I've tried to feel the same way to both boys, but I've never been able to. Milward represents a certain strain in the Tremaines that crops up every second or third generation, always at war with the others of the family. I imagine my ancestor Leonard must have been like him. Look at the portraits in the hall upstairs: you'll see two other Milwards, who look exactly like him."

He went on, offering the shy confidences of a man who finds it difficult to unburden himself:

"You see, Billy was born while I was at the war, fighting in the hell of the stinking, rat-ridden trenches in France, not daring to hope that I'd ever see my home again. And I'd been married only a month when my regiment sailed.

"Curtis—you met him—was my captain, and I was a young lieutenant. He saved my life—carried me across No Man's Land when I was wounded. He saved me, but he was badly hit, and was invalided home. I got a week in America, and went back into that hell again. You see, gentlemen, how painful all this is to me, because we're very much

of a single family down here, we descendants of the old colonists, and I don't like pulling the skeletons out of their closets.

"Milward has always hated Billy, and resented the fact that he's the older, and will inherit the property, though I've promised him that I'll make it up to him in other ways. Dr. Gabriel, I've got to tell you that my son Milward seems to have no conscience. I believe—I'm afraid that Milward is planning to do away with Billy.

"You heard what he said to Miss Drake tonight? Milward has got—well, a bad reputation among the young women in these parts, and I know he'd stop at nothing if he could win Miss Drake away from Billy, because she represents, for him, the unattainable."

Dr. Gabriel said quietly, "It is possible that the situation is not as bad as that, Mr. Tremaine."

Tremaine stood there, his face nervously twitching. If ever a man was on the verge of a breakdown, he was the man.

"What hope can you give me?" he said tremulously.

"Where are your sons?"

"Milward's gone possum-hunting. Billy rode home with Miss Drake and Curtis."

"Then your son's safe for tonight, at least, so far as his brother is concerned," answered Gabriel. "Have a good night's sleep, Mr. Tremaine. Tomorrow I may have a plan to avert this threatening danger.

THE oil lamps in the hall above cast only a dim light, but it was light enough for us to inspect the pictures. There were about a dozen of them, ranging from the earliest Tremaine, in red army coat, knee-breeches, and Ramillie wig, to a florid gentleman in the costume of the middle nineteenth century. There were two ladies among them, contemporaries of Revolutionary times.

And among these fair-haired, debonair men, there were two who might have been Wilward Tremaine himself, the likeness was so close. They were dark-browed, scowling, furtive persons. Some strain in the Tremaine blood that kept cropping up. No wonder the book Gabriel had read had said that the Tremaines possessed a strain of gypsy blood.

"It may be true," said Gabriel, reading my thoughts. "I don't suppose that Leonard Tremaine told quite all the truth in that diary of his."

We had two small rooms adjoining each other, at the end of the hall, some distance from the rest of the bedrooms. Gabriel sat down in a chair, and I watched him, wondering what was in his mind.

"If only it were possible—" he began, and stopped. "If only it were possible . . . you see, Spear, the question is whether this malevolent quality in Nature is blind or conscious. If, as I fear, it is a blind force, there is little can be done. But, if some conscious principle has lasted through the years, and is still directing this curse against the Tremaines, we might, perhaps. . . .

"If only we could persuade it that Milward is the elder son, and not Billy."

I was staggered by the idea. I had found it difficult to believe in the efficacy of the curse. But Gabriel had advanced so simple and daring a proposition that it seemed to cut the Gordian knot.

"How?" I asked.

"I should have requested Tremaine's permission to keep that diary for a while. It is a link—admittedly a very tenuous link with the personality of a gypsy girl who has been dead two centuries. At the same time it might prove a starting point—"

Gabriel went on musing, while I watched him. My experiences with him

had taught me that he had an uncanny knack of finding the clue through a labyrinth of baffling circumstances. But I didn't believe that the curse—if it existed—could be removed by playing a trick on whatever personality remained of a gypsy girl, dead for two centuries.

GABRIEL made no response when I said good night to him. I threw myself on my bed in the next room, and gave myself up to pondering. It was a nasty situation. Frankly, I believed that the death-curse was a myth, and yet it would be awkward if Billy Tremaine met his end while we were guests at his parents' house.

I had seldom seen any person whom I disliked as much as Milward. And Roger Tremaine's confession of fear, lest Milward was plotting his brother's death, filled me with apprehension. I lay there, hearing no movement from Gabriel in the next room, knowing that he was pondering the problem. I wished we were back in the office in Lexington Avenue. It was all very well to play with psychic experiments, but I felt the near approach of death—in the night wind, in the night noises, in the eeriness of the old house.

I glanced at my wrist-watch. It was two in the morning. I wondered whether Billy was going to spend the night with Curtis, after they had seen Miss Drake home. I got up, and prepared to undress.

And then I heard feet and voices in the hall below, and an exclamation from Roger Tremaine, and a high-pitched cry from Lydia Drake.

Gabriel had heard those sounds too. I collided with him in the hall. Then Roger Tremaine was running up the stairs, with Curtis and Miss Drake behind him.

Tremaine grasped Gabriel's arm. "My son!" he cried, in a sort of high-pitched whimper. "He's gone coon-hunting with —with Milward, on a challenge. They have taken our two Negroes and the dogs. If anything happens to Billy, I'll —I'll follow it up, wherever it leads."

"I'm to blame," cried Lydia Drake. "When Billy saw me home, he said what he'd already told you, that he was going to live a normal life and forget that silly superstition. He told me that Milward had challenged him to go coon-hunting with him tonight, and I encouraged him. I thought it would show him what nonsense the whole thing was.

"Then I got frightened. I got to thinking that, if Billy died, I'd be his murderess. And I went to Mr. Curtis, and he got up and brought me here. I'm afraid, Roger, afraid for Billy. We've got to go after him before Milward shoots him, as he tried to do tonight!"

"How can we find him in the swamps?" asked Roger.

"We'll find him somehow. We've got to find him," answered Lydia.

Then suddenly, from far away, there came an eerie call. It rose into a high, whining scream, and stopped short on a single note. That cry, coming out of the darkness, stabbed me with fear, but Roger said:

"That's the assembly-call. That's black Mose. The dogs have treed a possum. We'll bring him back."

HE HADN'T meant to include me in the invitation, and certainly not the doctor, but Gabriel said, "I'll come with you, Mr. Tremaine."

"You, doctor? Through those swamps? You'll want high boots. The swamps are full of snakes. I can lend you a pair, if you mean it. Only let's hurry."

He paid no attention to me, but I meant to go, high boots or none. I knew the danger wasn't nearly so great as Tremaine fancied, in his state of excitement. Snakes don't attack human beings anyway, unless they're trodden on. At

least, that was my idea. I saw little Gabriel waddling down the stairs after Roger, looking grotesque in jack-boots that reached high above his knees. And I followed, somewhat like a bad boy, wondering what was in Gabriel's mind, and what had induced him to accompany Tremaine.

Was the danger really acute, or was Gabriel merely actuated by the spirit of sportsmanship? I laughed at that little frolic of my mind; and then I found myself outside the house, under a half-moon, with Curtis beside me.

"Ever been possum-hunting?" he asked me.

"Never," I said.

"Well, it's a fine sport. Down there!" he added, as another cry rang out. And now I could faintly hear the barking of the dogs. I followed Curtis, who strode as if he knew the way blindfolded. We pushed along a hardly discernible path through the thick undergrowth, which was brittle and stiff from the fall frosts. Then the ground grew soggy underneath, and I would have fallen into a little stream if Curtis hadn't caught me.

We crossed it. Somewhere ahead of us I could hear Roger and the doctor tramping through the sedge. Then there came the flicker of a torch, away through the stunted trees, and the dogs began barking furiously again.

"They've treed him in that cluster of persimmons down by the bog," said Curtis.

A furious baying from the dogs, and an outburst of yelling from the Negroes announced that fact. We struggled on. Now I could see another torch, and presently came upon the two Negroes, and Roger Tremaine, and little Gabriel, who had just reached their side.

From some place a little back came a whoop, and Billy broke through the undergrowth. I saw Tremaine instinctively move to his son's side and put his arm across his shoulders. Thank God nothing had happened!

"Where's Milward?" Curtis asked.

"He got into soft ground," said Billy laughing. "Up to his knees in ooze. I didn't wait for him."

One of the Negroes was holding the frantic dogs, the other was climbing one of the thin persimmon trees. "Thar he is!" yelled the climber, gripping the tree with his knees, and pointing upward with one hand. And now, in the topmost branches, I could see a small, gray, furry body, motionless.

The dogs were baying with all their might, and leaping frantically against the tree. Halfway to the top, the Negro gripped with one hand, and with the other began shaking with all his might. We stood in a group beneath, the terror that had dominated us forgotten temporarily in the excitement of the hunt. Even little Gabriel, puffing and blowing from his unwonted exercise, seemed to have caught the contagion.

A tail as long as the furry body came out and began to quiver and clamp itself about the branch. The Negro shook furiously. The baying of the dogs was deafening.

Then suddenly the gray body came hurtling down at our feet. It lay there inert, seemingly dead, eyes closed, tail limp, paws limber. The dogs leaped at it, but it never stirred, and they began sniffing at it in a puzzled way. That trick of the possum somehow fools the best possum dogs time and again. The second Negro caught the little creature by the tail and slipped it into a gunny-sack. The hunt was over.

We looked rather foolishly at one another. Roger still had his arm about Billy's shoulder, and I saw him whisper in his ear. Billy nodded. I guessed what Roger had said to him. He had told him to go ahead in his own way, and not be influenced by others' fear for him.

Curtis voiced the words that were on the lips of all: "Where can Milward be?"

"I guess he's still mired," said Billy. "Let's go and look for him. That black gumbo is pretty stiff to get trapped in. There are no quicksands, though. I guess he's all right."

We turned away through the trees. Billy shouted, and now Milward's answer came, freighted with curses, from some point down in the swamps. As we drew nearer, the shouts grew louder.

"That's him!" yelled one of the Negroes, pointing with his torch.

"You all right, Milward?" shouted Roger, taking the lead.

"Damn it, I got trapped in Bog Creek!" snarled Milward.

HE WAS sitting on the near bank of a little stream that seemed to be of black mud. One of his boots was gone, and he was smeared with slime from head to foot. He had continued drinking, too, for his oaths were all but incoherent.

"I tell you I got trapped. Whatsher leave me for, you fool?" he shouted at Billy. "Where's my other boot? You niggers, go find my other boot. It'sh down the shtream somewhere. Think I'm going home through this stubble without my boot?"

He went on raving, then drew a flask from his hip and took a drink. "Wouldn't wait for me, eh Bill?" he snarled. "Hoped I'd go under that slime, didn't you?"

"No," said Billy, "it was your dirty language got under my skin, if you want to know. I guessed you'd be all right."

"You'd have let me die, you dirty yellow dog," Milward blustered. "But don't forget you're a dead man, Bill. Death's waiting for you. He's coming up close. Maybe tonight."

An evil cackle came from Milward's lips. "I've always hated you, jusht as you've always hated me, but I won't have to see that grinning face of yours much longer."

Roger rasped: "You can cut out that sort of talk, Milward, if you expect to stay in my house."

Milward made no reply, but sat rocking, his bare foot, from which the sock had been sucked by the ooze, resting upon the other knee.

The Negro, who had gone downstream, appeared through the trees, waving the boot. "I've found him, boss," he shouted. "Standing bolt upright in the mud, Mister Milward, and there ain't no dirt got into him, I'll swear, though he was sunk to a coupla inches of the top."

Milward took the loose jackboot from him, inserted his foot, and began tugging at the side-straps.

Suddenly a frightful cry broke from his lips. He tossed his hands in the air, and tried convulsively to kick the boot from his foot. Scream after scream came from him. The Negro seized the boot and jerked it free.

Out of it a long, thin, whiplike shape shot into the underbrush, and vanished.

Milward lay on the bank, writhing and moaning. Gabriel was on his knees beside him, the foot in his left hand, and a pocket-knife in his right. The tissues were already swelling, and I could see the blood-flecked incision that had been made by the snake's fangs.

Milward howled louder as the knife bit deep. At the rush of blood, I tried to catch Gabriel's eyes, but failed. The Negroes were moaning and blubbering. Roger was kneeling on the other side of Milward. And Curtis was standing in the same manner as earlier that evening, looking down, and one by one I heard the joints of his fingers crack.

"We've got to get him back as quick as we can," said Gabriel. "I've got a medicine-case at the house."

Roger and Curtis carried the stricken man back through the woods.

But the bite of the water-moccasin, which is an aquatic species of the copperhead, is not good medicine for a man soaked with alcohol, popular belief to the contrary.

IT WAS dawn when Millicent Tremaine came out of the death-chamber. She was on her husband's arm, but it was she who seemed to be supporting him. The rest of us were downstairs in the drawing-room. Gabriel had been the last to arrive. He hadn't spoken, but we had read the verdict in his face. And Lydia Drake, clinging to Billy, had kept whispering, "I can't be sorry, I can't be sorry."

When Millicent came in with Roger, I was struck by the hard, almost dangerous glint in her eyes. "I've got something to say," she told her husband. "I'm going to say it here, because I've lived with it for nearly two-and-twenty years. I'm going to say it in the presence of all, because it's their right to know.

"Billy is not your son, Roger. You know whose son he is."

Billy grew rigid, as if frozen. I saw Roger raise his eyes and glance at Curtis for a moment, and that was the look of a man who has always known something, but has only just realized that he knows.

"I was only eighteen,. and I had been married a month when you went to France, Roger. I was crazy with fear for you, and, when John Curtis came back, badly wounded, and told me about you, I was so grateful to him, and I think my mind slipped, because I can remember hardly anything except that Billy is not your son, Roger, and he's nearly twenty-two.

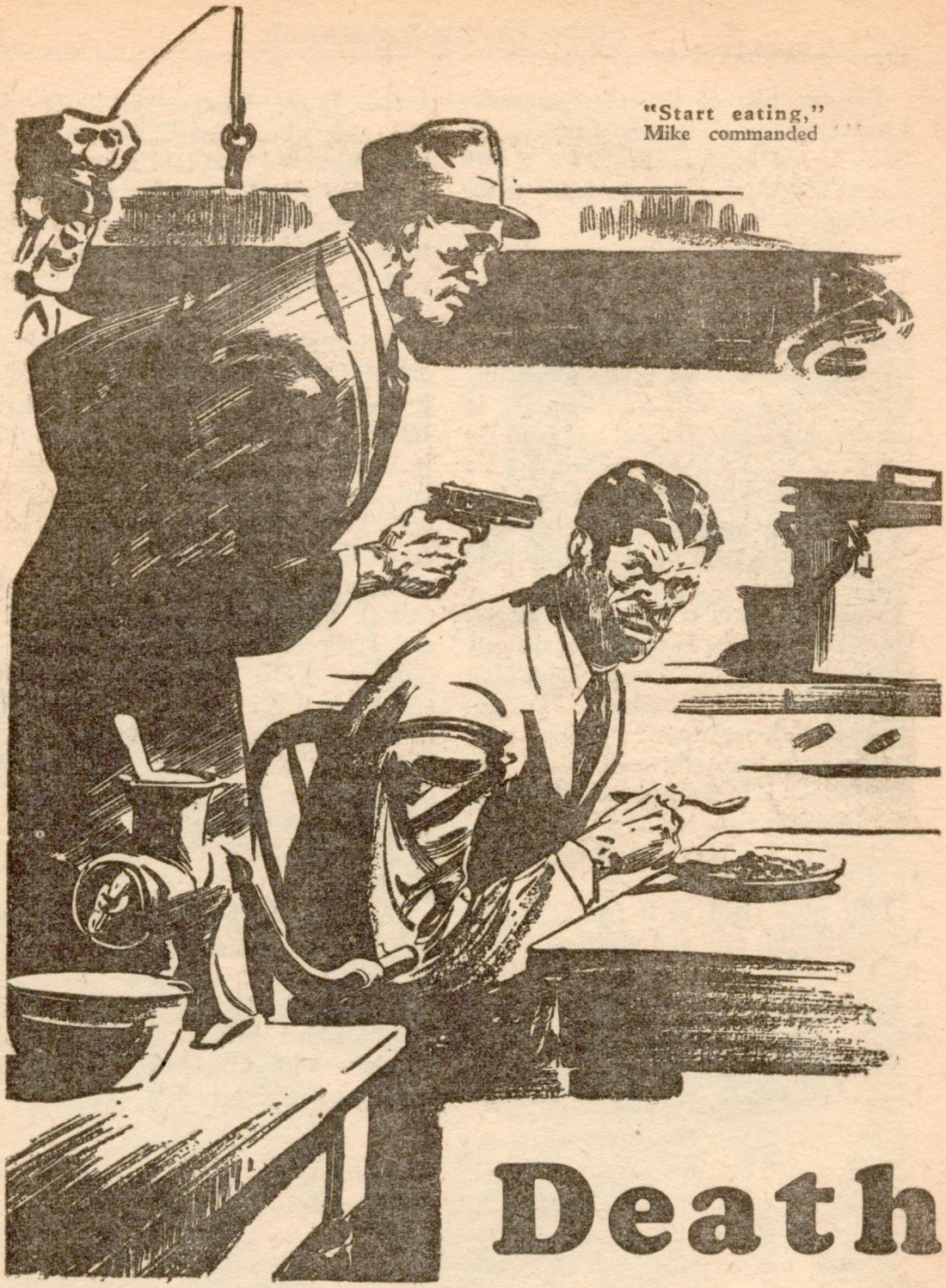
"I was alone two years in this house, except for the Negroes, and that brief furlough of yours. I didn't even have John Curtis to help me, because he was in Washington. When you came back at last, to stay, I resolved that you should never know. But now I've had to tell you. And—that's all, Roger."

Roger's eyes were those of a stricken animal. Nobody said a word as Gabriel and I slipped out of the room, but I could see Lydia still clinging to Billy, and I felt that everything was going to be forgotten. Only neither Gabriel nor I must see the Tremaines again. We slipped out quietly, and started on the long tramp to the station.

"So the curse was fulfilled," I ventured.

"And has also been lifted," answered Gabriel, "if you remember the words of the diary."

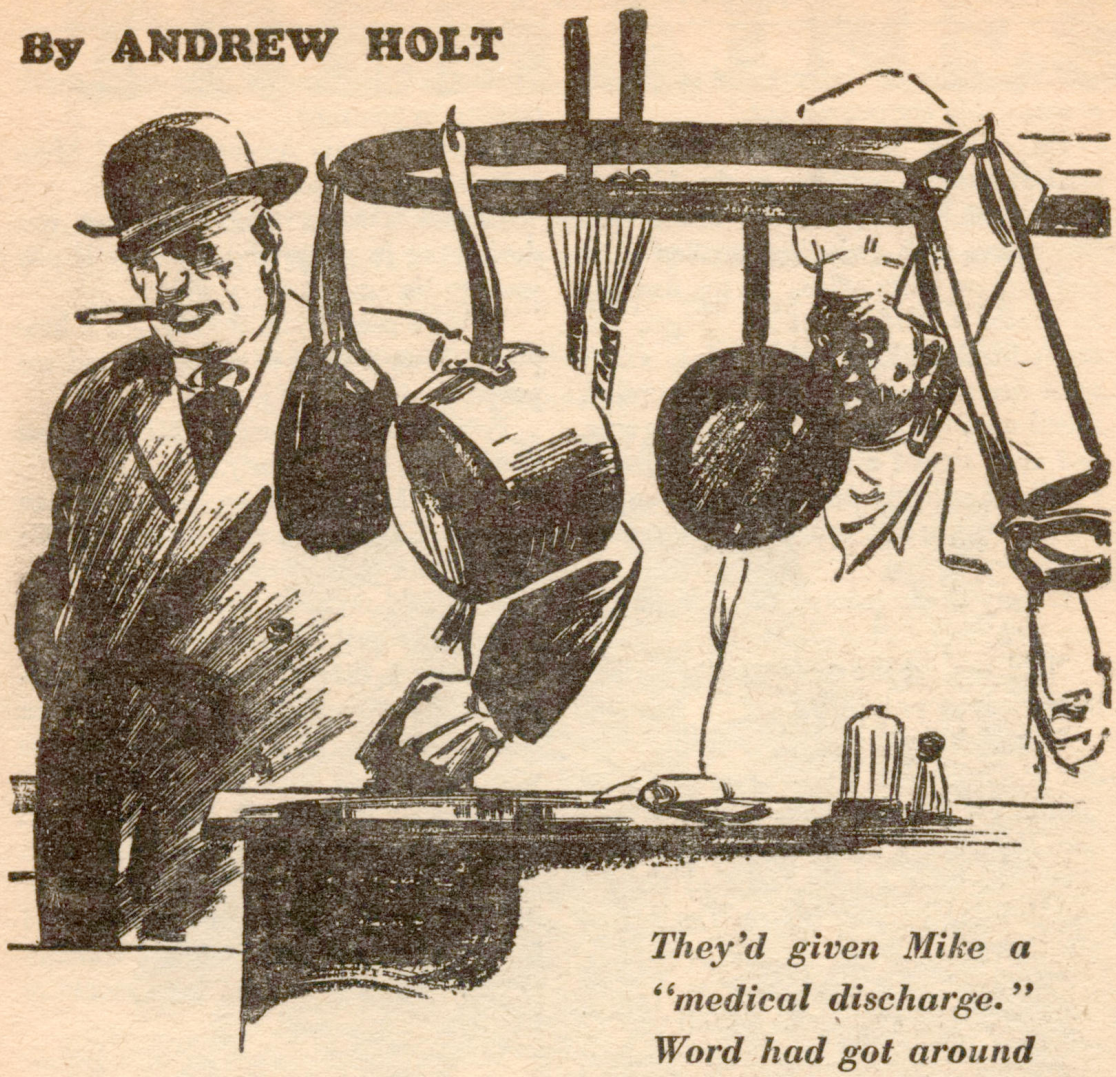
When the station came into sight at last, he added, irritably, "You can't get anywhere with women who persist in keeping something back."



"Start eating," Mike commanded

Death On a Platter

By ANDREW HOLT



They'd given Mike a "medical discharge." Word had got around that he'd never be the same. "Battle fatigue" was the official explanation. The wise guys on Broadway said he was "jungle-happy". Of course, the department didn't want to take back a man with a case of nerves like his!

NEW YORK police headquarters looked and smelled as it had looked and smelled for the five years he had known it as a detective—like the stained entrance hall of an old, metropolitan school. He tried to slip past the sergeant at the gray marble desk but the old man saw him and stood up.

"Mike Carroll!" He grinned in genuine excitement. "Mike! When did you get out?"

Mike heard himself answering in the usual banalities.

"A month ago. San Diego. Medical discharge."

What they meant, he knew, was not *when* but *why*. The papers were full of stories of jungle-happy Marines who would never be quite the same. He remembered the sideways glance he had seen before he had learned not to talk about it. Shrapnel in my leg, he would say, and "battle fatigue." Then the glance.

"A month ago," he repeated to the sergeant. "My leg put me out."

He waved and walked down the cracked marble corridor to the big oak door lettered "Homicide." There were two offices with swinging wooden gates and then an inner office. In the first two he caused a mild sensation. There was much handshaking, backslapping, and a great deal of noise. He nodded, smiled, rolled up a trousers leg to show his scar, and even signed a secretary's autograph. Finally, he closed the inner door on the babel of voices and leaned his back against it.

Deputy Commissioner Bill Folsom did not look up.

"Did you get the cigarettes?" he asked trying not to smile.

"Sure," Mike answered, "but they were out of Luckies, so I went down to New Guinea for Camels." He flipped a pack onto the desk. "Have one?"

Folsom took a light, inhaled deeply, and, leaning back in his chair, surveyed his visitor.

"Well!" he breathed.

"Well," Mike exhaled. "Well what?"

"Well nothing. I was worried about you. How did you get on the force without knowing how to write?"

"I'm sorry," apologized Mike. "I just didn't write to anybody." He spoke with sudden intensity. "It's different down there. I can't explain it but writing home is like writing a letter to Mars. There's no reality to it." He relaxed and his tone became lighter. "Anyway, I'm back and ready to go to work."

Folsom rose and walked to the other side of the panelled room.

"Are you well enough to start right away?"

Mike followed him with his eyes.

"Of course. Except for my leg and that won't last forever."

Folsom spoke over his shoulder. "You went back on salary the day you got your discharge. You've got a month's check coming to you now."

"That was very decent of you," Mike commented a little dryly.

"I didn't mean that. I meant you don't have to worry about money if you want to lie around for a while."

"I have been lying around—in a hospital. Now I want to go places and see people."

Folsom walked back to his desk, sat down, and spoke gently.

"Look, Mike . . ." he hesitated, then went on, "I'll give it to you straight. We know about your medical record."

Mike said nothing, staring at him.

Folsom edged his chair closer.

"Look, I didn't know how to pronounce neurosis before I got mixed up with smart cops like you, no less know what it means. But the commissioner knows what it means." The older man pushed himself away from the desk. "You've got to get over being bitter about it. I think it's a lot of hooey, too, but I have my orders direct from the commissioner. Go sit on a farm for a month or so. Then come back."

Mike looked down at him with distaste as he stood up.

"I think I'll write a book called 'Homecoming of a Hero' or something like that."

"You're a stubborn Irishman," said Folsom. Then, with a single movement he opened his desk drawer and extracted his .38.

He let himself go limp as Mike flew across the desk, snatching at his gun arm. Folsom rolled skillfully to the floor, then turned and watched quizzically as the Marine, having recovered the gun, pulled the trigger four times. There were four clicks as the empty chambers slid into place. Mike threw the gun onto the leather-covered couch.

"That was a stinking, lousy trick," he panted.

Folsom picked himself up. "Maybe, but it was the only way to make you see you're still too jumpy. You know as well as I do that a cop can't afford to have nerves."

Mike's face grew livid.

"Go to hell," he exploded as he slammed the door.

GOLDIE'S restaurant was in the fifties, on Broadway. Outside, it was elegant, marbled; inside, it looked like a cafeteria. Its customers could easily afford squab at the Waldorf; they preferred smoked salmon and cream cheese on bagels at Goldie's. Everybody who counted for anything in New York in the area bounded by Fifty-ninth and Forty-second Streets on the north and south and Sixth and Eighth Avenues on the east and west, sooner or later made his way to Goldie's.

You could chisel in on a racket at Goldie's or, just as easily, get kicked out of one. You could tell someone your troubles or pretend you listened to theirs, or you could join forces and make trouble for someone else.

Goldie's was a kind of showcase in which were displayed the habits and characteristics, economic, social and biological, of the species Manhattanite, habitat Broadway. In short, Goldie's was a dive.

It was enroute to Goldie's that Mike Carroll slowly cooled off. No argument, he reasoned, would change Bill Folsom's mind. What he needed was a private coup—a case juicy enough to force Folsom to take him back, with the solution withheld as a lever. He smiled to himself. If a case was what he needed, his sentimental visit to Goldie's might easily combine business with pleasure. There were enough people with enough knives in other people's backs at Goldie's to make it an ideal place to spot a lead. Folsom had suggested a rest. He would rest at Goldie's until the undercurrent of Broadway washed up an unsavory morsel of larceny or mayhem in his direction. That, he concluded, looking at his watch, as he got out of the cab, should take about half an hour.

Halfway through the revolving door, Mike saw the long corridor of tables, the sharp, familiar faces. He followed the door in its full circle back to the sidewalk. Rather than face any glad-handing, he decided to go through the kitchen.

He walked unnoticed past the time clock, through the busy kitchen, and down the little hall past the rest rooms. Goldie's rasping voice grated through the office door.

"So your husband's a neurotic?" it said. "Neurotic—shmeurotic. I still don't like the way he moves around watching us."

"What do you want him to do? Beat you up?" It was a woman's voice, slightly on the whiskey tenor side. Mike recognized it as Inez Richman's voice.

"I just want him to go away. I hate to see a good actor like Ben Richman booze himself to death."

The voices came closer to the door.

"You just have a guilty conscience," said Inez.

"Which is more than you've got. Why don't you stop him from drinking?"

The door opened. "And spoil all my fun?" Inez, blonde, studiously soft, and expertly brassiered came out.

Mike leaned against the wall, looked at her distastefully.

"Nice girl," he said.

"Still a cop," glared Inez. "I was hoping they'd make suki-yaki out of you down there."

She swayed past him into the huge dining room.

"Well, well," said Goldie. "I am glad to see you." He was a big man with a permanent flush in his cheeks.

Mike interrupted him. "Why don't you play with some of the other children on the block?"

Goldie shrugged his big shoulders. "Yeah. I know. I can't make up my mind whether to marry her or kill her or both."

"How do you expect to get rid of Ben Richman?"

Goldie led him into the dining room. "He won't last long—not at the rate he's going." He indicated Richman's table.

The ex-comedian sat, or more properly sprawled, with Inez in a large booth. He saw Mike and tried to rise. Inez pulled him roughly back to the red leather seat. He pointed at Mike with a fat finger.

"Hero," he said. "Me, too. Remember big show Camp Dix last war? My show." He sighed, almost snored. "Best damn' show you ever saw."

"Shut up," said Inez. "Since the draft board turned him down for being a rummy, I've heard nothing but that show, morning, noon, and night."

Richman began to cry.

"For God's sake," Goldie said. "Take him home. He's making me sick to my stomach."

THE headwaiter made his way through the tables to Mike. He was a short man and his tuxedo was much too big for him, as though he had suddenly become quite thin.

"Mike Carroll," he called across the tables. He shook hands. "When did you. . .?"

Goldie interrupted. "Get Mr. Carroll a table, Morris."

"Sure," answered Morris Koenig. He stepped back a pace and looked the Marine up and down. "Well, Mike . . ."

Goldie's voice was louder. "I said get Mr. Carroll a table. And I've told you before, don't call my customers by their first names. You're a headwaiter now, not my partner."

Koenig's face was impassive. Only a faint twitching under his left eye revealed his feeling. He turned on his heel.

"This way, Mr. Carroll."

"See you later, Mike," called Goldie.

"He doesn't miss an opportunity to humiliate me," Koenig complained bitterly.

"Some place in my pocket," Mike said, "I have a card which will entitle you to one half hour of solace from Broadway Rose. You're lucky you're not in the pen. You would be, if Goldie had wanted it that way."

"I know, but he doesn't have to kick me when I'm down."

"He does on Broadway," Mike stopped and slid into a seat at Joe Fortuno's table. He waved the headwaiter on.

"This is a cop, Irving," Fortuno said to his companion.

Irving, huge, monolithic, grunted politely.

"Back from a vacation in a nice, cool jungle while we sit here, working our fingers to the bone over a hot black market."

Mike took a drink of Fortuno's scotch. "You're too cynical to be a good crook, Joe. You should have been a respectable business man."

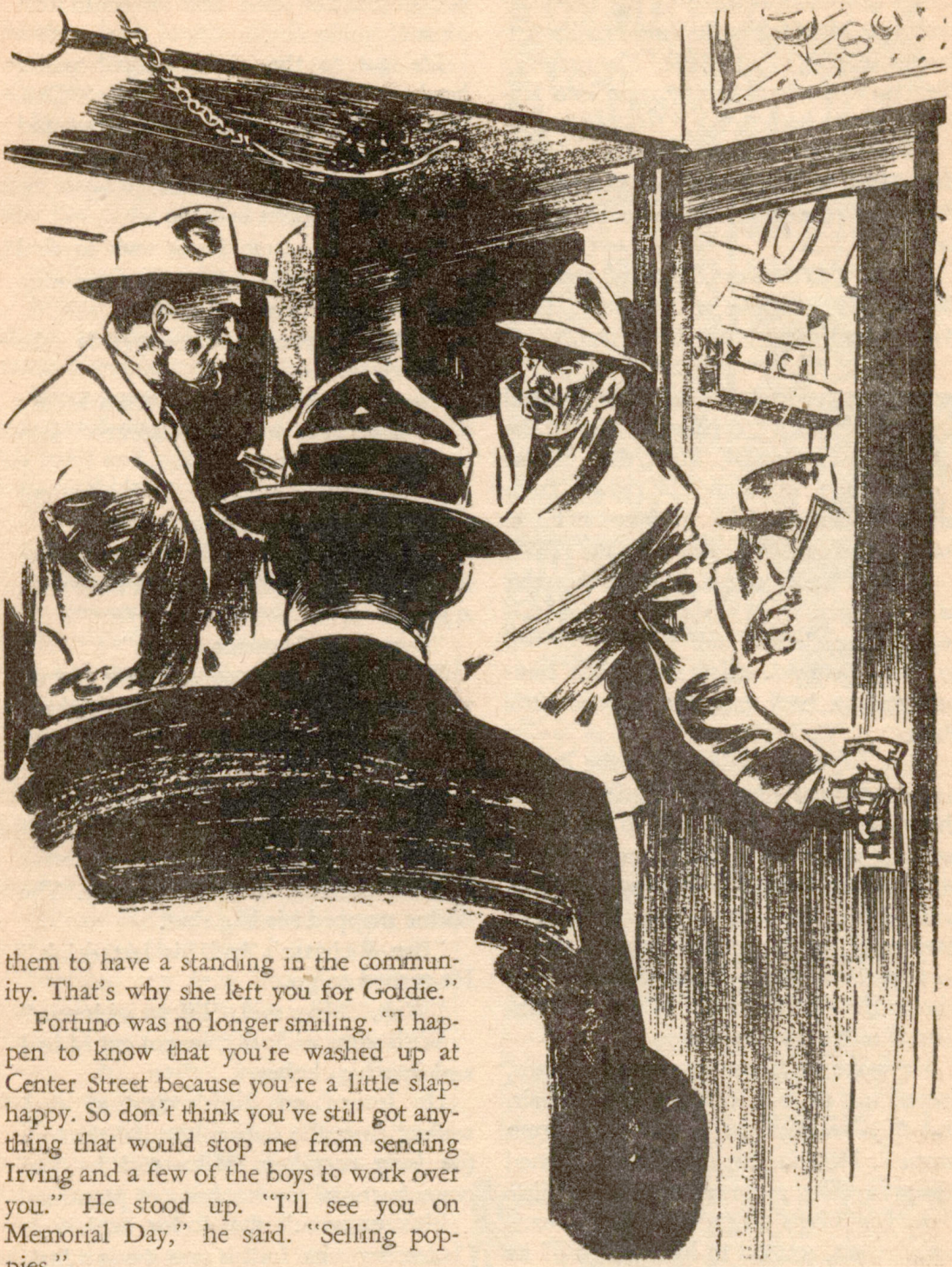
"Help yourself," Joe said, taking the glass out of Mike's hand. "It probably would interest you to know that I am almost legitimate. Unobtainable nationally advertised merchandise obtained for a small fee."

The waiter approached and Mike gave his order. He nodded in Inez Richman's direction. "I see Goldie's got your girl."

Fortuno smiled. He reached over the table and placed his hand on Mike's wrist so that his forefinger and thumb pressed the nerve.

"I am a bad loser," he said. "Very bad." He relaxed his grip. "You are one of those people who think there is something basically funny about a short man named Joe Fortuno who wears two hundred dollar suits."

Mike grinned back. "I think you're a cheap bum. Inez likes bums but expects



"It's the first time I ever heard of any one being taken for a ride on a subway," he said.

them to have a standing in the community. That's why she left you for Goldie."

Fortuno was no longer smiling. "I happen to know that you're washed up at Center Street because you're a little slaphappy. So don't think you've still got anything that would stop me from sending Irving and a few of the boys to work over you." He stood up. "I'll see you on Memorial Day," he said. "Selling poppies."

Two slightly crooked fingers of Mike's left hand caught him just below the rib casing. Mike stood up quickly to avoid the splash as Fortuno crashed across the food-laden table. Irving tugged at something inside his jacket. Mike

deftly beat him to it, using his knee under the table. Simultaneously, he extracted Irving's automatic. He removed the clip and tossed the weapon into Irving's noodle soup.

The waiter returned with his own order. Mike took his arm and steered him through the gaping diners to an empty table.

"Serve it to me here," he said, straight-faced. "The people at the other table were very sloppy with their food."

AFTER dinner Mike walked up Broadway past the Capital and the Hollywood and the crowds from the CBS Theatre on Fifty-fourth to his hotel opposite the Park.

He had been gone a year, he thought, as he slipped from his still strange-feeling civilian clothes, and nothing seemed to have changed. Already he felt himself sliding back into the intense little Park.

That was good. The year in the Pacific had broadened him, and made him see that there were other people in the world besides songwriters and gamblers and other streets besides Broadway but there were things about that year he wanted desperately to forget and he was happy to feel them slowly drifting away from him as the familiar street noises of Manhattan lulled him to sleep.

He woke up to the sound of a scream, leaped out of bed, crashed into a chair, and then realized the scream came from himself. He shut his mouth and opened his eyes. The room swam before him. From his thighs down every nerve, each little axiom, seemed to have a will of its own. The trembling was uncontrollable and he found that he was bathed in perspiration. Then there was an overpowering nausea and, as though it were somebody else, he found himself retching. Someone seemed to have put a great weight on his chest and he could feel himself going out.

He got to the phone, called police headquarters, and managed to say, "Doc, this is Mike," before he passed out and Police Surgeon Emerson Fitch was left shouting into a dead phone.

WHEN he came to, it was to find Emerson Fitch's broad arm pressing him to a bed. It was daytime.

"What happened, Emmy? Is the jungle fever back?"

The doctor took his hand from Mike's chest and began to toss instruments into his case.

"No, nothing so romantic. You've got a very extra special case of ptomaine."

Mike sat up tentatively to see whether he felt dizzy. He did and sank back with a groan.

"Everything happens to me."

"You and seventy-seven other people who had dinner at Goldie's last night—that is, seventy-six people and one corpse."

"Who's the corpse? Inez Richman, I hope."

"No, but you're warm."

Mike decided to sit up anyway. The doctor snapped his bag shut.

"Ben Richman's had his last drink." He turned to go.

"Wait," Mike said. "I'll go with you."

With some difficulty, he got out of bed and into his clothes.

He leaned on Fitch's arm as they walked from the station hospital through the long corridors. Mike said he had never heard of anyone dying of ptomaine.

"It's unusual," the doctor explained, "but it happens. In this case it was a little organism known to the trade as *Salmonella aertrycke* lodged in a batch of peas."

Mike remembered eating the peas. "Did you do a post on Richman?" he asked.

"We had to, for the record, but there

was nothing to it—death from asphyxiation, paralysis of the lung muscles due to toxin from the *Salmonella.*"

The doctor stopped, opened his bag and extracted a large bottle. A yellowish object floated in a colorless liquid.

"What's that?" asked Mike.

Fitch held it up against the light.

"Ben Richman's liver. With cirrhosis like that, a good burp would probably have killed him." He shoved the bottle back into the bag and propelled Mike toward Bill Folsom's office.

Mike drew back. "I'm not going in there."

But he found himself too weak to resist the doctor's pressure on his arms and went in anyway. Secretly, he was not unhappy at the prospect of making peace with Folsom. He had a growing hunch that a few diseased peas might lead him back to work. His visit to Goldie's might turn out to have been worth a little ptomaine. He turned to the doctor as they passed through the wooden gates.

"Got any idea who's responsible?"

"Folsom's trying to pin a criminal carelessness charge on the headwaiter who is supposed to have hated Goldie's guts, but I think it's only window-dressing for the papers."

Morris Koenig, seated beside Bill Folsom's big desk, turned a haggard eye to the door as the two men came in. Seeing Mike, he drew himself to his feet and cried:

"You know me, Mike. I wouldn't do a thing like this, just to get even with Goldie. A lot of those people were my friends and Ben Richman used to stake me years ago when I was hard up."

One of the cops pushed him back into his seat. Folsom extended his hand and Mike took it.

"Everybody apologizes to everybody else," the deputy commissioner said. "Do you think Koenig knew the peas were bad?"

"How could I know?" the headwaiter blurted. "You can't stop to look at everything you pour from a can these days."

Mike leaned over the desk and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"I don't think he was responsible. If I did, I'd push his teeth in for making me sick. He's too much of a sentimentalist to take it out on some of the people who have stood by him."

Folsom took his arm and they walked away from the group of cops and Koenig to the other end of the room.

"Listen, Mike," he whispered, "even if Koenig is guilty, there's just no way we can hang him with it. We'll hold him a few days until the stink dies down and then turn him loose. Meanwhile, if there is any other angle, I'd like to know about it."

"Is that an assignment?"

"No, a suggestion. If you turn up anything hot it may convince the commissioner you ought to go back to work." He paused and smiled. "Were you looking for an angle of some kind when you got that vegetarian mickey last night?"

Mike grinned. "Just a social evening." He waved at Koenig and Fitch as he went out the door.

"Better stay on liquids for a day or so," the doctor said.

"Sure," Mike answered, "that's exactly what I had in mind."

Fitch stepped into the hall and called after him. "I mean liquids like tea and milk."

MIKE was already out of sight. He found a cab at the corner and was at Goldie's in fifteen minutes. He walked straight through the restaurant to find Goldie seated at his desk, phone in hand, and looking decidedly dismal.

"Listen," Mike said, "Morris Koenig just called me Mr. Carroll. Supposing you spring him as a reward."

"Mike," Goldie indicated the phone in

his hand, "I'm going crazy calling all my customers and apologizing. I was up with my doctor all night, myself."

"Oh," Mike asked hopefully, "you were sick, too?"

"No, my doctor was sick. He ate at the restaurant and came home with us to play gin rummy and passed out."

"Too bad," Mike replied. "How about springing Koenig? How long do you want to keep him sweating?"

"The rest will do him good."

"I know, and so long as he's got his hands on somebody to keep the papers quiet, Folsom won't bother to look for the guy who really did it."

Goldie lowered his voice. "Listen, Mike. I know about your fight with Folsom and I know ways of getting you back over his head. All you have to do for me is get the papers to lay off. It's ruining my business. My only customers today were two press agents who haven't paid a check in five years."

"It's a deal. Now, who slipped the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder?"

"Joe Fortuno."

"Are you sure?"

"He threatened to do it."

"Come on down and swear out a warrant."

"I can't."

"Afraid of Joe?"

"Afraid of my Uncle with the beard. Joe delivers without asking for those little coupons."

Mike frowned. "I have a hunch if you want to keep those little bugs out of your vegetables, you'll send Inez Richman back where she came from."

"Sure." Goldie started to dial a phone number.

"And another thing," Mike added, "I didn't get myself full of shrapnel so your customers could eat black market groceries. I'm going to tell the OPA you've been a bad boy."

He went outside to use the phone but the three booths were occupied. While he waited, he slipped a nickle in the big juke box and listened absently as the arm slipped Inez Richman's latest blues recording on the turntable. He noted that it was a good rendition technically, but without fire. The colored girl from whom she copied her style was much better. But it was good enough, he suspected, for Goldie's customers who listened attentively as a number came out of the juke box for the first time. You could, he remembered, almost gauge its potential popularity by the attention it got from whatever band leaders were present.

He got Folsom on the phone from the smoke-filled booth.

"Your boy is Joe Fortuno," he told him. "But Goldie won't say so. You'd better spring Koenig."

"Well," Folsom sighed, "that's that. Unless you want us to come up and stick little pins in Goldie?"

"It wouldn't help," Mike answered. "Joe's probably covered on the black market angle and we can't prove the ptomaine wasn't an accident."

Folsom said something in reply but it was drowned out by a sudden burst of circuit noise, the kind of noise you get from a bad tapping job. Mike hung up and walked thoughtfully out onto Broadway and toward the subway.

The case was a washout for his purposes. He would get a casual thank you; Goldie would get fined; and Joe Fortuno would have somebody to take the fall for him.

He walked down into the Fiftieth Street station, entered an uptown local and moved toward the rear car, looking for a seat. He saw one, only one, in the last car and walked toward it. As he passed between cars, a short fat man pressed rudely against the safety chains. He turned to receive the thrust of a gun barrel in his stomach.

The noise of the speeding train was

so great that he could see the man's lips move, could not hear his words. But he got the idea from the pressure of the barrel, indicating the direction in which he had been walking. The train came to a stop, the barrel pressed warningly into his abdomen and some one took the remaining seat.

He looked at the gunman and made a mental note to get Joe Fortuno. Then:

"This is a lot of trouble to go to just to get a seat away from me."

The man eyed him coldly and prodded him into the front platform of the rear car. Then he placed his lips at Mike's ear and yelled over the thunder of the wheels.

"Walk through to the rear platform and don't try anything."

Both men staggered through the sway-

The sweep of his arm knocked the gun from her mouth.

ing car. A youngish-looking gunsel waited for them on the rear platform. He reached over and drew the doors shut, cutting them off from the view of the passengers.

THE track, shining and nickle-covered, spun out behind the speeding train. With a year in the Pacific behind him, Mike found himself curiously unafraid of two gunmen in camel-hair coats.

"Well," he said. "I never heard of anyone being taken for a ride in the subway."

The gunsel smiled crookedly. "Gas rationing," he said. "We couldn't get a C card for the big black sedan."

The train slowed into another station. Mike saw that the train would stop before the last car reached the platform. The passengers would enter and leave by the middle door.

The fat man spoke. "What makes you think you're being taken for a ride? All we want to do is push you around a little."

With no waste motion, he slashed across Mike's face with his gun.

"Like that," he said.

Mike went down, numbed by the blow, but not as numb as he pretended to be. The gunsel aimed a careful kick at his nose and brought his foot forward. Mike reached up quickly, placed the back of his left wrist against the gunsel's calf, and struck the knee cap with the edge of his right hand. There was a snap and the gunsel plunged writhing to the floor.

The train clanked slowly out of the station. The fat man rushed Mike before he could get to his feet. For a graduate of the Commando course at Quantico, the rest was ludicrously simple. The fat man, sucking helplessly for breath and clutching desperately at his groin, crashed into the platform doors and shattered the glass.

Mike, still on the floor, watched the blood spurt from a jagged cut in the fat man's ear.

He did not wait for the approach of the startled passengers. Instead, he climbed under the chains, just as the train began to gather momentum, and dropped to the tracks. He vaulted to the station platform directly in front of its only occupant—a buxom matron who had just missed the train. He grinned at her foolishly.

"I forgot to get off," he said lamely.

He caught a cab across town and got up to his room. He had been in the bathroom applying hot towels to the reddening gun welt on his face, when the phone rang. Still pressing a towel to his cheek, he picked it up. It was Inez Richman and her voice was tense, strained to the breaking point.

"I've got to see you," she said, overdramatically.

Even when she's on the level, she sounds phoney, he thought.

"What about?" he asked.

She couldn't say over the phone.

"I'll see you tomorrow at the funeral," he told her.

She was tearful now. He had to come right over, she apologized for everything she ever said about him—only please, please come right over.

"What are you crying for?" he asked. "Surely not Ben. You're glad to get rid of him."

She knew, she knew, that was what she wanted to tell him about.

Little paths of pain began to form across his bruised face.

"Put it into a song and send me the record," he told her angrily and shoved the receiver back in its cradle.

He went back to the bathroom and stood his conscience for five minutes. Then he threw the towel into the tub, grabbed his coat, and slammed the apartment door behind him.

NEZ' apartment hotel was three blocks away. Full of a growing foreboding and cursing himself for his impatience, he sprinted the distance. The elevator took him all too slowly to her floor. He flipped the brass door knocker several times. There was no answer. The door opened to his touch. Inside, the living room was a wild disorder of underclothing, makeup pencils, and lipstick-stained cigarette butts. The bedroom door was closed. He thrust it open. Inez sat on the bed, red-eyed and immobile, staring at a shiny little revolver in her hand. She saw Mike, started, opened her mouth, and pressed the short barrel against her palate.

His leap carried him across the foot of the bed and the wide arc of his arm swept her hand from her mouth. The little gun went off and clattered to the floor. He stared at the cracked plaster where the slug had entered the ceiling. He pocketed the gun. Inez, her face distorted beyond recognition, began to scream hideously in one long high note. He reached over and slapped her sharply, twice across the mouth. She fell back on the bed and the screaming subsided to a low moan.

He filled a glass with water in the bathroom and drenched her with it. The moaning softened; she buried her face in the bedclothes. He sat down on the bed, grasped her wrists, and pulled her to a sitting position.

"Spill it," he said.

Inez swallowed a few times, sank back on the headboard, and averting her eyes, began to talk. Her voice was dull and tired.

"Goldie poisoned Ben. I thought he did it because he imagined I wanted it that way—because he loved me."

"And now you're sore because you think he did it for a more practical reason?" Mike let go of her wrists.

Inez reached over, picked up some papers from the bureau, and handed them to Mike.

"I found Ben's will this morning. Goldie is named as executor. Ben has over $300,000 in life insurance for which Goldie has been paying the premiums." Inez' face began to redden. "That's why he killed him. Not for me," she breathed, "but for the money. The dirty rat."

Mike got up from the bed. A twinge of nausea rose in his throat.

"Now," he said, "I've heard everything. Goldie's a rat, not because you think he killed your husband but because he did it for money instead of sweet you." He tapped the gun in his pocket. "Why did you want to knock yourself off? If you're right, Goldie slipped him the mickey. You're in the clear."

Inez lowered her head. "I loved Ben," she said. "He was a slob but I loved him." The way she said it, Mike almost believed her.

He found his hat and opened the door. "I oughtn't to tell you this," he said. "If you found some other way of knocking yourself off, it would be a public service but I'm an old softie, so I will." He touched the bruise on his face. "See that?"

Inez stared miserably at him, her disordered straw-colored hair dangling into her eyes.

"I got that from a couple of Joe Fortuno's boys because I turned Joe in for deliberately unloading bad peas on Goldie. Goldie didn't poison Ben—he died because he was a rummy and a little ptomaine finished him off."

Inez got up off the bed and examined her face in the mirror.

"Who said anything about green peas? The poison was in the goulash. Goldie ordered some goulash. He knew Ben always ate goulash whenever they served it so when Ben asked for some, Morris Koenig said it was the last portion. So

Goldie gave his to Ben. That was part of his alibi—if anything came up later, he could say he had even intended to eat the stuff himself."

Mike closed the door and came back into the bedroom. Inez turned away from the mirror and faced him.

"I wondered what the rest of his alibi was," she said, "but the peas are the answer. He knew they were bad and figured Ben's death would be blamed on the ptomaine if everybody else was sick."

Mike played thoughtfully with the brim of his hat. "Do you expect anybody to believe that Goldie would poison seventy-seven people and ruin his business?"

"No," Inez replied. "I don't. That's why it's such a good alibi."

She walked across the room and flung back the drapes that covered the big French windows.

"Do you think you can hold him for Ben's murder?"

He opened the door again. "If Morris Koenig tells the same story about the goulash and a further autopsy indicates some other poison, I can guarantee it won't take long to get a confession out of Goldie."

Inez smiled as he said this, a secretive little smile. Then, before Mike could move a step, she opened the French doors, stepped out onto the narrow stone balcony, and slid quietly over the low balustrade.

THE apartment was on the fifteenth floor. He ran to the window but did not look down. The sound of the impact that came up to him was terribly muffled.

Shivering a little, he backed away from the window. He heard a voice from the doorway.

"She's better that way."

He spun around. White-faced and trembling, Goldie stood at the door. He held a small automatic in his hand.

"I live two floors below," he said, fighting for control of his voice. "I've been in the next room all the time you've been here. I want to talk to you before you do anything." He motioned with the gun. "Please walk as fast as you can down the hall to the stairway. My apartment is 1320." He raised the little gun significantly. "I'll be right behind you."

He was still covering Mike with the automatic as they entered the apartment. When they were safely inside, Goldie did a surprising thing. He flipped the gun onto the couch, turned his back on it, and hung his hat in the foyer closet. Mike bent down and picked it up.

"What's the matter?" he asked, "losing your nerve?"

Goldie poured two shots of Bourbon from a decanter and handed one to Mike. Both men threw them down quickly. He poured two more.

"I had to get you out of there," he explained, "before someone found us." He placed his glass on the low, modern coffee table. "She was washed up," he said, "but completely, and to make it worse she had been hitting the snow for the last six months. You heard her voice before she jumped. Did it sound like the voice of a woman about to take her own life?"

Mike had to admit that it didn't. It had completely thrown him off guard. Goldie got up and began to pace the floor.

"Sure I was in love with her—once. But not lately. She had a diseased mind. I paid those premiums but only because I felt sorry for her and I knew whenever Ben came out of his fog he worried about not meeting them."

Mike finished his drink. "Sure," he said, "you worried about poor Ben but you kind of took over poor Ben's wife when he was too far gone to suspect anything."

"I'm not pretending to be a saint. I'm

While he studied the paper, the juke box took up its tune.

just telling you I didn't kill Ben Richman and I don't want to be fried for it just because you want your job back and Folsom needs a victim."

Mike looked wearily at him.

"Two years ago I would have slapped you around for a crack like that, but now I'm not entirely sure you haven't got something." He picked up the phone and asked for police headquarters. "I guess fighting in the jungle for a year has spoiled me for a Broadway cop. It was cleaner work."

Goldie could hear the phone ringing at the other end.

"What are you going to do? Turn me in?"

"I would," Mike answered, "but I'm not sure you're smart enough to think of an angle like poisoning everybody else to cover up."

He got the police surgeon on the line. "Listen, Emmy, how far did you dig into Richman's guts?"

"Far enough to see it was ptomaine in the peas, and to place the cause of death as strangulation."

"Did you find any goulash?"

The doctor sounded irritated. "What do you think it looks like in there, a steam table in a cafeteria? I was happy enough to recognize the peas."

Mike asked if he knew of any drug that would cause death with the same symptoms as ptomaine.

Yes, Fitch told him, there was an alkaloid called Colchicine, an extract taken from the seed of the *Colchicum Autunole* plant of Central Asia. It caused death by paralyzing the nerve centers and arresting the action of the lung muscles. "But," he added, "you'd have to be awfully drunk not to taste it."

"About as drunk as Ben Richman?" Mike asked. "You better dig deeper, Doc."

He started to hang up and then, as a second thought, had Fitch switch him to Folsom's office. The deputy commissioner wasn't there, so he told the sergeant to get hold of him and tell him that Inez Richman had committed suicide.

"And tell him," he added, "not to waste any time looking for a murder angle. I was there when it happened."

The sergeant sputtered questions but Mike hung up on him. He got up and handed the gun back to Goldie.

"I'm leaving. I'll be in for dinner tonight and you'd better not forget to be there."

MIKE wasted no time. He paid off the cabbie at the service entrance and strode past the time clock into the kitchen. Sam Goldie's high-priced colored chef, laid down a soup ladle.

"Sam," he said, "I've got a lot to tell you about culinary archeology in the South Pacific but it will have to keep. I've got some questions to ask you."

Sam led him into his book-lined office. Mike scanned the shelves, picked up a first edition of Brillat-Savarin's "Psychology of Taste," then put it back.

"Sam," he began, "do you remember if Ben Richman's table got the last plate of goulash last night?"

"Sure, it was for Mr. Goldie, himself. Just after it was served, a bus boy knocked over the pot and what was left spilled on the floor."

The phone rang and Sam picked it up. He handed it to Mike. It was Fitch.

"You'll be interested to know," he said, "that I found Colchicine. I'm certain that was the cause of death, but I can't prove it wasn't the ptomaine. Have you got anyone?"

"Not yet."

"Well, when you do, you'd better have a confession. A smart lawyer might twist the murder charge into attempted poisoning. In Richman's condition the ptomaine could have killed—the Colchicine just made sure."

Mike hung up thoughtfully, turned to Sam. "Do you know where that colored blues singer lives? The one Inez Richman imitated?"

"Ruby Johns?" asked Sam. "She lives on Sugar Hill." He pulled out an address book and scribbled a number on the back of an envelope.

"You get around," said Mike.

Sam grinned. "When I want to listen to blues, I just like to hear the original."

"Do you think," Mike asked, "that Ruby Johns can imitate Inez Richman's imitation of Ruby Johns?"

"I don't think she can sing that bad."

"You shouldn't speak ill of the dead, Sam."

"Did Inez Richman die?"

Mike started to leave. "She did this morning but she's going to sing her last song this afternoon just the same."

"I don't get it," said Sam.

"Keep your ears open tonight," Mike answered. "You will." He pushed through the door and strode out through the kitchen.

BY THE time he got to the big red apartment house on Harlem's Sugar Hill, Ruby Johns had already seen the late afternoon papers. Inez Richman's suicide and a rehash of Ben's sudden death were given two full columns, second only to the war news.

Ruby would not hear of his scheme.

"It's just a matter of singing a song," he pleaded.

"It would be in very bad taste," she answered, "just after her death, particularly."

He said the wrong thing. "Think of the publicity afterward—think of everybody knowing that you, not Inez Richman, deserve the credit for those songs."

Ruby Johns simply stared at him coldly.

"All right, all right," he apologized. "I shouldn't have opened my big mouth. Do it," he appealed as a last resort, "do it just to help catch Ben Richman's killer."

Ruby drew on her high-collared mink coat and opened the door. "Why didn't you say that in the first place?" she said.

He got her into a music shop on Lenox Avenue and One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street and for two hours they cut platters on a Presto Recorder. At seven he left Ruby, thanked her profusely, and sped downtown with a shining wax disc carefully tucked under his arm.

He stopped off at his apartment to pick up his service automatic and headed for Goldie's. He walked straight through the revolving door, took the juke box key from its hook behind the service bar and opened the glass door. Nobody paid any attention to him.

As he laid the platter on top of the pile of records, he looked around the room. Everyone he wanted was there. Joe Fortuno and Irving sat three tables away immersed in their chicken soup. Morris Koenig, thinner than ever, hovered over the noisy tables. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Goldie walk past the booths toward the cash register. He counted three bandleaders, a few singers, and half a dozen musicians. At least, he was sure of an audience. He locked the box and walked slowly over to Joe Fortuno's table.

Irving and Fortuno froze as he approached. Conversation at the surrounding tables died out. Heads turned in the corner and people stood up. Mike ran his fingers across the welt on his face. Irving slid his hand into his coat and under his armpit.

As Mike reached the table, he jerked his hand into his trousers pocket and flung a dime onto the linen tablecloth.

"Have you got two nickels for a d'me?" he asked straightfaced. His voice boomed past the now silent diners.

Fortuno sank back against his seat.

"Wh-what for?" Irving stammered, fumbling desperately under his coat to return his half-drawn automatic to its holster.

"For the juke box," said Mike. "I want to play a number and I need a nickel."

"Get out," said Fortuno. "Didn't you have enough today?" The voice trembled. Fortuno's venomous expression barely concealed a bad case of jitters.

Someone threw a nickle toward Mike. It fell to the floor. He turned his back contemptuously on the gangster and stooped to pick it up.

People shifted in their chairs and began to talk nervously. Most of them panned their heads with Mike as he walked to the juke box. He turned and spoke so that everyone in the place could hear.

"It has long been customary," he began in a caricature of the after-dinner manner, "to play the latest creations of the artists in our midst on this architectural monstrosity." He indicated the juke box.

"He's crazy," he heard someone whisper.

"Tonight," he continued, "we will have the rather signal honor and sad pleasure of hearing the latest and last recording of Inez Richman, who, as you know—" he hesitated, and the satirical note went out of his voice, "died this afternoon."

He shoved the nickle into the slot, the circuit clicked on, and the pickup arm clumped down on the record. Now the restaurant was so silent that the first scratchings of the needle could be heard far in the back where some of the diners were noiselessly crowding forward to see what was going on.

THE first few notes of the piano beat across the room and then Inez Richman's throaty voice welled from the amplifier:

"If you don't like my peaches," it sang, "why do you shake my tree? If you don't like my peaches, why don't you quit worryin' me?"

The voice hummed a few bars and then stopped. The needle scratched on—people leaned forward and stared fixedly at the juke box as though they expected to see the singer herself. The scratching continued. Mike could hear the breathing of the people seated nearest him—could feel the rising tension of the room.

Irving slowly began to rise. Fortuno motioned him to sit down. Morris Koenig clutched the notebook in which he wrote reservations and stared at the floor. Goldie, at the far end of the room, fixed his eyes on Mike.

The scratching stopped and Inez Richman's unmistakable accents filled the room. The voice was low, tired, huskier than usual, but nevertheless, calm and deliberate.

"Listen, kids," it said, "someone once told me that Bernard Shaw has a movie of himself speaking his own funeral oration. Well, you won't see any pictures but, by the time I get through, you won't need them." The voice drew in its breath and the little gasp could be heard clearly. "Because, people, this is it. The fadeout at the end of Reel 10, the last act, the pay-off. By the time you hear this, I will have been for some five hours wherever blues singers go when they die."

A shudder ran through the gaily-decorated room. On some of the tables there were papers with Inez' picture and the headline screaming the word "suicide."

The voice took on a new urgency. "You all know how I died but you don't know how my husband died. I think you'll be interested. I think the police will be interested."

Mike's eyes sped across the heads of the diners, surveyed the scene. No one had moved. Reassuringly, he felt the butt of the .45 in his trousers pocket.

"You've all read in the papers that Ben

Richman died of ptomaine — the same ptomaine that made some of you sick. Well, the papers got it a little wrong. Ben didn't die accidentally. He was murdered—murdered accidentally." She said the words with grim humor.

In front of Mike a fur-draped blonde stifled a scream. The voice went on, inexorably.

"He was murdered by a poison dropped in some of Goldie's famous goulash—by a man who knew about the ptomaine and expected the death would be blamed on that just as the illness of the others would be blamed on that.

"Oh, yes," the voice added in a new note, "the people who spent the night throwing up may be interested to know that the ptomaine was Joe Fortuno's idea —a little reminder to Goldie that he had better continue to buy from Joe's black market and nobody else's."

FORTUNO stood up. Mike flipped the safety catch on his gun and slipped it halfway out of his pocket. A beefy diner at the next table jerked Joe back into his chair by the coattails. Fortuno scowled at the angry faces around him, then subsided. Mike shifted his weight, did not re-safety the weapon.

The needle seemed to travel faster along the little grooves as it neared the center of the disc.

"I said Ben was murdered," the voice continued. "The murderer could not risk intercepting a waiter carrying a single plate of goulash, so he poisoned the entire pot. From this pot he saw dished out a portion intended for his victim. The victim was the man he felt had ruined his life, the man to whom he was sending a weekly check representing instalments on money he had embezzled from his victim. The victim was Goldie. Then, because he thought he could get away with one poisoning but not ten or twenty, he pushed a kitchen helper against the stove and spilled the rest of the goulash onto the floor. Then he waited quietly with a feeling of certainty that at that very moment death was creeping down Goldie's throat. Only it wasn't. Death was in Ben Richman's throat because Goldie had been told it was the last portion of goulash and had let Ben have his."

The needle slid to the last three grooves. In the center aisle leading to the revolving entrance door, Morris Koenig laid his reservation book carefully on a table and stepped backwards. Goldie, his mouth open and his face redder than ever, moved slowly away from the cashier's desk toward Koenig.

"The man," said Inez' voice, "the man who murdered my husband, is in this room."

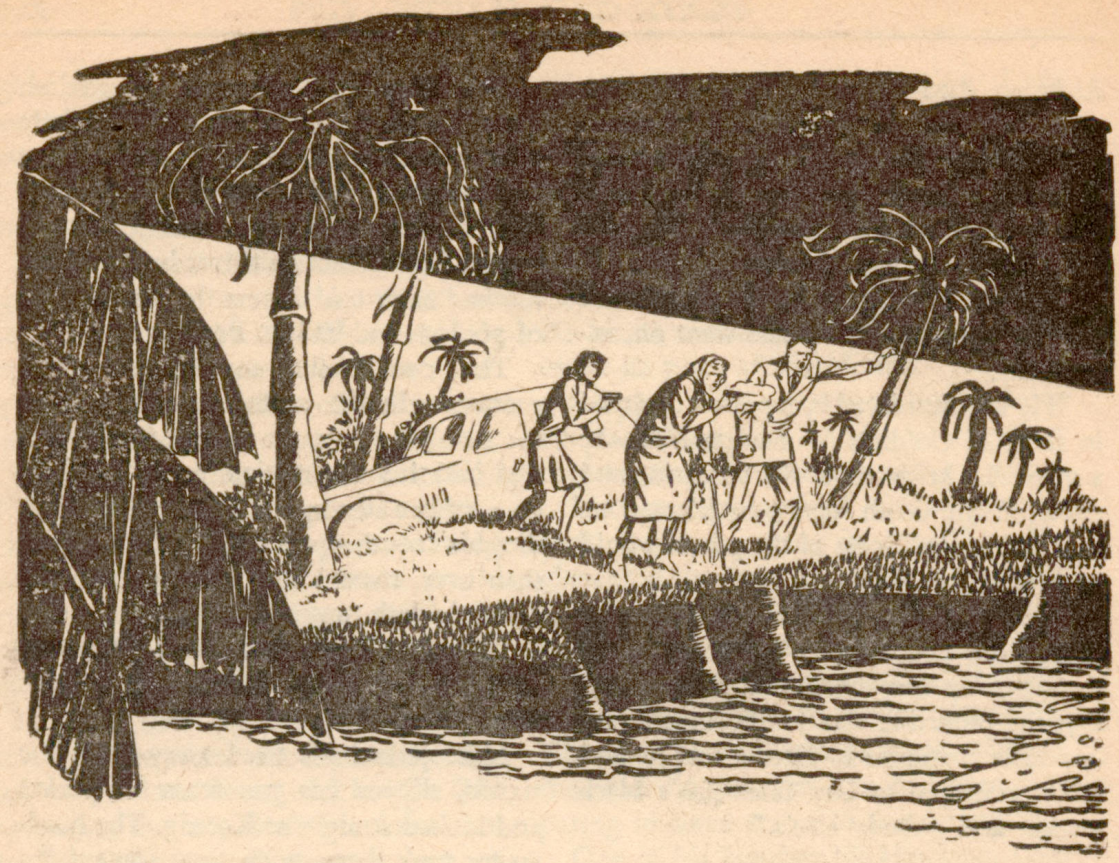
Mike jerked his head away from the record, slipped his gun from his pocket and looked straight at Koenig. The headwaiter took three quick steps toward the door before someone tripped him. He went down.

"The man," said Inez' expiring voice, "is Morris Koenig."

The needle could be heard scratching for a split second on the ungrooved wax. Then a woman shrieked.

Koenig came up with a gun in his hand. He fired from his hip. The slug zinged past Mike and crashed through the glass face of the juke box. Koenig reached the door and Mike aimed carefully. In the instant before he squeezed the trigger, a woman and a small child spun through the door from the street. Koenig twisted around as Mike hesitated. Goldie flung himself desperately at his former partner. Mike heard the report, felt every muscle in his body wait sickeningly for the bullet and then saw Goldie pitch forward. As Koenig went through the door, Mike leaped down the aisle of tables, cleared Goldie's body and ran to the street.

(*Continued on page* 112)



Pistol-Packin' Gran'ma

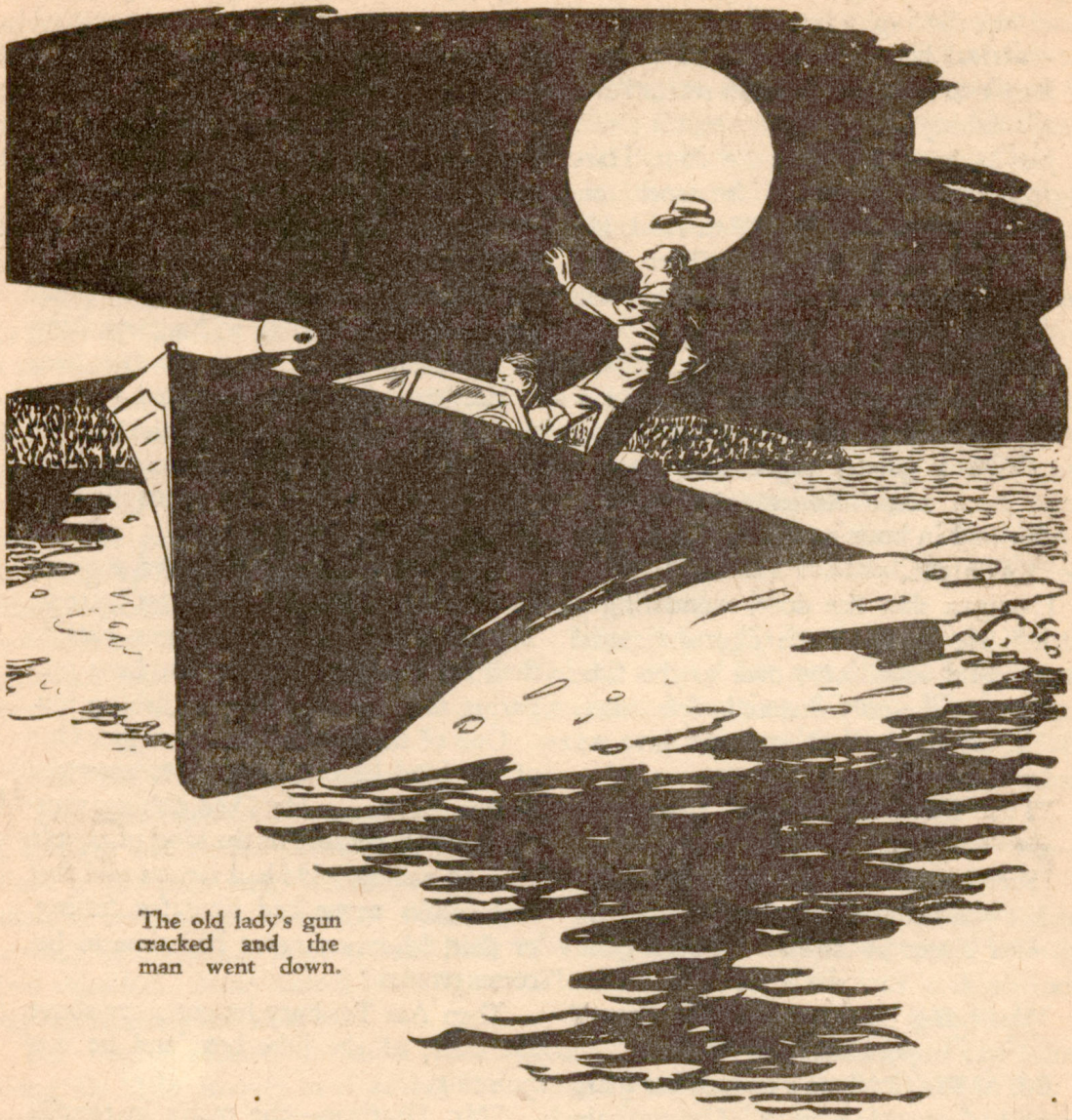
HARDBOILED years of experience told Harrigan that the tall stranger coming out of the storm was more than drunk. The man had suddenly materialized out of the coastal night. The Key West highway was flooded by the sudden Winter blow on a high tide.

"Run your bus in a ditch?" queried Harrigan, climbing to his feet. "Need a hand?"

The Philly police reporter, on his Winter fishing vacation along the Keys, was

He was dying, and he was a crook. And yet because his love for Millie was greater than anything else, he saw his chance to do one good deed in an attempt to atone for much of the evil in his misspent life

By LAURENCE DONOVAN



The old lady's gun cracked and the man went down.

sympathetic. He was the only other customer in Asa Tewbury's fishing lodge and tavern at the moment.

The tall stranger staggered some, but he put out his hand with a negative gesture and grunted:

"Nope—I'm okay—Mister, I'll have a double shot—"

Pat Harrigan slid back into his booth. The stranger's long raincoat flopped wetly about his knees. His soaked slouch hat was pulled low over his eyes.

Asa Tewbury was pouring a double of rye as the new arrival weaved his way into another booth where only one long leg was visible to Harrigan. Harrigan watched the rainwater forming a puddle on the floor at the man's foot.

He still believed the stranger was hurt rather than drunk. But that was none of his business. Probably he had been bumped by his car going into a waterhole.

Harrigan got up and walked to the door that the man had neglected to fasten. He was surprised to see the dimmed

lights of a car, high and dry, some distance up the highway. It appeared the new arrival had left his car and walked at least two hundred yards to reach Tewbury's fishing inn.

Just as he was closing the door, Harrigan's keen eyes spotted movement on the other side of the Key West road. He was sure he had seen at least two men and the shadowy outline of another car with its lights turned off.

Harrigan was curious, it being the kind of night when only a swamp frog or a water moccasin could have enjoyed being out. On a quieter night there would have been some fishermen along the bridge and in boats on Snake Creek. But not this night.

Harrigan shut the door, wondering a little. He expected the figures he had seen would soon come over to the fishing tavern, the only shelter in five miles. He heard the soaked stranger give an order in a weak croaking voice.

"Two dozen raw oysters—two dozen —got 'em?"

"Sure have," said Asa Tewbury. "But hadn't you better shuck that wet coat an' git over closer to the fire? You'll catch your death o' that wet."

"Just bring the oysters—" The man's voice was imperative.

But to Pat Harrigan's trained ear there came the wheezing croak of some pain the man could not quite conceal.

Tewbury heaped the double order of raw oysters on a plate. Funny kind of order for a guy that's cold and soaked, thought Harrigan. But then one of the rules of his fishing vacations was to attend to his own business, strictly that of fishing.

Two minutes later Harrigan could hear the stranger gulping raw oysters. He was washing them down with swallows from a glass of beer. Harrigan glanced at Tewbury.

Asa Tewbury was a mild, little man. He rented boats and kept rooms for anglers, because he liked fishing. Usually he was garrulous and started talking steadily with every stranger that came in.

But now Tewbury was strangely silent. Harrigan met his eyes. Tewbury held out both hands in a funny gesture. His small, round face was a grayish white under its years of Florida tan. Harrigan got it that Tewbury was trying to point out something to him without speaking or attracting the other man's attention.

Harrigan got up and walked over to the juke box, putting in a nickle. He glanced at the door, still wondering about the other men he had seen across the road in the pouring rain.

For when it rains on the Keys, it opens up and lets go with all the water there is. The men he had seen had been outside their car. Apparently they had been preparing to come across to the fishing inn.

One of his hunches hit Harrigan. One of the kind he did not care to entertain on his vacation. He liked fishing vacations mostly because of the kind of people who go fishing. He had always said that real crooks never had time for fishing, or that fishermen never had time to become crooks.

Then Asa Tewbury let out a cry above the noise of the juke box, and he was pointing.

"Mr. Harrigan—the man's in trouble —he's keeled over—"

Harrigan whirled just in time to see the raincoated figure of the tall man slump from the seat of the booth. The plate, now emptied of oysters, banged on the floor and smashed.

"I'll say it's trouble!" and Harrigan added a short-bitten oath, sliding across the floor. "And his last trouble, or I've never seen a mug pass out! Look!"

The water puddled on the floor from the man's raincoat had turned a pinkish color. The stranger who had just consumed two dozen raw oysters, washed down by rye and beer, had his white

hands spread on the floor as only a dead man would hold them.

And as Harrigan got down beside him, it seemed that the man had died with a sardonic smile across his broad mouth. His black eyes remained open and staring, but all of the luster was gone from them.

Harrigan had just ascertained the dead man had two bullet wounds in his body near the stomach line.

"An' he sat there an' ate two dozen raw oysters," muttered Harrigan. "It don't make sense and—"

Harrigan was about to seek the dead man's identity when the night storm seemed to slam the door open. The two men with guns in their hands were wearing fishing waders and slickers. But that could not erase the undeniable marks of hoodlums around their crooked mouths.

"Git back from the guy!" rasped one of the hoods. "An' you come out from behind that bar with your hands up, Mister!"

Asa Tewbury gasped and obeyed. Harrigan raised himself from beside the dead man. He was unarmed and would have had no chance if he had had a gun.

"Keep your nose outta this an' you won't git hurt!" slammed out the other hood. "I'll stick here while you frisk him, Corky! An' make it snappy! We ain't got all night on this damn' one-way road!"

HARRIGAN did not speak. There was nothing for him to say. He was close enough to the telephone. If this was a simple hold-up, the hoods were fools. They could not make Miami thirty miles north before every road would be blocked.

The hood called Corky leered at Harrigan as if he could read his thoughts.

"No dice, chum," he said cheerfully. "The phone wire's cut. An' the first one that starts from here on the highway will be stopped, and quick. Don't git any wrong idea either. They ain't nothin' gonna be taken except what this dead thief—"

"Can the talk!" snapped the other hood from the doorway. "Git the stuff an' we'll be on our way! What ain't known, ain't known!"

"So the dead man is a thief, huh?" said Harrigan. "An' I suppose you two mugs are cops?"

The hood, already tearing the dead man's clothes apart, snarled an oath at Harrigan.

"I said to keep outta this, an' nothin' will happen to you! We're only takin' back—"

The hood stopped talking then started swearing. He was fairly ripping the clothes off the dead man. Harrigan grunted with resignation. Whatever the play, there was nothing he could do about it. Asa Tewbury was shaking on his bowed legs until it seemed he would fall down.

"Corky! Dammit They ain't—wait, I'll take off his shoes! Yeah! That's where the smart guy would put 'em, 'cause we've given his car the double-O."

Harrigan watched the dead man's shoes slip off of wet silk socks. And the hood stood up and slammed one of the shoes at the mirror back of the bar, swearing again.

The man in the doorway said, "All we can do is take the body then. Grab on an' we'll put him in his own car!"

The hood started to move from the doorway. Harrigan swallowed hard. For coming from the darkness was a little, old woman who walked with a cane and was being supported on the other side by a blackhaired girl who could have held the spot anywhere in the world.

The sallow face of a youth showed behind the girl. A face with big, scared black eyes.

Suddenly everything was blurred in

Harrigan's startled mind. The shrieking wind tore at the opened door. There was the dead man with his hands stretched across the pinkish pool of puddled blood and water.

The searching hood had lifted his ugly face. He had seen the new arrivals from the storm. It tempted Harrigan to kick the dead man's robber squarely on his crooked chin. But the hood's gun swung quickly upon him.

Then there was the face of the old woman again. The hood in the doorway was swinging toward this new group of petrels that seemed to be blown in by the storm.

"Keep back!" shouted Pat Harrigan. "Don't come on—"

He was abruptly cut off by what seemed the impossible. Although leaning upon her cane and partly supported by the gloriously figured girl, the gray-haired woman spoke with an emphasis that could be heard.

"Sneakers!" she said. "I'll give you one chance—one chance—"

The hood in the doorway laughed raucously and swung his rod toward the group. Harrigan felt as if he were in the middle of some fantastic nightmare. For a heavy-calibred automatic appeared to blossom by magic from the old lady's handbag.

"Gran'ma!" It was the lustrous black-haired girl crying out.

SHE was too late with her warning, if she meant it for that. The heavy rod exploded and jumped in "gran'ma's" hand. The hood in the doorway dropped his gun, spun around, and fell.

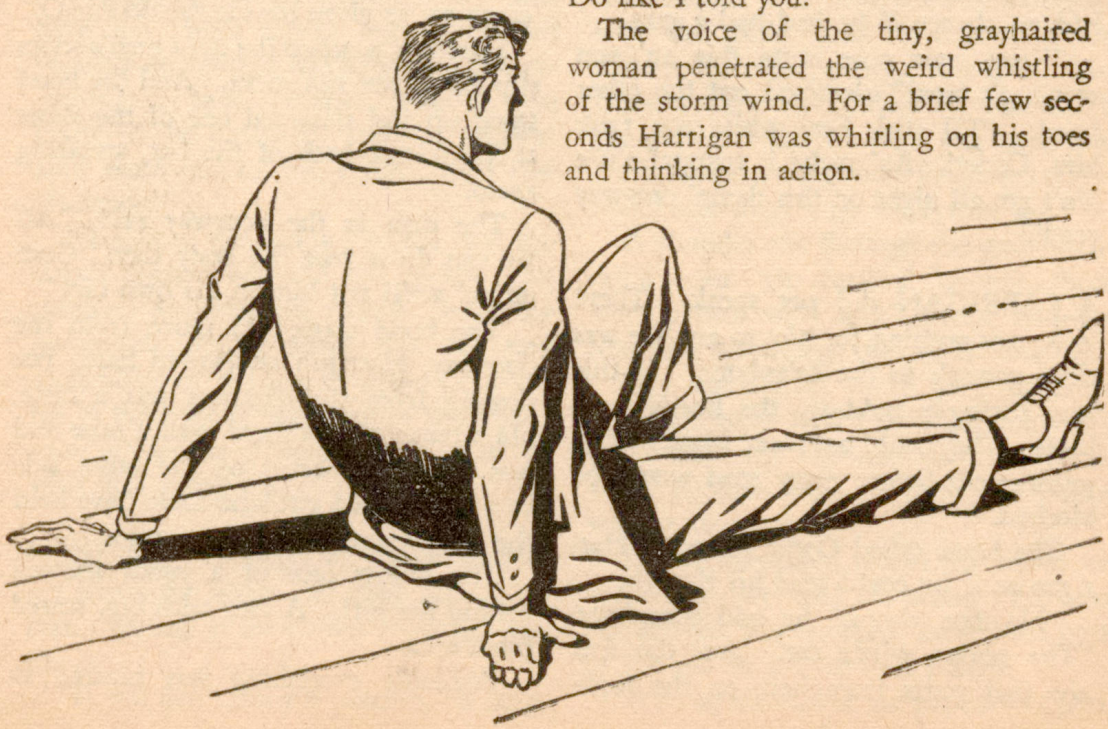
"Hold it!" yelled Harrigan. "There's—"

The old woman's pistol planged and the lights went out.

The crackling flash of blue light preceding the darkness was evidence that "gran'ma's pistol" had by accident or intention slugged into one socket of Tewbury's rather exposed wiring. In fact the round-faced, little, old woman had slammed lead directly behind one of the light bulbs. A fuse had been blown out.

"Get away from me—Millie! Danny! Do like I told you!"

The voice of the tiny, grayhaired woman penetrated the weird whistling of the storm wind. For a brief few seconds Harrigan was whirling on his toes and thinking in action.



"Millie?" That blackhaired, graceful girl was as neat as some nymph from the sea. And her face had impinged upon Harrigan's retentive memory from somewhere in the past."

This was his thought. In that swift flash of her he had seen the sparking of the little devils in her eyes. The midnight hair and her slim loveliness had completed the picture for him.

"Sure as sin," ran his mercurial thought. "Millicent Manvers, the supposedly dead-broke heiress of old Clinton Manvers, one-time South American shipping tycoon. Pictured and pampered by the sob sisters as the night-club singer who had gone all out in entertaining in the service camps."

The little, old woman would be Grandmother Manvers who had also been often pictured. And the sallow-faced youth would be the brother who had been reported to have slapped down two husky members of a draft board that had classified him as a 4-F because of a supposedly leaking heart.

Harrigan had been too long in the game of give and take, and hit first and hardest, to permit his astounded identification to interfere with instinctive action.

All of this was a bit on the screwy

"Get on your feet!" she snarled. "You look like you can drive a car."

side, but it did not make him forget he had figured he had a chance to kick the hoodlum near the dead man on his crooked jaw.

"Land o' time!" grunted Asa Tewbury with a gulping breath. "That old lady's a stemwinder!"

There was only the thump of the hood at the doorway falling to the floor. Harrigan luckily made a better guess than kicking at the thug near the dead man. He threw himself sideways, one hard fist punching as a ripping red blaze of the hood's gun followed the unexpected shooting out of the lights.

Hot powder burned across Harrigan's ear. But his knuckles had the bruised, satisfied feeling of a connection. He was rolling, one hand hooking into the hood's collar and the other snapping down upon the blazing gun.

Vaguely he heard the voice of Grandma Manvers shrilling into the room.

"Stay put, you sneakers, an' I won't kill you off! If you don't, I'm shootin' promiscuous—Millie! Keep out o' line! Here's that first sneaker's gun, an' don't go shootin' that little man who runs this fishing joint!"

With a sudden flurry of a fist hammering at his head, Harrigan still had time to grin to himself. Very evidently Grandma Manvers had seen life not far distant from the loading docks of the family shipping line.

IN ALL of his hardbitten years as an ace reporter, this capped the climax of fantasy. Like the newshound, he was, Harrigan could even then think of what a whale of a yarn this would make turned loose in the northern cities.

With that it came to him that here had been murder, and more killing, colored by the oddest turns he had even known. And it came to him that the dead stranger in the raincoat must have had his desperate reason for appearing as he had without seeking any help, or making known his dying condition.

Gulping raw oysters with the aid of rawer whiskey and beer.

But even a fast-thinking newshound cannot think too much with a bulky, desperate hoodlum doing all possible to rub him out. Harrigan could but guess at the reason for the presence of these members of the much publicized Manvers family.

The reporter turned as he heard Grandma Manvers again giving orders that Asa Tewbury was not to be hurt. She need not have troubled, for the timid fishing inn man was on his hands and knees, crawling as fast as possible toward the storm-lashed platform where his boats and bait boxes were drawn up.

Stunned by a smash on the hood's rod across his hitherto straight nose, Harrigan had his mad up. For a split second he employed one hard knee in a strictly unethical and competent manner.

The hood groaned and sagged and Harrigan banged his head on the floor. Then he had the hood's gun and was getting off the floor beside the dead man.

Grandma Manvers must have had the eyes of a cat or some seventh sight. Harrigan sensed rather than felt her slight figure beside him.

"You would, wouldja!" she intoned, and if Harrigan had possessed real sense he would have smacked her down, regardless of age, sex, or the days when knighthood was in flower.

Instead, Harrigan uttered a reassuring word—

"Got him—so what do we play now, and who is the man who wants to eat oysters when he's dying—?"

"Millie!" The word was a command.

It appeared that Miss Millie Manvers, dead-broke shipping heiress, had been too long with her pistol-packing grandma. Also Millie's gorgeous black eyes must have been abstracted from a

cat. Or perhaps it was that Harrigan's voice guided her.

Harrigan heard Grandma Manvers say, "Danny, head off that crawfishin' bait man! We'll have coast guard an' the whole condemned navy down upon us any minute now! Drag that sneaker back from the door an' maybe he can be used for barracuda bait!"

"Wait—Mrs. Manvers—" That was Harrigan's expostulation and it was his grave mistake.

The barrel of a rod, presumably in the hands of lovely Millie would have amputated an ear if it had not stopped at putting a deep and sleep-producing crease in Harrigan's skull. The reporter faded out without further thought of why thieves claimed to be pursuing a thief, and why a little, old pistol-packin' gran'ma had upset their apple cart.

PAT HARRIGAN awoke to find the fishing inn lights were on. He first saw Asa Tewbury sitting motionless and quiet in a chair back in a corner. Tewbury could scarcely do otherwise.

He looked like a mummy with all the heavy fishing line that bound him tightly and with a woolen sweater tied into his mouth. Someone was prodding Harrigan savagely.

He twisted, looked up, and said, "Now wait a minute, Mrs. Manvers. I ain't—I didn't—"

"Get on your feet, you bit of scum!" rasped out grandma poking his ribs with her heavy automatic while she still supported herself on her cane. "You look like you can drive a car, an' any minute now the coast guard patrol might happen along. You ain't hurt, so get up! You're one o' them or you wouldn't name me right off like that!"

Harrigan ventured a quick look about him. He first saw the puddle of blood where the raincoated man had passed out. Neither of the two hoods, nor any evidence of their mortal remains was to be seen. Harrigan pulled his long body to a sitting posture, trying the effect of his usually laughing blue eyes upon Grandma Manvers.

There was no visible result. Harrigan turned his blue orbs upon the white, lovely face of the tall, blackhaired girl. She looked about as sympathetic as a Russian woman guerrilla out for meat, and she dangled one of the dead hood's rods in her daintily curved hands.

There was Danny. He, too, now had a rod, presumably taken off the other hood. Harrigan rubbed his eyes. He realized that only the passing storm has kept a coast guard patrol away until this time.

And now, except for the watery stain of blood on the floor, there was not a single *corpus delicti* to meet the eye. Asa Tewbury was screwing his small face into awful knots, trying to tell Harrigan something, but that brought forth only incoherent grunts.

Before he came all the way up Harrigan exploded.

"Just for the record, did the spirits of the dead come and take them away? And I ain't—"

"Speak when you're asked, young man!" snapped Grandma Manvers. "Not for any record, the sneakers have been put where nobody will look—as for you, I hope you have a coast guard identification, or you'll get in trouble driving our car down the Keys to Snake Creek, even in this storm—"

"Now wait a minute," cut in Harrigan. "I'm not driving any motor vehicle down the Keys, it being against the law at night. And especially I'm not driving a hearse. Who was that dead guy who glommed oysters while he was dying? And where is he?"

Harrigan was fast. But not quick enough to get away from the rod rammed into his stomach by the old lady.

Harrigan had sense enough to keep his hands down. But his roving eyes noted that a new shade of whiteness came over the tall Millie Manvers' face as if drawn there by an artist's brush, at his mention of the first dead man.

"If I've gotta, I've gotta," muttered Harrigan, and knew he wouldn't have missed all this for the biggest sailfish ever gaffed in the Gulf Stream. "An' what car am I drivin', an' where an' why?"

He could see the old woman's eyes become smaller as the skin about them crinkled.

"You're askin' me!" she said bitingly. "You're driving Salters' car back to where it came from, which you know well enough. You know the exact spot on Snake Creek we want to go, an' we're getting there ahead of the road police, the coast guard and the whole U. S. Air Force, if it comes to that."

"Nice business," said Harrigan resignedly.

"If we don't get shot as saboteurs, we'll wind up doing time on the Dade County road gang. These roads are closed at night and—"

"You'll get off the main highway and onto the road that leads us to the *Spiritus* on Snake Creek," snapped the old lady.

"Sounds like a drunkard's nightmare to me," murmured Harrigan, suddenly deciding he was overlooking something big if he opposed the old girl. "But where's the bodies—I mean the guys you called the sneakers, and this man who died first?"

Harrigan caught a violent gesture of old Asa Tewbury's head toward the stormy platform and the bait boxes. Well, at least that was settled. It seemed that the hoods had been placed where they might become either shark or 'cuda bait.

"On second thought, I'll drive for you, Mrs. Manvers," he said. "I'm sure I'd make tough bait to cut."

BECAUSE of the storm and no traffic supposed to be moving, the coast guard boys were seeking shelter where they could. The station at Snake Creek could be missed by cutting into a swamp road, as Harrigan had learned while fishing.

The reporter's blood tingled, however, with the mention of the fishing cruiser *Spiritus*. It was one of the finest boats lying up in the tarpon-filled waters of Snake Creek. Evidently Grandma Manvers with her deadly pistol had a direct reason for believing he had come from the small crew of the *Spiritus*.

Might as well let it ride that way, he decided. For he recalled that the *Spiritus* was owned by an Amos Salters, with many passes and privileges, because he was a manufacturer of torpedo boat engines in New Jersey. He knew Salters and his deluxe cruiser.

Harrigan gave Millie Manvers another once-over. Now that he had a good view of the sweetly-fashioned girl with her wet garments clinging to her, this promised to be somewhat of a desirable assignment. Nature did not pass out many such figures.

If only the old lady would put that pistol down, he mused in the words of the song. He hoped she wasn't out for Salters' blood.

"Okay, Mrs. Manvers, you can stow the artillery," he said. "I'll drive if the coast guard will let us get through to Snake Creek. But I wasn't in on this until you came banging in."

The old lady's voice was acid.

"You was standing over John Mathers with that gat when we came in," she said. "An' I'm gun-herdin' you right back to the lousy crew you come from. You try one word of warning, an' you'll get it before Amos Salters does. Now get going!"

"But—say, you're not out to get Salters, are you?"

Prayer That Works

SCIENTIFIC PRAYER is both useful and effective. And consecrated prayer is a sign, not of a weak, fearful mind, but of a strong, sound, intelligent, confident mind. Praying is an art requiring skill, practice and careful application, the same as needed for the successful achievement of any other undertaking. The requirements are easy and simple but these requirements must be met earnestly and sincerely.

We cannot blame God if our prayers go unanswered. God is willing to give us whatever we need but we must be receptive and do our part. A Bible statement reads: *"Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss."*

In cases where your own prayers may not have been favorably answered, you can usually trace the difficulty either to lack of faith or a wrong motive. Whatever the trouble is, it can be corrected. Faith can be developed. Wrong motives can be discarded and replaced with right motives.

People often say: *"If only I could BELIEVE."*

Belief is a quality of thought that can be *ACQUIRED* by constant practice. It is easy to believe in something that you *KNOW*. For example, you have no trouble in believing that two and two are four. It is equally easy to believe in the power of God when you *KNOW* and *UNDERSTAND* what God is. Ontology reveals the real nature of God and explains your true relationship to Him. In the same way, Ontology reveals the true nature of prayer and explains how you can develop vigorous faith.

The Bible-promises concerning the effectiveness of prayer are positive and unmistakable. Jesus said: *"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."*

"Give me the chance an' he'll be deader'n than a nit," came from Grandma Manvers' tight lips. "Had Mathers killed, didn't he? He'll never get a chance to beat a phony police rap."

Harrigan was walking slowly toward the door. The old lady's cane thumped and his eye cornered upon the lovely Millie supporting her grandmother on the other side.

But the stubborn old woman managed to keep that pistol prodding into his back. It was not the time to take a sudden chance. And moreover, Pat Harrigan's blood was tingling with a desire to see this killing mystery through to the end.

Nevertheless, at the door he uttered a warning.

"You know Amos Salters is big stuff in war work, don't you? Whatever stake you've got in this, I'm thinkin' they'd burn the whole lot of you if you did shoot Salters. Again I saw I wasn't in on—"

"Shut up an' keep goin'!" rapped out Grandma Manvers. "Right on over to Salters' car that you come out of! You're thinkin' on account of John Mathers havin' a record the lot of you can get away with murder, but this time—"

"Gran'ma! No! Please! Don't talk any more. Maybe this guy's tellin' you straight, an 'we ought to take the body—"

"That'll be all, Millie," said the old woman firmly. "All the record John Mathers ever had has been wiped out this night. As for your Uncle Amos, he's the only kin I ever had that was born a rat."

HARRIGAN stepped out then to find that, like most Florida storms, this one had been turned off. It left a huge and illuminating moon that seemed to float like a brilliant balloon over the Keys down toward Snake Creek.

At any minute now, Harrigan was sure some of the coast guard boys would come hooting along on patrol. Especially if the lights of a moving car were seen.

But evidently the coast guardsmen did not expect anyone to be moving yet. High surf slapped the rocks and sent shallow streams slithering across the concrete highway. The swamp to the west was still steaming from the rain, creating a low-lying fog. Harrigan realized that coast guard patrol boats would be holding well off shore with that rough water pounding over the shoals.

"Get in and the first move you make wrong, young man, you get what the others had comin' to them," commanded Grandma Manvers. "An' don't turn on any lights. The moon's good enough. Danny, you get back there and follow with John Mathers' car the same way."

Possibly the old lady was batty, thought Harrigan. Anyway, he had too much proof that she would use that pistol that never left his side. And Amos Salters was her brother, she had said.

Yes, he had seen the big sedan, a new Caddy. It carried a New Jersey license plate. It was Amos Salters' bus. The old lady's rod never left his side, but Harrigan stole a look into the back of the car. Perhaps they had Mathers' body there.

Nothing there except the lovely Millie Manvers. And she was toying with another automatic too close to the back of his neck to keep him comfortable. From the tightness of her mouth and the mask-like whiteness of her face, Harrigan got the idea the night-club singing heiress who had no fortune would turn on the heat as quickly as her pistol-packing grandmother.

Harrigan could hope for but one break. If it would be a break? A patrol might come along somewhere between here and that Snake Creek road, which was about two miles southward.

They would surely be stopped, and it might give him a chance to end the old woman's apparent murderous mission. As he slid the big Caddy along the highway, a police memory intruded. Why hadn't he thought of that before.

John Mathers? Grandma Manvers had said he had a record. And Harrigan's memory supplied something more. The hoods had said Mathers was a thief and had stolen something.

Not at all improbable, thought Harrigan. For his clicking mind had recalled that John Mathers had been one name used by one of the slickest crib crackers in the business.

As he slid the big Caddy along, the build-up did not add any to Harrigan's peace of mind.

Here was an apparently half-batty old dame out to put a slug in her brother, according to her own record. That brother was a big shot with the government.

And, unless he had misjudged the old woman's shooting, there were two dead men back in Amos Tewbury's bait boxes. Sure, they had all the marks of being hoods, but a big shot like Amos Salter would hire tough boys as guards.

Salters' business gave him a lot of privileges and the coast guard recognized him as a top guy in war work.

Add to that the statement that John Mathers was a thief, and had stolen something, and Pat Harrigan began to get the idea that from the lovely Millie to her aging grandmother, the Manvers must have suddenly turned into a group of killing maniacs.

But with all of that top-heavy evidence piled up against them, Harrigan found in himself a sneaking sort of liking for the pistol-slinging grandma, and considerably more than that for the white-faced girl with a gun on his neck.

"Look! If you'd only tell me what—"

"Shut up" The old woman's voice was deadly but low. "You want the sound to carry! Find that road to the *Spiritus!*"

Harrigan shut up because he distinctly heard the little click of the safety opening on grandma's automatic rod.

DANNY MANVERS was following with the car of the dead John Mathers. As he saw the Snake Creek bridge

poke into view, Harrigan had an idea that the dead man's body might have been put into his own bus. Still there was only the moonlight and the beating of surf that effectively drowned out the low purring of the big Caddy's motor.

Harrigan wished Grandma Manvers would slip that safety catch back. But the suddenness of the old lady this evening was not reassuring. She had come into the picture shooting, and it appeared she would go out of it the same way unless a miracle happened.

Snake Creek had been named for its twisting channel rather than for the number of cotton-mouthed moccasins making it their habitat. It was a swell fishing creek. Cut deeply in spots, it had every variety of fish from barracuda to tarpon.

Off the main highway, Harrigan sent the big Caddy plowing through the rutted creek road. After the rain the car threw up as much water as a Solomon Islands landing barge for marines.

"If I could maybe stall in a mudhole," whispered Harrigan to himself. "And if I did, the old heller might plug me just for the fun of it."

He kept going. He knew Amos Salters' *Spiritus* was anchored less than half a mile up the creek. One more curve and it would come into view.

If ever a hardboiled police reporter prayed to hear a siren, it was Pat Harrigan. But he heard nothing but the car driven by Danny Manvers having tough going behind them.

"Grandma," said Millie suddenly. "We just can't do it. John got them—let that be enough—Grandma, please! You wouldn't really want to kill anyone—"

"Stop it, Millie," fumed the old lady. "I've wanted to wring Amos Salters' neck ever since he drowned my kitten forty years ago, an' now he's a murderer, but he hires others to do his killin'. I'm doin' my own."

Harrigan's ribs contracted as the old lady's gun pushed in harder with a bad bump in the old road.

"Grandma." Millie again. "I don't know for sure this guy we've got wasn't on our side—"

It was the first break Harrigan had been given. He would have added to it, taken a chance. But then he heard the explosions of a speedboat. It was coming from up Snake Creek. Amos Salters' cruiser must be no more than a hundred yards away.

The speedboat was coming fast. Its white wake swirled into the moonlight just as Harrigan sent the big Caddy around a curve on a shallow shore of Snake Creek.

Only Harrigan missed sending the Caddy all the way around the bend. Instead, he jerked to one side, twisted the wheel hard and sent the nose of the car into the swampy creek all the way over its hood.

TWO things happened. Grandma Manvers swore. Loudly and fervently and her gun exploded so close to Harrigan's ear he was half deafened. Powder burned his face.

And a light beam jumped from the speedboat and bathed the Caddy.

From Grandma Manvers came a surprising ejaculation.

"Millie! You fool! You almost made me shoot this young man What do you mean—?"

And Harrigan shot up a hand to grab at the gun. The girl had acted with the swiftness of a snake striking. As the car had plunged, she had seized her grandmother's arm and jerked it upward.

But then Grandma Manvers had the arm free. Waterfront language spilled from her quivering mouth. Harrigan had the car door open and was crouched low.

Even in this crisis the old lady did not lose her head. She punched on the Caddy lights and their beams picked out two men in the speedboat. Beyond the smaller craft Harrigan could see the riding lights

of the cruiser *Spiritus*.

"At last!" screamed Grandma Manvers. "You thought they were bringing John Mathers back to you, dead! But it's me! An' the mugs you sent after the diamonds ain't ever comin' back!"

Harrigan scrambled up in the mud. He could see two men in the speedboat. One man stood up suddenly. He had a paunch that had come of good living. Harrigan groaned, then shouted.

"Salters! You fool! Get down or—"

It was of no use. Amos Salters got down because Grandma Manvers' gun cracked and Salters folded at the knees.

The other man was crouched low over the speedboat's wheel. A gun flamed in his hand and slugs pounded the Caddy's windshield.

Some instinct caused Pat Harrigan to lunge back into the car door and seize Grandma Manvers. Her language would have poisoned a moccasin as Harrigan rolled with her into the creek mud.

It was then that the siren screamed. It came from a coast guard patrol boat racing up Snake Creek.

"Too late for Amos Salter," muttered Harrigan. "You're an old woman and I hate to think of you burning."

Grandma Manvers pulled forth another shocker.

"What? Me burn? For breaking a rat's leg! I'd got that other killer, too—"

Harrigan saw then that Amos Salter was crawling about in his speedboat. But the other man suddenly dived into Snake Creek. He started swimming desperately toward the other shore.

The guard patrol boat sliced a beam across the swimmer. To Harrigan's amazement one of the gunners cut loose with a machine-gun and laid a circling pattern around the escaping man. The swimmer threw up his hands and gave every evidence of a sudden desire to surrender.

LIEUTENANT KEMPER, in command of the patrol boat, was doing the talking. One of his men was patch-

ing up a broken leg for Amos Salter. The man who had tried to escape by swimming sat in sullen silence, securely handcuffed to a pipe in the patrol boat's cabin.

"Yeah, Harrigan, you've got yourself a yarn, anyway, and it was luck that put you on the spot right then," said Lieutenant Kemper. "This Nazi who called himself Ross has been dickering with Amos Salter for several days. We got a phone call from a John Mathers who said he wanted to square up some kind of rap. He said he would never be a witness, but we would find this Ross on Salters' cruiser, and that he was about to take over something like two hundred grand in unset diamonds for the Germans—"

"He'd do that." It was Grandma Manvers. "He couldn't take them though, because John Mathers got them from Salters' safe on the cruiser.

They were all the fortune that was left to Millie and Danny Manvers, and their Uncle Amos stole them before the will was read.

"Poor John Mathers. Thief or no, he turned out to be a grand guy. He got back the diamonds tonight and Amos Salters' hired killers got him. But they didn't get the stones."

Lieutenant Kemper looked bewildered. Harrigan's head was whirling.

"But where is John Mathers' body?" exclaimed Harrigan. "The two mugs you —that were killed, didn't find any diamonds. They tore up John Mathers' car and searched him—"

"Mr. Harrigan, now that I know you," interrupted Grandma Manvers. "I'll have you understand I have not killed anyone. I'm too good with a pistol for that. The two killers Amos Salters sent after John Mathers are tied up, one with a broken shoulder and the other with a busted kneecap, in the bait boxes on that fishing tavern wharf."

Harrigan gasped, but he was watching Millie Manvers' pretty, white face. The girl's mouth was a straight line of grief.

"John Mathers is in the trunk of Amos Salters' car you were driving, Mr. Harrigan," the girl said with a dry sob. "He was in love with me, but he was a thief, a safe-cracker, and it was John Mathers himself kept me from marrying him.

"But Danny met him and Mathers learned about Amos Salters holding out the diamonds, the only fortune our father left us. John said nothing to me, but he talked with Grandma Manvers."

"He told me there was one good deed he might do to help square up the bad part of his life," said Grandma Manvers. "He would get those diamonds back from Amos Salters. We knew nothing about Amos being hooked up with any Nazis, or that he was trying to get a big price out of the stolen diamonds."

Harrigan did not know how it happened. But suddenly he was comforting the girl. He had never believed he would go for a night-club singer, but he guessed what he believed didn't matter.

"But the diamonds?" questioned Lieutenant Kemper. "The Salters men did not find them, you say. Probably John Mathers hid them where they'll never be found."

Grandma Mathers walked over beside the lieutenant and spoke in a low voice. Kemper's eyes widened with amazement and he turned to Harrigan.

"You were at the fishing tavern when Mathers came there," he said. "It seems he managed to contact Mrs. Manvers by telephone after he was shot and before he got to the tavern."

"Yes, I was there," said Harrigan. "And you don't have to tell me, Lieutenant. I'm a newshound enough to figure that one out for myself. There will have be be an autopsy to recover the Manvers' diamonds.

"He may have been a crook, but what a game guy he turned out to be. He knew he was dying and yet he swallowed

two dozen oysters that have become the most valuable in the world at this moment. He lived just long enough to put the diamonds where no one but a surgeon could find them."

MURDER WEARS A HIGH HAT

(*Continued from page 25*)

paid me the dubious compliment of offering me a full partnership. And coming from the cleverest criminal brain in history, that meant something.

Her lips framed a mocking smile as Nevel and I started for the door. She said: "We'll be meeting again, Killer Cain. That's a promise."

As we rode a cab over to Phil's Oyster Bar, I sketched the case to date for Nevel, from the air-gun shot that had knocked off his hat, through the murder of Silk Hat Harry, the attempt to knock me off, the murder of Maria Novotny's blond aide and finally the death of the lovely Polish agent.

The proprietor of the oyster bar showed us Harry's locker with the dress suit and the illuminated dress shirt front the poor old rummy would never wear again. Nevel grabbed the hat from the locker, then said: "This isn't my hat, Cain. Have you made a mistake?"

I shook my head, started searching the pockets of the dress suit. I found the pawn check and heaved a sigh of relief.

"I thought Harry was saying something about Joe's tub as he died. It wasn't until a couple hours later I figured he meant stub from Joe's pawnshop. We'll find your skypiece there."

We did. Nevel was the happiest lad in Washington, as he pried out the lining and a thin laminated layer of silk. He pulled out some thin sheets of onion skin and almost sang with joy. I didn't see them. I didn't want to. In fact, I didn't ever want to see a high hat again.

DEATH ON A PLATTER

(*Continued from page 95*)

CROSSTOWN *traffic had just started* and the middle of the block on Broadway was empty of cars. Koenig had reached the car tracks when Mike's shell entered his back, penetrated his lung, and came through the front of his body. Koenig kept running, first on his feet, then on his knees. When his face splashed into the little puddle at the curb on the other side of the street, his legs were still running. Then they slowed like a mechanical toy running down. Finally, they bent at the knee and drew up toward the little man's bullet-torn abdomen. Morris Koenig had left the world in the very position in which he had entered it.

Emerson Fitch and Bill Folsom came up a few minutes after the squad that screamed from the precinct station. Fitch wiped his bloody hands carefully with a handkerchief as Goldie was carried out on a stretcher.

"Will he live?" Mike asked him.

"Sure," said Fitch. "Anyone who has survived forty years of delicatessen food can live through anything."

Folsom extended his hand and waved toward the juke box.

"Your methods were a little corny, Mike, but I think you can come back now. If the commissioner still says no, he's going to have two good cops sitting around on a farm instead of one."

"Come to think of it," said Fitch, "once we found the Colchicine in Richman's stomach, the evidence pointed straight at Goldie. He had the motive and the perfect alibi in that he had intended to eat the stuff himself." He jerked a finger toward Koenig's blanket-covered body in the gutter across the street, "how did you figure this angle?"

Mike grinned. "The kind of deduction you don't get blown out of you—even in the South Pacific. Inez told me that Goldie gave Ben the goulash because Morris said it was the last plate. When I questioned the chef, he said the goulash was spilled *after* Goldie's table had been served. That meant Morris Koenig was lying at the time he told Goldie it was the last plate. Either Koenig was the murderer, or he and Goldie were working together. I figured that was impossible because they were the last two people in the world who could trust each other, so that made Morris It." He tapped the doctor's bag. "Did the cop who got my call tell you I wanted some of the ptomaine peas?"

Fitch nodded and extracted a half-filled glass jar.

"Watch," Mike said.

He ambled through the still-excited diners to the other side of the room where Fortuno sat, smiling sardonically, in the center of a little knot of policemen.

"You haven't got a thing on me," he repeated. "That dame's dead and there isn't a soul in the world who can prove I knew anything about the peas being bad."

Mike came up with Folsom close behind. He dug his automatic into Fortuno's ribs.

"Get into the kitchen," he ordered.

Fortuno looked wildly about him. "This lunatic is going to kill me," he screamed. "I demand protection."

The policeman looked questioningly at Folsom. The deputy commissioner shook his head.

The remaining diners made a wide path for Fortuno as Mike prodded him into the kitchen. Inside, he emptied the unsavory peas into a plate and thrust a soup spoon into it. He held the gun at the back of Fortuno's head.

"Start eating," he said grimly.

Fortuno ate.

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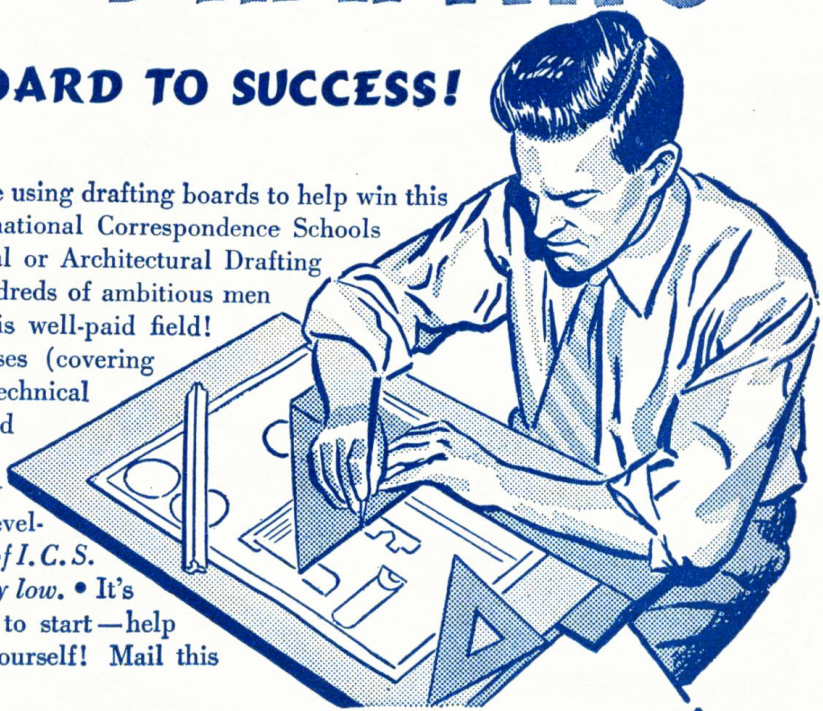

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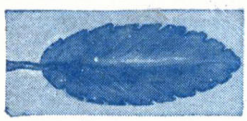

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