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# DETECTIVE

## DEATH MAKES A MAN MAD

*A Complete  
Mystery Novel*  
By **LAURENCE  
DONOVAN**

## LET ME KILL YOU TENDERLY

*An Exciting  
Novelet*  
By **ROBERT  
SIDNEY  
BOWEN**

1946 JUNE 1946

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A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION





## Let your HEAD take you

*(The average American today has a choice of just going where "his feet take him", or choosing wisely the course to follow. Let's skip ahead 10 years, and take a look at John Jones—and listen to him . . .)*

"SOMETIMES I feel so good it almost scares me.

"This house—I wouldn't swap a shingle off its roof for any other house on earth. This little valley, with the pond down in the hollow at the back, is the spot I like best in all the world.

"And they're mine. I own 'em. Nobody can take 'em away from me.

"I've got a little money coming in, regularly. Not much—but enough. And I tell you, when you can go to bed every night with nothing on your mind except the fun you're going to have tomorrow—that's as near Heaven as man gets on this earth!

"It wasn't always so.

"Back in '46—that was right after the war and sometimes the going wasn't too easy—I needed cash. Taxes were tough,

and then Ellen got sick. Like almost everybody else, I was buying Bonds through the Payroll Plan—and I figured on cashing some of them in. But sick as she was, it was Ellen who talked me out of it.

"Don't do it, John!" she said. 'Please don't! For the first time in our lives, we're really saving money. It's wonderful to know that every single payday we have *more* money put aside! John, if we can only keep up this saving, think what it can mean! Maybe someday you won't have to work. Maybe we can own a home. And oh, how good it would feel to know that we need never worry about money when we're old!"

"Well, even after she got better, I stayed away from the weekly poker game—quit dropping a little cash at the hot spots now and then—gave up some of the things a man feels he has a right to. We didn't have as much fun for a while but we paid our taxes and the doctor and—we didn't touch the Bonds.

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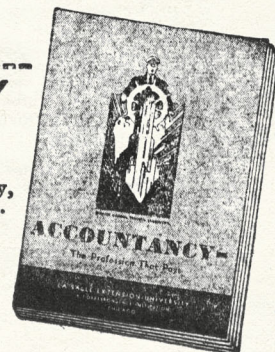
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# POPULAR DETECTIVE

Vol. XXXI, No. 1

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

June, 1946



**A Complete Mystery Novel**

## DEATH MAKES A MAN MAD

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

*When mysterious murder stalked, Airlines Pilot Jim Rock went right into action with swinging fists—and took plenty of chances in his fight to unravel a sinister riddle!* 13

**Two Complete Novelets**

LET ME KILL YOU TENDERLY . . . . . Robert Sidney Bowen 50

*When sudden death strikes, Detective Chet Lacey hastens to heed the siren call of duty—but not the call of a siren!*

THE SIGN OF MURDER . . . . . Wayland Rice 76

*Private Detective Andy Riggs tackles a grim and baffling crime puzzle at a mountain chateau of evil, bewildering mystery!*

**Short Stories**

WHERE THERE'S A WILLIE THERE'S A WAY . . . . Joe Archibald 41

*Willie Klump tries to discover what makes a killer tick*

SOMETHING OLD—SOMETHING NEW . . . . . F. R. Read 63

*A young scientific sleuth and an old-time sheriff join forces*

BALDY AND THE DEAD SOUTHPAW . . . . . Jack Kofoed 69

*They said Lefty Waldron was a suicide—so Simmons investigated*

**And**

OFFICIAL BUSINESS . . . . . A Department 6

*Where readers and the editor meet*

POPULAR DETECTIVE, published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., at 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription (12 issues), \$1.20; single copies, \$0.10. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter April 14, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1946, by Better Publications, Inc. In communicating with this magazine, please include your postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

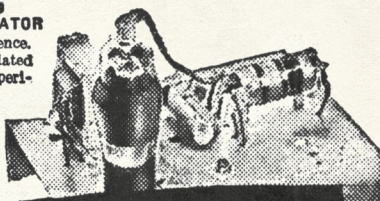
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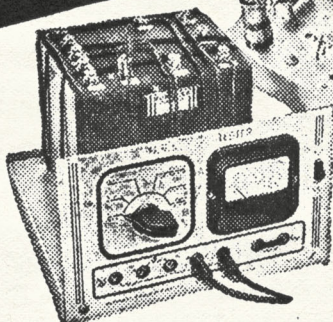
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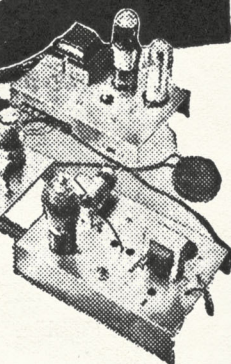
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# OFFICIAL BUSINESS

A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS  
AND THE EDITOR MEET

**S**TEP UP, folks, and meet Lawrence Hackett—private investigator who is known to his friends as “Moody.” Just why he is given this nickname, you will learn next issue when you follow his escapades in **THE DEAD DON’T WRITE**, the exciting featured novel by Roger Fuller.

Hackett’s father was a policeman. A slug from a marijuana-crazed hoodlum’s gun ended a promising career. With his dying breath, the elder Hackett made his son promise that he would “keep off the cops.” That is why we find the younger man in the much more difficult role of private dick.

As the curtain rises on **THE DEAD DON’T WRITE**, Hackett is sitting in his office, under the watchful eye of Alice, his fifty-year-old bookkeeper. Alice announces, with a disdainful sniff, the arrival of “Miss Gee-Gee Griscom.” Hackett would not be more amazed if Alice ushered in Winston Churchill or Babe Ruth!

You see, Hackett has just finished reading a letter—mailed from the Grand Central post office and written in a backhand, feminine hand. The letter says: “Bet you can’t—ten to one you can’t!” That is all. No signature, no return address. And now, in walks Gee-Gee Griscom. Truly, Hackett thinks, the beginning of an unusual day!

Gee-Gee Griscom is considered by practically everybody, to be the most beautiful show girl in America. Looking her over, Hackett is of the opinion that her photographers haven’t done her justice. Gee-Gee is a looker and no mistake.

## Find the Husband!

The story the show girl tells Hackett is an odd one. She wants him to find her husband, who is one Oliver Wainwright III. No, none of the gossip-column writers even knew Gee-Gee is married. What a dainty morsel it would be for them if they found out! America’s most beautiful show girl and one of Manhattan’s most notorious millionaire playboys, man and wife!

Hearing this news, Moody Hackett can do nothing but protest. How can he find Oliver Wainwright III when the Government has announced that the young man in question has

been killed in action? He was even decorated posthumously.

But the show girl is positive Wainwright is still alive. She shows Hackett a letter, written in the same feminine backhand as the letter the private detective has received. It contains two code words. They are “Iggy” and “Snark.” Those terms are only known to Gee-Gee and Wainwright. The letter goes on to say that the supposedly dead husband is watching the showgirl—a polite warning for her to be a good girl.

Gee-Gee lays out a cool thousand dollars as a retainer—nice, crisp, new money! And when the beauty leaves the office, Hackett wonders if she is wacky. Of course the letter isn’t in Wainwright’s handwriting, but it may have been dictated. The girl seems to set a lot of store on those two secret words. Well, a thousand bucks is a thousand bucks, so Moody Hackett—get busy!

## A Message from Karjok!

The detective doesn’t claim to be a drinking man, but there is a certain bartender named Johnny Farrell who has given him some wise tips in the past. From him the detective gets the lowdown on the missing Wainwright.

There is a blue-eyed young man standing at the bar, evidently engrossed in a racing sheet. This young man tells Hackett that Mike Karjok wants to see him—now! Hackett is given to understand that it will be dangerous for him if he doesn’t go.

Only too well does Hackett know who Mike Karjok is. Smooth, sleek and debonair, he is the undercover king of the racketeers. Hackett has always suspected that this gangster was indirectly responsible for the death of his father, although he has never been able to pin it on him. A sinister customer is Mike Karjok!

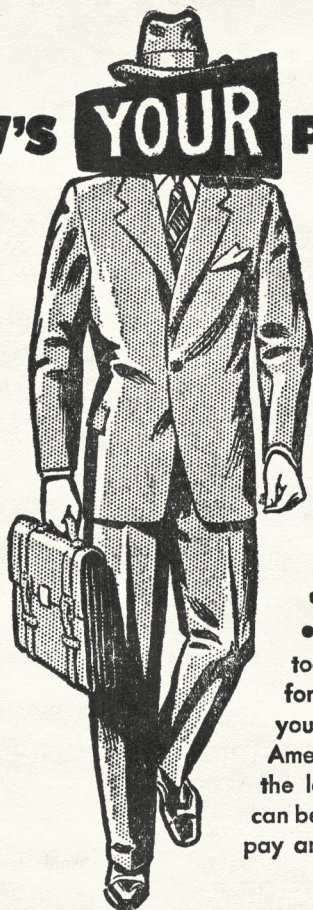
Karjok tells Hackett he wants the detective to go down to Florida and investigate a crooked horse-trainer. For this the detective will be paid five thousand dollars. Hackett sees right through that one. It is only an excuse to get him out of town. After much verbal fencing, Karjok decides to tell Hackett the truth.

(Concluded on page 8)





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## OFFICIAL BUSINESS

(Continued from page 6)

Yes, the racketeer knows of Gee-Gee's visit to the detective and exactly what it was for. Up to now, it has always been thought that Karjok has been interested in Honeyball Moore, who is Gee-Gee's room-mate. But now that Gee-Gee is considered a widow, she is the logical heir to the Wainwright millions. So Hackett just *mustn't* find out that Oliver Wainwright III is still alive. He must drop the case right where he is!

If he doesn't—well, Mike Karjok leans over his magnificent mahogany desk and speaks pointedly:

"Now it's your fault if you get hurt!"

With a score to settle on his father's account, you know very well Moody Hackett doesn't drop the case! As to whether or not Wainwright is really alive and keeping an eye on the beautiful Gee-Gee, we're not going to spoil your enjoyment of the story by giving you the least inkling. Just a tip—keep your eye on Gee-Gee. You won't find her hard to take.

You won't find keen-thinking, quick-acting and two-fisted Moody Hackett hard to take either. Don't miss this humdinger of a novel. It ranks with the very best we've ever given you!

## The Road Home

Another grand yarn next issue is **WITH INTENT TO MURDER**, a baffling novelet by Norman A. Daniels that will hold you breathless from start to finish!

Steve Emory is just out of the Merchant Marine. He hasn't been home in three years, said home being St. Petersburg, Florida. Wearily he goes from railroad station to railroad station, from one airport to the other. He even haunts the bus terminals, only to hear daily and hourly:

"Sorry buddy—nothing outta here for a couple of months."

Wearily he turns away. Suddenly an ugly-looking man taps him on the shoulder. He introduces himself as Alex Foley. His face gives Emory the shivers, as he looks like a regular Dracula. However, the proposition he makes to the ex-Merchant Seaman is interesting. Would Emory drive him and his partner down to Florida in a car? Emory jumps at the chance. It's a way to get home!

The partner is introduced a short while later. He is Paul Taylor and seems a pleasant enough chap.

Emory swings his dufflebag aboard the car,  
(Continued on page 10)

The June issue (No. 12) of the new pocket-size **MYSTERY BOOK Magazine** features the newest mystery novel by Brett Halliday, also Q. Patrick, Will Cuppy and others. Get it today, 25c at all newsstands.

(Adv.)



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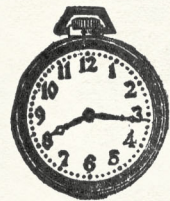
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## OFFICIAL BUSINESS

(Continued from page 8)

grabs the steering-wheel and they are on their way! The first night they stop at an hotel. On the second, at a tourist camp. The next day they are roaring through the pine-flanked roads of Georgia.

It is then that Taylor and Foley begin to quarrel. There is a storm approaching, with the wind whipping into a hurricane. They urge Emory into more and more speed. To add to the difficulty of the wind, the rain now pours down in torrents.

Speed—more speed! Faster—faster!

Suddenly Emory feels the steering-wheel come apart in his hands. The car lurches wildly and dumps them all into a ditch. They see a house nearby—one of those old, dilapidated, Southern mansions, surrounded by moss-hung and sinister old trees.

The three men feel there is no use standing there in the downpour, so they enter the house. They find it utterly deserted, with just a few bits of rickety furniture here and there. The atmosphere is dank and eerie. The entire setting could very easily be the home of some wandering ghost.

## Reason for Murder

Among the many things Emory has learned about these two men from their quarrels is that they are business partners. Each one is insured for fifty thousand dollars—the entire hundred grand to go to the survivor. If ever two men have reason for murder, Foley and Taylor are perfect set-ups! But who is going to murder whom—and how—and when?

Suddenly, toward evening, there is a blinding flash outside the front of the house, followed by an explosion. The three men rush out to find the car a complete wreck. They now are completely cut off from the outside world, in the midst of a howling storm with evening coming on. All the light they have is one flashlamp.

With their last match, they light a fire made out of odd bits of broken furniture. Taylor begins to fry some mushrooms he has picked. He offers some to Foley, who apparently eats a few. Looking at them, Emory realizes that they are not mushrooms, but poisonous toadstools! He knocks the pan out of Foley's hand.

Foley now doubles up with terrific agony, so Emory has him drink many glasses of water. Foley is taken to another room where he lies down on an old mattress.

Later Emory looks under a rug and finds the mushrooms, which Foley evidently did not eat at all. So Foley is only playing sick. What's the reason for that?

## Steps in the Dark

When inky darkness finally descends upon the marooned three men, Taylor begs for the lone flashlight. Emory, without any source of light, goes alone to a room upstairs. There are steps in the dark, the creak of the stairs, the flash of a knife— (Continued on page 96)





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The housekeeper seized Rock by the wrist as he sank back against the table

*When murder stalked, Airlines Pilot Jim Rock went right into action with swinging fists—and took plenty of chances, because—*

# DEATH MAKES A MAN MAD

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

## CHAPTER I

### *Corpse on Board*

**T**HE big northbound United Airways passenger clipper from Lima to Miami was coming in close to the lower Florida Keys. Jim Rock, pilot, looked up as Peggy Devlin, the stewardess, stuck her blond head in through the control room door. Her usual smile was gone, and he was surprised to see her pretty little face was soberly serious.

"Jim," she said. "I wish you'd come back and give two of my passengers the double-o."

"Is something wrong?"

She knitted her brows and gave her slender shoulders a little shrug.

"I don't know. It's Senores Don Vargos and Camora. One of them started to examine a camera. It flew open. He closed it in a hurry, but a little bug that was in it got away." She opened a piece of paper. "Look at it, Jim. I slapped it dead with a newspaper, but I'm sure there are others in that camera."

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A COMPLETE MYSTERY NOVEL

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Jim Rock turned to see what she held in her hand. One glance at the hourglass design on the back of the insect she was showing him was enough.

"A black widow spider!" he whispered hoarsely.

He grabbed the paper and crushed it with the spider, as if to make sure the poisonous thing was really dead. He had scarcely finished when a muffled explosion came from the rear of the plane. The giant four-motored clipper staggered, slipped off its dipping port wing and commenced to belch smoky fire through shattered portholes.

"What the devil!" cried Joe Wade, the co-pilot.

Rock worked the ailerons this way and that to compensate for the sudden crazy gyrations of the big ship. It was tossing and pitching like a small craft in a hurricane sea.

With a sharp cry, thinking of her passengers, Peggy Devlin groped her way back into a cabin that was filled with acrid smoke. The clipper went into a long, thundering dive—a dizzy descent. It tossed Peggy to her hands and knees in the smoky darkness.

The cabin lights had been knocked out, but except for explosives oaths, there was little evidence of panic.

Peggy breathed a swift prayer for Jim Rock, as the clipper continued its spinning dive.

"Everything will be all right!" she called out to the passengers as the thundering spin of the dive eased off into a sickening side slip. "Buckle on your lifebelts. There's been only a slight accident."

Voices could be plainly heard now, because somehow Jim Rock had leveled off and cut down the motors. But fire still trailed from the rear of the fuselage. Rock could see smoky tongues of it against the star-spangled sky.

"Rudder's slapping, Joe," he snapped to his co-pilot. "But we're holding on the flaps. Take over. I'm going back to help Peggy."

He stepped back into the cabin. A couple of the passengers had lighted matches and Rock had snapped on his emergency pocket flashlight.

"Miss Devlin!" he called, formal now. "Did you find out what broke loose? I see a little smoke back there. It must have come from a fuse blowing out. I'll have it fixed in a jiffy. Everybody take it easy. The trouble's under control."

He wished it were true. But he knew that whatever had caused the explosion was burning now, back of the washrooms. And he had

a hunch that a deliberate attempt had been made to knock the Lima-to-Miami clipper from the sky.

He hurried past Peggy who was beside a moaning woman, giving first-aid to a gashed forehead. His hand touched Peggy's fleetingly.

"The men's washroom, Jim," the girl said in a low tone. "There's someone—something—there."

Acrid smoke pouring from the shattered door of the small washroom made Rock's eyes smart. There could be no mistaking the odor of cordite and thermogenic chemicals. He reached for an extinguisher—and was all but hurled through a gaping hole in the side of the fuselage when he stepped on something. One downward glance showed a dead man between his feet.

**W**HERE the washbasin had been, a hole had been blasted. The plumbing had been ripped out, and a large section of the fuselage was gone. The blast had ignited the wooden fittings, and the blaze was creeping along the side walls.

Rock started the extinguisher going and quickly put out the fire inside the narrow tail. If there was still fire outside the fuselage there was not much they could do about it. They would just have to trust to luck that the flames did not gain too fast before they made a landing.

Jim Rock dropped the extinguisher now and examined the corpse. The body had been so badly mangled and scorched that even the color of the man's skin was not distinguishable. His hands had been smashed, and his face was an unrecognizable ruin.

"And I thought this was a routine trip," Rock muttered grimly.

After a brief search, he found the broken wires of the blasted fuse box. His emergency repairs brought on the cabin lights.

When big Jim Rock strode back into the cabin, the first thing he noted was that where two Spanish passengers from Peru had been seated, there now was but one.

"Are you Senor Don Vargos or Senor Camora?" he asked the tall, black-haired man who remained.

"Senor Camora, Mr. Rock," said the passenger steadily. "But if you want my friend, Senor Don Vargos, he was—"

"We'll talk about that later," interrupted Rock. "Meanwhile, I'll take that camera."

He reached for the little black box that was set on the rack above the seat. He was





Snatching up the automatic, Rock sprang out of sight just as the door of the inner office opened



completely taken by surprise when Senor Camora clipped him on the chin with all the force of his powerful right arm!

The blow jolted Jim Rock back to his heels. He half fell and, before he could recover, Camora, lithe as a whip, was out of his seat.

Eluding Rock, he grabbed the camera from which the deadly black widow spider had been spilled, and darted back toward the washroom. Rock was after him instantly. But he was too late. Senor Camora had hurled the camera through the blasted hole.

Rock slapped the man's head with the flat of his hand.

"Tried to murder your friend with poison spiders, huh?" he demanded. "And when that missed, likely you planted a bomb on him! Talk, Senor Camora!"

Camora's nostrils flared with anger.

"I have nothing whatever to say, Mr. Rock," he answered quietly.

Jim Rock's own anger flamed higher. Having a hole blasted in his ship, and his unblemished record with United Airways spoiled was enough to make any man mad. But on top of that, having a man murdered and then this cool Peruvian announcing he had nothing to say—that was too much.

Peggy Devlin's entrance stopped whatever Rock might have done.

"Stop it, Jim!" she pleaded. "Joe Wade's calling for you. One of the motors has conked out, and we're losing altitude. You're a pilot, remember—not a policeman."

Jim Rock could feel the big clipper falling off. Though they were over these lower keys and only minutes out of the Pan-American Airport at Coconut Grove, there was still danger of a crackup.

"I'll see you when we land, Senor Camora," Rock said grimly. "Peggy, keep that gun of yours handy. Use it instantly if the senor tries any more murder tricks!"

In the bucket, Rock took the controls. Looking back, he saw smoke was still trailing thinly from the tail of the fuselage.

"That's only a fabric or grease fire back there—I hope," Rock said tightly. "Good glory, Joe! We're coming in with our tail smoking and a murdered man in the cabin—not to mention that box of black widow spiders we'd have had if our Peruvian passenger hadn't jettisoned it after smacking me one."

Joe Wade grinned, looking at the bruise on Rock's craggy chin.

"Anything can happen to us now," he declared. "We may even make a safe landing."

Jim Rock accomplished wonders within the

next ten minutes. It was said that he could have put a motor on a canoe and flown it. When finally he set the clipper down on the landing canal of the United Airways depot, it was with a side slip that dragged off the remnants of the tail assembly, but the ship remained upright.

Then Rock went in the cabin to confront the passengers.

"Just keep your places," he announced. His gaze centered on Camora. "All of you know we've had a murder on board. It may even have been intended that the clipper was not to arrive at this port. No one can leave until the police take over."

## CHAPTER II

### *Mysterious Senor Camora*



EGGY DEVLIN had one hand in the pocket of her uniform, on her small automatic. Joe Wade was calling the Miami Homicide Squad on the ship-to-shore connection.

"You might save yourself plenty of trouble by talking now, Senor Camora," Jim Rock told the Latin-American. "What about the black widow spiders? Why, and how come the explosion?"

"I might call to your attention," Camora said calmly, "that the explosion would have ended all our lives, except for luck. Only the fortunate blowing of the washbasin through the side of the fuselage, instead of into the cabin, saved the plane from being ripped apart. And had a bomb been in my friend's clothing, as you intimate, his body would have been blown to bits."

"Is that all you have to say?" demanded Rock. "It doesn't explain the poison spiders, or why you ditched them. Who are you, and who was Senor Don Vargas?"

"We are plantation managers for the Transit Latex Corporation in the Amazon Basin. But to get back to what we were discussing. Do you think I would have risked my life to get rid of Senor Don Vargas?"

"Why don't you leave it all to the police, Mr. Rock?" urged Peggy Devlin.

"Somebody wanted this plane destroyed," Rock said harshly. "The explosive might have been planted in the washroom, perhaps in the drain pipe. Water could have set off



the fulminating cap."

Police sirens wailed. Squad cars were coming off Bayshore Drive onto the grounds of the Pan-American Airport. Rock frowned at Senor Camora.

"Just what is the Transit Latex Corporation anyway, senor?" he demanded.

"Oh, I can tell you that," Peggy Devlin put in brightly. "It's a company belonging to the Andrews Ship Corporation which, in turn, is owned by Miss Isabelle Andrews, better known on Park Avenue and various yachts as 'Billy' Andrews. And Billy Andrews—"

"Hasn't enough brains to stuff sand in a rat-hole," snapped Jim Rock. "Come on, Senor Camora. I'm going to look over that washroom before Captain Ramer takes over. I may want to ask you some questions. And I'll guarantee you one thing—your business, Miss Billy Andrews' millions, and the whole Andrews Ship Corporation won't pry you out of jail until Captain Luke Ramer has a good and sufficient answer to this murder."

Camora bowed elaborately, smiling a little.

"Your friend, Captain Ramer, has no jurisdiction outside of Miami, Mr. Rock," he suggested quietly. "The death of my friend occurred in a jurisdiction that comes under international law."

Jim Rock's jaw tightened. Murder over the Caribbean, he realized, might prove up in the air in more ways than one.

He could hear a gangplank already being connected to the locked door of the clipper as he took Senor Camora's arm.

"Have Joe keep off the police for a few minutes, Miss Devlin," he directed, and urged Camora ahead of him into the blasted washroom.

Camora moved past the body of his friend and bent as if to examine some broken pipes. Abruptly, he kicked backward, catching Jim Rock squarely in the stomach.

Rock roared. For the second time Senor Camora had taken him by surprise. Then, while Rock was doubled up, Camora leaped through the hole in the side of the fuselage into the black water below.

Instantly, though agony burned through his body, Jim Rock dived after him. He might be handicapped by pain, but he meant to snatch Camora out of the bay to face the police. This attempt to escape seemed confirmation of guilt, in spite of the Peruvian's argument that the exploding bomb had endangered him as greatly as it had anyone else.

Rock emerged from his dive, swimming painfully and slowly. He could see Camora's

head bobbing past the landing platform into the darker area of Biscayne Bay.

Captain Ramer would be demanding admittance to the clipper for himself and his squad by this time, he knew. But Peggy Devlin and Joe Wade could tell them all that was known.

Then Jim Rock began to swear. Peggy would not be telling the police anything for a while. Her white uniform and her blond head showed briefly near the tail assembly of the clipper—then her slim white form flashed downward, and there was a splash as she struck the water.

"And the bay full of barracuda!" groaned Rock.

**H**ER clean, quick strokes carried her toward him.

"Jim, you fool!" she gasped as she came alongside. "Why didn't you let the police search for Camora? Where did he go? . . . O-o-oh!"

For at that moment they both saw Camora wading ashore into the mangroves below the fence marking the boundary of the big airport. Without a word, they struck out for the spot.

Where they came into the mangroves proved to be the deadend of a Coconut Grove street.

"Jim, how about calling it a day" the girl panted. "In spite of the black widow spiders, I don't believe Senor Camora expected that explosion. Besides, I think what was in that camera box surprised both him and Don Vargas. That's why they didn't notice I killed one of the spiders. Don Vargas must have gone to wash his hands because he'd been handling that box."

Jim Rock nodded. That seemed to make sense. Except why then had Camora been so anxious to escape the police?

"I have it, Blondie!" Rock exclaimed suddenly. "Camora must not have taken that dive because of the police at all! He was probably trying to get away from someone who was going to meet him at the landing float—someone who may have been responsible for the explosion."

Rock halted, whispering.

"The police will search the bay. If Camora is mixed up in the murder, he'll likely get to a telephone soon. If he does, I'm going to see if I can find out whom he calls."

"Jim, please drop the whole thing," pleaded Peggy. "There's no mark against you. And what do you care why Senor Don Vargas was murdered?"



"Or why someone tried to blow us to Kingdom Come?" snapped Rock. "Look! Someone is looking for Senor Camora."

A car had slipped silently in among some coconut palms, and a huge man climbed out. He came on toward the lighted street intersection.

"Jim!" Peggy shuddered. "He looks like a ghost walking! Did you see his face?"

Jim Rock's own quick glimpse of the man's face had sent a chill down his spine. There was a peculiar set fixity about the man's pallid features which reminded Rock of what a walking zombie, a corpse resurrected from the grave, might look like.

Reaching the edge of the water, the frozen-faced giant paused, listening. Then he called out a few words in Spanish, and repeated Camora's name. Senor Camora emerged from the mangroves.

"Senor Conklin?" Rock and Peggy heard him say. "How did you know where to find me? Did Tom Grove come with you?"

"I was waiting for the clipper, senor," the big man with the dead face said. "I tried to reach you by cable before the clipper left Lima, but I was too late. Then when the police boarded the clipper I learned that Don Vargas had been slain—as planned. Tom Grove will be at the office. We must get there before the police arrest you."

Jim Rock touched Peggy's arm. "Go to your bungalow," he whispered. "I'll call you later. I'm going to get to the bottom of this or never fly another plane."

He silenced her protest and left her, circling toward the small parked sedan of the dead-faced man called Conklin. Rock meant to follow Camora and this spectral-looking Conklin who had just admitted knowing that Don Vargas was to be murdered.

Taking a chance that the two men would get in the front seat, Rock got in the back of the sedan, planning to huddle his big body to the floor. At that moment, however, the dripping Senor Camora and Conklin came under the street light, and another car appeared, leaping from the darkness like a pouncing monster. Its driver swung it around on the graveled roadway and the machine-gun in its back began to stutter.

Rock saw Conklin push Camora to the ground. Then Conklin himself dropped and rolled to one side.

Whatever might have been Camora's connection with the murder of Don Vargas, the machine-gun settled forever any possibility of his talking. The weapon tore him to pieces.

Swearing furiously, Rock jumped from the parked sedan. Gravel from the killers' car kicked up into his eyes, then the car was gone. Whirling, Rock glanced toward where the big, deadfaced Conklin had dropped, but detected no movement. Then from the darkness came a frightened cry as Peggy Devlin ran across the street to Rock's side.

"Didn't I tell you to beat it?" he raged, as he pulled her behind the sedan for protection. "Want your head blown off? That was a beautifully framed killing. Conklin either brought Camora into a trap, or they both walked into it accidentally. At any rate, the killers got Camora, and Conklin got away."

He drew Peggy back into the shadows alongside a stone wall. The shooting had been heard, and already police cars were converging on the spot.

Conklin took no chance on returning to his own parked car. Rock caught one glimpse of him. The man was cutting across lots for another street.

"Look, Blondie," Rock said. "The police will be here in another minute or two. You search the car. I'll take a chance on looking through Camora's pockets. It looks as if we've been pitched head-on into this murder business, and until I get somewhere I think I'll let the police do their own guessing."

"I won't let you get mixed up any worse than you are, Jim!" objected Peggy. "Look, Jim! Here's a driver's license in the car. It may give us a line on Conklin!"

Jim Rock took the paper from her hand. It was not a driver's license. It was the car's ownership certificate and it was made out in the name of Isabelle Andrews. "Well!" he said excitedly. "The cops will never identify Conklin by this license. . . . Stick here a minute, Blondie!"

**R**OCK ducked back under the light, and bent over Senor Camora's body—and for the second time that night shuddered over a faceless corpse. He probed into the dead man's pockets. He was removing a wallet and several letters when Peggy screamed shrilly. Then her cry was choked off.

Rock started running, but his lumbering speed was no match for the car owned by the heiress to the Andrews millions. Conklin, apparently, had returned and snatched Peggy.

The red tail-light disappeared from the street just as howling sirens heralded the arrival of two police cars from an opposite direction. Cursing bitterly, Rock dodged back in the darkness.



"If I hook up with the police now and start a chase," he thought, "Conklin might be the kind of killer who would use Peggy as a hostage."

It came to him then that only one person might be able to assure Peggy's safety. That person was Billy Andrews.

"But would she be mixed up with a mob of killers?" he asked himself.

He didn't know. But he meant to find out.

### CHAPTER III

#### *Jim Rock "Stays Dead"*



LUKE RAMER, Homicide Captain of the Miami Winter Police, was from New York. The resort town required tough and weathered coppers. Jim Rock sat with him in a rear booth of a Coral Gables tavern and told him what had happened to Peggy Devlin. Rock had

phoned Captain Ramer

from a place near the Pan-American Airport. "I've told you every detail, Ramer," Rock said. "Peggy was taken away by someone I didn't see. I was afraid sending out a general alarm might result in our finding her somewhere in a ditch. As for myself, I'm officially dead—drowned—see?"

"I never went in for fancy stuff, Jim," said Captain Ramer. "But because you've confided in me, you're drowned, so far as I can report. And I'll hold off awhile on sending out a routine alarm for the stewardess. You're sure you didn't see who took her away? Were they the same men who chopped down Senor Camora?"

"There were two cars, but I couldn't identify either one of them," said Rock. "But perhaps I can give you a clue as to the motive for all this. Don Vargos and Camora undoubtedly were on their way here to transact business with the Andrews Ship Corporation. It was obviously intended that they should not arrive, and that my clipper should go down."

Captain Ramer nodded.

"There are other curious angles, Jim," he said. "About a year ago, the Andrews Ship Corporation went on the rocks, since practically all South American business was cut off. Then Mark Temple, executor of the Andrews estate, was trapped in an embezzlement as he was about to get out of the country."



Waist deep in water, Jim Rock turned as a heavy explosion shook the Andrews wharf



"A few embezzled thousands wouldn't affect the Andrews playgirl much, would it?" Rock asked impatiently.

"But Mark Temple wasn't playing for peanuts, Jim," said Ramer. "He cleaned out a vast amount of cash and several millions in negotiable bonds. In fact, the former international pain in the neck known as Billy Andrews wasn't left one dollar not tied up in useless shipping property, or in rubber lands somewhere in Peru."

"Heck!" exclaimed Rock. "She could always get credit on that kind of gilt-edged property."

"Not in the amounts Billy Andrews needs, Jim. The rubber trees are all new plantings. They may not pay off for ten or twelve years."

"Listen, Captain," Rock said thoughtfully. "Did the papers of Don Vargos and Camora show they were interested in anything besides the ship corporation?"

"They showed only personal interests, Jim," said Captain Ramer. "Don Vargos' son and Camora's daughter attend the University of Miami."

"Captain," Rock said, more thoughtfully, "if the Andrews Corporation was cleaned out, how are those rubber plantations being worked? They have big payrolls. I've heard no hint of any threatened smash-up of the Transit Latex Corporation. Are you positive someone in the company never was tipped off where Mark Temple hid some of the stolen cash and bonds?"

Captain Ramer swore shortly.

"That's the devil of it," he said. "Mark Temple was farmed out on a road gang from Raiford Prison. He made a break, landed in Big Cypress Swamp chased by the hounds, and never came out alive. The efforts made by the Andrews Corporation to borrow money since are proof none of the embezzled money ever got back into the company."

Jim Rock had a sudden illuminating thought which he did not care to pass along. But it brought up his final question.

"You know where Don Vargos' and Camora's kids are staying?"

"Sure. They're at the San Palos, a small hotel in Miami Beach. The Andrews Ship Corporation offices are not far from the hotel. But they're not kids, Jim. They're both around fifteen or sixteen, and you know Latin-Americans."

Jim Rock rose to leave.

"Oh, by the way," he said, "how about the identifications of Don Vargos and Camora? From what I saw, I don't believe their faces would be much help."

"That isn't the half of it," said Captain Ramer. "Don Vargos' hands were mutilated beyond getting fingerprints. And Senor Camora seemed to have tried to stop a hundred chopper slugs with his hands. We only know who they are from the passenger list, and the passports and papers on their bodies."

The night edition of the Miami Herald was on the street when Rock climbed from a taxicab in front of the small stucco San Palos Hotel. Being so near the Andrews steamship offices he had decided to stop off at the hotel first. Anyhow, he had little hope of finding Tom Grove in his office now. He had learned from Captain Ramer that Grove was the present manager of the Andrews Ship Corporation, and he meant to have a talk with him.

The wrinkled Spanish woman who came to the door of the hotel, with a newspaper in her hand, had been crying.

"May I speak with the Don Vargos boy and the Camora girl?" he inquired. "It's important."

"You are from the police?" the woman asked, and moaned as she held up the newspaper with the murder headlines. "It is so terrible, so unbelievable!"

"Yes, it's terrible," agreed Rock. "But I wish to speak with the boy and girl at once. They may be of assistance."

"Why, they had a phone call only a few minutes ago," the Spanish woman said, puzzled. "The man said he was of the police. He asked them to meet him at the Andrews Ship offices. My husband drove them over in his car."

"Thanks," said Rock hurriedly. "I'll see them there."

He pushed a fiver into the taxi driver's hand.

"Make it to the Andrew Ship Corporation as fast as you can," he ordered, for he knew it might be a matter of life or death. Why else had the Don Vargos boy and the Camora girl been summoned to the waterfront on the pretext that they were wanted by the police?

The taxi headed back in along the shore, and as Rock watched the dark blotch of Biscayne Bay he thought of the car owned by Isabelle Andrews. A heavy-calibred revolver that Rock had newly purchased was a comforting weight in his pocket.

A darkened sedan came suddenly from a side street not far from the Andrews Corporation pier. The driver of the sedan narrowly missed the taxi.

"The dumbhead!" the taximan roared. "Why, he—Look!"



**B**UT Jim Rock was jumping for the street, even as the driver slammed on the brakes. A girl's voice had screamed. One door of the speeding sedan had partly opened and Rock had seen a girl—before hands inside pulled her back.

Jim Rock, hitting the street, was thrown to his face by the impact. But the stumble undoubtedly saved his life for slugs from the flying sedan scored the pavement beyond him.

A plopping explosion followed the shooting. The taxi driver swore. One front tire of his taxi was down.

Two pier guards came running up, but by this time the car carrying the screaming girl had turned into another street.

"What goes on here?" demanded one of the guards angrily. "You fellas do that shoot-in'?"

Jim Rock wanted no trouble now.

"Nothing's wrong here," he said hastily. "But some fellows appear to be playing Wild West. Their car almost hit us, then one of them shot off a tire."

The guards glanced sharply at Rock and the taxi driver.

"Yeah?" snapped one. "You wouldn't know anything about the dead man in the car down the block, would you?"

Jim Rock never thought or acted faster in his life. He couldn't be detained and questioned now. His big hands snapped out. Two pier guards had their heads cracked together before they could blink. They slumped to the pavement, out.

"Holy catfish!" the taximan babbled. "Them guys is tough babies. Oh—oh, but you've got me in a jam!"

"I can't let you take the rap for me," Rock said quickly. "And you sure can't get away on that bum tire, either. So here's what I'll do..."

His huge fist thudded against the taxi driver's jaw, and the man went over backward, also in dreamland. Rock didn't like to sock the driver like that, but it was the only thing he could do and still get away.

"At any rate, that driver can lay all the blame on me now," Rock told himself, as he raced down the street.

Two blocks away he took shelter in a yard filled with thorny tropical bushes, while he surveyed a small crowd around a smashed coupe at the corner. A shrill-voiced woman was giving several cops her version of what had happened.

"I saw the whole thing!" she shrieked. "Those hoodlums deliberately ran into that poor devil's car so they could grab a boy

and girl out of it! When he tried to interfere, the hoodlums shot him down!"

"I know who that dead man was," one policeman said emphatically. "Anyway, it's his coupe. He's the feller who runs, or did run, the San Palos Hotel."

Jim Rock slid back through the bushy yard, cut around the bungalow, and reached the next street. He still meant to visit the Andrews offices, but that taxi driver would now be recovering from his knockout punch.

"And by the time he gets together with the two pier guards I'll be mighty unpopular in Miami Beach," reasoned Rock. "But if that boy and girl were called to the ship offices, maybe Peggy was taken there, too!"

But the street was well lighted, and company guards were on duty on the wharves. It was scarcely likely that Conklin could have brought Peggy Devlin there without being observed.

Four cars were parked in a small lot at the end of the Andrews building. Rock evaded the guards to get a look at those cars. And as he reached the second one—a sedan—and saw its registration, he swore.

"Isabelle Andrews" was the name on the tag fastened to the steering post. This, apparently, was the car Conklin had driven Peggy off in. He could have brought her here. But why?

Silently Rock crept through the shadows, heading for the offices. Out of the darkness a long arm came snaking out at him. It came so swiftly he could not duck or pivot.

Few men, however, could hold Jim Rock at a disadvantage for long. Reaching back, he grabbed a handful of shirt and flesh with an iron grip which brought a quick grunt of pain from his assailant. Then he lifted and pulled, arching two hundred and twenty pounds of hard muscle in a quick duck forward. As he dropped to his knees, the clinging hands of the man on his back were torn loose and the fellow went sailing through the air, to land with a heavy thud.

Rock bounded after him, his big fist cocked. With the resiliency of a rubber ball the man bounced to his feet and came at Rock. And for the first time Rock saw him. Those waxy, white features were becoming familiar. It was Dead Face Conklin again!

Rock let him have a short, looping overhand to the jaw. Conklin staggered back, recovered, and with a savage snarl let go a sizzling punch to the solar plexus that sent Rock spinning into the brick wall. His head crashed against the bricks and he slithered to the ground.



## CHAPTER IV

*Knives in the Dark*

EVIDENTLY Conklin thought Rock had been knocked out, for he started to turn away. But Jim Rock was anything but finished. He was about to leap to his feet, ready for more combat, when he heard a scuffling of feet and saw several men rush up on Conklin. Conklin squared away and began swinging his fists with devastating effect. But when Rock saw the dull gleam of knives he realized it would only be a matter of time before the zombie man would be put out of action.

Rock climbed to his feet just as one of Conklin's attackers was knocked down. The man held a wicked-looking knife, and now he gripped it by the tip of the blade, preparing to throw it into Conklin's broad back.

Rock had no reason to feel friendly toward Conklin, but he couldn't stand by and see any man made the victim of a sneak knife-throw. Besides, Conklin might be the only one who knew the whereabouts of Peggy Devlin.

Some loose bricks lay on the ground. Rock swooped one up and hurled it with all his strength. The whizzing brick caught the knife wielder squarely on his bullet head. The knife clattered to the ground as he went down.

Then Jim Rock plunged into the fracas. He had to admire the fighting ability of the dead-panned Conklin. Despite their knives and numbers, Conklin's attackers were not having an easy time of it.

Rock picked off two men in his initial rush, putting them out for good. Two others came at him like maddened wolves. He felt a ripping pain as a knife cut into his shoulder, then he swung a pile-driver left into the foremost man's middle.

Rock was giving his attention to his remaining assailant when there came a shrill whistle from the darkness beyond, evidently the signal of a lookout. Jim Rock was having the satisfaction of hearing ribs crunch under his iron fist when a man came running down alongside of the steamship building.

"Scatter quickly," the man yelled in Spanish. "Meet on the boat. Tayora expects you!"

Then, from further away, another voice in the darkness called bitterly:

"In the next meeting you shall not escape, Senor Conklin!"

Conklin seemed dazed by the abrupt termination of the fight. Jim Rock seized his arm. Now he'd be able to find out what had happened to Peggy. But first he had to get away from the threat of dock guards and policemen who were already headed this way.

Rock shoved the muzzle of his gun into Conklin's side.

"Run, Dead Pan!" he ordered. "Or this thing is liable to go off!"

Lights were flickering nearer as Conklin trotted off with a queer, unearthly laugh.

"Don't know who you are, pal," he clipped, "but thanks for keeping a shiv out of my back. Under the wharf platform—that's the best spot for us now. The slimy knifery nearly got me. But you proved you're not one of them."

Jim Rock, with his gun against Conklin's ribs, jumped with him into a shallow space formed by the pier meeting the shore. As they made it, they heard a boat scrape against piling as it moved away, without lights, into the bay.

"What the devil has been comin' off here?" Directly over Conklin and Rock a pier guard with a flashlight was searching. "See them fellers? They're out cold. And here's a bloody knife. There must have been a fight. But where'd the rest go?"

The powerful motor of the departing boat, well out now, suddenly roared. The guards yelled, their feet thudding overhead. A searchlight abruptly cut across the smooth bay. An officer yelled a command to halt the motorboat.

"There's only one man in that boat," said Rock. "Who is he, Conklin? Who are those men who attacked you? And I want to know—"

A guard started shooting. The machine-gun sliced a silvery stream of spray over the bow of the speedboat—as a warning. But when the boat roared on, the shooting guardsman's slugs cut like a great knife through the slim prow of the boat.

The tip of the prow dissolved. Then the whole craft went slanting down like a submarine making a crash dive, and disappeared under the water.

**J**IM ROCK'S grip upon Conklin must have relaxed momentarily. In that instant the man with the corpse face knocked aside the gun, tore himself free, and vanished into the darkness of the pilings.



Rock's search for Conklin proved futile. And he was sore in body and soul when finally he crawled from under the wharf. Just when he had begun to think Conklin might be all right, the man had somehow managed to trick him.

Guards and Miami Beach policemen were talking near the door of the Andrews Ship Corporation. The "Mr. Grove" being questioned was a clean-cut, blond fellow who did not seem old enough to be managing a steamship company.

Two old men of the bookkeeper or director type were with Grove.

"Sure, I'll give you all the help I can," Grove was telling the police. "But we know nothing of any fight out here. We got out too late to see anything except the sinking of the speedboat."

One of the elderly men spoke.

"I am Amos Calder, company auditor," he said. "We have had no trouble here. Only one visitor called at the office tonight—Miss Andrews' gardener, Conklin. And he's a peaceful sort who wouldn't have been in a brawl."

"Someone used knives," said the Beach policeman harshly. "We found this gold cross and chain, too—one of those religious emblems the Spanish like to wear. You have any Spanish employes, Mr. Grove?"

"Yes—Spanish, Italian, Cuban, and any other men we can find to help load our few ships," Grove said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have some business at the home of Miss Andrews."

"You visit your boss at this hour of the night?" demanded a police officer. "Little peculiar, isn't it, Mr. Grove?"

"It would be peculiar for a policeman to mind his own business, too," snapped Grove. "Your department permitted killers to escape with a kidnaped boy and girl tonight. That certainly ought to be enough to keep you occupied."

Jim Rock slipped quietly away. Minutes later, he hailed a cruising taxicab. He felt a little uneasy about hiring a cab after having so recently slugged one driver. But Tom Grove and Amos Calder had driven off in a car and Rock needed some means of trailing them.

Grove turned into Washington Street, and shortly drew up before an old two-story building that was completely dark. As Grove and Calder got out and entered the building, another man, whose skin marked him as Latin-American, hurried away along the sidewalk, carrying a satchel. His actions were furtive, and he kept an eye cocked over his shoulder.

It apparently had alarmed him to see Grove and Calder enter the old building.

Since it was past midnight, Washington Street was deserted. Rock, hidden in the shadows of another building, saw two more men of Spanish appearance come along. The reaction of the man with the satchel was immediate when he saw the two men turn into the building into which Tom Grove and Calder had gone. He hurried at once toward an all-night drug store across the street. Jim Rock followed.

Cap over his eyes, Rock entered a phone booth next to the one occupied by the man with the satchel.

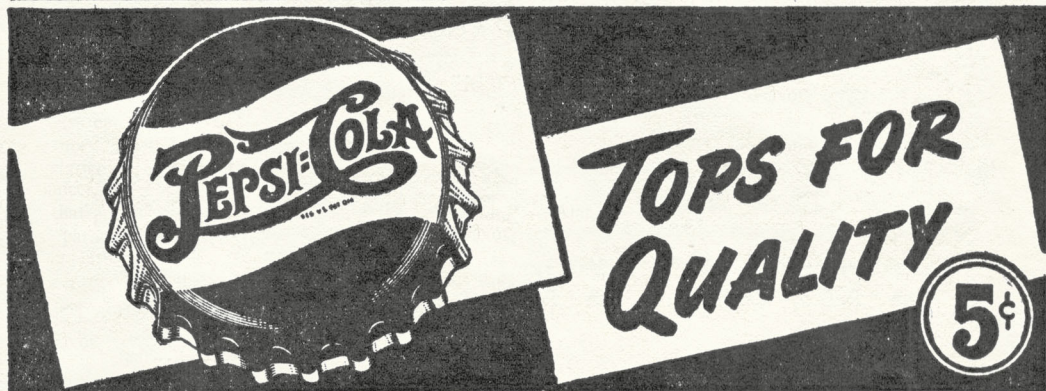
He caught fragments of what the man was saying in rapid Spanish.

"You were right, senior. Now is the proper time to get them all. Si, senior. I saw Don Vargas and Camora . . . Very good, I shall wait a while. Pedro has just left. He also has a satchel, and he will manage to smuggle it aboard the yacht somehow. Don't worry."

Rock was so startled by the announcement that Don Vargas and Camora had been seen that he lost the remainder of the conversation.

Then the man had hung up and was leav-

[Turn page]





ing the place. Rock emerged, and followed him.

In short order the man became aware that he was being shadowed. Rock decided to cast off all pretense, collar the fellow and extract some information. If this man knew anything about what had happened to Peggy, he'd find out, using force, if necessary.

"Hi, fellow!" he called. "You dropped something."

The man shot one look at the big air pilot and took to his heels.

"Hey, there, stop!" Rock yelled. "Halt, or I'll shoot!"

The fleeing man paid no attention. And he was so fleet that Rock would either have to fire or let him escape.

Rock hauled out his heavy revolver and blazed away.

His intention was to fire over the man's head, but he had never been particularly adept as a marksman. His first shot hit the man's satchel.

**T**HERE was a blinding flash, a thunderous explosion. The whole street seemed to buckle, and Rock was hurled violently from his feet. When he was able to crawl to his hands and knees, dazed, he saw no sign of the man who had carried the satchel. Where he had been, only a ragged hole and a few curling wreaths of smoke were all that remained.

Rock ran. That blast had been powerful enough to rouse half of Florida, and crowds would be milling around in no time.

He dived back into the doorway of the building from which the man with the satchel had emerged. The crowds came all right—fast.

There were plenty of radio cars. Immediately, the police established lines and cleared a zone around the crater.

Others searched for a corpse, but the man carrying that satchel had been blown to such bits, apparently, that not a sign of him remained.

Finally, someone found a fragment of satchel and a few twisted steel tools.

"Soup man," announced a plainclothes officer. "Must have been nitro in that bag, and that once was a steel drill. Probably meant to go to work on some safe. Poor sap must have stubbed his toe."

Jim Rock eased himself into the building. Mounting the stairs, he began to listen at doors.

He heard nothing, then he saw that through the glass panel of one rear door a light showed, outlining a sign that read:

## AMOS CALDER

Real Estate

Rock tried the knob, found the door unlocked, and entered a cheaply furnished, shoddy outer office. From behind the closed door of the inner office came the sounds of conversation. Rock was moving nearer when his foot caught on a chair and knocked it over.

Instantly, there was silence in the inner office. Quick as a flash Rock was beside the door of the inner office.

When it opened, he was concealed from view behind it.

**W**HOEVER opened the door must have looked the room over carefully. Then he said:

"There's no one here. It must have been the wind." The voice was that of Tom Grove, the young manager of the Andrews Ship Corporation.

The door was closed again. Rock placed his ear against the panel.

"There's nothing to be excited about," he heard Grove say. "We are alone, and can get on with our business. Now, if you men are Senores Don Vargas and Camora, as you claim, why haven't you brought your credentials?"

"We did not expect to have our identity questioned," answered a deeply accented voice. "We wish to see Senor Mark Temple. He asked us to come, and it is with him we wish to confer. He would recognize us both at once."

"Haven't heard about Temple, Senor Camora?" asked Grove, in surprise.

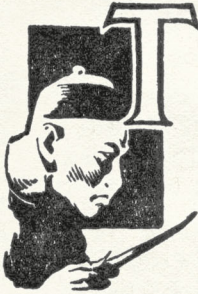
"We have heard nothing."

"Then Temple must have sent for you before he perished in the swamp," said Grove. "He got into trouble over estate funds, received a prison sentence, and died while trying to escape from a chain-gang. The money he was accused of stealing has never been traced or recovered. As a result, our steamship company is in financial difficulties and we employes have been working practically without pay. Miss Andrews owns your Latex Company also, so perhaps you can solve the difficulty. Have you an idea, Senor Don Vargas?"

"Some parts of Senor Temple's letter we did not understand," said another voice with a South American accent, "but now we comprehend better. So he is dead! When we know you better, Senor Grove, perhaps we will talk. But first we must recover our children who have been abducted."



## CHAPTER V

*Peggy's Strange Job*

HE conference in the inner office was about to break up, and Jim Rock thought it best to get away before he was discovered. But he was puzzled. What was Tom Grove up to? The young manager had struck him as honest.

Rock also had noticed an old-fashioned safe in the outer office, and he wondered if that was the safe the "soup man" outside had been intending to crack. If so, why?

Crowds were still thronging the street outside the building, as Rock slipped away. He took a bus to the Midway Bridge. He meant to have a try at interviewing Billy Andrews. She might know where Peggy was.

Hiring a boat at this hour was impossible, so Rock borrowed a row boat. Luck and the tide were with him, for he passed unchallenged through Flamingo Basin.

A night fisherman directed him to the huge home, half hidden by tropical shrubbery, called The Heron. So Billy Andrews was broke, eh? The only place the poor child had left was this mansion on exclusive Hibiscus Island.

Rock rowed as close as he could to a vine-covered wall. He swore at the jagged glass fixed in the cement on the top of it. Astride the wall, he looked up at an open window on the second floor of the mansion. At the window was a small blond girl—and at sight of her Jim Rock almost fell off his perch.

"I'm getting goofy!" he groaned. "It couldn't be her!"

But as the blond girl turned, her lovely profile was fully revealed. There was no mistake—it was Peggy Devlin!

Plainly she was not a prisoner of dead-face Conklin who had snatched her. Nor was she under restraint. Instead, she was clad in the neat uniform of a maid!

Rock jumped from the wall and landed in an hibiscus bush inside the grounds. He was near a driveway which, curved away to the ornate entrance of the house. He decided then and there to go in and ask Peggy for an explanation. His eyes fell on a small side door, and he found it unlocked. Entering, he discovered himself in a living room where a dark-haired woman, evidently a housekeeper, seized him by the wrist.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. "Get out before I call the police!"

Rock did not stop to argue. He left. Outside, in the darkness, he drew a deep breath.

He was trying to figure out the best way to reach Peggy when an expensive limousine drew up before the house. Rock received another shock then. In the driver's seat, stiff and straight as a ramrod in his chauffeur's uniform, was the dead-faced Conklin.

Peggy herself came running out of the house as Conklin tooted his horn.

"Miss Andrews phoned, Conklin," she called. "She said you needn't bother to meet her. She'll come home with Count Garno."

Rock stared at the girl. He had been eating his heart out and breaking laws because he believed her to be in danger, and seemingly she had been all right all the time.

"Garno!" Conklin muttered angrily. "All right, Miss Courtney. I'll put up the limousine."

As Peggy reentered the house, Rock started toward Conklin and the shiny automobile.

"I'll darn soon find out what all this screwy stuff adds up to," he vowed. "Peggy working as a lady's maid! It doesn't make sense."

Jim Rock halted in his tracks. Perhaps it did make sense. He had been chasing all over Miami trying to dig up a reason for the murder of two men, and what better position was there to obtain plenty of information than the one in which Peggy had put herself?

He thought of the message she had just given to Conklin, that he needn't bother meeting Miss Anderson. But Conklin, apparently, had no intention of putting the car away.

**G**RAVEL flew from under the wheels of the limousine as Conklin sent it toward the gateway, and Rock had just time to sprint for the machine and hop onto the rear bumper before the car went into high gear. He managed to cling there as the limousine sped over the Causeway.

Rock slipped off the rear bumper just as the limousine pulled up alongside a factory building. He could not guess why Conklin had come here except that in doing it, he was disobeying Miss Andrews' orders.

Conklin left the limousine and remained in the shadows, watching. Then a girl came out that Conklin must have been looking for. Jim Rock often had seen pictures of Billy Andrews, but he never would have identified her with this girl in overalls, her face covered with grimy oil, and with a small lunch-



box in one hand. She went up to a slick little roadster pulled up at the curb and a man got out and bowed from the waist. He was a foreigner, though Rock was not sure of the nationality.

"Now do you see, Artie, what I meant?" she explained gleefully.

"Yes! Yes!" the dark-faced foreigner cried gaily. "You look marvelous, Billy! It was a wonderful idea to come to a factory to get an authentic costume for our 'workingmen's' yacht party."

The girl got in the car, and the foreigner went around to get in beside her.

"Artie?" whispered Jim Rock. "Yeah, I get it now. Count Arturo Garno. The papers have had Billy Andrews hooked up with Count Garno—some distant connection of the defunct royalty of Spain, or Portugal."

Then Rock saw Conklin make a sudden move toward Count Garno's car. Billy Andrews was about to be entertained aboard a yacht, and it looked as if Conklin, gardener, chauffeur, kidnaper, or whatever he was, had an idea of breaking up the party.

"Let her play out her own cards," Jim Rock muttered grimly, moving forward to intercept Conklin.

Rock took no chances this time. He let go with a jaw-cracking punch that snapped back the dead-pan face. Conklin sighed and sank down, and Rock reached into the man's pockets swiftly for the ignition key to the limousine. In a moment more, Rock was following Garno's bright blue roadster, in the Andrews' limousine.

The roadster sped into the Venetian Causeway, and swerved toward the road that crossed numerous small bridges toward Flamingo Basin. A sedan passed Rock, going fast. A light showed men and women in overalls, with soiled faces. Rock chuckled. They were Garno's guests.

"All the world's crazy," he told himself. "Just the same, I want to get on that yacht. I've an idea I'll learn plenty."

He pulled up and got out. The trunk at the back yielded nothing, but when he lifted the front seat he found greasy overalls and a jumper stowed for emergency repairs. When Jim Rock headed for the Flamingo Basin shore docks five minutes later, he looked as much the part of a factory worker as anyone.

Big Jim Rock had never witnessed such a party as that aboard the yacht. Women in overalls gushed over little Billy Andrews; and Count Garno, who had changed into overalls and had greased his face, appeared to be a gracious host. Still, Rock thought he

had never seen anything so screwy.

All of a sudden he realized he had wandered near Count Garno and Billy Andrews where they sat in a shadowed spot. They were so interested in each other they never even noticed him.

"Why not do it, darling?" Count Garno was persuasive. "We still have the license. It was such a mistake, your believing I wanted to marry you for your money. Now, everyone knows you've lost your money. So let's get married tonight. I've already made arrangements with a padre. I want to prove to you, darling, that I'm not a fortune-hunter."

Jim Rock slid back, crouching in the darkness behind a lifeboat. He was puzzled. This Count Garno seemed on the level.

But Rock would like to know whether the Count—and Billy Andrews, herself—fitted into all that had happened within the last few hours. The events passed in swift review before his mind.

Senores Don Vargos and Camora had been murdered. Or had men impersonating them been killed? An attempt had been made to wreck the Lima clipper. A boy and girl had been abducted, and a cracksman had been blown up while fleeing from the offices of Amos Calder, Andrew ship auditor.

Before that, Dead Pan Conklin had appeared, slugging everyone, including Jim Rock. He had kidnaped Peggy Devlin, who had turned up working as a maid for Billy Andrews, and on good terms with the zombie man.

"My aching brain!" groaned Rock. "I can't make head or tail of all of this."

And now here was Count Arturo Garno, reputed to be a fortune-hunter, laying his title and his life at the feet of a once glamorous heiress who now was penniless. None of it made sense.

"Oh, Artie!" Billy Andrews cried rapturously. "Now I know you love me for myself. But—but—Well, my steamship company is about to be sold to satisfy creditors, and all I can bring you would be—"

Count Garno cut her short with a kiss and a laugh.

"Pooh, for your fortune, sweetheart mia," he said lightly. "We will sell your home on Hibiscus Island and get another not so costly. I have an offer of a splendid brokerage position. The income may seem small, at first, still I will be able to give you some luxuries."

Garno swept Billy Andrews into his arms.

"Let's leave right away," Rock heard him say softly. "I long to have you all to myself—my wife."



## CHAPTER VI

*Jim Rock Blunders*

**R**OCK suddenly noticed Garno make a motion to a sailor not far away, and the man ducked below. Billy Andrews did not see that as she moved away with the Count.

The two had not taken half a dozen steps when three men in overalls moved into view from behind a superstructure. Rock recognized the frozen face of Conklin, although it was covered with grease and oil. He recognized Tom Grove, too, though Grove looked like a garage mechanic.

The third man was old Amos Calder, who had concealed his dignity behind smudges of black.

"Billy," Tom Grove called to her. "I thought you had more sense! Get away from her, Garno! There's going to be no hasty marriage tonight!"

A quick flush of anger spread over Billy's pretty, smudged face.

"How dare you try to interfere with my personal affairs, Tom Grove!" she cried. "And you, too, Amos Calder! Conklin, I'm surprised! I thought you were a friend of mine!"

Suddenly understanding came into her expressive features.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I see it all now! Tom Grove, you and Calder have been looting my company. If I marry, there must be a quick accounting to my husband. You've been telling me that my last hope of saving anything out of the fortune my father left me depended upon the arrival of Senores Don Vargas and Camora. You prevented that! You killed them! You scheming villains, I'll—I'll!"

"Shut up!" yelled Tom Grove. "You're wrong, Billy!"

"Don't you dare try to shut me up!" retorted the excited girl. "I'm going to get married tonight! I'm going to discharge you all and get some good honest men in your places!"

Count Garno laid a placating hand on her arm.

"Not so fast, my dear," he said. "Your friends are overzealous, perhaps, but after we're married these misunderstandings can be cleared away."

"Not so fast yourself, Garno," Conklin rasped. "She'll never marry you. We've brought help along to prevent that."

He leaned over the rail and waved an arm. A score of husky dock workers who had been waiting in small boats came swarming over the rail. They went for every sailor on deck in a prompt general melee.



**J**IM ROCK remained where he was, not knowing what to think about Billy Andrews' frenzied accusations. Had Grove and Calder been looting the steamship company? Was that the reason for the straitened financial circumstances of the heiress?

With that fight going on, though, there was little time for logical thought. Everybody was battling. Tom Grove, Conklin, and even Amos Calder, old as he was, were punching at the heads of anybody who happened to be handy.

Then Jim Rock got a surprise. He knew Conklin's fighting ability only too well, so it was a shock when a stoker darted up and launched a vicious kick on the zombie man's ankle before Conklin could fairly get started. Conklin yelled with pain and limped away, out of action.

Coming near the lifeboat where the air pilot was concealed, Conklin bent over, pulled up the bottom of his trousers, and began to massage his bare ankle.

Seeing that ankle by the light of a nearby lantern, Rock was horrified. At some time the man must have been tortured without mercy. Nothing else could account for the scars Rock saw—and the man's tragic face.

Conklin straightened up and went limping away. But he did not again mix in the fight.

Count Garno was in it, though—plenty. He might be a nobleman, an idler, but he knew how to handle himself.

With two powerful blows he had knocked over a couple of his antagonists, and was sailing into the rest. Some of his overalled guests had taken a hand in the conflict as the sounds of blows and yells echoed over the shadowy bay.

In the midst of it, the sailor who had gone below in answer to Garno's signal, barged on deck. He rushed up to Garno, yelling something in Spanish.

Rock could not understand what was said, but the effect upon Garno and the other Spanish-Americans was electric. Rushing from the fray, they began to dive into the bay.

Garno wrenched himself loose from the clutches of a dock worker. In two long



bounds he reached Billy Andrews, snatched her up, and leaped with her into the bay.

Rock instantly got the idea. The yacht was in peril! And the next moment he also went over the side.

He landed in the water with a big splash and went down deep. When he popped up to the surface he began to swim away from the yacht with all his strength. He touched long, silky, floating hair and held on to it. Billy Andrews—he was sure of it.

Rock had turned on his back, supporting the girl, when the yacht let go with a thunderous explosion. Flames, smoke and debris shot high into the air. Fire lighted up the basin.

Around Rock were bobbing heads, and floating fragments. And plenty of dark figures were still coming over the side of the fiercely blazing yacht. Were Grove, Calder and Conklin among them?

"Thanks," the heiress gurgled to Jim Rock.

A man swam up to them. Rock recognized the dark, lean handsome face of Count Garno.

"Thanks, senor," Garno said gratefully. "I'll take her now. Billy, my love, are you hurt?"

"I'm okay," she said. "Oh, Artie your beautiful yacht!"

"Never mind" said Garno. "The important thing is you're safe."

From all over Flamingo Basin now came the toot of warning whistles and sirens. Boats were coming to the rescue from all directions. Men aboard one speeding cruiser spotted Rock, Garno and Billy Andrews, and made a wide circle to pick them up.

Jim Rock did not want to be taken aboard that cruiser and have to give his name. So he quietly swam for shore, toward where he had left the Andrews limousine. Peggy Devlin was still on Hibiscus Island. He meant to go there, get some dry clothes, and some vital information.

As he swam, he revised some of his previous opinions. He would have sworn the young manager, Tom Grove, was honest, and that white-haired Amos Calder was honest too. But apparently he had been wrong. He had even cherished a secret hope that Conklin was not a villain. Drawn to the dead-faced man because he was such a hard, clean, skilful fighter, he hated to believe that Conklin had had a hand in looting the steamship company.

But what of the explosion aboard the yacht? Had Grove, Conklin and Calder planted a bomb to help prevent Billy Andrews' marriage? Could that man with the

satchel have been Grove's agent, and had he phoned Grove just before being killed?

What Rock could not understand was where the real Don Vargos and the real Camora came into the picture. Was Grove trying to obtain concessions from them by using the abducted son and daughter of the South Americans as a lever?

"I'm getting Peggy," growled Rock. "Then I'm going to have a look in that safe in Calder's office. I'll find out who and what is back of all this deviltry, or else!"

**T**HE Andrews limousine was where he had parked it. Getting the motor going, he set out for Hibiscus Island. Twice, he had to make long detours to avoid the police. When he finally drew up in front of The Heron he was surprised to find the big house as brightly illuminated as a Christmas tree.

"Looks like a party," muttered Rock. "Could Count Garno and Billy Andrews be planning on a wedding anyway, in spite of what's happened?"

He was moving toward the house when he stumbled over something soft and bulky. He bent to examine what had tripped him, and smothered a whistle. It was a man's body!

Rock lighted a match and took a look at the face. It was the white-haired Amos Calder.

"When a man gets in the habit of murdering people," he muttered grimly, "he apparently can't stop."

By the light of another match he made a more thorough examination. Calder had been stabbed.

"This doesn't make sense," Rock growled, as he rose to his feet. "If Calder was in the deal to loot the steamship company, why should he have been killed?"

His toe kicked something, and he picked it up. It was a knife, still wet and bloody. As he straightened, a voice spoke from the shrubbery.

"Drop that, you murderer! One move and I'll fill you full of bullet holes!"

Jim Rock knew he could not afford to be caught this way. He made a wild lunge toward the voice. His huge body ripped through the shrubbery, then his hands closed on a dodging body. The muffled cry which went up was in a voice he could not mistake. He let go in a hurry.

"Peggy!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

His arms went around her and he kissed her hard, so hard that when he released her she was gasping for breath.



"Jim, I'm so glad you're all right!" she exclaimed. "But I ought to ask you what you're doing here. I followed Count Garno when he came out to look for the padre who's expected here to marry the Count and Billy Andrews. The priest has been delayed and the Count is worried. I haven't seen Garno, but when I saw you—and didn't recognize you—lighting matches and standing over a dead man, I thought of course you were a murderer. I'm still carrying my little gun, you see."

Rock had dropped the knife beside the body. He thought it best to find the weapon and wipe his fingerprints off the handle. Peggy Devlin tagged beside him.

"How long have Count Garno and Miss Andrews been here, Peggy?" he asked.

"Only a few minutes," said the girl. "There was a big explosion on the count's yacht where they were having a party. Miss Andrews jumped overboard, he followed, found her in the darkness and rescued her."

"Oh yeah?" Rock said grimly. "Who else is here?"

"Everyone who was saved from the yacht," said Peggy. "All sopping wet. Tom Grove, the steamship manager, burst in, too, and objected to Miss Andrews' marriage. He swore he'd prevent it, if he had to kidnap the priest. I guess he did, too, because he left in a fury, and the padre hasn't shown up. But I guess Billy Andrews can marry whom she wants to, and the count is so handsome—"

"Period," growled Rock. "Who stuck the knife in Amos Calder?"

"How do I know?" said Peggy. "I thought you did, but—Calder? Was that his name?"

"It was," said Jim Rock. "Now tell me—how do you happen to be working as a maid?"

"When Conklin found me in the Andrews car, he knocked me out. When I came to, I told him about being a stewardess, and maybe I'd lose my job, so he offered to get me another as maid for Billy Andrews. I—er—thought I might find out something. I have—so far. That heiresses are pretty swell and Conklin's fine. And I will find out—"

"Hold it," snapped Rock. "Was Dead-Pan Conklin here with Grove? Maybe he humped off Calder."

"Oh no, Jim," Peggy said quickly. "Conklin wouldn't hurt a fly!"

"Sure," growled Rock. "He's tame and gentle—like a wolf. You don't know what happened to Grove and Garno after they left the house?"

"All I know is they didn't come back."

Jim Rock decided to have a better look at the knife which had killed Amos Calder. Lighting more matches, he examined the weapon.

The knife was a peculiar affair. On the yellowed bone haft were Inca carvings such as he had seen on knives in Peruvian shops. Thinking of Peru brought to mind the mysterious men who had been in Calder's offices, but whom he had not seen, and who had called themselves Don Vargos and Camora.

That reminded Rock that he had delayed a long time in trying to get a look in Amos Calder's safe. He decided to take Peggy with him and make another visit to the real estate offices in that ramshackle old building. He could use some of that explosive which had been in the satchel his bullet had destroyed in the street, he thought. But he would get that safe open somehow.

He took Peggy Devlin firmly by the arm.

"Come on," he snapped. "We're getting out of here!"

He started to turn away with her—and it was at that moment that a police car, bearing down on Billy Andrews' estate, flashed its headlights across the shrubbery. The beams disclosed Jim Rock and Peggy Devlin standing beside the body of an old man on the ground.

**E**VERY detail of the scene must have been revealed to the policemen in the car, who were probably investigating the destruction of Garno's yacht. From the radio car came startled exclamations. Brakes squealed and gravel flew.

Jim Rock had better reason now than ever for not wanting to be questioned. Snatching up Peggy Devlin, he went crashing through thorny branches, dodging in and out of the trees.

Radio police were yelling for them to halt. Some began to shoot. But the whining slugs failed to come anywhere near the fleeing man and girl.

Instinctively Rock headed for the garages. Once, many cars had been housed there, for it had been claimed that Billy Andrews always bought a new car to match each new Paris frock. Rock hoped to find one of those cars there—unlocked.

But he didn't dare stop at the garages to investigate. Pursuit was too hot. He set Peggy on her feet, seized her wrist, and ran on, dodging the radio car headlights as the car whizzed around the curving drive.

Suddenly there were renewed shouts, so loud and excited that Rock stopped short.



Then he saw the fleeing man that the car headlights had revealed. The police shouted for him to stop, but he paid no attention. Again they began to shoot.

"It's Tom Grove," Rock whispered to Peggy. "Gosh, how that lad does get around. But why didn't he stop when they ordered him to? Why is he afraid of the police? I don't like it, Peggy. The more I see of that fellow's actions, the less I understand them."

Rock was hoping that amid all the flurry and excitement over Grove, he and the girl could get away. Presently, he realized that he and Peggy were standing by a canal. Farther on was a wharf and, moored to the piling, near a light, was a big cabin cruiser.

Tom Grove was heading toward that cruiser.

## CHAPTER VII

### *Torture Boat*



**M**EN were busy on the deck of the cruiser casting off lines, just as Grove appeared. The engine already was humming. Grove yelled for them to wait for him, but they paid no attention. As the boat started to pull away, he put on speed and leaped aboard. Even as his feet landed on deck

one of the crew hit him over the head with a piece of iron pipe.

Grove fell back into the canal and sank like a stone. Another crew member tossed something onto the pier that landed with a thud.

This was too much for Jim Rock. He was tired of murder being committed all around him. He raced for the wharf and dived into the water, groping blindly along the bottom for Tom Grove's body. He found the limp form almost at once.

Holding the injured man's head above water, Rock made for the shore. He discovered the water at this point was only waist deep, and he turned to make his way back to where he had left Peggy. Just as he turned, a heavy explosion shattered the pier.

With the limp body of Grove, the pilot made for the other side of the canal, anxiously wondering what had happened to Peggy. Radio car headlights began to gleam on the bushes behind him, as he landed on the opposite shore.

Tom Grove had only been stunned. His

head was bleeding, and there was a big lump on it, but in a moment he began to stir.

"Conklin!" he muttered dazedly. "We've been crossed! Try to get the stuff out of the safe before they find it."

Then he lapsed into unconsciousness again. Jim Rock watched the beams of flashlights play over the foliage on the opposite bank as the police searched the shrubbery.

"There's too much action in this murder case," he thought sourly. "Too many hair-breadth escapes, and too many trusted pals doublecrossing each other and slicing each other's throats."

Water splashed nearby. Rock reached for the gun under his armpit, and discovered it no longer was there. Then a stray beam of light showed Peggy in the water. Rock dragged her ashore.

"How did you get away from the police?" he demanded.

"They aren't after me," Peggy said indignantly. "They happen to be chasing you and Tom Grove, you heel. Here I've been worried to death, thinking you were drowned, so I jump in the water to find out—and all you do is talk to me like I was a crook being chased."

"Quiet, Peggy!" Rock cautioned. "Tom Grove is waking up again."

The young steamship manager was, in fact, sitting up and surveying them.

"I remember being knocked into the canal," he muttered. "I thought Conklin pulled me out. Who are you two?"

"We happened to be passing and I saw you floating in the water," Rock said glibly. "So I jumped in and pulled you out. My girl friend here got wet trying to help us ashore."

Before Tom Grove could answer, a scrambling sound caused them all to lift their eyes to the canal wall in back of them. Two dark figures there were peering in their direction.

One of them spoke Grove's name in a low voice, and a few words in Spanish. Grove heaved a relieved sigh.

"Don Vargas—Camora," he called. "It's me, Tom Grove. Why didn't you remain in the car where I left you?"

"We could not, Senior Grove," one of the men answered. "Some men surrounded us and tried to capture us. We had to flee. They are still after us."

Tom Grove scrambled to his feet.

"Wait—I can guide you," he said. "I know these grounds like a book. We should be able to give those men the slip."

Tom Grove climbed the wall and joined the two Latin-Americans. In a moment more Rock had helped Peggy over the wall.



Tom Grove was holding out his hand.

"Thank you, my unknown friend," he said earnestly. "My name is Tom Grove, and I work for the Andrews Ship Corporation. Be sure and look me up tomorrow. Sorry I have to leave now, but my friends are in trouble and—"

He got no further. From the bushes on all sides squatty shapes abruptly materialized. They came swarming over the four men and the girl.

Taken by surprise, Rock emitted a smothered bellow and tried to fight. But a heavy club landed with crushing force on his head. There was a blinding flash. Then he knew no more. . . .

SEVERAL hours passed before Jim Rock painfully opened his eyes and knew, from the placid lift and fall of the boat on which he was a prisoner, approximately where he was. Off-shore for a distance from the Florida coast, there was something about the smooth swell of the tide, as it met the current of the Gulf Stream, which distinguished it from all other ocean waters the world over.

The air pilot's feet were loose, but his hands had been secured behind his back with ropes. He began to work on them frantically, exerting his strength to the utmost. His frenzied efforts were redoubled when he heard the screaming voice of a boy.

"Not her—not her!" the youth shrieked. "Madre de Dios, she will be blind, you devils! Let it be me—I can bear it!"

A low, soft voice answered in mocking tones. By shifting his body, Rock managed to obtain a view of the scene being enacted at the end of the cabin.

A stout little man, as pudgy as a Chinese idol, was crouching there on a rug, smoking a long, thin cigarro. Opposite him was a sweet-faced Spanish girl of about fifteen, with smooth masses of raven-black hair. She was fastened to a post. Beside her, a villainous-looking man was dipping a cloth into some liquid and applying it to her forehead and eyes.

If ever anyone witnessed an exhibition of sheer courage, Jim Rock saw it then. The girl uttered no sound, though her frail body quivered and jerked with anguish.

In a bunk nearby the boy who had protested was fastened with ropes.

"You have only to speak the word, amigos, and the girl's suffering will cease," said the fat man, in Spanish.

"Stop it!" another man's voice boomed agonizedly. "Do not blind Dolores! Have

we not promised everything you wish?"

The voice of the man who spoke was one Jim Rock had heard twice before—Senor Camora's voice.

Rock understood now what was happening. These were the abducted children of Don Vargas and Camora, and the fat brute was torturing the boy and girl to force something from the parents.

It was daylight now, but the light in the cabin was subdued. It was almost dark where Rock lay. Presently, however, he was able to make out a tier of bunks opposite. In one of them Peggy Devlin was bound. In the bunk above her was Tom Grove.

The pleas of Senor Camora finally prevailed. At a signal from the fat man, the brown-faced fiend who held the cloth stepped back. Rock smelled the pungent odor of some acid, but though he could not recognize it, he had a dim idea that it was one that would sting and pain, but would leave no permanent injury.

"It is good you two senores have seen reason," the pudgy man said to the bound and helpless Don Vargas and Camora. "Though it soon will not matter to you."

"You mean to kill us?" shouted Don Vargas.

The fat man laughed.

"A quick end is better than prolonged torture. That will be the reward for you four at this end of the cabin. As for the others—I have different plans."

Rock had been working unremittingly at his ropes, and at this moment they came loose. He was free. But he remained quiet, for the fat man was waddling toward him. The man stopped near Rock's bunk.

"Senor Jim Rock and his bright-haired young friend," he wheezed. "They have mixed into affairs which were none of their concern. For that, we shall feed them to the barracuda and the crabs."

This threat brought a chill even to the cold-steel nerves of Jim Rock. While one might search in a hundred miles of ocean for man-eating sharks, millions of barracuda—sea tigers—were always in the Gulf Stream, waiting for any fish or flesh that might come along.

A sailor entered the cabin, bellowing loudly.

"We are nearing the reef where the barracuda make their feeding place! Shall we anchor, Senor Tayora?"

"We will slip the yellow-haired woman into the water first where the propeller will strike her," the fat Tayora said. "All the barracuda require is a little blood to draw them to the



feast. Then we will toss in the air pilot. The other four we shoot first, because I have given my promise, and I am an honorable man. As for Tom Grove—"He began to whisper.

Rock, stealthily rubbing his wrists to restore circulation, had his eye on a man who was attending the motor.

From the deck came an order, and the engineer allowed the motor to idle. Someone opened the cabin door and wisps of fog drifted in.

Tayora and the boat crew now betrayed signs of nervousness. Rock knew why. The Coast Guard maintained a close patrol in these waters.

"As soon as we have disposed of the prisoners we shall become innocent fishermen," Tayora was telling the sailors. "Then we shall not be bothered."

**T**HE sailor who had been talking with Senor Tayora, and the engineer, approached Peggy Devlin's bunk. The next moment one of the men flinched back with an oath. Blood was streaming from a wound on his wrist.

"The little devil!" he shouted. "She has bitten me!"

Peggy screamed then, and began to fight.

Rock had to force himself to lie quiet. It was difficult, but the play he had in mind would turn the tables on Senor Tayora and his mob.

Somehow the two sailors managed to force the screaming, struggling Peggy to the front of the cabin. And abruptly there came a furious shout. A tall, thin mustached Spaniard in soiled white clothes appeared in the center of the cabin floor. Although the upper part of his body was trussed like an Egyptian mummy, his spirit was not leashed.

"You shall not slay that helpless woman!" he shouted. "Camora, help me!"

Another prisoner, trussed the same way, rolled up beside the man who must be Don Vargos. Camora was stockier, smooth-faced, and wore rumpled black clothes. Though their hands were bound, Don Vargos and Camora hurled themselves into battle with Tayora, kicking and butting with their heads.

The sailors dropped Peggy and leaped to the aid of the fat man.

Now, Jim Rock knew, was the time for him to act. Leaping from his bunk, he sprang toward a small valve wheel set low in the woodwork of the stern.

Tayora came sailing down the cabin, propelled by a mighty kick from an infuriated Peruvian. Sputtering oaths, he bounded to

his feet, his hand darting to a knife at his belt. Weapon in hand, he sprang back toward the fray, looking like a black demon.

Jim Rock was straining at the valve. He spun it as far as it would go and clamped it so tightly he was sure it would require the combined efforts of two men to loosen it.

Even with the uproar he could hear the gurgle of water beginning to pour into the hull. Unless that valve could be closed, the cruiser would sink.

A fighting sailor wheeled, saw Rock free, and shouted an alarm as his hand swept up his revolver. The cruiser rolled as Rock surged toward the man, dodging bullets in his bull-like charge. His big fist caught the sailor on the jaw and sent him spinning, head over heels.

Don Vargos and Camora lay on the floor, their bound bodies bloody. Tayora and the other sailor tried to doge the onrush of the furious air pilot, but Rock's knuckles collided with the middle of the fat leader of the killers.

Tayora went down, and Rock hit the sailor like a sledge-hammer. Blood and teeth flew in every direction. Groaning, the man dropped.

There were shouts from the deck, and more men came pouring into the cabin. Peggy Devlin sprang up from the floor. To Rock's surprise, he saw that her captors had not bothered to tie her. An exultant light leaped into Rock's eyes. Those men would regret that oversight!

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Accused!*



**A**S JIM ROCK closed with two of the men who pounded down the companionway, Peggy dashed after another who was headed for the motor. The man had reached out to throw it into gear when Peggy flew at him tooth and nail.

Her clutching hands caught his long black hair and began to remove it in bunches. He tried to hit her, but she grabbed his flailing arm and bit it. Her feet kicked his shins as she began to claw at his eyes.

The mariner, first surprised, swiftly became terror-stricken. For Peggy had started on the ju-jutsu tricks Jim Rock had taught her, and every time she touched the man it hurt.

(Turn to Page 34)



# Trail Leads To Haunted House And Then...

E-E-E-K!  
GHOSTS!

GHOSTS NOTHING! THAT'S  
A MAN AND A CHILD. I'M  
GOING TO TELL DAD QUICK!

GREAT SCOTT, MIDGE! THAT MAY  
BE THE MISSING OTIS CHILD!  
LET'S GO, WILLIS!

WHAT'S  
GOING  
ON HERE?

I'M PEMBROKE  
FROM HEADQUARTERS,  
SHERIFF. I'VE JUST  
FOUND THE OTIS BOY  
AND HIS KIDNAPPER  
IN THIS OLD HOUSE. LET'S  
GET TO YOUR OFFICE QUICK

THE CHIEF AND MR. OTIS ARE  
ON THEIR WAY...WHEW! I'M  
TIRED. BEEN ON  
THE TRAIL 2 DAYS

WHY NOT  
FRESHEN UP  
WHILE WE'RE WAITING

SOME BLADE,  
SHERIFF. I'VE  
NEVER ENJOYED  
A QUICKER,  
SMOOTHER  
SHAVE

YES, THOSE  
THIN GILLETTES  
ARE PLENTY KEEN  
AND EASY-SHAVING

GREAT WORK, PEMBROKE!  
BREAKING THIS CASE  
CINCHES YOUR  
PROMOTION

HE'S  
BETTER-  
LOOKING  
THAN  
I THOUGHT

NOW—ONE OF YOU  
AND THE SHERIFF'S  
DAUGHTER

WITH  
PLEASURE!

SHE'S  
LOVELY

I DETECT  
ROMANCE,  
THANKS TO  
THIN GILLETTE

THIN GILLETTES ALWAYS GIVE YOU SMOOTH,  
REFRESHING SHAVES THAT MAKE YOU LOOK  
RIGHT ON THE BEAM AND FEEL SWELL.  
THEY'RE THE SHARPEST, EASIEST-SHAVING  
LOW-PRICED BLADES YOU EVER TRIED.  
WHAT'S MORE, THEY'RE PRECISION-MADE  
FOR YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR AND PROTECT  
YOU FROM THE DISCOMFORT CAUSED BY MISFIT  
BLADES. ASK FOR  
THIN GILLETTES





He turned to flee. Peggy made a flying leap to his back, where she clung, removing more handfuls of hair.

The sailor stumbled and fell. His head collided with an iron stanchion. He groaned once, and lay still. Peggy eyed him warily for a moment, then leaped to her feet.

"I got one of them, Jim!" she called.

But Jim Rock was busy. He was trying to keep his two sailors from knifing him. The keen blade of a knife grazed his cheek, and he began to pound at the dark faces with heavy blows. In a moment one man's face resembled hamburger, but he refused to go down. Rock tried a kick to the stomach. That worked. The sailor didn't bother him any more. And as soon as Rock managed to close with the other sailor, that one folded up like a wet rag.

Peggy, disheveled and panting, ran to him. Rock looked at the floor.

"Jeepers, Peggy!" he exploded. "This danged thing is sinking under our feet! If I don't close those sea-cocks pronto we'll get our ears wet!"

He whirled at the sound of movement, and was just in time to see Senor Tayora darting toward the companionway door. Rock sprang after him. But, fat as he was, Tayora got away. As the air pilot reached the deck the fat man was disappearing over the side into the sea.

No one was at the cruiser's steering wheel. No one was in sight. A curtain of gray fog blanketed the boat. The dark waters of the ocean rose and fell in long, oily swells. Senor Tayora did not bob up to the surface, and Rock decided that his drowning was good ridance.

There was not a single craft in sight or hearing that might be hailed for rescue. Rock knew their only chance was for him to do something about those sea-cocks. When he hurried back to the cabin, Peggy was attending to the wounds of Don Vargos and Camora.

Rock shut off the motor and, knee-deep in salt water, fumbled for the handle of the valve. The wheel jerked loose in his hand. He had yanked it so hard he had broken connections. The sea-cocks refused to close!

"We'll have to move out of here, Peggy!" he called. "The boat's sinking!"

Tom Grove promptly climbed down from his bunk. His eyes were bright and his manner alert. He had not been unconscious. Rock sizzled with anger at the thought of all the fighting he and Peggy had done, while Grove hadn't lifted a hand!

The next moment the cruiser rocked as

something bumped into it. Then from above a voice shouted:

"Hey, there! Anyone aboard? This is the Coast Guard."

Rock gave a bellow of joy.

"Whoops! Saved by Uncle Sam!"

Twenty minutes later the Coast Guard launch which had accidentally found them in the fog, was headed for Miami. Don Vargos and Camora had been treated for their injuries, and now Dolores and the young Peruvian boy sat beside their unconscious fathers.

The dark-skinner sailors of the cruiser had been revived, then put in heavy irons. Tom Grove sat alone and silent. He had refused to make any comment about his actions aboard the cruiser.

At Miami Beach, where the vessel tied up, the first man Rock saw was Count Arturo Garno. Standing beside him was Billy Andrews. Both seemed surprised to see Peggy Devlin. They didn't know Rock.

"We've been waiting here for a friend of mine who went out fishing," the Count said to Peggy pleasantly. "I want him to be my best man. You seem to have been in some trouble."

Garno looked shocked at the tale Peggy hastily told him. Billy Andrews looked worried. Then she smiled at Peggy.

"I'm glad you're back," she said. "I intend to discharge Conklin who hired you, but I'm going to keep you on. I'm sure you're not mixed up in all that's been happening. I—"

She stopped short as she spotted Tom Grove, froze him with a glance, and deliberately turned her back.

"Thanks, Miss Andrews," Rock said, firmly getting her attention. "But Peggy won't need your job. After all we've been through, we've decided to get married ourselves. We're on our way to City Hall now."

"You ain't goin' to marry anybody for a time yet, young man," a harsh voice broke in. "I know you. You're Jim Rock, the airlines pilot. The police have been searching all over for you for the last twelve hours. Your fingerprints are on file and they were on a knife that killed a man. You were supposed to have been drowned, but you sure were seen here last night. I'm Chief Davis, of the Miami Beach Police. I'm holding you for the murder of Amos Calder!"

**J**IM ROCK stood at the barred window of his cell in the small Miami Beach lock-up, accused of the murder of Amos Calder. Twenty-four hours had passed since



he had seen the man who had been impersonating Senor Camora cut down by machine-guns in Coconut Grove. Rock was wondering what had become of Peggy. Had she forgotten her whispered promise?

He had turned to pace the cell again, swearing resentfully, when he heard a slight noise. He turned again quickly, and saw Peggy Devlin looking at him through the bars of his window.

"Hello, Wild Man," she said. "I've a good notion to let you stay in there. You were supposed to marry me this morning, and instead you choose to sit here all alone."

With one spring, Rock crossed the floor, looking eagerly at the girl who had scaled a barbed-wire fence and climbed the tree she was in to get to him.

"Gosh, I'm glad to see you, Peggy!" he cried. "Did you bring it?"

"I certainly did," she said. "Come a little closer, Big Boy. I want to use it to whack you over the head, you cold-blooded, heartless jilter!"

"Gimme," ordered Rock, holding out his hand.

Peggy slipped him a long bar of polished steel. Rock uttered a heartfelt sigh as he handled the weighty tool.

"Just the thing," he murmured. "I could tear out the whole side of the dinky jail with this."

"Any news, Peggy?" he asked, as he prepared to attack the window grating. "Count Garno and Billy Andrews all hooked up now?"

"Billy Andrews has disappeared, Jim!" Peggy said excitedly. "And Count Garno is wild. He's sure she's been kidnaped."

"Billy Andrews snatched!" Rock growled. "Who do they think did it, Peggy?"

"They haven't any idea. Captain Ramer and Chief Davis are running around everywhere, trying to pick up clues. Ramer blames more of those Spaniards, like you and I ran into. But Count Garno thinks either Tom Grove or Conklin is responsible. They've disappeared, too. They—"

Jim Rock suddenly lifted his hand, as he heard approaching footsteps in the jail.

"Duck, Peggy!" he warned.

As her face disappeared, Rock hid the steel bar under the mattress.

A key scraped in the lock and the door was pushed open.

"Visitor to see you," announced the attendant.

As the visitor entered, Rock looked his surprise. The man who had come to see him

was Count Garno. The man was as sleek and well-tailored as ever, but his smile was missing. Rock had never seen anyone appear more worried.

"I come here to you, a stranger, seeking information," Garno said at once. "My fiancée, Miss Isabelle Andrews, has been stolen."

"So I've heard," Rock said. "I'll be glad to help you if I can, Count. What is it you wish to know?"

"All day I have been trying to pick up some clue to where Billy is being held prisoner," he answered. "But everywhere I—and the police—have come up against a stone wall. Something terrible may be happening to her and I am helpless. You are my last hope. Captain Ramer thinks you may have picked up some information from the Senor Tayora who had you a prisoner aboard the cruiser. It may be just possible that you can tell me where either Tom Grove or Conklin is hiding."

Rock's eyes narrowed.

"You think they're responsible for Miss Andrews' disappearance?"

"I'm sure of it!" the Count cried vehemently.

"The only thing I can suggest, Count Garno," Rock said, "is for you to go to Amos Calder's real estate office on Washington Street. You may find either Conklin or Grove there."

"I have already been there," said Garno. "Neither of them could be found."

"If you keep watching the place," said Rock, "I'm certain that sooner or later one or both of those two men will turn up there."

Count Garno's face lighted up. He wrung the pilot's hand.

"Thank you! You have given me new hope."

Before he could say more, another visitor was ushered into the cell. It was Captain Ramer, of the Miami City Police. He boomed a hearty greeting to Rock, shook hands with Count Garno, and reported that although neither Conklin nor Grove had been located, the city was being scoured from end to end.

Count Garno looked gloomy. In a few minutes he departed, and Captain Ramer grinned at Rock.

"Chief Davis tried to keep me from seeing you," he said. "Some day I'm going to take an hour off and change that man's face. What did Count Garno want with you, Rock?"

"He thought I might be able to tell him where to find Conklin or Grove. But how could I help him, locked up like this?"



"You've got yourself in a jam, all right," said Ramer. "Did you kill Calder, Jim? A couple of Beach cops swear they saw you standing over the body the minute after you'd knifed him."

"Sure I killed him!" Rock shouted angrily. "I always go around murdering everybody! Don't be dumb! What happened to Don Vargas and Camora?"

"They're in the hospital," said Ramer. "Their children are being guarded by police, but I wouldn't be surprised if they were bumped off at any minute."

"What were you able to learn from Don Vargas and Camora?"

"Nothing, Jim." Ramer's lips clamped grimly. "They've shut up like two clams. But they sure hate Tom Grove. I wouldn't give a nickel for Grove's life when they're in fighting trim again."

## CHAPTER IX

### *Jail Break*



WHEN the cell door clanged shut behind Ramer, Peggy Devlin's face again appeared at the cell window, in the moonlight.

"Hist, Big Boy!" she whispered. "Do you think I'm the kind of bird that's used to roosting in trees? How about getting a move on?"

"Coming," muttered

Rock.

With the steel bar he went to work on the window grating, a simple task for a man as powerful as Rock. Prying the grating loose, he laid the twisted frame on the floor and boosted himself through the window. In only moments more he and Peggy had surmounted the barbed-wire fence and were out in the street.

"What next?" asked the girl.

"I'm going to follow the advice I gave Count Garno," answered the pilot. "The key to the whole mystery is locked up in Calder's safe, and I still mean to find out what it is."

"All right," Peggy promptly agreed. "Let's go."

"Hold on," Rock said sharply. "You're going straight home."

"I'm not," she said firmly. "I'm sticking right along with you."

Rock sighed. He saw a cab and flagged it, ordering the driver to head for Washington Street. Rock had not gone far, though, when

he had a new idea. Instructing the driver to pull up near a drug store, he told Peggy to stay put, and went inside. From a booth, he called Captain Ramer.

When he heard the raspy tones of the police officer, he sighed with relief. It had been such a short time since Ramer had left him at the jail he had been worried he wouldn't answer.

"Hello, Cap," he said. "Glad I got you. I want to ask you some questions."

"Rock, huh?" Ramer said, surprised. "Has Davis put a phone in your cell?"

"I'm out," said the pilot.

"Fine! Who furnished the bail—Hey!" Ramer grew excited. "They don't accept bail in murder cases!"

"I'm too busy to waste time in jail," said the pilot. "Besides, I have a hot hunch. I want more details about the Andrews Ship Corporation scandal that you told me about. Short and snappy, Captain. Who was it ran off with the funds?"

"Mark Temple," Captain Ramer said. "Got a fortune and was sentenced to a long term. Tried to escape from the chain-gang and died in the swamp."

"Was there anything about the case that struck you as phony?"

"Yeah," said Ramer. "It looked as if three men were in on it, but Temple took all the blame, and charges against the others were dropped. Tom Grove had been testifying when Temple suddenly stood up and asked the court to allow him to plead guilty. Kinda funny, I thought."

"Who were the other two suspected men?" asked Rock.

"Tom Grove and Amos Calder—Say, Rock, what's this all about?"

"Go back to your beat," jibed Rock. "But when the shooting starts in Calder's office over in Miami Beach, hop into your kiddy-car and come a-running!"

When Rock went back to the taxi, he noticed a strange-looking van, with lights out, in an empty lot next door. There was a canvas over the wagon, but beneath the cover Rock caught a glimpse of bright red paint. An old man who sat on a box nearby, seemed to be keeping guard over the van.

"New kind of a trailer, eh, Pop?" Rock said, with a nod toward the vehicle.

"Nope." The old man shook his head. "I'm kinda worried, too. Maybe I shouldn'ta let 'em park in this here lot of mine, but they gave me a nice piece of change." He lowered his voice. "Know what that truck is full of? Nitroglycerin!"

"Wow!" said Rock. "Well, Pop. So long.



Don't blow yourself up."

Rock had the cabbie drive away, but down the street he had him park, and got out again.

"What's the big idea this time?" Peggy demanded.

Jim Rock reached toward her in the darkness.

"Just hand me that hunk of steel I used to break out of jail, and keep still," he whispered. "I won't be gone more than ten minutes."

He was back in less time than that, carrying a small can, cushioned with rubber, which he carefully deposited in the back of the taxi.

"What's that?" asked Peggy. "A can of lard?"

"That," whispered Rock, "is nitroglycerin. Be careful not to go kicking it around."

The cab driver made quick time when once more Jim Rock set him off on his interrupted journey to Calder's office. When Rock and

away," said Peggy.

She flung open the door to the practically bare inner room.

"Lurking enemies, did you say, Jim Rock?" Peggy grimaced. "Lurking dust. I'm going to raise a window and let in some air."

As he heard a sash being raised, Rock turned back to his safe-cracking problem. He had begun to apply strips of paper around the cracks on the safe door when he heard Peggy scream.

He reached the rear office in two bounds. The room was empty. But the rear window was open and Peggy was on the roof of a small, adjoining shed.

"There's someone here—tied up in an old packing case!" Peggy cried. "Help me, Jim! It's a woman!"

**J**IM ROCK sprang to her assistance. It was too dark to tell who the woman was, but between them they lifted her from the

**Next Issue: Death stalks a deserted old mansion in WITH INTENT TO MURDER, a baffling complete mystery novelet by Norman A. Daniels packed with thrills!**

Peggy left the taxi, only a few persons were on the street. They paid little attention to Rock and Peggy as they entered the building and mounted the wooden steps.

Upstairs, Rock halted before the dingy door to Calder's offices. He set down the nitro can, safely out of the way.

"Stand back, Peggy," he said. "I'm going to break down the door."

"Why don't you try the knob first?" asked Peggy. "Maybe the place isn't locked."

Rock laughed, but turned the handle. Peggy was right. The door was unlocked.

When they entered the poorly equipped office, Jim Rock thought again that if Amos Calder had been conducting business here, it must have been small and sparse indeed. Yet Tom Grove and Calder had brought two prosperous managers of the Peruvian Latex Company here to dicker with them.

Rock was not interested in the shabby furnishings, though, but in the old-fashioned safe, set upon iron wheels. He examined it, figuring how he could open it with his nitro.

He glanced around as Peggy put her hand on the knob of the door to the inner office.

"Don't go in there, Peggy," he said. "I'll take a look around first. Someone might be there."

"Then we ought to find out about it right

box, and Rock carried her through the window and laid her on the floor. He lighted a single globe of the electric light bracket on the wall. One glance told him who the woman was. The missing Billy Andrews!

Jim Rock set to work on the ropes and gag and quickly she was free.

"Oh, I never thought they would treat me like this!" she choked angrily. "Tom Grove was bad enough, but Conklin was worse. And to think that I once trusted Conklin!"

She covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

Rock was surprised by her emotion. After all, Conklin had only been her chauffeur and gardener.

Peggy was kneeling beside Billy Andrews, trying to console her, when two men projected themselves violently into the scene. One was Tom Grove. The other was Dead-face Conklin.

Conklin launched a pile-driver blow at Rock's jaw. Rock went down, but was up like a flash, and went to work on Conklin in a furious assault.

In the heat of his attack, he did not at first notice that Grove had not stopped to mix in. Instead, Grove had darted into the front office, and Billy Andrews ran after him. Angry voices arose in a fierce argument.



## CHAPTER X

*Too Much Murder*

**F**IERCELY, Rock waded into Conklin for all he was worth. He swung his fists as if they were weights at the ends of his arms, and every punch he landed brought a grunt from the stony-faced man.

But Conklin had power in his punches too. Rock felt his ribs growing numb under the pounding Conklin was administering, but he kept after the man, never giving him a chance to rest.

He soon discovered that Conklin had one fatal weakness in his style of offense. He had a habit of launching a right cross to the jaw, then bending over to launch a curving hook to the mid-section.

The next time the dead-faced man tried it, the big airlines pilot cut loose with an upper-cut which sent him backward over the rickety table in a sprawling heap. Rock sprang after him, but got tangled in an overturned chair and fell flat.

Before he could regain his feet, screams came from the next room. Conklin scrambled to his feet and barged through the door. Rock was slower in rising.

"Grove Conklin, put up your hands quick!" a loud voice rang out.

"No, no, Artie!" Billy Andrews cried in agonized appeal. "Don't shoot! It's all right!"

But apparently Count Garno paid no attention. Two quick shots rang out, followed by a man's groans.

Rock was on his feet now, and beginning to grow angry again. He had seen enough of murder within the last day or two, and murder always made him mad. With an enraged roar he sprang for the door.

Just as he reached it, Tom Grove came bounding through. Rock cut loose with one of his pile-driver punches. The young manager went flopping over and over like a be-headed chicken. He crashed against the wall and lay still.

Jim Rock burst into the front room. Count Garno was standing over Conklin with a smoking pistol. Billy Andrews was tottering, white-faced.

"Artie!" she gasped. "You shot him down like a dog! You never gave him a chance!"

Count Garno swung around, snarling at her. Then he seemed to realize that was a mistake, and he managed to control his emotions.

"Billy, forgive me!" he begged. "I've been frantic with anxiety for your safety. I was justified in shooting Conklin, on account of the crimes he has committed."

Abruptly there was a rush of heavy boots and policemen dashed in. At their head was Chief Davis. On the instant, he spotted Jim Rock.

"There he is!" he yelled. "Jim Rock! Grab him, men!"

In one corner lay the body of a man in a pool of blood. Standing over the body was a man with a smoking pistol, and two horrified women were nearby. But all Chief Davis could think of was that he had found an escaped prisoner!

But Jim Rock had no intention of being captured. When the uniformed men surged forward, he went into action again. Then just as things were beginning to get lively, Captain Luke Ramer came charging in with half a dozen of his men.

"Quit it, Rock!" Ramer roared. "Stop it, Davis! This thing has gone far enough."

"What do you mean, Ramer, by butting into a mess which is none of your concern?" Chief Davis shouted. "We're arresting an escaped prisoner. Jim Rock murdered Amos Calder! You're out of your jurisdiction!"

"Rock didn't kill Calder!" bellowed Ramer. "I have evidence to prove he didn't. My men and I came over here to the beach to arrest a man and we mean to do it. Shut up!" He turned to Rock. "You're cleared, Jim. I know who murdered Calder."

The airlines pilot emitted a roar.

"I knew it before I broke out of jail!" he retorted. "I practically told you his name over the telephone!"

Obviously Count Arturio Garno was a good guesser, for he acted at once. He discarded as useless his mask of good-breeding and, with an expression like a demon, he whipped up his gun and leveled it at Jim Rock.

Fire laced toward the airlines pilot as he dodged, then launched himself toward the Count. Bullets sent plaster and dust flying, but Rock was moving too fast to be hit. He landed on Garno and began to batter him with all his might, completely altering the contours of Garno's handsome face. The Count fell, out cold.

Rock whirled to the Miami Beach policemen who were leaping forward.



"Let me introduce to you the murderer of Amos Calder, and the mind behind all the deviltry that's been going on here ever since the Lima Clipper arrived—Count Arturo Garno!"

Then, while the police were snapping handcuffs on the wrists of the semi-conscious Garno, Rock bent over Conklin's motionless form.

**T**HE frozen-faced man was not dead, but he had a serious wound in the chest, and a hole in his leg from which blood was pouring in a crimson stream. Swiftly Rock applied a tourniquet. As he ripped open the leg of the man's trousers to apply the necessary pressure, he caught a glimpse of the flesh around the ankle, and a grim smile spread over his face.

Those marks, which he had first seen during the fight on Count Garno's yacht, as well as something the Count had let slip in the Miami Beach jail, had given Rock the key to the mystery—the motives behind the murders.

Conklin was beginning to regain his senses, and a call had gone out for an ambulance. Billy Andrews was having a wild case of hysterics, despite Peggy's efforts to calm her. She was heaping reproaches upon the head of Count Garno.

"So you are like all the rest—a liar and a fortune-hunter!" raved Billy. "I was willing to give up everybody for you, and you deceived me. Are you a murderer? Did you take away my fortune, and leave me without a cent? Tell me it's all lies!"

But the Count only shrugged.

"I'll tell you, Miss Andrews," said big Jim Rock. "You might just as well take it on the chin. Count Garno is a phony, including his title. From his accent, I suspect he hails from Peru."

A flush mantled Garno's face.

"That is not true," he said. "I come from Brazil, which is Portuguese. My family is an ancient one, and it is from Portugal my title is derived. My right to it cannot be questioned."

"Okay, then," conceded Rock wearily. "But that doesn't make you any the less phony." He pointed to Conklin. "Now take Mark Temple there, Miss Andrews. He's a brave, honest fighting man."

"What did you say?" barked Captain Ramer. "Conklin is Mark Temple?"

"Certainly," answered Rock. "I ought to have been sure on Garno's yacht, but I didn't tumble until I was in jail. Mark

Temple escaped from the chain-gang, leaving behind a boot, his convict clothes, and other planted evidence. He was helped by his firm friends, Tom Grove and Amos Calder. Temple had to submit to a face-lifting job and although it kept him from being recognized, it wasn't a success so far as beauty was concerned."

"That's right," spoke up Tom Grove, who at last had recovered from the blow Rock had given him. "There's no use trying to hide it any longer. Conklin is Mark Temple all right."

"Ah," said Captain Ramer. He walked over to Conklin. "What became of the funds you stole from the Andrews Ship Corporation?"

Conklin did not answer. Grove also kept silent.

"I'll tell you," answered Jim Rock. "Those funds are right behind you in that old safe. If you'll let me go to work with a little nitroglycerin, I'll prove it."

Billy Andrews stared at Tom Grove.

"Is what Mr. Rock says true, Tom? Did you and Calder and Mark loot my steamship company?"

"None of us ever stole a nickel in our lives," Grove said tightly. "You'll find all your assets in that safe, just as Rock said. We wanted to keep you from marrying a scoundrel and handing over your fortune to him. The only way we could do that was by putting your company into financial difficulties. We believed if we did that he would lose interest."

"But Garno had spies in your employ," Rock cut in. "He knew all about the Latex Company in Peru. He knew Isabelle Andrews was wealthier than ever. From his spies he learned when Temple sent secretly for Don Vargos and Camora to come to Miami. If they came, he knew, the truth of the prosperity of the Latex Company would have to come out. Garno didn't want that—yet. So, through his agent, Senor Tayora, he gave orders for them to be killed. But, warned of danger by Temple, who knew Garno would go to any length to gain his ends, the Latex managers sent substitutes. Both of them were killed."

"No men would hire out to be killed, Jim," scoffed Ramer. "That's screwy."

"They didn't know they were in danger on the clipper," said Rock, "until they found black widow spiders in their belongings. They thought, as Camora and Don Vargos did, that the only danger was that they might be abducted in Miami, to keep anyone from



knowing the truth about how prosperous the Latex Company is. Nobody had an idea a bomb had been planted on the clipper."

"How do you know Tayora was Garno's agent?" asked Ramer.

"Because Garno accidentally let slip his name when he saw me in jail. The man's name hadn't even been given to the police—then. How did he know it?"

"Who blew up Garno's yacht?" demanded Chief Davis. Revelations couldn't come too fast for him. "Tom Grove and Conklin? Or Mark Temple? Count Garno wouldn't have destroyed his own property."

**R**OCK laughed.

"But he did," said the airlines pilot. "And that was the slickest trick of all. He knew Miss Andrews was not actually in love with him—just fascinated and flattered. He had to make a grandstand play. So he blew up his yacht and pretended to save her life. You can bet it was no sacrifice. The yacht must have been insured for more than it was worth."

"Garno slipped up though when a bullet of mine hit a satchel of nitro carried by another one of his agents who was on the way to blow up Amos Calder, Tom Grove, Don Vargos and Camora, the Latex managers, when they were in conference in Calder's real estate office. That little chore didn't come off. I heard that agent of Garno's talking to him, just before the soup man was killed, though of course I didn't know—then—that he was talking to the count. I had to figure that out in jail. Great place for thinking."

"Why are you so sure Garno killed Calder?" put in Ramer."

Rock turned to Billy Andrews. "Remember he went out of your house to look for the padre? That was when he stabbed Calder with the Inca knife that can be traced to him. He was afraid his marriage plans would go wrong when he ran into the old auditor out there."

Rock turned back to Captain Ramer and Chief Davis.

"Garno was never fooled about Miss Andrews' finances. When she was supposed to be in financial difficulties, that was right up his alley. He could prove that he was not a

fortune-hunter by marrying a 'penniless' girl. He didn't want anybody to know her real financial status—if he had to kill everybody who knew the truth."

"Then I'm not a pauper?" Billy Andrews said, as if she could not grasp the fact.

"No," Grove told her. "You're wealthier than you were when your father died. When the Latex Company began to prove up so big, Temple—or Conklin—had to send for Don Vargos and Camora to persuade them to keep still about it until you could be saved from Garno. You were so determined to marry him. You always did act the fool after you broke your engagement to Mark Temple."

He scowled heavily.

"So Mark, Calder, and I concealed your assets, but the stockholders made a howl and Temple went to jail. I told him he was a sentimental fool. I still think so. But Mark said he'd die before he'd let you marry Garno."

Billy flew across the room to Conklin and put her arms about him. He now was swathed in bandages, waiting to be taken to the hospital. "Mark—Mark!" she moaned. "Do you still love me like that? I thought you hated me."

"I'll never be able to quit loving you, Billy," said the frozen-faced man.

Billy lifted her head and looked at the others defiantly.

"Yes!" she said. "And I love him, too! I always have. I want everybody to know it! I'd love him, no matter what he looked like. But I know a surgeon who can fix him up all right. I loved Mark even when they said he was a thief. I nearly died when they said he'd perished in the swamp. Now I've got him again—and I'll never let him go!"

No one paid any attention to Count Garno as a couple of policemen led him away, Billy Andrews' avowal of love for Temple ringing in his ears.

Jim Rock started wandering toward the door.

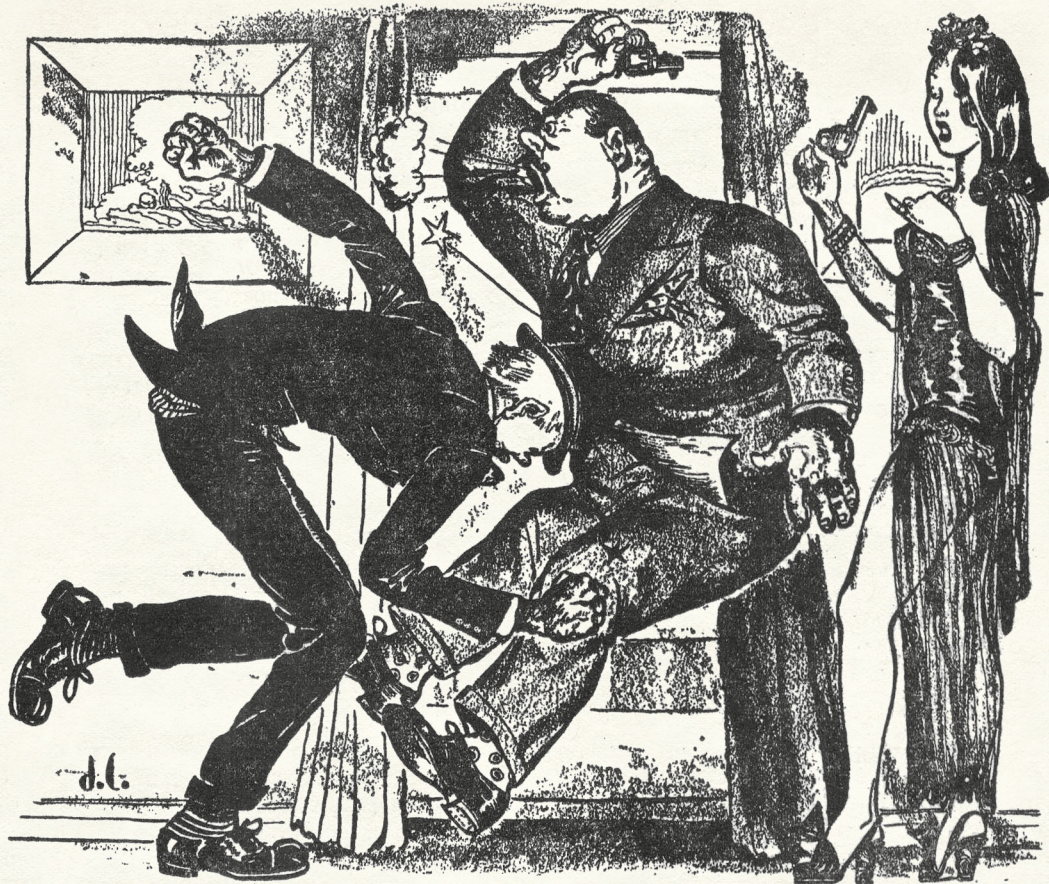
"Hey, wait a minute, Jim!" Peggy grabbed his arm. "You've got a date to marry me. Remember?"

"Sorry, dear, but City Hall is closed and—"

"But the church rectories aren't," said Peggy. "I just asked. Come on—let's go!"

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Willie Klump ate up yardage across the carpet and drove the top of his hard head deep into Harcourt's meridian

# WHERE THERE'S A WILLIE THERE'S A WAY

By JOE ARCHIBALD

*When Gertie Mudgett's gift watch goes over the hock-shop counter, it's time to discover what makes a killer tick!*

**W**ILLIAM J. KLUMP, president of the Hawkeye Detective Agency, specialists in personalized service in the person of Mr. Klump, sat down for a game of rummy with the boys in the back room of the —nth precinct station, in midtown. He glanced at the clock on the wall. "Only got an hour, guys. I have to meet Gertie at seven."

"How's business?" a character by the name of "Hardhat" Hanrahan asked, and laughed.

"It is bad enough without them wantin' to add twenty-five thousand more cops to the force," Willie complained. "What's goin' to become of small businesses, huh? With the war over, we anticipated a wave of crime. Where is it?"

"That is the way with politicians," Hardhat



said. "They make promises an' then double-cross us voters. Half a cent a point okay, Willie?"

"Yeah." Willie nodded.

A crime-chasing citizen called "Porky" Gibbs began to riffle the pasteboards. Just as he was about to deal, he cocked his head to the side.

"Somebody's comin' an' the footsteps are familiar."

Willie listened. Sounds came from the corridor outside as if someone was beating a sack of oats against the floor.

"Yeah," he sniffed. "I am sure it is somethin' I hate."

The door flew open and Aloysius "Satchelfoot" Kelly entered.

"Well, well, my favorite game, boys. The same suckers, huh? And Willie!" He advanced toward the table, rubbing his palms together. "Somethin' told me to drop in."

"It should of been from twenty thousand feet without a parachute," Willie grunted. "Then I would of been awful glad to see you arrive, Kelly."

"You say the nicest things, Willie," Satchelfoot grinned, and pulled up a chair. Porky scowled at him and dealt the cards. Just fifty minutes later, William Klump paid two dollars and ninety-four cents to Satchelfoot Kelly and wiped his brow.

"An' I was takin' Gert to dinner on that money," he gulped. "Satchelfoot, maybe I could pay you tomorrer night instead?"

"Oh, a welcher!" Kelly snapped. "I also don't trust you, Willie. I've heard you ain't exactly solvent. Sorry, ol' pal."

"I am glad you ain't a landlord an' I had a wife an' eleven kids livin' in one of your flats an' it was the coldest night of the winter, Satchelfoot," Willie said. "The only soft thing about you is your skull. Well, I'll think of somethin'. Thanks for the game, boys."

"Don't mention it," Kelly grinned.

"I was not talkin' to you, lemonhead." Willie bridled. "I do not expect to be doin' it for some time to come."

Outside in the street, Willie felt a touch of panic. It drifted out of his midriff as he took a big silver watch from his vest pocket. Gertrude Mudgett had given it to him three years before and on the timepiece had been engraved—G. M. to W. K.

"Sixty-fifty nine," Willie said. "I think Sam is open until eight. I can just about make it an' then meet Gert only about a half hour late. It is flirtin' with a fractured skull but what else can I do? That Kelly!"

Willie hurried into the shop on upper Lexington just about the time Gertie expected

him in front of a restaurant nine blocks downtown.

"Evenin', Sam," he said. "A little short t'night. How much on the watch, huh?" Willie laid the timepiece gently on the counter of the emporium that thrived on contingencies such as his.

"If my own gran'mother asked me, Klump," Sam said. "I would be honest with her and say about four dollars. Then I am doin' her a favor."

"But it is me who is astin' you, Sam."

"So you get three, Klump. Take it or leave it."

"You talked me into it, Sam," Willie said.

Two minutes later the president of the Hawkeye Detective Agency hurried into a kiosk and caught the first rattler to fifty-ninth. When he approached Gertie Mudgett on the run in front of Henri & Antoinette's French restaurant, he could see the evening promised pyrotechnics. He skidded to a stop.

"I know I am a skunk, Gertie," he yelped. "I'm a heel and even a cad. So I admit it an' you don't have t' convince me. I was detained as somebody I know well got into a jam an' I had to help him out. The Bible says a good Samaritan oncet stopped an'..."

"Why, Willie," Gertie said. "I am so proud of you! It is why I picked you as you have such a kind heart. I forgive you, sugar."

"Huh?" Willie asked. "You feel awright, Gert? Maybe you are workin' too hard an'..."

"Don't be silly," Gertie said. "Let's hurry before they are out of blueplate specials. What time is it, Sugar?"

"Why—er—ha, I had to take my watch to git it fixed, Gert," Willie said, getting scared again. "I am to pick it up tomorrer."

**H**E ESCORTED Gertrude Mudgett into the restaurant and when he sat down he managed to let his napkin slide off his knees. He bent down and retrieved it, at the same time slipping a pawn ticket into the cuff of a blue serge trouser leg. Willie sighed deeply as he lifted himself erect and grinned at Gertie. His lady love was not grinning.

"What's the trouble, Gertie?" he asked in a gravelly voice. "Like I said outside, maybe you been workin' too hard an'..."

"I been thinkin' about that, William Klump. 'I'm losin' my looks, huh?'"

"Why, I didn't say..."

"You just as much. Awright, so I got circles under my eyes an' maybe got a gray hair or two, but what girl wouldn't who spent



the best years of her life waitin' for the likes of you? You are all alike. You stall 'em off until a younger face comes along an' . . ."

"Gertie, I only mentioned . . ."

"It is the same old story. They forget them in November after they've met 'em in June," Gertie went on and then let the floodgates down and buried her face in her napkin.

"I only said . . ." Willie began, then felt someone tap him on the shoulder. He looked up and saw a big waiter giving him a cold eye.

"Look, punk, maybe it ain't my business, see? But why don't yer bully somebody yer size, hah? One of them big brave mugs that browbeats his wife, huh? Gits her in public an' humiliates her."

"She is not my wife, understand?" Willie snapped.

Gertie sobbed louder. "The way—you—said—that, Willie Klump. Just as if you—was—glad—oh-h-h-h-h-h-h!"

"Scram, pal," the waiter said and picked up a heavy tray.

"I'll have you discharged," Willie threatened.

"I own half of the joint, pal. I'm Henri although I was borned Mike Gratsky in Brooklyn. Now I'll give you two seconds t' hit the road, bum! We ain't the court of inhuman relations. Go see Mr. Antonio on the raddio. Anyways, scram!"

Gertrude Mudgett picked up her reticule and left abruptly.

Don't you dare follow me, Willie, or I'll call a cop," she sniffed.

Willie dropped his head in his hands.

"What started this, huh?" he mumbled, then felt the waiter's breath on his neck. "Awright, I'm goin'. There is nothin' that don't happen to me. I'm goin' . . ."

"Two bucks, pal," Henri growled. "You drove four customers away. Hoggin' a table fer almos' a half hour. Two bucks or I slug you."

Willie paid and hurried out, ears as red as fire pails, the scathing remarks of the other patrons flaying him limb from limb. Walking south, he wondered if the army could use 4F's for occupation purposes. Willie was sure two years on Iwo Jima would just about get him readjusted.

If things did not pick up in more ways than one, he mused, he would look into the matter thoroughly. Reaching his rooming house, Willie was introduced to a certain returned G.I. by his landlady.

"It is my nephew, Roscoe Pertle, Mr. Klump. He was tellin' me about all the

things you can catch in the Pacific like elephantitis, crud, dengue an' cat fever, malaria an' cholera an' things."

"Pleased to meet you," Willie gulped. "Ain't it wonderful to be in the U.S., huh? No matter what troubles you got, it is worth every bit, even Gertie M— well, g'night."

The next morning, in his office, Willie was perusing a letter from a company offering a selected group of citizens first chance to invest in an uranium mine recently discovered near Rahway, N. J., when the phone rang. Willie answered it.

"This is Gertrude, William. I want to let you know I still think you are abominable. You are a no-good . . ."

"Look," Willie snapped. "Maybe I'll call you sometime, Gertie, when I have the hives. I will invite you up to see my itchin's. Ha! I am busy. G'bye."

Just as he hung up it occurred to Willie Klump that Gertrude Mudgett still possessed the earnings of his lifetime. He picked up the public utility gadget and called her back.

"I was kiddin', Gert," Willie said desperately. "We could talk this over, huh?"

"Soon as I git proof you've cast me aside or are thinkin' of it, William Klump, I will sue for heart balm," Gertie announced acidly, then broke the connection with a bang that put bees in Willie's ear-drum.

**J**UST forty-eight hours later, another call came for Willie. It was closing time and he had just about finished reading the latest edition of his favorite comic book.

"Hello," the president of the Hawkeye said. "This is the Hawkeye Det . . ."

"Forget the buildup, Willie. This is Hardhat. Look, come on over for a rummy game as Kelly's luck is runnin' bad. Fer two nights we been takin' him an' we figure you should have a chancet t' git even with the jerk too."

"I dunno," Willie said. "Awright, I'll be over. In about twenty minutes."

Once more Willie sat across the table in the back room of the midtown precinct station, matching wits with his pet allergy, Satchelfoot Kelly. At nine p.m. Willie was in the red by over two bucks and had thirty-nine cents in his pocket. Satchelfoot Kelly picked up a king Willie had tossed away and immediately spread his hand on the table.

"Pay me," Kelly grinned, just as the door opened.

"It's murder," Willie gulped.

"How did you know, hammerhead?" a gruff voice snapped and the rummy players stared at the cop. "Yeah, a guy calls up an' says there is a body over on Eleventh an'



Forty-eighth with two bullet holes in it. It's in an alley nex' to a garage an' . . ."

"Well, what are waitin' for?" Willie yelled, and grabbed for his hat.

"Yeah!" Satchelfoot kicked back his chair and yanked Hardhat Hanrahan out of his. "Let's go."

They were halfway to the scene of the rubout when Kelly discovered Willie Klump wedged in between himself and Porky Gibbs.

"Who said you could come?" he snapped. "You pay me two bucks an' then git out of this boiler."

"You talk of money at a time like this, Kelly?" Willie said. "Murder has been done. Anyways, who horned in a rummy game one night when he wa'n't invited? Didn't he, Hardhat?"

"Look," Hanrahan said. "Willie might help, Kelly, and at times like these, we can use a laugh. After all, private detectives go along with famous detectives in books."

"Awright," Satchelfoot growled. "When you put it that way, boys. What time is it, Willie?"

"The time? Oh, I left my watch home, Kelly," Willie said. "I changed to my other suit an' . . ."

"I bet Sammy has it ag'in," Satchelfoot said. "If Gertie ever found out you—hah, I figure you'll pay that two bucks I just won from you. I give you twenty-four hours, Willie."

"Don't make me hate you worst than I do," Willie yipped, "or there'll come a night when detectives will be on their way to brief a dead ringer for you, and where would you have a double unless it was livin' in a tree. What do you use for a heart, Satchelfoot?"

They found the corpse in the areaway near the garage. A mangy dog was sniffing at its expensive oxfords. The defunct, it was clear to all present, had been a citizen of some standing before he had been flattened for all time.

"They sure ain't clothes you git from where I do," Willie ventured. "Aviation Tailors, Inc. You get one of their suits after the first flight. It is the longest stairway I ever . . ."

"Shutup!" Satchelfoot Kelly snapped. "An' keep your hooks off everythin', Willie. H-m-m, here is an identification card of the Order of Mooses. The stiff's name is Mervin DeMurrage. An' they didn't knock him off for his lettuce as it would take a quart of mayonnaise to cover this bankroll. Here is another card, a business card. It says he is connected with Atomic Advertisin' Airs, Inc."

"Then just take the cadaver to the freezin' locker," Willie said, "No jury would convict any citizen who killed one who wrote stuff like I heard last night on the radio. This is the way it goes, Satchelfoot, I ask you . . ."

"Sipple's Seltzer makes me feel jus' ri-i-ight, 'Even tho' I was drunk all n-i-i-i-ight!"

"Hango-o-overs are a pleasure noo-o-o-w, 'Set 'em up, Mike, again—an' ho-o-ow!"

**S**ATCHELFOOT clamped a hand as big as a dried codfish over Willie's mouth. He hit William Klump on top of the head with his fist and made Willie's Truly Warmer look like a truffle.

"You go psycho oncet more, Willie, and I'll freeze you for an hour. Hardhat, you cover him an' if he as much as . . ."

"I only was lookin' for a motive," William Klump protested. "Go ahead an' solve this crime yourself an' then I will believe Hitler was persecuted t' death. This loser was not shot here as what business would he have in an alley? I bet he was dumped here after gittin' dragged in from an auto an' maybe if we take his coat to a lab an' see if upholstery fuzz is stickin' to it, why . . ."

"Then all we got t' do," Porky Gibbs sniffed, "is t' check on the upholstery of every boiler in Manhattan, Queens, The Bronx an'—what would we do without him, Satchelfoot?"

"You'll know in a minute!" Kelly yelled and wiped his face with a very fancy hanky he had borrowed from the defunct. "Because if he says just one more word he will be as stiff as the other one. Give me that flash, Hardhat, as we might find a clue."

"It better have teeth," Willie said. "If it can't bite you, you would never . . ."

"Ye-e-e-e-cow!" Satchelfoot screeched. "Git it offen me! Git that d—d mutt offen my leg!"

"I thought we chased that pooch away," Porky grunted and finally kicked it in a tender spot and sent it yiping up the alley, where it cleared a fence eleven feet high. Satchelfoot Kelly played the flash on his right calf and Hardhat lunged forward and grabbed at a piece of pasteboard that was close to one of Kelly's big feet.

William Klump dived in too and there was a hollow sound as two heads collided. Willie picked up his marbles first and saw that Kelly had snagged the little square of pasteboard between thumb and forefinger.

"Gimme that!" Willie snapped and snatched it from Satchelfoot's fingers. "It is one thing to tell Gertie I hocked the watch, but you ain't goin' to prove it, Satchelfoot."



You git this pawn ticket from me an' it'll be over two dead bodies."

Satchelfoot Kelly assumed a threatening Henry Armstrong pose, noticed a very dangerous light in Willie's eye, a piece of kindling wood in Willie's right fist and suddenly calmed down.

"Look, let's quit clownin', huh. We better git down to business."

"I'm for it," Willie agreed.

There were no tangible clues. The body was removed, after a brief diagnosis by the coroner, and the next day bright and early, William Klump was hovering in the corridor outside Atomic Advertising Airs, Inc., when Satchelfoot Kelly appeared.

"Hah, so you did figure I might have some brains," Willie sniffed. "You are goin' to cross-examine his boss, like I suggested, Kelly."

"There is nothin' to it," Satchelfoot growled. "Only a top detective never overlooks a possibility, even a suggestion from a mental deficient." He walked in with Willie on his heels and braced a very tearful blonde, who was reading about DeMurrage's demise in the tabloid on her desk.

"I'm from headquarters, Babe. I want t' see the big boss."

"It is awful," the doll wept. "Who would want to wipe out such a gorgeous hunk of male as Merv? He was just beginnin' to make passes at me. Oh, I hope they trap that fiend—the second door to the left, Mister."

They went into an office through a door marked Ogilvy Tumbriel, President. Ogilvy was chewing a cigar to ribbons and tearing a telephone directory in half. He took a swift gander at Kelly's badge.

"Yeah, sit down," he snapped. "I was hoping you'd get here. There may not be anything in this, but we got a threatening letter a week ago from a crank named—wait till I find the letter. Here it is. From a Jonas Q. Fusky. I'll read it.

"Dear Sirs: it has come to my attention through a radio column that you have a writer of radio ad jingles named Mervin DeMurrage, who has written most of the stuff they sing on programs.

"I am a recluse, which is my own business, and have come to hate the world outside so I stay in all the time. But I am goin' to be driven out again if this DeMurrage doesn't stop writing those nerve-wracking silly songs. Will he take twenty thousand to stop?

"If not, I'll have to take more drastic measures. When I keep the radio off until they are finished, I can hear them from a

hundred sets in the apartment next door. Please advise, Jonas Q. Fusky'."

"Did you?" Satchelfoot asked.

"We refused, as we have a gold mine in these jingles, Mister," Tumbriel snapped. "Who'd ever think anybody would be so screwy he would . . ."

"Recluses are nutty," Willie said. "I had a aunt oncet who was one. She got so bad she used to train a rabbit to sit on her head. She said she looked good with her hare up. Ha-a-a!"

"Did you have to bring him?" Tumbriel ground out. "You'd better check on that screwball. I mean Fusky. I have his address here."

"He could of done it," Kelly mumbled. "It couldn't happen in a book, but truth makes a bum out of friction, Mr. Tumbriel. I could think of worst murder motives."

"Let's go," Willie said.

"This is where we start hatin' each other as usual, Willie. You are not goin' to git any credit for this job so scram. Or I'll call up Gertie an' tell her to go to Sam's hockshop an' . . ."

"I'm goin', Satchelfoot," Willie said. "I never saw nobody so vindictive."

**W**ILLIE left the building and walked slowly across town and then negotiated seven blocks south and finally came to his office. He grinned as he sat down.

"Kelly will git nowhere as that motive is too silly for even me to think up." He took half a loaf of day-before-yesterday's bread from a file cabinet, got out a jar of peanut butter and made himself a sandwich. The telephone rang and he clutched it hopefully.

"Hello, Mr. Klump?" a voice said sweetly.

"At your service," Willie yelled. "Missin' Persons Traced. Private inv . . ."

"We are taking a survey, Mr. Klump. Do you listen to the Sipple's Seltzer program? How many time a week? Do you find it good on the morning after? Do you . . ."

Willie banged the receiver on its hook.

"If I was Tumbriel, I would look up steamships to Okinawa. Maybe Kelly will hit on somethin' after all, the big tramp! Tomorrow I'll check over want ads. Until the big shots of crime reconvert, it looks like I will close up. I better make up with Gert or I don't eat."

He reached for the phone. In a few moments, he heard Gertie's voice.

"It is Willie," he said.

"Who ast you? I am not interested, William Klump. Right now I have no doubt you have got your arms around a redhead,"



Gertie sniffed. "I would not put one past you."

"Listen," Willie said. "We are bein' silly."

"Go ahead an' kiss her, Willie. I hope you catch leprosy," Gertie snapped and hung up.

"What makes me such a stinker?" Willie sighed.

The evening papers contained new developments anent the assassination of the radio network Gershwin. Satchelfoot Kelly had apprehended Jonas Q. Fusky, had found a witness who stated that on the night of the crime, about seven p.m., he had seen the eccentric emerge from the rooming house.

"Yes," the witness was quoted as having said. "And only about a week before he told the landlady his nephew Alfred came back from overseas an' gave him a present of a Heinie Luger, which is a pistol that packs a wallop."

Kelly had immediately contacted the boys at ballistics and they had examined the bullet taken from the torso of the late Mervin DeMurrage and had unanimously agreed that it had been fired from a Luger. What was more, Jonas Fusky had admitted leaving his room for the first time since D-Day to go looking for DeMurrage. He had carried the Luger.

"I intended to threaten him once more," Fusky admitted. "I couldn't find him. Maybe I had murder in my heart, but if everybody that did got electrocuted, we wouldn't have citizens enough left in this city to make the subways pay. I want my lawyer."

"I will never kid Satchelfoot ag'in," Willie moaned. "How would I know he'd of took me serious. Fusky ain't got a chance as such circumstantive evidence will hold up even in a kangaroo courthouse."

He flung the paper aside when an ad depicting a delicious sugar-cured ham caught his eye. Willie felt the pangs of hunger and rummaged in his pockets. He had seventeen cents and the pawn ticket. He eyed the redemption slip caustically at first, then leaned forward and stared at it close.

"Huh? It is not the one I . . . I didn't lose . . ."

Willie jackknifed and explored a trouser cuff with a hooked finger. It came up with another pawn ticket.

"Well, what do you know?" he gulped.

The alien bit of thin cardboard said:

Hymie's

1967 Seventh Avenue.

Best Prices.

Willie got out paper and pencil and scribbled notes. Fruity thoughts that came to

him quickly generally departed twice as fast and seldom if they ever came back.

"Who'd ever think anybody dressed like the corpse would ever have to hock anythin'!" he exclaimed as he scribbled. "No wonder Kelly didn't tumble there could be two pawn tickets in the same alley?"

"Why would a character like Mervin DeMurrage be short of funds? Huh, three reasons maybe—bangtails, cards and dames! How can you find out? Why, by takin' the pawn ticket to Hymie's, you dope, Willie!"

Just eighteen minutes later, Willie entered a pawnshop on Seventh. He tried to be calm as he slid the ticket across the counter between a bull fiddle and a stuffed lynx.

"I come t' redeem that," Willie said.

**H**YMIE was a little citizen with a goatee and he wore bifocals and seemed near-sighted indeed. He picked up the ticket and disappeared for a few moments. He came back with a diamond bracelet that rocked Willie back on his heels.

"Fifteen hundred bucks, Buddy," Hymie said.

"Let's leave us stop pretendin'," Willie gulped. "I am from police headquarters."

"I am not a fence, Buddy," Hymie choked out. "I do an honest business. I was sure it couldn't have been you who brought it here you maybe redeem it for somebody, no? Was it hot, huh?"

"Let me look at it, Hymie," Willie said.

"I remember. He was a han'some guy lookin' like he was strictly from Hollywood," Hymie said. "Ah, such a topcoat he had on! I offer him fifty dollars for the coat. Such a piece of goods I never . . ."

"To Lucille from Harcourt," Willie said. "It is engraved all around the inside of the bracelet, Hymie. That citizen who hocked it was named Mervin. You put it back an' sit tight, see? Don't you say one word about it as if this leads to a crime, I will grab you as an accessory."

"What else would I do but shut up?" Hymie sniffed.

Willie spun on his heels, then whirled about again and stared at Hymie.

"I just thought of somethin', pal," he said. "Now this Mervin DeMurrage is dead, who else could redeem the wrist rocks, huh? Only the babe who—why am I tellin' you? Oh, I know. Look, it is the way we detectives figure things out, Hymie."

"The doll will wonder what become of the pawn ticket and maybe will even go to the undertaker's and pick up a guy's clothes, huh? If she got the arm dazzler from a



sucker named Harcourt, why would Mervin DeMurrage have it, Hymie?"

"Women," Hymie said, and shrugged. "Who knows what they will do, Buddy? You should ask me to figure them out when guys like Julius Caesar an' Mark Anthony . . ."

"Sooner or later she will show here, Hymie," Willie said. "From now on I am livin' with you in the back durin' business hours."

"Three dollars a week and maybe breakfast," Hymie said.

"It's a deal," Willie said. "You got a phone? I must call Digges and Berriam, where DeMurrage is goin' to be laid out in his lost-all-hope chest."

"In the back," Hymie said. "Next to the bronze elephant."

Will contacted the morticians. Mr. Digges answered and told Willie that a woman had called an hour before and had said she was the late DeMurrage's sister and wanted his clothes, which she took.

"Have I done wrong?" Mr. Digges asked.

"Can't you remember?" Willie quipped. "G'bye now." He hung up and sat down on an old African war drum. "Now, we will just sit an' wait," Willie said.

"What else?" Hymie sighed.

William Klump lounged around in the little back room for hours, listening to the radio and bemoaning the fact that Hymie did not go in for comic books. It was about nine-thirty p.m. when Hymie pushed a little buzzer which told Willie that a dame had entered the store.

He got up and opened the door a crack, saw a representative of the distaff side that spun his eyeballs around in their sockets. The number was tall and willowy and had red hair. She wore a veil covered with what looked like currants to Willie, and a short mink coat with chapeau to match. Summing her up, she looked like a fugitive from a magazine cover.

"I am in a little difficulty," the doll said to Hymie and her voice made Willie's heart flutter. His kneecaps became butterscotch pudding. She lowered the voice until only the proprietor could hear and talked for ten minutes. Finally Hymie nodded.

"I understand, Ma'am. So you bring the money, you have it the bracelet."

"You are a darling," the doll said, and clicked out on heels as high as Willie's temperature. Willie gave her time to get away and then emerged from the back room.

"You git her name an' address?" he asked eagerly.

"What else? Ah, she called me darling, Klomp," Hymie sighed. "From now on, I

am dissatisfied with my home life."

Willie got an address. It read: Mrs. H. K. Thripp, Shoder Arms Apartments. 800 East Eighty-Ninth Street.

"See you again, Hymie," he said, and sprinted out.

It was nearly ten-thirty when William Klump took a gander at the mailboxes in the lobby of the swanky pueblo not far from the East River. A name plate caught his eye—Harcourt Thripp, Apt. D-9. Willie drew a deep breath, took in his belt another notch and went over to the elevator. A dusty attendant looked him over.

"Delivery entrance aroun' back, Boss."

"Huh?" Willie grunted, and flashed a badge, but quick. The flunkey's eyes rolled. "Sorry, boss. Me an' mah big mouf! Go-o-oin' up!"

**W**ILLIE pressed a button. The red-head came to the door, wrapped in a negligee that would have been of little use in an eskimo igloo.

She ogled Willie for a moment, began to close the door.

"It is an outrage, the Fullam Brush people sending salesmen at this hour!"

But Willie's foot was in the door. He held a pawn ticket in his hand and waved it under Mrs. Thripp's retrousse nose.

"Now, can I come in?"

"You certainly can," the redhead purred and swung the door wide. She slammed it shut and asked, "Who are you?"

"William Klump, private detective, is all. Why did DeMurrage have the ticket on the wrist bobble, huh? Who knocked him off, sister? Why does the bracelet say it is from Harcourt to . . ."

"I didn't kill him!" the doll snapped. "It is none of your business, see?" She crossed the room with Willie dogging her steps and trying to keep his mind on his work. Mrs. Thripp took the lid off an ebony box, whirled and pointed a Roscoe at Willie.

"Hand over that pawn ticket, stupid!" she said. "Or this might go off. You forced your way in here and I had to kill you. There has been an epidemic of robberies here so the cops . . ."

"I bet you told Harcourt you was robbed of that trinket Hymie has in soak," Willie clipped. "You was that way over Mervin an' he got in a jam an' needed ready scratch an' you let him hock the . . ."

"I give you ten seconds to hand over that pawn ticket, pal!" the redhead bit out.

"I'd git the worst end of that swap," Willie said, and his eyes widened as they stared



at the window behind the glamorous Mrs. Thripp.

She fell for the moth-eaten ruse, turned her head slightly and Willie stepped in fast and got his arms around her, which was a pleasure in more ways than one. He pinned the redhead's arms to her sides and was nearly swooning from the effects of the perfume she wore when the door opened and a beefy citizen barged in.

"Again, hah?" the arrival roared. "Another guy, hah? Com weez me to ze Casba-a-a-ah? So I've got to knock off another one, have I? All right, so . . ."

"Shut up, Harcourt!" the redhead shrieked. "He doesn't know you—he—so it was you killed . . . what am I saying? Look, Harky, this is a big mist . . ."

Willie released the doll and stabbed a finger at Harcourt Thripp.

"The violently jealous hubby, yeah? She has been ogling other guys, huh? You give yourself away, Thripp, ha! Where is the Luger you rubbed out DeMurrage with? Want to see a pawn ticket for a bracelet, Harcourt?"

"Well, I got it an' . . . What am I sayin'? Now, don't put up a fight as if I don't catch you, somebody elst will. Drop that cannon, Mr. Thripp!"

"I am going to knock you off, whoever you are," Thripp said. "Then I rub out a two-timing redhead. Then I might fix my own wagon, although I'll have to think it over a lot. Pretty soon undertakers'll have to give me a cut hah?"

"Huh-huh," Willie forced out. "Look, you can maybe beat the rap as there is a law they haven't writ yet about unfaithful dames. Let's stop gettin' excited an' talk this over."

"You first," Harcourt Thripp said and shifted a fat cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

He leveled a big Betsy at Willie and was about to turn it loose when Mrs. Thripp touched off her small persuader. A bullet whipped the cigar from Harcourt's teeth and disconcerted the outraged husband long enough for Willie to eat up yardage across the lush carpet and drive the top of his hard head deep into Harcourt's meridian.

"Woof!" Mr. Thripp grunted and left his feet and ended up in a corner, sitting in a very large jardiniere. Harcourt wriggled like an eel on the end of a gaff but found himself fully wedged and resorted to cussing.

"I saved your life," Mrs. Thripp yelled at Willie. "How about a two-hour start for the border?"

"You got t' testerfy," Willie said, rub-

bing his head, wishing Thripp had not worn his big silver watch. "Sorry, Red. You just come along quietly an' . . ."

"Oh, yeah? So you want to make it the hard way?" the redhead said and snatched up her Roscoe once more.

"Surprise!" Willie yelled. "Look, I got a Luger. Shall we shoot it out, babe? Draw, pardner!"

"Don't be silly, Lucille," Harcourt yowled. "This lemonhead has the drop on you. Anyway you've got to stay alive to admit in court you drove me temporarily insane by going about with and entertaining other men when I was away. They'll let you go afterwards. I'll do life at least and I'll have a long beard when I come out and will be too old to hunt you down and finish you off. Git me out of here, copper!"

"He has somethin' there," the redhead said to Willie. "Here I almost put myself in the rotisserie. You will wait until I make myself presentable for the D.A.?"

"He would not mind the way you are," Willie snickered. "But maybe you know best!"

Willie had to hit the big jardiniere with a fire-axe he found out in the hall to get the corpulent Harcourt Thripp loose. Harcourt made one more try for Willie and Willie had to boff him with the Luger.

**S**ATCHELFOOT KELLY walked into the D.A.'s office at eight-thirty in the morning.

"I'll have a confession out of that old goat by noon, D.A. I—what are you doin' here, Willie? Who are these . . ."

"The male rubbed out Mervin, Satchelfoot. Don't interrupt until the stenog has heard his sordid story. He is Harcourt Thripp. This gorgeous creature with the red locks drove him to his fate, Kelly. Just sit down an' listen to this. It is her turn next."

Satchelfoot Kelly gaped like a goldfish at feeding time and groped for a chair. He kept staring at Willie, even though the best eyeful the D.A.'s office ever saw was sitting there, displaying twenty bucks worth of ny-lons.

"I got 'em both out of hock, Kelly," Willie said. "Redeemed 'em with that ticket you thought was mine. Imagine my surprise when I got home an' found there were two. But listen to the culprit, Satchelfoot, as he is tellin' all."

The newspapers of a certain type clowned around with the story. William Klump was found by the assassin of Merwin DeMurrage with his arms around the guilty party's wife,



who had been dressed in a wrapper absolutely unsuitable for the cocktail hour in a public bistro.

"Private Detective Klump, when questioned, admitted the arrest had been a pleasure," a tabloid writer informed the public. "It is rumored that Klump spent the rest of the night in a hospital with a thermometer in his mouth and two trained nurses in attendance."

Gertrude Mudgett called Willie at his office at nine-thirty.

"This is Gert. I was right about you, you cad! It was a redhead an' it is too bad for you I am psychric, as I have some loot myself, William Klump. A Luger with two loaded clips, but I will have use for only one. I am givin' you a fair start, Willie, like I'd even give a skunk that don't wear blue serge!"

"Look, Gert," Willie yelled. "I can explain what hap—oh, she has hung up!" Willie hung up himself and then clicked for the operator. Getting her, he asked for the nearest police station.

"Sergeant Grofogskowski speakin'," a voice said.

"I am tippin' you off," Willie told the law. "A dangerous character is around loose, a dame, packin' a concealed weapon. A Kraut Luger. You should pick her up in the vicinity of Forty-Sixth an' Lexin'ton, but approach her cautiously. She is a hefty doll with ginger-blond locks, has a snub nose an' a lot of chin. Got that?"

"Yeah. Who is this?"

Willie disclosed his identity.

"Call me later, huh?"

Willie got a call two hours later. It was Gertrude Mudgett, much deflated and calling from the hoosegow. She wanted Willie to come quickly and spring her. She assured Willie the cops had the Luger. She begged him to agree to bury the hatchet.

"You hand over the ax to the cops too, Gertie Mudgett!" Willie said harshly. "You don't happen to have poisoned choklits on you also? Well, I'll be over sometime t' day." Willie hung up, and signed deeply. "Ain't we the romantic couple, though?"

## NEXT ISSUE'S HEADLINERS

### THE DEAD DON'T WRITE

A Moody Hackett Mystery Novel by ROGER FULLER

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A Complete Mystery Novelet by NORMAN A. DANIELS

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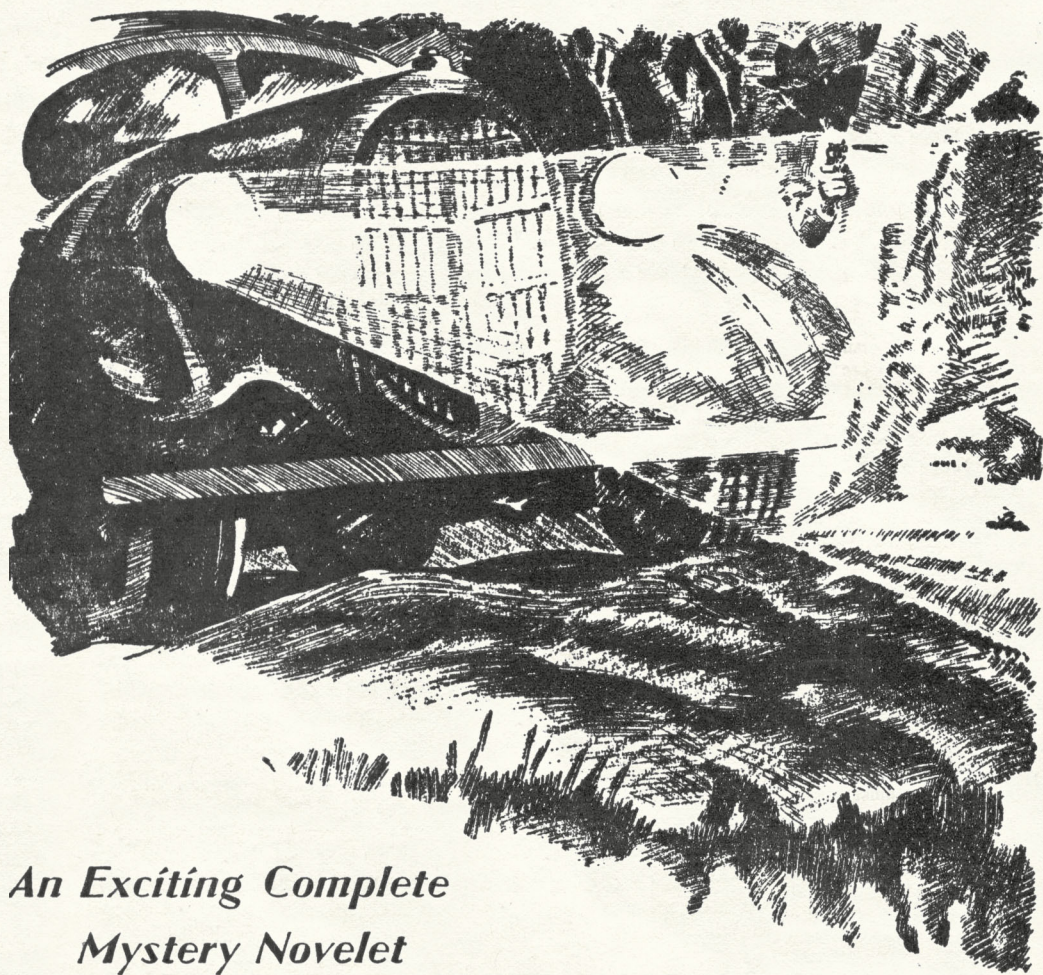
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*An Exciting Complete  
Mystery Novelet*

I saw Slugger get knocked backward, then suddenly

# LET ME KILL YOU

## CHAPTER I

### *Beauty and the Beast*

**F**OR the first time in quite a spell the bank balance was what I'd often dreamed it might be, and the season for going to Mexico City was just beginning. Everything was exactly as it should be. Money, time, plans, and expectations.

And then my office phone bell jangled.

The throaty, honey-coated voice that poured into my ear belonged to Vivian Ames. She was Mrs. Kenneth R. Ames, wife

of our biggest bank's president. But there had been a time when she had been just Vivian Murphy, Senior Four, Bedford High, with me, and definitely priority cup-cake in my life.

Truth to tell, she still was in that little special part of my brain I set aside for memories, for though Viv had four-alarm-fire blood in her veins, it was pumped straight from the ice-house that was her heart. And the ideas she began to get around the age of ten had never included me.

"Chet!" the throaty voice said over the phone. "Come out right away, will you,

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*When Death Strikes, Detective Chet Lacey Heeds the*

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I had toppled off the lip of the gorge and was on my way down

# TENDERLY

By ROBERT  
SIDNEY BOWEN

darling? I'm in terrible trouble!"

Five years, if it was a day, since I had heard that voice. And it did things to me. But not as much as Viv had probably expected it would.

"Hello, Viv," I said. "Trouble? Dial the operator and say, 'I want a policeman.'"

"Chet, please! I've got to talk to someone. Someone I can trust! . . . Well, you know what I mean."

My laugh stopped her. We were both thinking of those moonlight drives, years ago.

"Chet Lacey, I could kill you! Please!

I'm serious. I've got to see you. Something awful has happened. I can't tell you over the phone. Please, Chet. Twenty minutes?"

I laughed again. Not at her. At me, for the times she had made a sucker out of me. And the extra time she was making a sucker out of me now. Anyway, I was too top-of-the-world to bother battling temptation.

"Okay, lovely," I said. "For you I'll make it in fifteen minutes. But I'll be thirsty."

"You always were, darling," she said, and hung up.

Fifteen minutes exactly had passed when I came to the end of the half-mile blue stone

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*Siren Call of Duty—but Not the Call of a Siren!*

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driveway of the Kenneth R. Ames domicile, a cozy little place of forty or fifty rooms. I had been there a couple of times before and had darned near broken my neck falling over the small army of servants.

**T**HIS day, though, there was nary a one. Vivian in trailing, diaphanous silk that clung to her, answered the door, and five years of trying to forget her went up in smoke.

I won't try to describe what she looked like, standing there with one hand on the door, and the other reaching out to me. When it caught mine, the electricity went clear up my arm into my neck.

"Chet, I'm so glad you're here!"

Then she was drawing me inside and closing the door. Not until then did I see the tears in her eyes. She squeezed my hand tighter, and smart, smart me went right overboard.

"What's the matter, sweet?" I asked. And somehow her head was suddenly against my chest. "No trouble is ever that bad, baby."

She suddenly straightened up, let go of my hand, and her smile went over me like moonlit Miami surf.

"I'm sorry, Chet," she said. "I can be such a fool. Come along and have a cocktail first."

The room into which she led me was about right for the Ringling Brothers, but the little corner alcove where she finally stopped was perfect. A divan strictly for two, cobbler's bench table, solid silver cocktail shaker and glasses.

I really was thirsty, and that shaker contained just what I wanted. We touched glasses in silent toast, and downed the first one. I poured a second, then settled back on the cushions.

"All right, Mrs. Ames," I said, "what's all the trouble?"

She didn't answer for a moment, and I didn't prompt the answer. Vivian Murphy Ames never ever gave anything away for nothing. Not even a cocktail. And the first one had moved me into the cagey stage. Of course, with several more I might move to another stage, but right now I was slowing up my dive overboard.

"Chet, for once it isn't about me," she said, "and the way she said it would have made strong men weep. I didn't, but I did turn and look at her. Her lips were two inches away, and I covered them with mine."

"Okay, sorry, lovely," I said then. "Tell me about it."

"You still do—a little, don't you?" she whispered. "Oh, Chet!"

Funny, but that was suddenly the wrong side of the record. Anyway it made me go the noble and honorable guy.

"The name is Kenneth R. Ames," I said. "And I think he's a very swell egg."

That was true. I'd always liked Ken Ames a lot. I guess that's why I wasn't too sore when Viv kicked Cloud Nine out from under me and married Ken. Noble I was, and way off base for what was to come.

"Kenneth Ames is a fool!" she hissed. "A despicable one at that. I loathe the very thought of him. But—but I am helpless. Chet, you must do something!"

I looked at her with my best blank and puzzled look.

"For instance?" I asked.

"Find Kenneth!" she said "At once before everything is ruined!"

"Huh?" I echoed. "Me find Ken?" You mean he's missing?"

"Since this noon," she said. "Look at this. An hour after Kenneth left to go back to the bank—about one-thirty—I found this stuck under the front door."

"This" was a sheet of paper she took from a pocket of her house-coat and held out for me to read. The words were made up of individual letters cut from newspaper headings and read:

AMES SAFE UNHARMED. HAVE  
FIFTY THOUSAND SMALL BILLS  
READY. INSTRUCTIONS LATER.  
GOING TO POLICE WILL BE  
KNOWN.

Suddenly I recognized the type style. It was the heads' style used by our local Bedford Financial Journal. A paper that all Bedford bankers would subscribe to!

I turned my head to look at Viv. All the emotions possible in a woman showed in her beautiful face. I didn't know whether she was going to scream with rage, or burst into tears, or what. Impulsively I put a hand on her knee.

"Take it easy, Viv," I said. "Maybe there's something wrong here."

"I'll say there's something wrong!" she said in that throaty voice of hers, but without honey coating this time. "This!"

She reached behind one of the cushions and pulled out a newspaper. It was a copy of the Bedford Financial Journal, and missing from the column heads on the first page were the letters that made up the kidnaping note.

**M**Y INSTANT reaction, of course, was that if Ken Ames had kidnaped him-



self, he hadn't been very smart to use letters cut from his own copy of the Financial Journal.

"Where'd you find this?" I asked.

"Upstairs in his study," she said. "It was on the floor by the waste-basket and I saw that it had been clipped. I didn't know why, until I got the note."

"What happened to your servants, Viv?" I asked.

"I guess I'd better begin at the beginning," she said.

The way she said it made me look at her. Sweet and soft, and in trouble. The old, old combination. The devil with the lady's husband! I kissed her again. Hard. The gallant, sympathetic guy, Chet Lacey!

"Skip it, if you want to, baby," I said.

She didn't want to skip it. She wanted to talk. And did. About a year ago love had begun to cool for Ken Ames, she said. Oh, she had noticed the change in him in a hundred different ways! And she had tried so hard to unchange him, but no soap. So she had gone to the Coast to visit friends, to make Ken miss her, of course. Maybe he did, and maybe he didn't. Anyway last week he had written her he was going to Europe on a business trip. He wrote he had given the servants six weeks' furlough with pay, and sent them away.

So she had come hurrying home. Perhaps if she made the trip to Europe with him, all would be wonderful again. She had arrived last night, and found him in the house alone—unpacking!

She let a single glistening tear slide down her shell-pink cheek.

"The trip was off?" I asked, when the tear-drop disappeared.

"Yes. He had canceled his booking."

"Why? Had you sent him word you were coming?"

"No. I had nothing to do with his decisions, as usual. Something at the bank, he told me. And that was all he would tell me."

"What was he like when you walked in?" I asked. "I mean, pleased, or what?"

The glitter that came into her eyes was answer enough.

"He hardly spoke a dozen words to me," she said, tight-lipped. "Neither last night, nor when he came this noon to get some papers—as he said. But of course he really came to make up that insane kidnaping note!"

At that moment we both heard a car outside as it braked to a stop. Viv got to her feet in a flash, and smiled down at me.

"That's Robert," she said. "He went to get

the money for me. Back in a moment, darling."

She was gone, leaving me stalled in a snarl of mental traffic. I had poured myself another drink when she came back with one of those beautiful hunks of man. Just looking at the guy, I didn't like him. Mutual though, I guess. A frown smeared his sweet map, and when he copped the cocktail shaker he doubled the frown in spades.

"Chet, darling!" Viv gushed. "I want you to meet a very nice person, Robert Strong. Robert, dear, this is Chet Lacey, an old and very, very sweet friend."

"Howdy, Strong," I said, half-remembering that he was something or other in Ken Ames' bank. "Have a drink?"

"Thanks, no." His frown went triple. "This is hardly the time for a drink."

To show I agreed with him I poured another.

"Sit down, Robert," Viv said quickly. "Chet is here to help me. He's a private detective, and I was just telling him the whole horrible story."

## CHAPTER II

### *Dear, Sweet Robert*



EAR ROBERT was not pleased. He gave Viv some of the frown.

"I question that being wise, Vivian," he said. "Frankly, I think it's a matter for the police. In spite of what the kidnap note said."

"No!" Viv said, and meant it. "I simply can't go to the police. I—I'd die of shame!"

That touched Sweet Robert deeply. His smile was sun on golden corn. And his gesture was just plain corn.

"As you wish, my dear," he said, and handed her a flat package. "You'd better take this, but please count it."

I sat up, and took a part in the conversation.

"Fifty thousand dollars?" I said, and pointed. "Of whose dough?"

"Mine, of course!" Viv snapped. "Kenneth settled it on me on our wedding day. He . . . Well, that note said fifty thousand dollars. Robert was kind enough to get my check cashed at the bank."

"You think Ken kidnaped himself so's to get fifty thousand!" I gave it to her straight.



"Okay. Now tell me why?"

"I fail to see, Lacey, why—" Dear Robert got that far before I gave him one of those looks.

"Why, Viv?" I prompted her. "And why give him your money?"

"The bank, Chet!" she said. "There is a fifty-thousand-dollar shortage. Robert discovered it yesterday. Tell Chet, Robert dear."

I looked at him and smiled. Just smiled. He caught on quickly.

"I'm head bookkeeper down at the bank, Lacey," he told me. "My job is to keep a running audit. Except the personal accounts of the officers, which I do at the end of every month. I did those yesterday, and found mistakes in Mr. Ames' accounts. Fifty thousand dollars' worth. Well, I told him about it. I—I had to. The State auditors will be here Monday."

"When did you tell him?" I asked.

"Yesterday, just before closing. Mr. Ames said I must have checked them wrong, that he'd go over the accounts himself."

"Did he?" I wanted to know.

"I don't know," Strong told me. "He took the books, and he hasn't given them back yet."

"Don't you see, Chet darling?" Viv moaned. "Don't you see how horrible? Kenneth was found out before he could get away to Europe, and now he's kidnaped himself to get me to pay the ransom with my money! Then he can cover his theft before the State bank auditors arrive!"

"So you should worry!" I said. "It's Ken's jam. Or is fifty grand too much to spend—for lost hopes?"

She didn't like that. Maybe she wanted to come at me with claws out, but she gave me that puzzled, hurt look I'd seen a million times before.

"I think I'm beginning to be a little sorry I phoned you, Chet darling," she said. "I may be Kenneth Ames' wife, but if they sent him to prison, what would that make me? The wife of an embezzler! I'd die of shame. So I'm forced to comply with his ransom note request."

Maybe she made a point there, but it was still hard to imagine Vivian Murphy Ames parting with a nickel. Always, next to herself, money had been the most wonderful thing in the world to her. But fifty grand!

"That is a lot of dough," I told her. "When Ken puts it back to cover himself, and continues to go his merry way, like you say he has been doing for a year—what price being able to hold your head up then?"

"I'll get my money back," she snapped. "I'm going along with him because I have to. But don't worry, I'll get it all back—and a whole lot more!"

Right then the door bell rang with such a loud jangle that all three of us jumped. Viv continued all the way up onto her feet, one hand to her mouth, and there was a sort of glazed look in her eyes.

"Who in the world?" she said, in a weak whisper.

Up jumped Sweet Robert.

"Stay here, my dear," he said. "I'll answer it for you."

I hadn't offered to be butler because it served me fine to stay right where I was.

"When, and why, did he spill to you what Ken had done?" I asked Viv as Dear Robert disappeared.

"Chet! Don't you be a beast, too!"

"Forget it, baby," I said. "You know I'll always help you all I can. It's natural for me to wonder about his connection, isn't it?"

**T**HAT smile like moonlit Miami surf went all over me.

"Darling, I'm so upset," she said. "I've known Robert for a long time. So has Ken, of course. A wonderful person, really. Ken often had him out for week-ends. Well, when I found that note I was frantic. I called Robert at the bank and—I don't know. I just happened to think of him first."

"Thanks," I said. "I never was higher than third or fourth on the list, was I?"

"You haven't even thought of me in years!" she said. "Anyway, I called Robert, and he came right out. When I showed him the note, and the newspaper, and told him what I suspected, he told me about the bank shortage. He didn't want to, naturally. But considering the circumstances, he felt that it was his duty."

"Very noble of him," I grunted.

"You're impossible!" she blazed. Then she kissed me. "Please, darling, be nice. I did call you when I'd had time to collect my wits, didn't I? Anyway, Robert was against my drawing out the money. He insisted that I should call in the police. But I couldn't do that. I wrote out my personal check, and he went back to the bank to cash it for me. He's only trying to help me. Don't you see?"

I skipped it. Sweet Robert was making a dramatic reentrance. The unhand-that-woman frown on his face. And a plain white envelope in his outstretched hand!

"It was a street urchin, and he gave me



this," he said, and dropped the envelope in Viv's lap. "Said some man downtown gave him fifty cents to deliver it. Then he scooted away before I could ask him a single thing."

"Why didn't you beat it after him?" I snapped. "You can run, can't you?"

"Among other things, much better than you, Lacey," he said, and gave me a look to go with it. "However, it seemed more important to find out what's in this letter."

Viv was ripping open the envelope and pulling out the single sheet inside, so I let any retort go by the board. The message was in penciled printing. The three of us read it together.

DRIVE YOUR CAR OUT CAMDEN GORGE NORTH ROAD TONIGHT. PARK AT KNOB TURN EXACTLY EIGHT O'CLOCK. DIM TO PARKING LIGHTS. WAIT WITH MONEY FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS. TRICKS OR POLICE WILL SEND AMES HOME DEAD.

"Oh, the beast! How could he? How could he?"

I reached out and patted Viv's knee, because I could see that Sweet Robert was just itching to do the same.

"It still stands that he has, baby," I said softly. "You still want to go through with it?"

There was the nicest beseeching look in her eyes. But she was dealing the cards, so all the help I gave her was a nice smile.

"Yes, I do," she said. "But—but you'll deliver the money to him, won't you, darling? I just couldn't. My car's in the garage, and the keys are in it. Please, Chet?"

I looked at Sweet Robert.

"You want to do it?" I asked bluntly.

"No," he said. "Mr. Ames might not understand if he saw me in Vivian's car. And Vivian says you know all about these things."

There were a lot of other things I knew by now, but I didn't bother to relate them. Camden Gorge was a good two-hour drive from there, and I had a few things I wanted to do first. I got to my feet, and held out my hand to Viv.

"Okay, let's have the dough," I said. "You both had better wait right here until I get back, or phone."

"Why, of course, darling!" Viv exclaimed and gave me the package. "I wouldn't dream of bugging until I hear from you."

She went with me to the front door. There she took a quick look back into the other room, then kissed me. One of her special brand for special occasions.

Well, as the saying goes, time passed, and eventually I was a little under a mile from Knob Turn on the north Camden Gorge Road. The gorge is a seven-mile V furrow in Mother Earth with one knob-shaped turn. From lips to bottom it's two hundred feet, and at no top point is it more than a hundred feet wide. Rocks and thorn shrubs cover both sides.

Yes, quite a fascinating ditch for certain types with certain ideas, and I wasn't taking any chances. As I drove along my .45 automatic was on the seat beside me.

The road was narrow. Three feet clearance on my right to piles of rock tossed aside when the road was made. And three feet clearance on my left to the fall off point.

I HAD mulled over many things. One of them being—and a startling realization—that here I was rendering the professional services of Chet Lacey for not even one thin dime. Simply for love. But that was a technique Viv always could trot out on you. You'd do what she asked without even thinking. And end up thinking, "Hey! What do I get out of this?" After the first hundred times you knew the answer by heart. "Nothing, brother!"

I was amused at myself and sore, by fits and starts. And then Knob Turn came into the headlights. I braked to a stop as far over on the safe side as I could get. I turned off the engine, and put on the parking lights. I slipped my hand over my gun, and waited.

Nothing happened for several minutes. I spent most of them taking a look in various directions. But with only the parking lights on, the moonless and starless night was a black wall ten feet away on all sides. Just pitch darkness.

I'm not the nervous, flighty type, but it was spooky out there miles from any place, and on a road that was traveled only once in a great while. It didn't lead any place in particular. Just went on and lost itself in some hills a few miles beyond the gorge. However, when I thought I heard a shoe kick a stone somewhere in the darkness back of the car, I didn't exactly take it with an expectant grin.

I tightened my grip on my gun, and eased my head around for a look. No movement, or anything. Just darkness. I finally told myself I was just getting jumpy, and tried to relax.

And then, the voice. Close, like the guy was right at my shoulder.

"Up with the hands! Up!"

Sure I put them up, and not with my gun



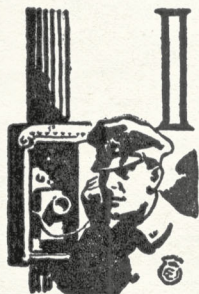
in the right one either. That voice meant business. And besides, it was the wrong routine. I mean, that in the better kidnapping cases I've been connected with the go-between is usually told to toss the dough out, and go on his way. I didn't get it. And that bothered me.

I caught the shadow of movement on my right. A hand snaked in over the roadster's door on that side, and away went my .45. The next second the man who had taken it and I were looking into each other's eyes. Recognition was mutual. He spoke first.

"Lacey, the private dick!"

### CHAPTER III

#### *Too Tough to Die*



LIKE to think that there was a little bit of awe in that man's tone, but maybe there wasn't. At least he did straighten up and rested the barrel of his own gun on the top of the car door. I grinned, looking at his homely, lopsided face.

He was a character who went by the name of

"Slugger" Perone. Many jails had he graced and the charges included most of those ever jotted down on a police blotter. But whether murder, or not, I couldn't say. But it was known that you could hire Slugger Perone for any kind of a job too distasteful to perform personally.

"Hello, Slugger," I said. "How much is Ames paying you for this?"

"What Ames?" he grunted. "I don't know no Ames!"

"Skip it," I said. "We'll make the name Robert Strong. Better?"

"Just skip everything, Lacey," he said. "Got the dough?"

"That's right," I said quietly, and started to lower my hands.

"Cut!" he rasped. "Keep 'em up, or you get it. Maybe you will anyway. Get out of the car. Smack the handle with your knee."

I did what he told me to. This wasn't the movies. Slugger knew my rep well enough, but it wasn't making him curdle any. But he was doing things to my insides. It was definitely the wrong play for that kind of a deal. I was tempted to do something about it, but I'm the curious type, and Slugger dead couldn't tell me anything.

So I got out of the car, and stood reaching for the sky and he came up behind me. He shoved the gun into my back and went all over me with his other hand. He stopped when he reached the pocket that held the package of money. He grunted, and pulled it out.

"You're a sucker, Slugger," I said. "You are a first-class dope."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!" I echoed. "For peanuts you're taking fifty grand back to Strong. Fifty grand, Slugger. Just how much green lettuce did he promise you?"

"I'm getting enough!" he snapped. "But I don't know any Strong. Nor no Ames! Start walking, private copper."

As he spoke he half-spun me around so that I was facing the lip of the gorge!

"Go on! Walk!"

I didn't move. Maybe you won't believe it, but I liked the feel of Slugger's gun in my back. I figured if this was a gun kill he'd have shot without first telling me to walk. Maybe he wanted me to walk over the lip of the gorge and knock out my own brains.

I didn't know who he expected to find in Viv's car, but I knew he hadn't expected me. I don't know, but maybe my rep as tough stuff did unnerve him when it came to shooting.

Anyway, I stayed right where I was.

"You're a bigger dope, Slugger," I needed him. "You know me, boy. Or don't you?"

"Shut up!" was his comment.

"Okay," I said. Then quickly, "But you're making a sweet target for a rifle. Or don't you know me?"

That got him, but only a little.

"Save it!" he growled. "You checked in alone, Lacey. I made sure, see? You rolled by me alone!"

I took a long shot, but I wasn't happy about it. As far as that goes, I wasn't happy about a lot of things. All of them being about the dumb cluck I'd turned out to be.

"Squeeze lead, then," I sighed. "I guess you didn't see the john I dropped off the car a half-mile back. But fifty grand is a lot of money, isn't it?"

"I said walk!" Slugger growled.

The gun shoved me hard, and I knew that this was it. The talking had got me no place. As I fell forward sort of, I dropped both hands and pivoted fast. But I'd guessed the play wrong. Slugger had not shoved to get me walking. He had shoved me simply to get in swing room for his gun. I was only half-way around when I saw it coming down.



By luck, I jerked my head just enough not to take it square and true. The left side of my head took it, and it was as though my ear had been clawed off by fish hooks, and the skin peeled to the corner of my neck and shoulder.

**T**HEY say you don't actually remember pain, but I can still feel that pain right now. It was like white light, laced with zig-zag red. Every nerve and muscle in me from head to toe was paralyzed. And a neat little stunt that had saved me many times before went up in smoke.

However, there was the factor of the momentum of my fast turning body. Anyway, the next thing that made sense to me through that blast of spinning white pain was that Slugger and I were all wrapped about each other. On our feet, but arms and legs tangled up like a vine. I had him around the middle, with his gun arm pinned. His left was free, though, and he was chopping at me with his fist.

I had ducked as I spun around and so my head was against his chest. I rammed it up against his jaw, and through the red, white and blue blackout for me that followed instantly I heard his gagged scream of pain.

Why I didn't blackout for keeps, I don't know, but I still stayed on my feet. Maybe that was simply because Slugger was holding me up.

A blow by blow description of what followed is kind of impossible, because my head was trying to fall off my neck, and the old brain was having a hard time trying to function. But we did waltz and weave around considerably, Slugger chopping away with his fist, and me bear-hugging him, and giving him the head butt routine.

I didn't dare let go and pull my time-proved life-saving stunt, because he might beat me to it with the gun I held pinned to his side. Besides, everything was a blur, constantly slashed by red, white, and blue lights.

So the thing to do was to hang on until I got him just where I wanted him. And I didn't want Slugger dead. I wanted him to answer three or four sixty-four dollar questions.

But Slugger had other ideas. He stopped chopping at me, and his free hamlike hand got me by the back of the neck. It's really pain when a lad who knows how gets you by the back of the neck. It's like hed-hot ice-picks going up through your brain and out the top of your head. It would be Slugger or me in the next few seconds, and no

fooling.

So I braced with one foot, lowered my arms a little, hooked a leg about one of his, and squeezed with all I had left as I forced him over backward. A scream came as his spine started to snap.

And then something screwy happened. I still don't know just what. Maybe I eased up a little, unconsciously.

Anyway, I suddenly didn't have my arms wrapped about him any more. He was free, and reeling backward, and trying to bring up his gun hand. I was trying to catch my balance. An invisible something seemed to be pushing me over toward the left.

And then out of nowhere came the shot. I hardly heard it. Truth didn't fight its way into my head until I saw Slugger get knocked backward, and saw his gun drop.

But that was all I saw because suddenly my feet were not on the ground any more. My feet were not on anything but thin air. I had toppled off the lip of the gorge and was on my way down. Instinct made me fling out both arms and clutch frantically. I clutched only thin air. Something tagged me, right on the back of the neck. At the time I thought it was the cow-catcher of the Santa Fe Chief.

Head over apple cart I went spinning down. Funny, but my brain was surprisingly clear. I knew that I was falling into the gorge, but it wouldn't be really bad until I bounced for the last time. And I didn't feel any pain, either. Only the sensation that a mess of wildcats were ripping every stitch of clothing off me.

I remember wondering what Viv Ames would do now. And if Slugger Perone still had the ransom money, or had dropped it in the fight.

I even thought of the shot, and how Slugger had jerked like a kid's toy monkey on a stick when the slug went into him. Whose shot, and whose finger had been squeezing the trigger? A puzzling question that one.

I bounced once more on something, and went ricocheting off into the most perfect blackout I've ever experienced. No pain, no feeling, no nothing. Just curtains, and blissful peace. . . .

Well I'm telling this now, so of course I didn't die. Instead, I regained consciousness. Not clear and crystal-like. Far from it. I came to without a thought, much less a memory in my head. Just a blurry sensation that all parts of me were all over the place, and that I would have a terrible time trying to get them all together again.



**M**AYBE I stayed right where I was for five or ten minutes, struggling to make sense out of at least something. Presently I did. I was flat on my back in a thorn bush, with my feet sticking straight up in the air, and with a hunk of rock for a pillow.

I was just about at the bottom of the gorge, but alive, and recovering just enough sense to do something about it. When I started to roll out of that bush, I really woke up. It was like trying to roll out of a blast furnace.

I guess I must have fainted while doing it. Anyway, the next thing I knew I was on hard ground that sloped down steeply. I was afraid that I was going to slide off it into oblivion, and in panic I pressed myself flat, and dug my fingers into the flinty dirt.

I cautiously lifted my head, and looked up, but couldn't see anything. It was too dark. And there wasn't any sound except that of my own pumper sounding off. Two hundred feet to the top and practically straight up and down.

My pencil flash was in my vest pocket, but I didn't dare pull my clawing fingers out of the flinty dirt long enough to get it out. And when I was able to convince myself that I wasn't in danger of sliding off that incline into space, I still didn't dare risk a light.

Because by then the memory of that shot had come back. The shot that I knew had killed Slugger Perone. Maybe the killer was gone, but maybe he was still around. I was still too full of spinning lights to think straight. But the yen to climb up out of there got stronger and stronger. It became an obsession. I didn't care how many guys with guns were waiting up there on top, just so long as I could get up there.

So I started up. Crawling and clawing. Shoving with my toes, and my knees. I eeled over rocks, and around scrub bushes. Grabbing for anything in the darkness, and hanging onto it long enough to work my way up another few inches.

I remember feeling lucky that no bones had been busted. But I also remember telling myself that maybe some were busted, because every cubic inch of me felt like it feels when the dentist's drill touches an exposed nerve. But I kept on going up.

And then my clawing hands touched something that wasn't bush, or rock, or dirt. It was a body that was as cold and as stiff as a fence post. It was in a jack-knife position under a sprawling thorn bush. I who have touched corpses a thousand times over, al-

most let out a shrill of fright. But I checked my outcry. And even as I fumbled for my pencil light I knew who the dead lad would be.

And I was right. Ken Ames.

His face and hands were raw from his spill down the gorge side. But it was not the fall that had killed him. A tiny half-shriveled-up hole in his forehead was where the death bullet had struck.

One sweep of his face and body with my pencil light, and then I winked it out. A small rock had been dislodged from somewhere above. I heard it go tumbling down, well off to the left.

I hugged myself close to Ken Ames' dead body, and waited. And I got all set with my little surprise—the one I hadn't been able to work on Perone.

The second gun I carry when out on business is a little vest-pocket-sized .25-caliber job fitted to a strap on my left wrist, and hidden by my shirt cuff and coat sleeve, even when somebody makes me reach. It works on a little spring gadget I can release with my middle finger when I crook my hand up under. It pops the little gun into my hand, and there I am all set, because I'm one of those ambidextrous lads when it comes to the use of firearms.

I popped the gun into my hand and waited. And waited, and waited, until I got to telling myself I hadn't heard any stone bouncing down. Still, I waited a few minutes after that to make sure. Then I started easing upward again. Reaching the top still had priority A-1 rating in my mind.

I covered about ten feet—and blam!

No, first there was the beam of a flashlight flooding me, and then the shot. Then came a second shot, but from my gun. Right at the level of the light and just a bit to the left.

It was perfect. The light sailed up in the air. A mad scream tore the darkness apart, and then came the crash of a falling body. The scream had become a gurgle when I fired again in the direction of the sound. The gurgling stopped as though a door had been shut on it.

I didn't slap out a third shot. You can always tell when you've killed a guy. Even in the dark. Could be, too, I always keep my ego at par. Anyway, I started crawling over that way. Presently I risked my pencil light beam.

A third shot would have been wasted. Robert Strong had taken both bullets in the chest. He was dead, and as sweet-looking



to me in death as he had been in life. The package of ransom money was in his coat pocket. I took it out and put it into my own pocket. Then I continued on up out of the gorge.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Watch the Birdie!*



**A**LITTLE after midnight I braked Viv's car before her front stoop. A couple of lights were showing on the ground floor. I sat behind the wheel working up strength enough to get out of the car, and nerve enough to go inside and tell her. I guess it was the realization that I needed a drink

bad, and could get one quick, that gave me the final impetus.

She had obviously heard the car, because I was reaching for the bell button when she yanked the door open. I was a mess, and she just about fainted when she saw me. She went as white as alabaster, then as red as a sunset, and then a sort of dirty green. She fell back a step, caught herself, and reached for me with both hands.

"Chet! Oh, darling! You're hurt!"

A brilliant deduction, but I was too pooped to make cracks about it. I stumbled inside.

"A drink, baby," I said. "And I need it now."

"Of course, darling!" she cried, and steered me into that four-square-mile living room. "Sit down. I'll go get it. Oh, Chet! Something terrible must have happened."

"The drink first, lovely," I mumbled, and sank back on the cushions.

She was on her way by then, the skirt of a red and gold brocade house-coat sailing out behind. I got a flash of her nice legs, but I wasn't interested in her legs for once. Just in the drink she was getting for me.

She came back in two or three minutes. No fancy cocktail shaker this time. Pinch bottle, and a couple of glasses. No soda or ice. Viv always knew when a man wanted a real drink. Also, when she wanted the same kind herself.

She poured three fingers for each of us, and saw the inside of the bottom of her glass only an instant after I saw mine. Then she spoke hurriedly.

"Darling! Darling, tell me! What hap-

pened? Did you meet Kenneth? Did he do this to you? Oh, you poor precious!"

I turned my head and looked at her. Straight into those big wide-open eyes that mirrored any and all kinds of feminine emotions anyone could care to name. I just looked, because for once I couldn't talk. Couldn't, because I hated to, dreaded to.

She put down her glass and clutched one of my hands with both of hers. Her whisper was like the burning fuse before the explosion.

"Chet! Tell me! Please!"

"I told Strong to stay here with you," I said. "What excuse did he give for leaving you and when did he go?"

"Why—why right after you left!" she said, as her eyes grew wider. "I told him he should stay, but he said there was something that he had to see about at once. He said it wouldn't take an hour. He . . . Chet! Why do you ask?"

She was thinking hard and fast, and terror began to show in her eyes.

"Yes, he had something to do," I said, and poured us both another drink. "He had to follow me out to the gorge—and do his stuff."

"Stuff?" It was hard for her to get the word out. "What do you mean, Chet? He—followed you?"

"That's right, baby." I grinned at her. "He went out there to fix his hired hand up for good. The hired hand who gave that kid the note to deliver you. To fix my wagon, too, in case the hired help hadn't fixed it by dumping me into the gorge. And then to take your fifty thousand smackers and go South. Or maybe East, or West, or North."

She didn't say anything. And how did she look? Well, kick the props out from under a beautiful dame with great big ideas sometime, and take a look at her face.

"His packed bags were in his car which was parked back along the road, lovely," I went on, rubbing it in. "Of course, he might have just been taking his clothes to the cleaners. Ah love, beautiful love! But Mr. Strong would rather have fifty thousand than even your love. Never occurred to you to figure that angle, eh, baby?"

She was crying, and saying things. She knew all the words. A lady with her hair down, and her claws out. She suddenly stopped, and looked at me. Then she grabbed me by the shoulders and tried to shake me. I half-slapped her across the face, and she dropped her hands.



"I'm an all-trusting guy, baby," I said to her. "Just putty in your hands always. But you were crazy to try to make me believe that Ken Ames ever did the bank out of fifty thousand. You were also crazy to let Strong talk you into covering up for him that way."

"You're crazy!" she screamed. "Oh, that heel!"

**S**HE began to cry harder. She leaned over against me, head buried on my shoulder. I let her head stay there. But I knew her—oh yes, I knew her.

"No, you and your heel boy friend were crazy," I said. "Even to think it would work. I catch quick. This is how it was—wasn't it? Check me where I go wrong, will you?"

She didn't answer. She just cried softly, and pressed against me harder.

"It was Ken who found out that Robert had been playing mumblety-peg with the bank's books," I said, staring at the pinch bottle. "Not the other way around. That's why Ken cancelled the European trip. He'd had enough of you and Strong—playing house. Stealing the bank's dough was the clincher. So you two cooked it up together. It would look like Ken had snatched himself. Friend Robert would juggle the books around by the time the bank auditors arrived to make it look as if Ken had been the guilty one. Am I boring you, or guessing wrong?"

"Go on," she answered into my shoulder.

"Calling me in was your idea, of course," I went on, and I was not very happy. "A trustworthy, and respected private dick to deliver the money, and get slugged by a guy Strong hired, a man who makes a living hiring out for that sort of thing. He would return the dough to Strong, and things would be just dandy. You'd go to the cops presently, with the ransom notes, but not with the cut newspaper. The cops would eventually find your car out on the Gorge Road. And when they hunted around, they would find me dead from being pushed off the cliff. And find Ken dead, too!"

She stiffened, rigid at last. I waited for her to say something, but she didn't.

"A perfect set-up the police could bat their brains out on, and get nowhere," I said, and got to feeling worse. "Plain as the nose on your face. It would look as if Ken Ames had done the bank dirt, and had dealt somebody in to help him out. Chet Lacey would have been the go-between. Too bad. That dirty rotten somebody, the cops would have

thought about some mysterious killer who had been at work. He killed Ames, he killed Lacey, and he ran away with all that money. The cops would keep asking—who could he have been? Want some more?"

She suddenly lifted her head and kissed me.

"Chet, darling, I—I—"

She faltered and pulled out all the stops. A lady really on fire for a purpose. I just sat like a hunk of stone. Then I gave her some more.

"A lovely piece of business!" I said, and laughed. "The cops would be sore because you hadn't gone to them first when you found that kidnap ransom note. But you would have smiled that special smile, and the poor guys would have ended up swearing by their badges they'd find the guy who did the killing, and the fifty grand somehow. But Sweet Robert had decided to make a really good thing of it. He hired a lad to collect the dough I was supposed to have delivered to the mysterious kidnapers, then to sort of push me off the cliff. But Robert wasn't a trusting soul. He followed me out there to make sure, and make it even better. He went there to kill his hired help, and me too, if the fall hadn't broken my neck. And then he would have been off and away with your dough. The price you'd have to pay—and say nothing!"

She looked at me, but didn't speak.

"But his plan only half worked," I said. "He did kill the hired help. But not me. I shot Sweet Robert dead."

"Robert's dead?" she whispered. "He and that other man?"

"Very dead," I assured her. "Did my story go wrong any place?"

She took a deep, quivering breath, and shook her head.

"No, it was close enough," she said. "That skunk! After what I was willing to go through for him! Chet?"

"Yes, baby?"

"About—about Kenneth," she said. Her eyes were looking into mine with all they had to give out. "A woman who thinks she's in love can be such a fool. Robert came here this morning to plead with Kenneth not to do anything. About the bank shortage, I mean. Kenneth was wild. Yes, he had found out about us—about Robert and me. Robert must have gone insane. He shot Kenneth. Right here in this room. It was horrible, darling! I thought I was going to lose my mind!"

The tears were on again, and her head was on my shoulder again.



"So he shot Kenneth this morning, eh?" I murmured. "That made it a mess for both of you. But he came up with the kidnaping idea? He'd ditch Ken's body in the gorge? You'd play through with him, eh?"

"I—I had to," she barely whispered, and stole one arm around my neck. "You see . . . Well, you know a woman in love. She'll do anything for her man. And, I thought I really loved Robert. But how wrong I was! Oh darling, how I realize now what I should have done—years ago!"

**I**F SHE had said that at another time it would have sent the heart-beat up for a new all-time high. But I didn't want any

of it now. Not any part of it. I reached up and pulled her arms off me, and forced her to sit up. I guess maybe I was really crying a little inside. Thinking of—years ago.

I pulled the package of money from my pocket and dropped it into her lap.

"You'll be needing this," I said. "For lawyers."

"For lawyers?" she got out, her voice ragged.

"For the best that money can buy!" I told her savagely. "When I found Ken's body he had been dead for over twenty-four hours. I know enough about corpses to be able to figure those things. He was shot last night

[Turn page]



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—by you! When you were alone with him!”

“Chet! Oh, how can you?”

“Ken was all washed up with you!” I drowned her out. “That’s what was in his letter to you in California, and it sent you hightailing home. And then yesterday he caught up with Strong at the bank. When you came in this house last night he called the turn on you. On both of you. He had found out everything. It was going to be twenty years at least for Dear Robert. And for you? You’d come down off the social heap with a blast that would make the front page of every newspaper in the country. That was it, wasn’t it? And you shot Ken! Right?”

“That’s a lie!” Her voice was hoarse and cracking. “That’s not true. I swear to you that Robert shot Ken!”

“No—you!” I stopped her. “The gun Strong used on me was a thirty-eight. The bullet that killed Ken made a small hole. The cops will find it came from a small caliber gun. From one of those little fancy pearl-handled pistols some women like to keep around the house, and in their purses. Remember you once showed me the one you had, baby?”

She was breathing hard. Her eyes were glazed, and she kept blinking them. I wanted to word-grind her down to a frazzle.

“I checked a couple of things before I drove out to the gorge,” I went on. “Strong was at an all-night poker party last night. His landlady told me that. She said he got home at seven this morning. And she told me something else, too. That a lady had phoned him every half-hour. Very anxious to get him last night. You didn’t get him until this morning. It wasn’t until this morning, when he came here, that he found out that Ken had caught up with him on the bank’s books. So he thought up all those bright plans. An out for you, and a very, very lovely out for him. With your fifty grand in his pocket. Tough, baby. But you’ve still got your fifty thousand. And maybe a smart lawyer, and a jury of guys with eyes can do something for you.”

She was looking at me, and the tears were streaming down her face. I could see that she was reading in my eyes what I was going to do.

“Chet, darling! You wouldn’t — wouldn’t—”

Genuinely from the heart, it was. But it was no go.

“Yes, baby,” I said. “Let’s go downtown.”

“Oh, Chet!”

She swayed and fell against me. She got her left arm about my neck, and was moving the right just as I snapped out of it. I grabbed her right wrist with my right hand, and put everything I had into it. The little pearl-handled revolver she had taken from the pocket of her house-coat dropped to the carpet. A second before it had been two inches from jamming against my chest.

“Please, Chet! You’re hurting my wrist!”

I wanted to crush all the little bones to a pulp, and bury my left fist in her beautiful face. I didn’t do either. I let go and looked at her.

She looked as if she were drugged. She wasn’t even breathing hard. Just sitting there, crying silently, and looking at me.

For the one and only time in my life I saw a beautiful woman suddenly stripped clean of all her womanly charms. She was little more than a sitting statue of emotionless, sagging, tear-streaked clay.

She didn’t move when I picked up the gun with my handkerchief and slipped it into my pocket. Nor protest by a single sound when I took her arm and got her onto her feet.

She was a limp dummy in the seat beside me, all the way down to Police Headquarters. I took her to the office of the Chief of Homicide, a friend of mine. She sat in one of his chairs like a dead drunk while I told my friend the whole story.

He cursed me up and down for not doing this and that. Then he called in a guy with a book and pencil. Like a wound-up talking doll Viv repeated most of my story, and added some points I hadn’t worked out, but which were not important. My friend asked her to sign it. She did, and let a police matron lead her away. She hadn’t looked at me once. It was as though all feeling, all sense of living had drained out of her.

“Well,” my practical Chief of Homicide friend said when the door had closed on her, “smart lawyers have done it before, and she’s sure got the face and the shape for the right kind of a jury.”

“Yeah, and she can act plenty,” I murmured.

I went out and went home. I was satisfied to find out what happened to Vivian Murphy Ames from then on—if anything—in Mexico City.



The fleeing figure  
fired as Gramps  
unloosed the  
hound's collar



# SOMETHING OLD— SOMETHING NEW

By F. R. READ

*A young scientific sleuth and a regular old-time sheriff  
join hands in order to round up three elusive criminals!*

**B**ARNEY Adair said good night to the last of the group of well-wishers who had gathered in his office to witness his taking of the oath. He closed the door and sank back in the comfortable old swivel chair which, like the desk, had been freshly varnished and waxed in honor of the new sheriff.

The intercity bus ground to a stop on the wet highway a block from his office. Automatically, Barney checked the time—ninety-one P.M. Too early to go back to his hotel room, and too late for the last show at the Bijou.

The new sheriff looked at the cases of scientific equipment he had hauled out of



the county warehouse. The boxes were unopened, though they had been delivered to the sheriff's office more than five years before. That had been one of the points Barney had raised during his victorious campaign for modernizing the office.

He rose from his desk and opened the door that led into the adjoining room. The room was bare except for the two counters and cabinets lining each wall. This was the room originally planned for use as a Criminal Investigating Laboratory. The preceding sheriff had used it to augment his income at poker.

The street door opened and shut. Barney looked into the outside office.

An old man, tall though slightly bent, wearing neat but shabby clothes, grinned back at Barney Adair. The gray-blue eyes twinkled with humor.

"Gramps!" Barney threw his arm about the thin damp old shoulders. "Gramps! This makes my day complete. It's a shame you couldn't have got here in time for the swearing in."

"Gramps" Macauley, Barney's grandfather and only living relative, looked up at his handsome, well-dressed grandson. His eyes took in every detail—and he was not entirely pleased with what he saw.

"You don't look much like a sheriff to me, son. You look more like one of those scientific G-men. Mostly lawyer, ain't you?"

"Yes," Barney was pleased at the comparison.

"Got a place on the deputy list for me?"

"Sorry, Gramps, things are going to be different around here. I'm going to have the most modern, up-to-date, scientific office in the state. You don't need work!" He looked at the old man anxiously.

"Nope, but it will help."

The shrill ringing of the telephone filled the room. Self-consciously, Barney lifted the instrument.

"Sheriff speaking?"

The voice at the other end of the line rattled over the phone like a machine-gun.

"Just a minute," Barney interrupted, and reached for a printed form. He looked at his wrist-watch and wrote the time at the top of the form. "Give me your name, address and your telephone number, please."

**T**HE phone crackled indignantly, while the sheriff filled in the spaces.

"Complaint? . . . All right! . . . All right! . . ."

"You just wanted to tell me that Mrs. Henrietta Small's dog is barking. I'll have one of my deputies look into it in the morning." Barney mopped his head and smiled at his grandfather.

"Yup"—the old man grinned—"I can see you're pretty much a lawyer. Whatcha gonna do about it?"

"Do about it, Gramps? Why—why nothing. I'll have one of the deputies stop out there tomorrow and tell her to keep her dog quiet. . . . Gramps, have you ever seen the scientific instruments we use in crime detection?"

"No, son, I ain't."

"Look," the sheriff opened one of the cases.

"This is a comparison microscope. You can place bullets in each of these holders, and draw them into one field. Without question, you can determine if a particular bullet was fired from a given gun. Look in the eyepiece. I'll give you a demonstration."

"Barney," the old man interrupted, "does Mrs. Small have a telephone?"

"I suppose so. . . . Now, this is the moulage outfit. Moulage casts are far superior to plaster of paris. They don't shrink. They—"

Gramps wasn't listening. He was thumbing through the S section of the thin county telephone directory.

"Yep." He spoke to himself. "Her number's Twelve-F-three."

"What are you talking about, Gramps?"

"Mrs. Small, Barney. Her number is Twelve-F-three. Call her up, lad."

"But, Gramps, you should know people go to bed early in the country. You've lived up at the end of the county long enough to know that."

"Course I have. Call her up, son. If her dog's barking at the moon—and there ain't no moon because it's raining—she'd have quieted him before he attracted the neighbor's attention."

"Maybe she has."

"Don't be foolish, Barney. If her neighbor called, you can bet the dog's barking is unusual. Humor an old man, son, and call her up."

The sheriff picked up the telephone and asked for the number. While waiting for the connection, he talked to his grandfather.

"Things have changed since you were the sheriff, Gramps. Why, in those packing cases, there is everything an investigator could ask for. A guilty man can't escape the story they can tell us. There is the equipment to bring out every known stain. An ultra. . . . Yes? . . . I see. . . . No, don't bother."

"Don't she answer?"

"No, Gramps. She must be out visiting."

The old man snorted in disgust. "Put your coat on, son."

"Aw, Gramps, I—"

"I ain't never seen the likes of you, Barney. For a lad who took all the honors in school, you're just plain dumb. Get your coat!" The old eyes glinted like steel.

Barney grinned, and obeyed the one voice he was accustomed to obeying. He held open the office door.

"I'm ready."

"You got your gun, handcuffs, flashlight?"



"Gramps! Things have changed. Just to investigate a barking dog?"

"Get 'em!" the old man snapped.

Neither spoke as they drove the five miles to the home of Henrietta Small. Only the muffled purr of the motor and the swish-swish of the windshield wiper broke the silence.

The dog was still barking.

"Don't turn in at the drive, son" said the old man. "Park on the highway."

"Listen, Gramps, be reasonable. It's a quarter-mile walk up that drive, and it's pouring rain."

"Park here, son. The oath of office you took didn't say nothing about not getting wet, did it? We'll walk the rest of the way. And walk on the gravel where you won't mess up footprints, if any."

A large hound tied before a neatly painted dog house, barked hysterically, gnawing at his restraining chain. He tried futilely to back out of his stout leather collar.

Barney snapped on his flashlight and shone it across the yard, then snapped it off.

A low moan escaped Gramps Macauley's lips.

"What's the matter, Gramps?"

"Dad blame it! Might as well keep the light on, now! Barney! Your gun! Snap on your light!"

The sheriff clicked on his flashlight. Fumbling, he unbuttoned his raincoat and jacket.

The flashlight beam had picked up the crouching figure of a man scurrying across the yard.

"Shoot!" Gramps shouted.

The fleeing figure spun and fired. The bullet whined harmlessly overhead.

Barney dropped the flashlight, and it blinked out when it hit the ground.

Gramps jumped to the side of the hysterical hound, and released the snap-hook that was fastened to the leather collar. The freed dog streaked into the darkness. A car door slammed, and a motor started.

"Got away! Gone off in a car! Why didn't you shoot him, Barney?"

"I couldn't get to my gun. The holster flap was caught."

"Don't take it too hard, son. You made quite a point about the old sheriff swaggering around with his gun lashed to his leg. But remember, Barney, when you need a gun, you need a gun. The handier it is, the better for you. . . . Got another flashlight?"

**B**ARNEY fumbled in the darkness, and the light snapped on.

"Two bulbs," he explained. "Up to date!"

They rushed to the open back door. Gramps reached around the frame and snapped on the kitchen light.

"Don't touch anything!" Barney warned. "Don't touch anything!"

"The story is all here," the old man spoke

with sadness in his voice.

A white-haired elderly woman, sprawled over the kitchen table, had been hacked to death with a butcher knife that was now lying on the oilcloth cover. Blood everywhere gave the room a pinkish tinge.

Newly-elected Sheriff Barney Adair stepped out the door and was sick in the back yard.

Gramps said nothing. He looked pityingly from the murdered woman to his grandson. His sharp eyes swept the room. An opened purse and overturned cookie jars told the story. A robbery killing.

"Come on, Barney." He caught his grandson's arm. "Let's go."

"Go!" Barney said stupidly. "We can't go, Gramps. It's an ideal crime for my scientific instruments. There will be footprints, fingerprints—hundreds of clues."

"Don't be a bigger dang fool than you can help being, son. Take off that folderol raincoat. Open your suit coat, and hang your gun low, where you can get it. Come on, boy, the killer's still nearby."

Without answering, the younger man obeyed.

"Now shoot your light on the footprints," Gramps snapped.

Most of the indentations were already filled from the pouring rain. One, in a bit of high ground, was clear. The light beam found it.

"Looks like a nine EE," Gramps said. "The soles have been tipped and heeled recently."

"Yes," Barney agreed. "The heel plate still carries the trade-mark—the Three Apple Brand."

"Come on," Gramps said. "Hurry."

"Where?"

"Barney, I'm ashamed of you. Didn't you hear a car start just after the killer ran out of the yard?"

"Yes, I did. But how do we know which way it went?"

"Honestly, son, it's a good thing I came here. I'm too old a man, Barney, to be chasing around getting you straightened out. What did you get given a mind for, but to use?"

Barney Adair blushed furiously. The rain had soaked through his new suit, and it hung like a wet bag over his big hard frame.

"Son, use your head. Did the car come back this way?"

"No sir."

"What's the first thing you want after you've been through a harrowing experience?"

"I want a drink, or a cigarette. I want a drink, now."

"Get rolling! Hurry!"

"There's only one place along this road," Barney said. "We're going there!"

The powerful car ate up the miles to Miller's Corner, the first cross-road. Barney showed no signs of slowing.



"Hold it, Barney," Gramps touched his arm. "Never miss a bet, lad. Turn in at the filling station."

Barney swung in under the overhang. An attendant ran out of the store, dragging on his raincoat.

"Sheriff!" Gramps snapped. "You see a car pass here during the last few minutes, heading west?"

"You ain't the sheriff," the attendant said, and grinned.

"But I am!" Barney snapped.

"Yes, sir. A car turned left at the cross-road—it was going fast. Three men were in the front seat. It—"

"I know," Gramps interrupted. "Is there a place along that road where they can get a drink?"

"Well—" The man obviously hedged.

"The sheriff here," Gramps nodded toward Barney—"ain't interested in a speak-easy. It's murder, son. Talk fast, if you don't want to be charged with being an accessory after the fact."

"Legally—" Barney opened his mouth to begin to say.

"Shut up, Barney," Gramps snapped. Turning to the attendant, he barked, "Where's that speak, son, and how do we get in?"

"The first white house on the left. Knock on the basement door, and say Joe sent you. . . ."

"Thanks, Bud. Let's go, Barney."

The sheriff dropped the car in gear, and turned left at the cross-roads. The motor hummed as he picked up speed.

"Take it easy, lad," Gramps advised. "Take it easy. I'm looking for something. Whoa! Let me off here. I'll walk up to the speakeasy and meet you there. You ain't afraid?"

"You know better than that, Gramps."

The sheriff drove off, leaving the old man standing at the side of the road. A large unlighted white house loomed ahead on the left side of the road. He braked and turned into the driveway. There were no signs of life.

**S**LOWLY, Barney followed the drive around behind the big rambling structure. Three cars were parked side by side. A fourth car stood to one side in the high grass, paralleling the driveway and headed toward the road. Barney parked behind it.

He climbed out of his car and crossed the drive. A small door three steps below ground level showed an edging of light.

The sheriff knocked briskly.

"Who's there?" a voice demanded.

"Joe sent me," Barney shouted.

The door swung open, and he followed a tall man wearing a white apron into the low-ceilinged room. A bare two-hundred-watt bulb, the only light, was set flush in the ceiling. The man stepped behind the bar, and looked at Barney through narrowing lids.

"Give me a whisky—any kind."

"Your name Adair?" the bartender asked. Barney nodded.

"This a business call on me?"

"No. Make that a double whisky."

The bartender shoved a large glass and a quart bottle over the bar. He leaned confidentially toward the young sheriff, as Barney poured his drink.

"The card players," he nodded at a group of men seated around a table in the center of the room, with glasses of beer at their elbows—"are regulars. The other three came in a few minutes ago. The only exit is out the door you came in."

"Thanks," Barney poured himself another drink. "How much?"

"It's on me, and I wish you luck."

The sheriff wheeled and rested his back against the bar. His coat was open, the butt of his Police Positive in plain view. Slowly, he studied the faces of the men in the room.

One of the card players saw the pistol and stood up.

"I think I'll run along, Sam," he called to the bartender.

"Sit down," Barney ordered. "This isn't a raid. It's a murder investigation. The first man who makes a move gets hurt."

Carefully he looked at the three men who were sitting alone.

"You,"—Barney pointed to one—"come here!"

The man rose and crossed the room.

"Turn up the sole of your shoe!"

The man stood on one leg, and turned up his shoe for the sheriff's inspection. The sole, an old one, was badly torn. There was no mud, nor any sign that the heels and toes had been recently repaired.

A gun roared. The light went out.

Tinkling glass from the smashed bulb dropped to the bare floor. Barney jumped to the end of the bar. After a few surprised gasps, the room was silent.

Barney drew out his flashlight, and reached as far down the bar as he could. He snapped it on, and the light rolled away from him. Two of the three men sitting alone had pistols in their hands.

The guns banged at the light. Barney fired three shots in the general direction of the table. A man groaned.

The flashlight rolled off the bar, and blinked out when it struck the floor. The close cellar smelled strongly of gunpowder.

There was movement at the table occupied by the card players—a swish, and glass breaking.

"Listen, you mugs," a voice cut the darkness. "Keep out of this!"

Barney's gun barked twice in rapid succession at the voice, and he jumped to one side. Two guns blazed at the spot he had occupied. Taking careful aim from around



the corner of the bar, he squeezed the trigger. The Police Positive roared.

Answering shots chipped splinters from the mahogany close to his head.

Again, Barney took careful aim, and again he squeezed the trigger. The firing pin clicked harmlessly on a fired cartridge.

Someone laughed.

Guns blazed and the three men backed toward the door, firing wildly into the room they were leaving. One of the card players grunted and cursed softly.

In helpless rage, Barney cursed his own stupidity and lack of foresight. He was out of bullets. His ammunition belt had never been filled.

The door of the cellar banged shut. Barney dashed around the bar and opened the door. The lights flashed on in the car parked

into the side of his car.

Deftly the driver dropped the sedan into reverse, backed it a few feet and changed gears. The car leaped forward, around the drive.

Barney stepped into the road, and blazed at the diminishing ruby tail-light as it sped toward the highway.

The heavy sedan's headlights swung wildly from one side of the road to the other. Brakes ground. Rubber screamed. A shattering crash told the story. The car had careened into the gatepost. There was the sound of gunfire, and the sedan rolled over.

Barney, well in the lead was the first to reach the wrecked car. Two of the occupants crawled out and raised their hands in the air.

"Put the bracelets on 'em—don't take any

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before his. The starter whirled, paused and whirled again.

"Get 'em, Barney!" Gramps called from somewhere in the darkness. "I took the rotor out of their distributor. Get 'em, Barney! Sic 'em, lad!"

The sheriff stepped into the driveway. A gun barked from the stalled car, and he jumped back into the doorway.

"What's the matter?" the bartender who had crept up behind him demanded. "You've got a beautiful target from here."

"Out of bullets," the sheriff said bitterly.

"Here!" Barney felt an automatic pushed into his hand. "It's fully loaded."

The three men climbed out of their immobile car, and ran to Barney's sedan.

"The key's in it!" one of them called.

**OUT** OF the darkness a long-drawn wail of despair cut the night. The young sheriff reddened, and was thankful that no one could see his face.

The lights of his sedan snapped on. The starter whirled, and the motor instantly broke into a throaty hum. The automatic in Barney's hand barked. Three shots ripped

chances!" Gramps Macauley shouted advice as he ran toward the wreck. "Where's the other one?"

"Still inside. He's a hospital case."

"Where's the dog?"

"Dog? What dog?"

"Widow Small's dog. What dog you think? I found him laying on the road, shot. I carried him here and put him in the car. Where is he?"

"He's in back," one of the prisoners said. "We didn't know he was there. He leaped across the seat as we were turning into the highway. That's what wrecked us... What's the charge, Sheriff?"

"Murder! First degree! Premeditated."

"Lawyer," Gramps muttered.

"You crazy?" one of the prisoners demanded indignantly. "Listen, Sheriff, you must be out of your mind. That car we were driving is hot, yes. We'll admit that. But not murder—not us."

"Gramps, commandeer one of those other cars." The sheriff turned back to the prisoners. "Let me see the soles of your shoes. I've examined the shoes of the man in the car."



Obligingly, they turned up their shoes. Neither pair showed the slightest sign of having been repaired.

"What you waiting for, Gramps?" the Sheriff asked. "I told you to commandeer one of those cars."

\* \* \* \* \*

The first gray streaks of dawn crept above the horizon. Barney Adair worked tirelessly in the small laboratory attached to his office. Gramps Macauley made himself useful running back and forth to the all-night lunch room for steaming cups of black coffee. Once or twice he dozed in the comfortable old swivel chair he had occupied during his own tenure in office many years before. Finally, he fell into a sound sleep.

The sound of voices jerked the old man back to consciousness. It was nine A.M. From the door opening into the small investigating laboratory came the buzz of many voices.

Sore with rheumatism, and creaking in every joint, the old man pulled himself out of the chair, and leaned against the door frame.

He nodded approval each time his grandson drove home a telling point.

"The evidence," Barney was saying "is complete. The murderer would hardly have saved us more time if he had signed his name in the blood on the kitchen table. I'll go over the vital points again."

Gramps slid into the room.

"There were drops of his victim's blood in his hair," Barney said. "Evidently, Mrs. Small had drawn some money out of the bank recently to pay off a mortgage. The bills were all new and fresh. Careful soul that she was, she placed the notes in an envelope, and wrote 'Mortgage Money' across the face of it. When the murderers divided it, they gave one note to each in turn, down through the pile."

"What does that prove?" Gramps asked, "and how do you know it?"

"By special photography. The pressure she put on the pencil pressed that message 'Mortgage Money' into the first six bills.

Each of the three men had two of these marked bills."

"Thank you, Sheriff. We'll go over the facts again, later." The district attorney rose to his feet. "I feel that I am safe in saying I've never handled a case where the evidence was so speedily assembled and so conclusive. Those three men are as good as in the electric chair now, thanks to your diligence and modern methods. . . . Is there anything this grateful county can do for you?"

"Yes, there is. If possible, I'd like to have my grandfather appointed as a deputy. You—see—"

"Explanations are unnecessary. Go right ahead and appoint him. Though why you want an old man like him, I can't imagine. You represent the last word in modern, scientific crime detection, while he . . . Well, he was an excellent sheriff in his day. I must run along. Good day."

"Barney," Gramps shouted when the office door had closed, "what happened to the shoe that made the footprint? I thought sure we had the wrong men."

"It will turn up, Gramps. The killer changed his wet shoes in the car. There was a perfect print on the mat. He probably tossed them out along the road. Thanks for setting the dog loose. If it hadn't been for the dog, I'd have been the laughing-stock of this town. Out of bullets, keys left in the car, and I nearly went out of here without my gun. Thanks again, Gramps."

"You're welcome!" The old man grinned.

"Gramps, if you hadn't made me go out to Mrs. Small's at once, I'd have started my term with an unsolved murder. The killers would have been gone, and I'd probably never have caught them."

"Now, son."

"Gramps—er-r-r-I'm lacking a lot in my education. Will you sort of take me in hand and make me stand a daily inspection until I catch on to my job?"

"Barney, you're a smart lad, because you realize how dumb you are. We'll work good in harness, son. Something old—something new."

# Can't Keep Grandma In Her Chair

**She's as Lively as a Youngster—Now her Backache is better**

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

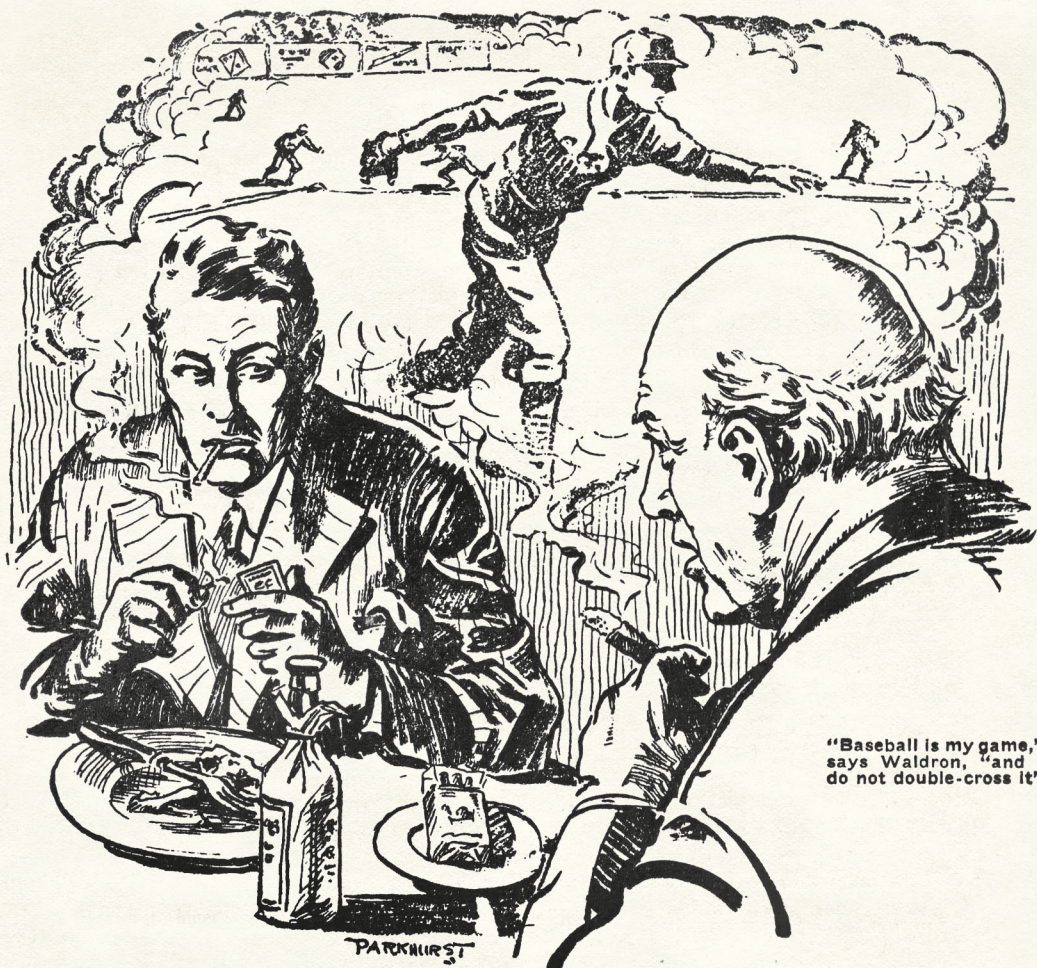
When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up

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Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)





"Baseball is my game," says Waldron, "and I do not double-cross it"

# BALDY AND THE DEAD SOUTHPAW

By JACK KOFOED

*When "Lefty" Waldron passes on, a crooked gambler and a two-timing girl call it suicide—so Simmons investigates!*

**I**NE day, as "Lefty" Waldron is hitting the feed bag in the restaurant of the Waldorf Ritz hotel, "Baldy" Simmons drops into a chair across the table from the star southpaw of the Pink Sox. Lefty is putting a heavy chew on a two-pound sirloin decorated with mushrooms, but there is no look of happiness on his pan.

As a matter of fact, Waldron is an unhappy character at best, who seldom gets on with his team-mates, or anybody else. However, considering the steak is worthy of a Cordon Bleu, and Lefty holds the Leopards to a

couple of infield hits this very afternoon, it does not seem reasonable to believe he is as gloomy as his expression indicates. To top it off, Waldron's sweetie-pie—a lovely actress named Pony McCoy—is in town with a road company of "Knee Deep in Blondes." Of course, Pony calls herself an actress, but she is really a chorus girl, with legs like Marlene Dietrich.

"Why the sour puss?" Baldy asks.

Lefty finishes working his choppers on a particularly succulent bit of beef, and looks Mr. Simmons squarely in the eyes.



"I am able to give you seven or eight reasons, but one or two serve the purpose very well," the southpaw says. "Yesterday Whispering Jones makes me an offer of two grand to toss off the game with the Leopards. As you know, Whispering Jones is the heaviest gambler in these parts."

"From the way you work this afternoon, it is clear to one and all you turn this character down cold," suggests Baldy.

The southpaw wipes a bead of sweat from his worried brow.

"This is just the trouble. I figure to frame Jones, because he is a very bad influence on baseball. It is my idea to have Manager Dockenspiegel and a couple of other witnesses hidden close by when Whispering hands me the dough. The only trouble is that Pony McCoy arrives in town. Her presence fascinates me so much I forget to tell Manager Dockenspiegel anything about it."

"What is to prevent you from doing this on another occasion?"

Waldron moans, and it comes deep from the heart.

"Last night I am having supper with Pony McCoy in the Gilded Cockatoo Club," says he. "Whispering Jones passes by, and drops an envelope on the table. When I open it in my room some time later, I find it contains two thousand clams."

"I see no insurmountable obstacle there," observes Mr. Simmons. "It is possible to return this unclean pelf, and tell him you change your mind."

"It is not very healthy changing your mind with Whispering Jones, but that is exactly what I plan to do," sighs Lefty Waldron. "I roam about until three in the morning, trying to find him, but am a complete failure at the effort. Now, this Jones character is a handy person with a John Roscoe, and it is reported that cemeteries are full of people he bumps off. This situation makes me very unhappy."

"And, you shut the Leopards out with two hits!"

**W**ALDRON lights a cigarette. The match burns his right forefinger, and he curses heartily.

"There is nothing to do but my best," he says. "If I am batted out of the box Whispering Jones thinks he has me in his pocket for the rest of his life. Besides, baseball is my game, and I do not double-cross it under any circumstances."

"Atta boy," says Baldy.

"Now I am waiting for Whispering Jones.

It does no good to return his two grand, for it is a cinch he loses five times this much betting on the Leopards. From all I hear, he is likely to put more lead in me than you find in a repeater pencil. There is only one thing I am glad of. If anything happens to me, Pony McCoy is safe for the rest of her life. I have a fifty-thousand-dollar insurance policy, and she is the beneficiary."

Mr. Simmons thinks this over very carefully.

"You are, I suppose, on the verge of marrying Miss Pony McCoy?" he says.

"As soon as she is ready, which is when she finishes this road trip with 'Knee Deep in Blondes.'"

"Look," says Baldy. "It is possible this is not as bad as you think. On the other hand, it is likely to turn out even worse. Whispering Jones is more careless with a cannon than Dillinger was in his prime. Go back to your apartment and lock yourself in. I'll look up Johnny O'Keefe, of the Broadway Squad, and ask him to keep an eye on Mr. Jones."

Lefty Waldron thinks this is a pretty good idea. To make sure nothing happens, Baldy not only tucks him into a taxi, but sends "Slugger" Willoughby, the doorman, with him as a body guard. Slugger is probably the worst heavyweight to ever step into a ring, but is quite rough in any sort of a bar-room brawl.

Baldy goes looking for Johnny O'Keefe. It takes some little time, but Mr. Simmons finally locates him playing gin rummy in the back room of Poppadopolous' place on Eighth Avenue.

"Whenever you come around, I always have to quit just as I am about to schneider somebody," says Johnny, a little unpleasantly. "Who is murdered this time?"

"Nobody yet," Baldy tells him. "But unless you ditch that deck of cards, somebody is likely to be knocked off."

"Your remarks leave me cold."

"Not you, but Lefty Waldron, is likely to be colder than a salted mackerel unless you do something about it."

This rouses Johnny O'Keefe out of his gin rummy fog, for he is a very patriotic citizen, and is keen to have the Pink Sox win the championship. Besides, he has a bet on the Sox, and they cannot possibly win without their star left-hander, who is good for thirty victories, anyhow. The detective puts the cardboards away.

"Why does anyone wish to bump Lefty?" he asks. "It is admitted Lefty is not the



pleasantest character in the world, but this is not enough reason to give him a cemetery job."

Mr. Simmons explains in detail what happens, and how afraid Lefty is that "Whispering" Jones lays him away. Johnny listens in heavy silence.

Then, he says like this: "It is really quite bad. Whispering Jones is not a person to forget such a deal. It is not a matter of principle with him. It is strictly the money."

"What do you intend to do?" asks Mr. Simmons.

Johnny pats the gun in his pocket. "The first thing is to find Mr. Jones, though chances are if murder or mayhem are committed, he hires someone else."

"You do this," agrees Baldy. "I have another job."

It is no more or less than to find Miss "Pony" McCoy and put her on guard. Practically everybody in America knows about the romance between her and Lefty. Maybe Whispering Jones tries to get even by damaging her in one way or another. So, Mr. Simmons goes to the Globe Theatre, where Pony is playing in this "Knee Deep in Blondes" extravaganza.

Old Pop, the doorman, takes a pipe out of his mouth, and looks up at Mr. Simmons comes in.

"Well, well, Baldy!" he says. "You gettin' to be a stage door Johnny at your age? Why, I wouldn't believe it."

"Not exactly," Baldy grins. "But I appreciate if you let me have a word with Miss Pony McCoy."

Pop takes a gander at the cards in the rack on the wall. Then, he shakes his head.

"Not tonight," he says. "Pony is not workin'."

"Sick?"

"No. Whispering Jones arrives in a Rolls Royce and a temper. He tells the company manager Pony is to have the night off, or else. Nobody argues with Jones, so he and Pony go off together."

Baldy looks at his watch.

"What time is this?" he asks.

"Oh, eight-fifteen — eight-twenty. Somewhere around there. Anything wrong?"

"I wish I knew."

**T**HE thought occurs to him that Whispering Jones pulls an old trick which is very popular in prohibition days, when tommy-guns and bodies loaded in cement are originated. This consists of putting the snatch on someone very close to the charac-

ter who is to be harmed.

Even a very hard-boiled person is not likely to make any sort of aggressive move if he knows his wife or sweetheart is in the hands of his enemies. Now, Baldy never meets Miss Pony McCoy, but he sees her pictures, and knows she has looks enough not to be ashamed of competing with Rita Hayworth or Paulette Goddard. Besides, Lefty Waldron's feelings are well known, since a character does not make a gal beneficiary of a fifty-thousand-dollar insurance policy unless he is nuts about her.

But, old Pop puts a stop to this line of reasoning.

"What I do not understand is this: Pony brags like mad that she is going to marry Lefty Waldron. As a matter of fact, she is ready to put in her notice at any given moment. Yet, when this Whispering Jones appears tonight, she throws her arms around him, and gives him one of the biggest and fattest kisses I see in all the years I am around the theatre."

"She kisses him?"

"But hot!"

"Then, it is not a snatch?"

"Well," says Pop judicially, "he snatches her, and she snatches him, so maybe you use the proper term. But, if you mean the kind Machine-Gun McCarthy pulls so often in the old days—definitely no."

There is, Baldy thinks, something very rotten, and not, by any matter of means, in the state of Denmark. Whispering Jones and the faithless Pony McCoy seem to be combining against Lefty Waldron. This is a sad state of affairs, and, as a matter of fact, a reflection on American womanhood.

It is eight o'clock when Mr. Simmons sends Lefty Waldron to his apartment. It is now ten. Lots of things happen in two hours, particularly when a killer is mad at somebody, and that somebody's girl friend gets fifty grand if he is bumped off.

"Let me use your phone, pop," Baldy says.

It takes only a minute to get Johnny O'Keefe's precinct station, and sure enough Johnny is there.

"Playing gin again?" Baldy asks.

"Sure. Why not?"

"I think you are looking for Whispering Jones."

Johnny laughs. "There is nothing to worry about, Baldy. I find this character at the Frivolity Club, with a very pretty judy, who turns out to be Pony McCoy. Now, it strikes me that if Whispering is so chummy with Lefty's girl, there is no intention on his part



to lay Lefty among the daisies. However, I leave Costello and Maginnis at the Frivolity to keep an eye on them."

In spite of this optimistic report, the whole thing does not make sense to Baldy, and he is a great chap for wanting things to make sense.

"Listen, John," he says. "I do not wish to be petulant, or suchlike. The facts, however, are these: Whispering Jones, who kills a man with less compunction than he steps on a spider, loses a wad of dough because of Lefty Waldron. On top of this, he is convinced Lefty double-crosses him. Mr. Jones is known to the citizens as one who settles his debts with the old equalizer. The dame he accompanies to the Frivolity Club is not only Waldron's sweetheart, but figures to get fifty grand if her boy friend turns up his toes. How do you play a tune like this on your harmonica?"

Johnny O'Keefe makes a sound in his throat as though he swallows a marinated herring without chewing it.

"Placed in this light the whole deal sounds bad," he admits. "If they bump off Lefty I lose a century note—because I bet on the Pink Sox to win the championship. What do you suggest?"

Mr. Simmons says: "Stay where you are. I pick you up at the station, and together we visit the forgetful southpaw's apartment. I suggest that you bring one of the medical examiners with you. I have a funny feeling that Mr. Waldron is no longer among us. And, you might tell Costello to keep Whispering Jones and Pony McCoy where we have immediate access to them, if my hunch turns out to be right."

Within ten minutes Baldy is at the station house, and they drive to the apartment house, where Lefty Waldron is holed up. The clerk at the desk is a half pint, with bifocals and a little mustache. Like many small men, he is very cocky. When they ask him to ring the pitcher's flat, he shrugs.

"Mr. Waldron tells me, before going up, that he does not wish to be disturbed by anyone," the clerk says. "He is emphatic about this. As a matter of fact, I even refuse to ring his phone for nobody less than Miss Pony McCoy, who comes here about eighty-thirty. Miss McCoy becomes highly insulted by my refusal, and for some fifteen minutes she calls me names I do not believe such a pretty girl is able to learn."

"Fifteen minutes," muses Baldy. "This is long enough for the job."

"I do not know what you mean. Now,

please get the heck out of here, and let me go back to reading True Love Tales."

**J**OHNNY O'KEEFE is in no frame of mind for any sort of argument. He is thinking about the hundred dollars he bets on Pink Sox, and how little chance he has of keeping it if anything happens to Lefty Waldron. So, he flashes his badge.

"Gimme the key, or you have no more nose left than an oyster," he says.

There is no answer to this, since O'Keefe is six feet three, and the clerk is five foot six. And, besides, the big man is the law. So Johnny and Baldy and the medical examiner, whose name is Wippenberger, go up to the fourth floor.

They open the door, and go into the living room, which is a very nice living room. No one is there. Now, it is known to one and all that Lefty is a very light sleeper. A mouse, wearing felt slippers, wakes him up by merely tiptoeing across the floor. But, there is no sound from the bedroom.

"Dear, dear," says Mr. Simmons. "I am very unhappy about this, and hate to open the bedroom door."

"Me, too," agrees Johnny O'Keefe. "But I am one hundred dollars unhappier about it than you are."

This does not make any sense to the medical examiner. He never sees a ball game in his life, and never hears about Lefty Waldron. His only interest in life is examining citizens who have passed away. So, he goes into the bedroom, and switches on the light.

The southpaw is lying on the floor. He wears a shirt and pants, and a pistol is on the floor an inch from his outstretched hand. He is deader than Napoleon's second cousin. The medical examiner rubs his hands, chuckles, and starts to look the deceased over.

After a few minutes he looks up. "Suicide beyond any shadow of a doubt," he says. "I find powder burns on the temple."

Johnny shrugs his wide shoulders. "There seem to be no worries in this deal. Lefty gets panicky and knocks himself off. It is as clear as the lipstick on Pony McCoy's mouth."

For the moment Baldy pays no attention to this remark. He picks up the telephone, and tells the room clerk to present himself on the double.

When the little man arrives, Baldy asks him to go over the whole story of Lefty's arrival, and what happens thereafter.

"Mr. Waldron comes in with Slugger Wil-



loughby. Since he forgets his key, I go up with the master key you have there, and let him in. Then he locks the door behind him, and Slugger goes down in the elevator with me. The only one who calls for him until you arrive is Miss Pony McCoy."

"And, no one is able to go up to that floor without you seeing him."

"I do not say this," the clerk answers petulantly. "After all, there is a back stairway, and I am not like Argus, who has eyes in practically every corner of his head."

"So, it is possible Slugger, or somebody, goes up those back stairs, and does a job on Lefty?"

O'Keefe allows himself a derisive smile.

"Do you not get yourself slightly botched up, Mr. Simmons?" he asks. "You hear the medical examiner. It is suicide. This is what the man says."

"Nobody tells me Lefty bumps himself off," snorts Baldy. "He gets thirty thousand dollars a year. He has a World Series coming up, to say nothing of a beautiful dame he thinks is his ever loving. Maybe he is afraid of Whispering Jones, but it is the Hope diamond against a peck of carrots he does not put a thirty-eight slug in his noggin on this account."

"I am not on the homicide squad for fifteen years without being able to tell the difference between murder and suicide," says Johnny O'Keefe coldly. "Here is a character with a gun practically in his hand, and powder burns on him, to say nothing of what the psychologists call a fear motive. What do these things count up to? Lefty gets so scared he does not know Wednesday from Whitsuntide, and rubs himself out."

For the moment, Baldy gives the flatfoot no argument on this point. He merely suggests that Johnny's henchmen bring Whispering Jones and Pony McCoy to the apartment. This is easily arranged, and within fifteen minutes they arrive, escorted by a couple of detectives, who look like Primo Carnera's brothers.

Jones is a tall, thin man, with a waxed mustache, cold eyes, and a low voice which gives him his nickname.

"All right, all right," he says. "Unravel this deal. I am not such a person as allows himself to be pushed around by a couple of hunkies just out of police school."

"Take it easy," says Baldy. They are in the living room, and the door to the bedroom is shut, so there is no sight of Lefty Waldron's body. "We have one or two questions we'd like answered."

"Such as what?"

"Do you offer Lefty Waldron two grand to ruff off today's game with the Leopards?"

**A**T THIS the Whispering person gives him a dirty look.

"For two grand I expect to buy nothing less than the Yankee stadium," he says.

"But, you do lose five times this much betting on the Leopards," old naked noggin insists. "There is no use denying it, because it is a very simple matter to prove."

"So, I lose a wad," Jones whispers. "No one goes to jail for this in all the years I am on Broadway. If Lefty Waldron says I give him two grand, he is a liar in spades, doubled and redoubled."

"It is also necessary to explain where you are between eight o'clock and ten, when you are observed in the Frivolity Club, with Miss Pony McCoy."

Whispering Jones sits down, and lights a cigarette.

"You ask more questions than Phil Baker, though I do not get sixty-four dollars for any answer," he says. "If you are trying to pin a bribery case on me, what difference does it make where I am between eight and ten o'clock this lovely summer evening?"

"Open up," ordered one of the detectives who looks like Carnera.

"At eight," says Whispering Jones, "I am in Monahan's bar. At eight-twenty I pick up Pony here. We go along Riverside Drive, park near the George Washington Bridge, and talk for awhile. By ten we are in the Frivolity Club. Is there anything else you like to know?"

Mr. Simmons ignores this. He turns a cold glance on Pony McCoy.

"You are supposed to be engaged to Lefty Waldron?" he asks. "Do not deny it, because Lefty tells me this himself."

"So, I am engaged to him. What am I supposed to do about this—bust into tears?"

"And he makes you the beneficiary of a fifty-thousand-dollar insurance policy?"

There is no use denying this, because insurance companies have more papers than a separation center. Pony admits this is indeed so.

"Then, if this is the situation with Lefty, why do you step around with this Jones character?" says Baldy.

"It is my business," she snaps. "And you keep your big fat mouth shut!"

"It is your business," agrees Baldy. "But it is also the business of the police."

"Police?" she asks, wide-eyed. "Because I cut a slice of guinea hen with Whispering Jones? What does the book give me for this?"



Ten years?"

"You carry the ball, Johnny," suggests Mr. Simmons. "After all, you are the Law."

"Commere, sister." The detective opens the bedroom door. "Grab a gander."

Pony McCoy looks, and utters a scream so high-pitched it makes the walls shake. Then, she falls flat on her face in what seems to be a world championship faint.

Whispering Jones does not move out of the chair.

"A psychological third degree, eh?" he says. "What do you have in there—Boris Karloff?"

"See for yourself," O'Keefe tells him.

The gambler slouches over, with not the slightest flicker of expression on his dead pan.

"Well, well," he says. "Imagine Lefty taking the Dutch route. I wonder why." Nobody pays the slightest attention to Miss Pony McCoy, who finally shudders and sits up.

"What is this all about, Whispering?" she asks.

The gambler says nothing, but Baldy speaks in thus fashion:

"Since you inherit fifty thousand dollars insurance from the dead man, and your new boy friend threatens to rub Lefty out, it does not take any more than a numb-skull to see a motive. To say nothing of the fact that you are here this evening."

The medical examiner speaks up impatiently. "I tell you several times this case is suicide, and you do no more or less than impugn my professional reputation by saying it is murder."

"You see," says Whispering Jones, lifting Miss Pony McCoy to her feet. "Leave us get out of this place."

Baldy gives Johnny O'Keefe a meaningful look.

"Do not be in too great a hurry, Mr. Jones," Johnny says. "The district attorney is definitely interested in having a bit of chit-chat with you." He turns to the policemen, who look like Carnera's brothers. "Take 'em away."

Protesting bitterly, the pair are hustled off. A police photographer makes many pictures of the body. The joint is dusted for finger prints, and all the usual police chores done before Baldy and Johnny hie themselves to an all night beanery in search of chow.

"I do not quite understand why you insist this is homicide when the medical examiner is definite in listing it as suicide," Johnny says. "After all, Dr. Wippenberger is quite a cagey character, and examines maybe a

thousand stiffes at one time or another. If we cannot prove this is murder, it does not matter to any court whether or not Pony and Whispering have motives."

"I know it is murder," says Baldy digging into the steaming chili con carne. "There is only one point which needs clearing up before the whole deal is solved."

"Okay," the detective agrees. "But work fast. We are not able to hold Jones and Miss McCoy more than a couple of days. Right now they are probably belling for lawyers and habeas corpuses and such things. So, I leave the matter in your hands, and spend the rest of the evening playing gin rummy with Poppadopolous, who is pretty nearly as good as I am."

SO, Mr. Simmons returns to the apartment house, where Lefty Waldron has his apartment. It seems to him the time element is one that needs cleaning up. The clerk says Pony McCoy bawls him out around eight-thirty, and both Whispering Jones and the lady swear they are on their way uptown in an automobile at this hour.

"Oh, it is you again," says the clerk in a disgusted voice.

"Well, this is murder," sibilates Baldy. "Confidentially the police do not look on such practises with favor. Whispering Jones and Pony McCoy say they are in Mr. Jones' sedan, and the Gilded Cockatoo from eight-twenty until the coppers check up on them. Yet, you say Pony comes here at eight-thirty and bawls you scarlet in the face."

"She has a tongue like a longshoreman."

Mr. Simmons looks carefully around the lobby, and then into a hall that leads toward the back of the building.

"A stairway there?" he asks.

The clerk — whose name is McElmurray — nods grumpily.

"And, it is possible that, while Pony engages you in a heated discussion, Whispering Jones goes up those stairs, and rubs Lefty out?"

"Could be," agrees McElmurray. "But the police department's own medical examiner says Mr. Waldron shoots himself, so you are wasting your time."

"Well, anyway, it costs nothing to have a look," says Baldy.

But, first, he calls Johnny O'Keefe, and asks him to send the finger print expert back again. When the gentleman arrives he dusts the handrail of the back stairway, and gets some very nice prints of Whispering Jones' fingers!

So, the next day a little group gathers in



the office of the district attorney. Mr. Jones and Miss McCoy, the D.A., Dr. Wippenberger, Johnny O'Keefe, Baldy and Mr. McElmurray are there, to say nothing of several stenographers, who record every thing that is said.

The finger prints are exhibited.

"We waste no small amount of time here, and I am a busy man," says Whispering Jones. "So, you find my finger prints on the rail. These do not mean I go to Lefty Waldron's apartment. As a matter of fact, I frequently visit a business associate of mine, named Ace Deuce Riley. Since the business is more or less secret, I use the stairway to avoid attention. Mr. McElmurray testifies to this, I am quite sure."

Mr. McElmurray does this little thing. He also adds that Pony McCoy is present, but disappears in a huff, because she is not permitted to go to Lefty's apartment.

"Nobody denies this, either," Jones says. "We stop at the apartment house for a minute on the way. Pony does not get up to see Waldron, either. I wait in the car outside."

"Now, these finger prints are comparatively fresh," says Baldy. "When is the last time you visit Ace Deuce Riley?"

"Oh, I do not know. A couple of days ago, I guess."

Dr. Wippenberger stirs restlessly in his chair. "Once again, gentlemen, I protest. My verdict is suicide. If Mr. Waldron blows his brains out, what difference does it make if Mr. Jones visits Mr. Riley today or a year ago?"

"You see?" says Jones, "That's exactly the point I am making."

The district attorney looks accusingly at Baldy Simmons.

"I recognize the fact, sir, that you help the police and this office on other occasions. It seems to me, though, that in this instance you go slightly off the beam."

Baldy lights a cigar, and settles back in the leather chair.

"Before going into what I have in mind, will Dr. Wippenberger be so good as to tell us why he is certain this is suicide," he says.

The medical examiner bristles. "It is well known that the deceased is a left-handed pitcher. The wound, surrounded by powder burns, is in the left temple. The pistol lay an inch from Mr. Waldron's left hand."

"Thank you," says Baldy. "Now, let us recapitulate. Lefty tells me Whispering Jones offers him a bribe to throw a ball game, and believes the pitcher double-crosses him. Lefty is very much afraid of being killed."

"This is your story," says Jones. "You are unable to prove it."

"But, it is a fact that you drop five grand betting on the Leopards?"

"Sure. I do not win all the time."

"And, it is true that Pony McCoy, who is engaged to Lefty, and who is so much beloved by him that he makes her beneficiary of a fifty-thousand-dollar insurance policy, is two-timing around with you. Revenge aside, it is to the advantage of both to have him out of the way."

Jones nods carelessly.

"The way you put the thing, it certainly sounds reasonable. The only flaw is that the man is not murdered."

"Before we reach this stage again, there is a point that needs clearing up," says Baldy. "You say you visit Ace Deuce Riley several times before the—shall we say—regrettable accident? It is then that you leave your prints on the rail?"

"Yes."

**M**R. SIMMONS goes on. "In this case I am a little puzzled to understand how this is possible since the charwoman washes the bannisters only half an hour before Pony McCoy starts her argument with Mr. McElmurray! You slip up those stairs while Pony keeps the clerk occupied with her argument."

Whispering Jones sags back a little in his chair, and lights a cigarette.

"All right, gentlemen," he says. "I'll tell you the truth. Lefty finds Pony no longer loves him. He is very unhappy, but we desire to be on the level. She wants to tell him we intend to marry, but this dunder-headed McElmurray refuses to call the room. So, I slip up the back stairs in order to break the news personally. I admit I think he double-crosses me, but I forget this in the joy of knowing Miss McCoy marries me. When I get up there, I find him on the floor, dead. It is very depressing."

"And, you say nothing about it to your girl friend?"

"No. I do not wish to spoil her evening. She is having too good a time."

The district attorney looks very sad.

"While I admit we have not yet shown that Mr. Waldron is murdered, I am sorry that you took the occasion to lie to us, Mr. Jones," he says. "It makes our job more difficult. However, no matter how well Mr. Simmons brings these points into the light, the evidence of our medical examiner precludes the possibility of holding you longer."

*(Concluded on page 95)*





*A Baffling Novelet*

# THE SIGN

## CHAPTER I

### *Darkness and Danger*

**T**HERE had been a note of insistence in Bertram Drake's voice when he'd telephoned and the memory of it made Andy Riggs' foot heavy on the accelerator. His coupe was rolling fast along the winding mountain roads of the Catskills, headlights breaking the darkness far ahead of him.

Andy Riggs was a private detective. Young enough to look like a college senior, but old enough to have plenty of horse sense and the

vast know-all that a successful private eye must possess.

During the six years he'd been at it, he'd built up a good business, with seven operatives, an office staff and comfortable and impressive quarters. He handled no divorce cases, nothing sensational. His name rarely got into the newspapers, but he was noted for his tact and the important fact that he could keep his mouth shut.

Right now, his assignment was of a nature he didn't very well like. A plain protection job. But Bertram Drake was wealthy, a prom-

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Detective Andy Riggs Tackles a Baffling

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A wild yell caused Riggs to swing around from the dead man just in time to see Addison slumping down in a dead faint and the others recoiling from the gruesome spectacle



# OF MURDER

By WAYLAND RICE

inent financier and had many friends and business acquaintances. He was the kind of a client Andy Riggs couldn't afford to pass up, even though he hated the job.

His objections to protecting anyone were obvious. If he failed, his client was dead or badly hurt. The conclusion was too definite and never could be tempered. It was success or horrible failure. The responsibility was too great. There was danger too, but Riggs accepted danger as a matter of course. He was paid to have this danger transferred, as much as possible, to his own sturdy shoulders.

He wondered why on earth some wealthy people built elaborate homes so far from civilization. Why did they spend fortunes to have stone and lumber carted so far? Drake's place was a veritable mountain chateau, noted for its isolation.

Riggs glanced at a road map again, realized he must be close to the entrance of the mountainside estate and slowed up. Then he saw the gates. They were closed. That made him frown because Drake had promised he'd meet him there and have the gates open.

Riggs slowed his coupe down to a crawl,

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## Crime Puzzle on an Estate of Evil Mystery!

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turned in and stopped. He got out of the car and unconsciously hefted the automatic under his armpit. He shook the gate, but it was locked and refused to budge. He leaned against it, wondering just what he ought to do.

Then he heard a groan. The sound came from a spot not far from the inner side of the high fence. Andy Riggs called out and the groan was repeated. Next came a crashing of brush as a man staggered into the twin beams of the headlights. He was gray-haired, robust-looking and was wearing a loud, checked sport coat and tan slacks. A huge diamond ring flashed on the finger of the hand that clutched his shoulder.

While Andy watched, the sparkle of the diamond vanished, as if a curtain had been drawn over it. He knew what kind of a curtain it was, too! Blood.

**T**HE man staggered up to the gate. Through the agony in his eyes, shone a silent question. "I'm Riggs," the detective said. "You sent for me, Mr. Drake. You are Drake, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Bertram Drake." The man lowered his hand and Riggs saw bloodstains on the shoulder of his coat. "I walked down here to let you in and someone attacked me in the darkness. A knife. I'm—all right, I think. Just suffering from shock and pain. The wound can't be so bad. Look, I can move my arm fine."

He unlocked the gate. Andy Riggs opened both of them wide, took Drake's arm and started escorting him toward the car. Drake resisted a trifle.

"No—please," he said. "I'd rather you just left the car there and we walked to the house. I knew my life was in danger, but I didn't think he'd strike so soon. He was just waiting his chance, I suppose. For twenty-four hours, I've locked myself in my private suite. Until you arrived."

"But what's the object in walking back, Mr. Drake?" Riggs asked.

"It was terribly dark," Drake explained. "I couldn't see the man who attacked me. I don't even know if it was a man. But darkness works both ways. Perhaps he—or she—didn't see me either, and just took a chance it was I. If that person thinks his victim was someone else, he may show his amazement and give himself away. We can bandage the wound so no one can notice."

Andy Riggs shrugged.

"Just as you say, Mr. Drake. It may be an angle, at that. Wait while I shut off the lights and lock up the car. Be right with

you."

Shortly after, Drake led Riggs along the drive, then off it onto a trail that took them to the rear of the house. Nearing the cleared space close by the building, they both stopped and watched and listened a few moments. Then Drake guided Riggs to the cellar hatchway. He opened it and they entered the cellar.

Drake spoke in a whisper.

"This is sort of a private way in and out," he said. "There are two stairways to the cellar. One leads to the first floor, the other directly to my private suite. I can come and go without being observed. I don't think anyone—except my nephew and the gardener—knows about this stairway."

In a short time they were safely inside Drake's suite. The rooms were well furnished, comfortable and in excellent taste. Drake peeled off his coat and shirt and Riggs examined the wound. It had bled a lot, but wasn't serious. The blade had slipped through the fleshy part of Drake's arm. While Riggs cleaned and dressed the wound, Drake explained the circumstances that compelled him to call for help.

"As you know, I'm a financier. I've plenty of money. Too much, I guess. I'm getting old and a bit careless. I trusted members of my organization too much. Last week I installed my nephew as an accountant. I had planned for him to work his way up. He'd studied hard and I wanted him to know I appreciated it. Leon Harding—that's his name—started a complete audit of the books and he discovered that someone had been stealing money over a period of months."

"Why didn't you call in the police?" Riggs inquired, politely enough and started daubing on the iodine.

"Ouch!" Drake winced. "Go easy with that stuff. The police? Hah, young man! You don't understand modern finance. The police would have called in an accountant to double-check and he, being quite impartial, could have discovered a few items I didn't want known. I'm incorporated, you know, and some of my investments weren't—well, to put it plainly—exactly within what might be construed as the law."

"I see."

Riggs didn't see, but it was none of his business if Drake wanted to manipulate finances in any way he saw fit. He did know the rules and red tape which governed such enterprises as Drake's. A man could be perfectly honest even though he did cut some of the red tape away.

Riggs finished bandaging the wound and



applied adhesive tape to hold the gauze in place. Drake felt better and acted better. He bent down and brushed leaves and dirt off his trouser cuffs.

"We walked through that blasted lily bed on our way here. The gardener has been babying them along. He'll be sore at me in the morning. Now I was telling you about the people in my home. Or I was leading up to it. I realized that only three persons in my offices could have doctored the books as Leon says they were doctored."

**A**NDY RIGGS lighted a cigarette and relaxed a bit.

"So you invited them up here to try and find out which one did it. Whoever that person is, he decided to kill you?"

Drake nodded.

"That's right. There were two previous attempts. Those people came up yesterday morning for the weekend. I was in the greenhouse when they arrived and someone turned on a tank of compressed lethal gas that I use to kill bugs with. Only the fact that the tank made a hissing noise saved my life."

Riggs scowled.

"Tanks of gas don't turn themselves on, that's a cinch. What else happened?"

"Well, at dinner last night I didn't like the taste of my cocktail. Perhaps, because of what happened in the greenhouse, I was overly suspicious. I threw the contents of my glass away. There seemed to be a white powder in the bottom of it. I rinsed the glass out."

"A foolish thing to do," was Riggs' dry comment. "Poison can sometimes be traced if you know the nature of it. You don't know who could have tampered with your cocktail?"

"No. And I don't know who could have turned on that tank of gas, either. That's why I sent for you. To find out who is responsible. I could hire fifty strong-arm guards for what you cost me, Mr. Riggs, but I must get at the root of these attempts. That's why I had to have someone like you. I'm afraid. Last night I didn't sleep a wink for fear that I'd never wake up. It has me, sometimes, in a state of mind where I might do anything."

"I'll go downstairs and meet everybody," Riggs suggested. "You can introduce me."

"No," Drake said quickly. "I won't go down. I refuse to leave these rooms. I'm scared, I tell you. I won't take any more chances until after you have discovered who wants to kill me. Go down yourself. I told

my nephew I was sending for you. Find him and he'll make the introductions."

Andy Riggs shrugged.

"As you wish. But I intend to do considerable prowling around so I'll need free use of the premises. If I discover anything, I'll report to you at once."

Drake nodded. "I'm sure of that. I feel I can trust you. Now get to work. The quicker you clean this up, the larger a bonus I'll pay."

Andy Riggs had to wait until Drake unlocked the door so he could go out. As he walked along the corridor overlooking the big reception hall, he heard Drake relock the door. There was nobody downstairs in the hall.

Riggs started descending the steps. Then he came to an abrupt halt. From upstairs, he'd heard a faint click, as if someone had been peering out at him from a room and had then closed a door. His eyes went to the room next to Drake's private suite. The door was shut tightly. Riggs hadn't seen the door move but he was sure somebody in that room had been keeping him under observation.

In the spacious living room he found the people he was supposed to meet. They all stared at him and he knew why. Until then, none of them had had the faintest idea there was a stranger in the house.

He smiled at them.

"My name is Riggs," he announced. "I'm a detective hired by Mr. Drake. Which one of you is Leon Harding, his nephew?"

A florid-faced young man came forward eagerly with outstretched hand.

"I'm Harding," he said. "My uncle told me you were coming, but I thought you'd arrive in a more ceremonious manner." He laughed. "How did you get into the house without us seeing you? Through a window?"

Riggs grinned.

"Private detectives have their methods, Mr. Harding. Will you tell me who all the others are?"

Harding was pleasantly agreeable. He conducted Riggs over to a girl. She had the brightest blue eyes Andy Riggs had ever seen. Her hair was golden and it framed her lovely face in soft waves. She was about twenty-six and wore a neat gray tailored suit.

"This is Kay Barry," he said. "She works for my uncle. She's in charge of payrolls and checks."

"Hello," Riggs said. "I didn't know this case was going to have such pleasant surprises."

He thought he saw Harding flush. At any rate, the nephew quickly piloted him over to



meet John Addison, office manager of Drake's firm. Addison was tall, middle-aged, hook-nosed and somewhat arrogant. Evidently he believed that private detectives should wear square-toed shoes, derby hats, smoke cheap cigars and flash suspicious eyes right and left. His manner, to Andy Riggs, was cold and distant.

"How d'you do?" Addison gave Riggs a limp handclasp.

George Capri, another one of Drake's employes, was next. A dark-haired, husky type. Andy Riggs knew his kind. They accepted nothing at face value and questioned the very best of motives. Their pose was one of super-sophistication.

Capri merely raised a pair of blasé eyebrows. "Now why does the old boy want a private detective hanging around?"

Capri's remark was a fortunate thing for Andy Riggs. It was exactly the opening for which he had been hoping. He wanted to give these cultured, composed house guests a shock—something that would jolt them out of their smug complacency and afford him a clue as to their true characters. He hoped a sudden attack might surprise Drake's hidden enemy into revealing himself or betraying some sign which would furnish a lead upon which to work.

So he sat down on a nearby chair, stretched out his long legs before him and gave them his brightest, most engaging smile.

"Well, folks, I'm here for a particular reason," he said. "One of you is a potential murderer. Twice you have tried to kill Bertram Drake—once by gas, once by a poisoned drink. I'm here to track down the would-be murderer. Before I'm finished, I'm going to send him to prison!"

## CHAPTER II

### *Death Message*



FOR a brief space of time the occupants of the room stood rigid with astonishment, staring at Andy Riggs. A variety of emotions showed upon their faces. Leon Harding's jaw dropped open in astonishment, Kay Barry's countenance turned pale, John Addison's fishlike eyes widened, and George Capri's olive skin turned crimson.

Addison, the office manager was the first to recover. He shot a suspicious glance at Andy

Riggs.

"Nonsense!" he snapped. "Attempted murder? I don't believe it. Why?"

Riggs shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Lots of reasons," he said. "One of you has been robbing him at the office. You've stolen a great deal of money, which is bad enough, and now you're trying to kill off Mr. Drake in order to cover your tracks. It's my theory that the thief is also the potential murderer. So I'm going to start things by asking each of you some questions." He turned his eyes toward Leon Harding, Drake's nephew. "Mr. Harding, you were probably in the house when the first guest arrived. Am I correct?"

It was now Harding's turn to flush.

"I resent this!" he cried angrily. "Are you inferring that I was the one who tried to kill Uncle Bert?"

Capri jumped up from the chair where he had been sitting.

"I resent it, too," he said in tones which were low and without heat. "After all, I'm a guest here. I'm not used to going to visit places and then having one of the host's servants come in and insult me. I'm leaving." He started for the door.

Andy Riggs stopped him with a gesture.

"I wouldn't leave, if I were you," he said grimly. "It might make me suspicious of you, Mr. Capri."

Capri stopped short.

"I haven't stolen any of Mr. Drake's money. What makes you think I'm trying to kill him?"

"Can't say." Riggs shrugged. "Except you're running away. Why are you afraid to answer questions?"

"I'm not afraid to answer questions, and I'm not running away." He went back and sat down. "Go ahead. Ask me anything you want."

Riggs switched his gaze back to Harding.

"You!" he said. "Who got here first?"

Harding seemed to grow somewhat flustered at the sharp question.

"Kay did—er—that is to say—Miss Barry," he faltered. "She came from the village in a taxi. Then Mr. Addison rang the doorbell. He said he'd come in his own car."

Addison shot a vindictive glance at Harding.

"You know blasted well I came in my car!" he cried. "It's parked half-way down the drive. Go look at it, if you don't believe me."

"After you arrived, did you come right in?" Riggs asked.

"Of course. I don't make a habit of wandering around other people's estates."



"I never said you did," Riggs retorted.

He watched while Addison produced a cigarette and adjusted it in a long black holder. The detective noted that Addison was nervous, that his fingers trembled and that he was careful to keep his eyes averted.

Riggs turned again to Capri.

"When did you get here, Mr. Capri?"

"After Mr. Addison," the swarthy-faced man said. "Sometime later."

"How much later?" Riggs asked him swiftly.

Capri spread his hands wide apart.

"I don't know. I came in a taxi. I'd never been here before and the driver was a stranger in these parts, too. He lost his way. And when we got here, the big iron gates were locked, but the small one, beside it, was open. So I dismissed the taxi and walked here the rest of the way. Was that a crime?"

His tone was cold and insulting, but Riggs had an idea that, inwardly, the man was uneasy. Very uneasy. Riggs decided to keep him that way. Therefore, for the present, he ceased to question Capri.

"I don't know if it was a crime," the detective said. "You certainly had time enough to commit one." He rose lazily to his feet and motioned to Harding.

"Come on, young fellow," Riggs said. "Let's go somewhere else. I want to ask you about some things."

Drake's nephew sprang to his feet almost too promptly. Riggs stared at him in surprise. He wondered if Harding was trying to get him away from the other guests.

"Sure," Harding said, with forced heartiness. "Come into Uncle Bert's den."

He led Andy Riggs down the hall to a richly furnished study. After Riggs had seated himself in a red leather armchair, he sat down in another just like it, not far away.

"Now tell me," Leon Harding asked, "have you talked with my uncle? Was he the one who told you about the two murder attempts?"

Riggs nodded.

"Sure. Your uncle also wrote me a letter. In it, he told me some things about you, Harding. He said you went away to school where you studied accountancy. When you returned and went to work for him, you discovered the shortages in the books of the firm. Your uncle says that one of the three persons in the other room was responsible for the shortages. Only they had access to the books."

"That's right," Harding said. "About eighty thousand dollars is missing. I still can't make up my mind who has been stealing it."

ANDY RIGGS whistled.

"Eighty thousand dollars!" As much as that! How long has this been going on?"

"About four or five years," Harding said. "And the deficit may be larger, much larger!"

Riggs' eyebrows went up.

"It seems incredible your uncle never found it out long before this."

"Uncle Bert was too trusting," Harding answered, with a shake of his head. "He trusted everybody. He's really a wonderful man. He never thought of having the books checked. Perhaps, when I show him the ledgers, he'll be able to figure out who it was. Of course, now that I've discovered the discrepancies, the culprit is anxious to kill Uncle Bert. You've got to prevent that, Mr. Riggs."

"I'll do my best," Andy Riggs promised, a steely ring creeping into his voice. "Where are the books now?"

"In my room, locked up in a filing cabinet." A worried expression crept into Harding's face. "They're valuable evidence, so they must be guarded carefully. I'll show you what I've discovered in them tomorrow." He glanced quickly at the detective. "One thing. I'm sure Kay—Miss Barry—had nothing to do with the shortages."

Andy smiled brightly at him.

"Don't be too sure," he said. "Sometimes killers and thieves come all wrapped up in fancy packages." Then the smile faded and he looked sober. "But so far as I'm concerned, I don't care much for your uncle's methods. If I were in his shoes, I'd get rid of these house guests—fast. Then if the killer should get another notion, he'd have to go to a lot of trouble. I don't believe in making things too convenient."

Harding shook his head.

"No, Uncle's right. It's best to keep them under his eye."

Andy Riggs rose to his feet.

"Well, I won't keep you away from the guests any longer, Mr. Harding," he said. "I'll stay here in the den and look around a bit. Later, I'll talk to you again about the books."

After Harding had left, Riggs made a hasty search of the study but he found nothing helpful there. So he soon abandoned the hunt and walked back to the kitchen.

When he opened the door four or five liveried servants, who had been seated around the large table, drinking tea and eating cakes, rose hastily to their feet, in confusion. But Riggs soon quieted them with a few suave words. He showed his credentials to the but-



ler and asked him to show him around. The butler took him into the pantry where the detective made a diligent search.

Finally Riggs straightened up in disgust. He still hadn't found that for which he was searching.

"Got a back porch?" he asked the butler. "Even fine houses like this one do have back porches don't they?"

"Yes, sir," the butler answered gravely. "This way, please."

He punched the button of an electric switch and led Riggs out onto a brightly illuminated veranda. There on a shelf, behind some empty flower pots, Andy Riggs at once discovered the very thing he had been trying to find.

It was a paper bag full of white powder. Such powder is usually employed by gardeners for killing bugs on plants, and it was labeled "Poison!" It was apparently very powerful stuff.

He turned to the butler.

"Last night, after you mixed the cocktails, did any of the guests come into the butler's pantry or did you notice any of them out here on the back porch?" he asked.

The butler shook his head.

"No, sir. But my not seeing them, doesn't mean they didn't come here. I wasn't in the pantry all the time, sir. I have other duties. They might have entered the pantry direct from the dining room and walked out here through the other door. If they did that, they wouldn't have to go near the kitchen, sir."

Andy Riggs stiffened with surprise.

"What! There's another door?"

"Yes, sir. Here it is sir."

The butler stepped past Riggs and turned a knob, swinging open a second door. When Andy Riggs stepped through, he again found himself in the butler's pantry. The butler followed him. He pointed to a shelf beside a sink.

"That's where I mixed the drinks, sir," he said.

At this moment the swinging door leading into the dining room swished. Riggs swung around quickly. A man had come into the pantry from the dining room. It was Capri. He was smiling slightly.

"I decided to have a talk with you, Riggs," Capri said. "Let's get this thing settled right now. You're all wet if you think I tried to murder anybody. Mr. Drake is talking nonsense. He's having hallucinations." His manner grew solemn, earnest. "Drake's been having worries and he's been out of his mind for a long time. Down at the office, we've all

suspected it for months. It's my belief that he has suicidal tendencies.

"I had an uncle, once, who cracked up in the same way. He hanged himself. Afterward, they found a note, written by him, accusing a friend of murdering him. The friend was innocent, of course." Capri made one of his characteristic gestures. "But you know about such things. You're a detective."

Andy Riggs didn't answer. He just stared at Capri and laughed. Scowling with anger, the swarthy man turned on his heel and walked out of the pantry. Riggs remained where he was for a minute or two, rubbing his chin. Then he went into Drake's study and telephoned his office. He got several of his best operatives on the wire and ordered them to check up on the past lives of Drake's house guests.

**I**T WAS five minutes later when Andy Riggs heard a shot. Not a sharp crack like a rifle but a heavy thunderous report much louder than that of a revolver. He raced out of the study. It was difficult to know from just which direction the shot came.

Upstairs a door banged. Then someone was running up the porch steps. It was Kay Barry, her face white as paper.

"Shooting!" she gasped. "Did you hear it?"

"Yes. What direction did it come from?"

"I think—the greenhouse. But I'm not quite sure."

"Where are the others?" Riggs demanded.

"I don't know. I went out with Mr. Addison. We were a bit shocked by your remarks. Leon joined us. Then he went off and Addison didn't want to come back to the house so quickly. I left him."

"Stay here," Riggs told her.

He hurried out the door, rounded the corner of the house and turned around as he heard someone running up the drive. It was Addison. For a man of his age, he was moving remarkably fast. Riggs didn't wait for Addison. He saw lights flash on in the greenhouse and sprinted for it. Leon Harding came from out of the darkness somewhere and then George Capri. Riggs reached the greenhouse before them. The door was open. He darted inside and almost bowled over a bent old man, dressed in muddy overalls, who was crouching near the doorway.

"It's him—Mr. Drake," the old man whined in a frightened voice. "I think he killed himself. In there."

Riggs followed the direction of the old



man's pointing finger and entered a small room which was used to keep gardening equipment in.

A man was slumped there on a box. He was bent partly over. One shoe and sock had been removed. His hands clutched a shotgun and the barrel was pillowed against his chest.

The charge of that gun had caught him full in the face.

Around his neck hung a sign. A fairly large piece of pasteboard with cord passing through two holes. The cord was around the man's neck.

The sign read:

#### WET PAINT.

Riggs heard a wild screech behind him, almost in his ear. He swung around. Addison was just slumping to the floor in a dead faint. Capri stood nearby, looking at the gory spectacle with bulging eyes. Then he turned and made a hasty exit. Leon Harding covered his eyes with one hand, faced the wall and sobbed quietly.

Andy Riggs conquered a squeamish stomach. Then he went over and knelt beside the corpse. It was Drake all right. The same clothes, the same flashing diamond ring on one finger. Riggs gently opened the shirt. The bandage he himself had applied was still there.

Blood had seeped through it, but that wound was no longer of any consequence to Bertram Drake.

"Where is that gardener?" Riggs called out.

**T**HE old man poked his head around the edge of the door.

"If you want to talk to me, come out here," the gardener said. "I ain't going in there. No, sir. Not me, I ain't."

Riggs left the storeroom. Addison was on his feet once more, shaking badly, but able to comprehend what was going on. George Capri came in, gray of face, but evidently resolved to miss nothing. Leon Harding remained in the little room with his uncle's body.

"When I met you," Riggs said to the gardener, "you said Mr. Drake had killed himself. What gave you that idea?"

The gardener shuddered.

"The way things looked in the first place. Him sitting there on the box with one foot bare so he could pull the trigger with his toes. Ain't nobody else went into the greenhouse that I know of."

"You said, 'in the first place,'" Andy reminded him. "So—what is in the second place?"

"Well, Mr. Drake he came into the barn a little while before I heard the shot. He keeps guns in there. He didn't say anything to me. He just took down the shotgun from its rack and hurried out."

"Good grief," Capri muttered. "He must have been insane."

"He was as sane as you or I," Andy retorted. "Furthermore, despite what the gardener said, I don't believe Mr. Drake killed himself. The stage was set for murder. If he contemplated suicide, why did he call me in?"

"Mr. Riggs," Leon Harding was in the doorway. "There's a most peculiar thing in here. Will you come look?"

**A**NDY RIGGS stepped into the room. Harding approached the body. He indicated the wet paint sign.

"I wondered why on earth that sign was around his neck," Harding said. "I examined it. There is something written on the other side of it. Most peculiar."

Riggs turned the sign over. It was a rather unusual message on the other side. In fact, Harding's use of the word peculiar was an understatement.

The sign, which was written in black crayon, read:

DO YOU THINK I COMMITTED SUICIDE? THE DEVIL I DID.

Bertram Drake.

The signature was written out!

"Is that your uncle's handwriting?" Riggs asked Harding after the first shock of surprise had left him.

"I think so," Harding said. "Riggs, I'm trying very hard not to be too affected by—by the fact that the dead man is my uncle. I'm trying hard to be impersonal about the whole thing. One must under these conditions. I also realize that I'm now a suspect too, because when it happened, I was wandering around the estate in the darkness. In addition to that, I'll probably inherit my uncle's business and money. That gives me a motive."

"Yeah." Andy Riggs carefully removed that sign. He noticed that there were other signs like it propped in a corner of the room. "We're all going into the house. That includes the gardener. Bring him along with you, Harding."



## CHAPTER III

*Fear Ridden Household*

LATER they all stood together in the living room. None of them sat down. Kay Barry was beside Harding and he held her hand very tightly. Capri was trying to enjoy a cigarette when he showed clearly that he'd have liked a triple hooker of whisky far more.

Addison was still white-faced and looked as if he might faint again. The gardener, whose name Riggs discovered was Mike Walsh, stood by the door, fingering the expensive drapes as if he were endeavoring to determine just what material they were made of.

Andy Riggs addressed them all.

"You heard the shot, each of you," he said. "That gun made a devil of a racket. Now, were any two of you together when it happened?"

"I was heading for the gate, taking a walk," John Addison said quickly.

"I'd started to walk back with Kay," Leon Harding said. "She told me she wanted to be alone so I wandered off to the west portion of the estate. I was walking along the border of Uncle Bert's tulip garden when I heard the shot. I at once hurried to the greenhouse."

George Capri had opened and closed his mouth several times, impatient because the others were speaking first.

"I went to the garage," Capri said. Mr. Drake owns on old Rolls and I wanted to see it. I was in the garage when the shooting occurred."

"Very nice," Riggs grunted. "Not one of you has an alibi. Miss Barry, why did you ask Harding to leave you?"

"I'd—rather not say."

She was slightly pink.

"Would you rather be suspected of murder?" Riggs snapped.

"I—won't tell you why I left him. I refuse to say another word."

Before Riggs could answer, Capri spoke up again.

"Why all this talk of murder?" he asked.

"To me it looks as if Drake took the shotgun, seated himself in that storeroom, removed his shoe and sock, pointed the shotgun at his face and pulled the trigger with his toe.

That's suicide in my language."

"We don't speak the same language, then," Riggs said, curtly. "Take a look at this sign. It was around Drake's neck. He wrote it. Harding says he recognizes the signature. Does that indicate he committed suicide?"

"Just a moment!" Kay Barry broke in. "How could he have printed that sign, put it around his neck, and shot himself. There is no blood on the sign."

Riggs eyed her intently. "How did you know there was a lot of blood? You didn't see him."

She couldn't meet Riggs' eyes. "I guessed things from what has already been said, that Mr. Drake got the full charge of that gun in the face. There must have been a great deal of blood. And if he wrote that sign, how could he have been murdered? Did he have it hidden behind him, for instance, when he thought the murderer was coming? Then, after the shot, he draped it around his neck? It doesn't add up, Andy—I mean Mr. Riggs."

"If I do admit your theories make sense, what do you think?" Riggs asked her.

Kay Barry looked startled.

"Well, I hate to say this, but I think Mr. Drake wasn't in his right mind. Suspecting one of us of being a thief, bringing us up here to find out which one had stolen his money—that indicates something was wrong with his mind. Why didn't he go to the police?"

"Kay is right," Addison chimed in. "I've thought that all along."

Mike Walsh, the gardener, plucked at Andy Riggs' sleeve.

"I ain't bothered so much about what happened as about the smoke I smell. There's something burning to beat the band in this house."

Riggs made a dive for the hallway. The whole upper floor was filled with blue haze. He raced up the stairs, followed by Harding. The source of the smoke was plain enough. It came in billows from beneath one of the doors. Riggs opened it. The room was partly fitted up like an office. The fire seemed to be confined to one corner where there was the remnants of a wooden filing cabinet.

"I'll get a fire extinguisher," Harding yelled and disappeared. He returned in two minutes and sprayed the smoking ruins with a chemical. As Riggs finished opening the windows, Harding put down the extinguisher and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"That does it," Harding said slowly. "All the files and books from the office were in that cabinet. Is there anything left?"



**R**IGGS was poking among the ruins. "Not much. Whoever did this, saturated the stuff with gasoline. You can still smell it. A candle was placed in the lower drawer which was left partially open so the flame wouldn't be smothered. When the fire reached the gasoline-soaked articles, the whole thing went up. This licks the investigation, Harding. Those books would have pointed to the killer, but he knew that and took steps. See if anything important is left, will you?"

Riggs walked slowly out of the room. None of the others had come upstairs. He came to the door which he had heard close as he was descending the steps when he had first entered the house. That room intrigued him. He opened the door, turned on the lights and went in.

It was just an ordinary guest room, empty now apparently. It was clean but it looked as if it hadn't been used for some time. Yet a glance showed Andy Riggs the place was in apple pie order.

Closing the door behind him, he sat down and thought over the amazing events of the last hour or so. First of all, Drake's actions did indicate that he hadn't been in his right mind. After two vicious attempts on his life, why had he been content to call in a private detective when the precarious situation called for police in generous quantities? Why had he written that strange sign stating that he hadn't killed himself, though every clue pointed squarely to the fact that he had taken his own life?

The idea was absurd. No man, expecting to be murdered, would have such a sign printed and ready. Also, how could he drape it around his neck just before the shot had been fired. Why hadn't the murderer removed it?

Riggs' thoughts centered on Addison and Capri. They had no alibis. If either one of them had murdered Drake, what was the motive? Riggs thought about Kay Barry, who refused to say why she'd insisted on walking back alone in the darkness. Andy Riggs even considered the nephew, Leon Harding. But he seemed to be out of the picture.

After all, Harding was the heir. That was a motive perhaps. But if Drake had suspected him of such designs, he'd have surely changed his will and mentioned his suspicions when he had met Riggs.

Also, a lot of money had been stolen over a period of years, money that would one day belong to Harding. So why should he steal it? Then too, he hadn't even been around

[Turn page]

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when the thefts took place. He'd had no access to the cash.

The gardener, Mike Walsh, presented another problem. For some reason Andy Riggs had a feeling Walsh could explain much if he wanted to. His story, of course, had washed out all possibilities of murder. He'd asserted Drake had hurried into the barn, taken down the shotgun and headed for the greenhouse where he was killed by that same gun a few minutes later. Walsh's testimony made it suicide—if he had told the truth.

Andy Riggs knew very well that he ought to call in the police, but he hated to. They'd take charge and he'd be out of it entirely. After all, Drake had trusted in him enough to retain him. Riggs remembered the bonus that had been promised him. Well, he didn't deserve it. He had failed and the failure galled him. Also he had liked Drake. He'd been friendly, acting like a man who respected others even if he was so very wealthy and so important.

"To the devil with the police," Riggs muttered. "If this is murder, I want to be able to hand them the killer. If this is suicide, I want that crazy sign explained and all the facts on the record."

He got up and left the room. But halfway toward the steps, he came to a stop. When he'd been spied upon, Drake had been in his suite and everyone else had been downstairs. Who then, had peered out of that room Riggs had just left? There was only Mike Walsh unaccounted for.

But further theorizing would not get him anywhere now. The situation called for action and Riggs intended to remove the gloves. His first target would be Kay Barry.

Riggs found Kay sitting on the front porch steps, alone. She'd been crying and the handkerchief in her hand was tightly wadded.

"I'm a sissy, I suppose." She tried to smile. "Mr. Drake was a hard man to work for, but I shall miss him terribly."

"Look here, Kay," Riggs said. "You can't be involved in this mess. Not a girl like you. Even I can see that. Why did you leave Leon Harding so abruptly out there on the driveway?"

SHE hesitated a moment.

"I suppose I've got to tell you. Leon was asking me to marry him. I—couldn't. I don't love him, but he was growing more and more persistent. I told him I wanted to think it over—alone. I intended to go back to the city first thing in the morning, without seeing him again and hoping he'd take



the hint."

"So that's it." Riggs nodded. "Got anything definite against Harding?"

"No," she said quickly. "He's a perfect gentleman. I think he really does love me, but I just can't seem to—fall in love with him. Please understand."

"I do." Riggs smiled a bit. "Frankly, I'm glad, but I won't tell you why now. Let's get down to business. You worked for Drake a long time and knew him well. What sort of man was he?"

She thought that over for a full two minutes, staring straight ahead into the darkness.

"I guess I didn't know him very well although I thought I did. He never showed any signs of being mentally unbalanced. Or emotionally upset either, for that matter. He was a difficult man to work for. He demanded exactness and promptness in all things. If he made us work overtime, he didn't care. He never paid us extra for it. He had a lot of enemies, men he refused to back financially. When he said 'No,' he didn't mince words."

"Was there no other side to him?" Riggs asked.

"Yes, I was coming to that. I've been here at his summer home before. It's beautiful in daylight. There are flowers everywhere. Drake raised rare specimens in the greenhouse and babied them as if they were human. I remember it too well. There was one particular bloom I thought was exquisite. I touched the petals and he slapped my hands away. He said they shouldn't be touched or the flower would die. He certainly was rough in protecting his flowers."

Riggs' expression was thoughtful.

"I noticed his library is stocked only with books on flowers and plants. Did he ever show you how he used gas to kill bugs?"

"Yes." She glanced at Riggs with a puzzled frown. "Yes, he did. I mentioned it to Capri early this afternoon, right after we arrived. He asked me if the gas was poisonous. I didn't know about that, but I said I supposed so if it killed bugs."

"Somebody tried to murder Drake earlier by turning on a tank of that gas," Riggs said. "I was just wondering how many knew about it. Addison, do you think?"

The girl arose.

"I'm sure I don't know," she said coldly. "But I'm not honored by your questions, Mr. Riggs. I didn't try to kill Mr. Drake."

She walked into the house and the door closed with a loud slam. Andy Riggs frowned. Up until that moment he'd been doing quite

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well with Kay and he wanted it to continue that way. Now she had given him a brushoff and he deserved it.

He walked slowly toward the greenhouse. The lights were still on. The lone occupant was a man without much of a head left. Riggs searched the corpse. He looked especially for a pencil or crayon with which that sign could have been written. There was none. It was not in the dead man's pockets or anywhere in the storeroom. He couldn't wait much longer before calling the police. They'd probably jug him now for the delay he'd caused.

But the whole thing didn't make sense. Walsh's story—and there was no reason for him to lie—spelled suicide. So did every other circumstance. Riggs studied the corpse. He noted the way the dead hands held the gun, and frowned again. That was odd. The bare toe too, was still stuck in the trigger guard.

"A shotgun kicks like the devil," Riggs muttered. "Especially one that gauge. It should have been kicked right out of his hands and off his toe."

He wrapped his fingers in a handkerchief and grimly tested the strength with which the dead hands held the weapon. They weren't holding it at all and there should have been a tremendous death grip to keep

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the gun from bucking clear over to the other side of the room.

It was murder! Mike Walsh had lied! Drake had been shot by someone who might have lured him to this isolated room. Drake had waited. The murderer crept up, close enough to give him the full blast of the gun straight in the face. Then he'd removed Drake's shoe and sock, propped the gun in a suicide position and departed. That wouldn't have taken very long. He might even have knocked Drake unconscious first. Certainly after what the gun did, no evidence of that blow would remain.

"The sign," Andy muttered. "That blasted sign. Drake printed it. His nephew says so. Unless Harding is lying too."

## CHAPTER IV

### *The Truth*



ANDY RIGGS hurried back into the house. He didn't bother to speak to anyone. They were all in the living room.

He ran upstairs and tried the door to Drake's private rooms. The door was locked. He grimaced, ran down to the cellar and used the second staircase.

Entering the suite, he sought out Drake's private study.

There were enough samples of his handwriting around. Even of the way he printed and—it matched that of the sign. Andy Riggs knew enough about handwriting to be sure of that. Then he blinked with surprise. Lying on the desk, in full view, was a black crayon. He drew some lines with it. This crayon had undoubtedly written the words on the back of that "Wet Paint" sign. How had it gotten up here?"

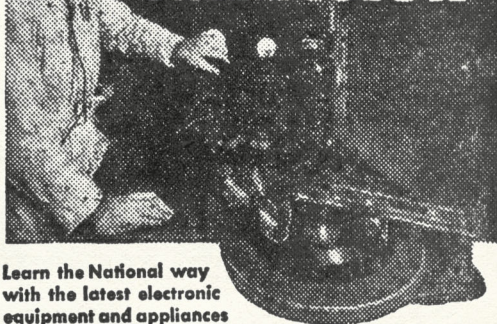
Grimly, Riggs inspected all the other rooms in the suite, paying close attention to the various closets. He made sure there was no one else around. Then he got another idea and hurried into the bathroom. He found a can of white talcum powder which would suit his purposes well.

Putting some of the powder on the back of his hand, he blew it gently so the powder settled in a fine film on the surface of the desk. He tilted a lamp to get an angle view and gasped. There wasn't a sign of a fingerprint. Perhaps the talcum wasn't exactly

[Turn page]

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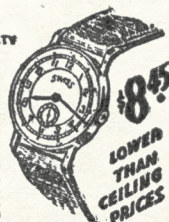
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fine fingerprint powder, but it should, at least, give an indication if prints were there. He tried other things—the metal lamp base, doorknobs, arms of chairs and drew blanks.

Still sorely puzzled by all this, he headed for the door, opened it and was entering the living room downstairs when he came to a quick halt. With his mind on the lack of fingerprints and all the other twisted details of the job, he'd forgotten that when he tried the door from the outside, it was locked. But it had opened easily for him when he departed.

They were all staring at him, sensing that he'd come to a sudden and unexpected twist in the case. Riggs said nothing about what he'd discovered. He sat down and lighted a cigarette.

He glanced at the nephew.

"Was there anything in those ashes, Harding?"

"Precious little," Harding answered. "That fire did a thorough job."

"It looked so," Riggs said. He glanced at Walsh. "Here's a question for you, Mike. As gardener here you ought to know the answer. Did Mr. Drake raise any lilies?"

"No, sir. Nary a one. He hated 'em. Said they were cheap"

"Um—so," Andy scowled. "There is a bed of flowers in bloom just behind the cellar hatchway. What is planted there?"

"Tulips, sir. Some of the best tulips we've ever grown. Mr. Drake was taking care of them himself."

"Uh-huh," Riggs grinned. "That settles something which has worried me. Mike, you lied like the very devil when you said Drake came into the garage after that shotgun. What really happened?"

Mike colored swiftly.

"It was just as I said, sir. I ain't lying."

"You won't tell the truth until you are ordered to do so by someone who has paid you to lie" Riggs said harshly. "Mike, you may as well tell me. If you don't the police are going to ask you the same thing. If you don't answer them, it means the clink for you."

"I ain't changing my story, sir," Mike growled aggressively. "Ain't no call to. I got eyes. I seen what I seen."

"All right," Riggs told him. "I don't hold it against you, Mike. You'll tell the truth before very long." He glanced at the nephew. "Mr. Harding, has anyone else been living in this house besides you and your uncle?"

Harding seemed startled by the question.



"No. There are the servants, of course, but they go home at night. They're all married and have families. They live in cottages nearby."

"But no regular visitor, staying as a guest would stay? Mr. Addison, you had access to the books. Ever notice any discrepancies?"

"No, sir," Addison said stoutly.

"And you, Capri?"

"Can't say. I rarely examined them although they were in the same office with me. I'll mention one thing. I didn't steal from the firm. Heaven only knows why because Drake paid us little enough. We haven't had a raise since before the war began. He thinks living expenses haven't changed. That's what comes of having too much money."

**K**AY BARRY broke in.

"Capri is right. We were underpaid. Terribly so. In fact, we were all going to quit last May. But then V-E day came and we thought the war might be over with Japan fairly soon and there was no telling what economic conditions might prevail. One thing we were sure of. Drake wouldn't cut our pay. He never did that."

Somewhere in the house a bell rang briskly. Everyone jumped nervously. Andy Riggs was on his feet first. He went to the telephone in the study down the hall. They could hear his muted voice, but his words were muffled. When he returned, he was smiling slightly.

"Look here, Andy, I'm getting tired of all this," Harding said. "You people have forgotten one thing. My uncle lies—or sits—dead in that storeroom. It isn't decent. The police ought to know about it."

Riggs was thinking the same thing, but not quite so comfortably. This mountainous region was out of the jurisdiction of city police. There might be a village constable who could do little and the whole thing would fall on the shoulders of the State Troopers. Tough babies who didn't fool around. They weren't going to like his stalling before letting them know about violent and sudden death.

"You're perfectly right, Harding," Riggs said. "Suppose you telephone the State Police. Give them bare facts and ask them to hurry."

Harding departed abruptly, returned in a few moments and looked daggers at Riggs.

"They asked me when it happened and I told them about three hours ago. I took a

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terrific tongue lashing, Riggs. You've got to accept the blame for this delay. We agreed that you'd be in full charge."

"Sure," Riggs said. "I'll take the rap. Funny thing though—ironical too. In my career this is the first time I ever knew of a murderer calling the cops to come down and pinch him."

Leon Harding drew a long breath.

"What'd you say?"

"You heard me!" Riggs snapped. "You killed the man in the greenhouse. You put the poison in his cocktail. You turned on that tank of poison gas. It had to be someone thoroughly familiar with this place and, except Mike, nobody else is. Mike isn't the killer. He's a faithful old man who obeys orders come storm or tempest."

"But you said—I killed—him?" Harding had turned green.

"I did," Riggs' voice was stern. "You were asking Kay to marry you. You were very persistent about it, but when she excused herself you left her promptly. That was no time to give up. A warm summer night, darkness, the scent of flowers. A more romantic spot couldn't be created.

"But you left and in a big hurry. You went around the house and entered the cellar. You called to your uncle upstairs. Told him you had information about the thief. You asked him to meet you in the storeroom at once and to wait if you weren't there. The shotgun wasn't in the barn at all. You had it conveniently hidden.

"Then you slipped into the greenhouse, struck the man with the gun and knocked him out. You arranged him to look like suicide, fired the blast into his face and ran away. All in darkness, my boy. Because a light would have attracted someone to the greenhouse, it being all glass. You ran out, ran clear around the house, rested a bit and them met us." Riggs grinned at the stunned youth. "How am I doing, Harding?"

"You're crazy," Harding cried.

Andy Riggs shook his head with decision.

"No, I'm not. There never was any discrepancy in the books. You made it up. I know because earlier I phoned my office and had them send out men to check on Capri, Addison and on Kay. That phone call a moment ago was their report. Capri owes two months' rent. Addison lives on the cuff continuously. Kay has a nice little bill at a millinery store, another at a dress shop. Now if they had stolen all that money, they'd hardly be in debt. They don't play the horses or gamble. I especially told my men to check on that. So—there was no



shortage except that which existed in your imagination."

"I tell you this man is making it all up." Harding turned appealingly to the others, but got stony stares in answer.

"You rigged the whole thing to scare the daylights out of your uncle," Riggs went on. "So it would seem as if he was losing his mind. These others knew nothing of the shortage in the books. They had no idea why they were called up here. Your uncle acted strangely toward them, locked himself up half the time and probably asked a lot of silly questions of these people. You didn't go to any school of accountancy.

"Your uncle thought you did, but you never were far away from town. You wanted him to die before he found out what you really were. A heel, a chiseler and a cheat. It was bound to get back to him sooner or later. He'd have cut you off."

**H**ARDING drew himself up. "Prove it!" he demanded. Andy Riggs raised his voice a bit.

"Mr. Drake, you may step into the room now. I heard you coming down the stairs and that full length mirror out there in the

hall was a dead giveaway."

A gray-haired, sturdy-looking man walked in and came to an abrupt halt. Harding's eyes grew wider and wider. He raised a hand to shield his face as if he expected a terrific blow. He uttered a hideous shriek.

"No—no—no!" he yelled.

Then he fainted.

Andy Riggs hurried to Kay Barry's side and put an arm around her. She looked rocky. He grinned at Bertram Drake.

"You moved pretty fast from your suite to that other room, Mr. Drake," Riggs said. "But you forgot to lock the door the last time. Suppose you relate what happened. Tell us who the man in the greenhouse is. Also explain about that sign you printed. Most certainly explain that. It's the most puzzling feature of this whole affair."

Drake sat down slowly. He looked very tired.

"So it was Leon," he said. "I thought so after he called to me from the cellar. It sounded like a trap so Cooper went in my place. He's the man who received you, Riggs. I didn't dare. I hired Cooper—he was a sort of private detective too, though

[Turn page]

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more of the strong-arm type. He was to act as my bodyguard.

"I'm sorry for him. Terribly sorry because he had my safety at heart. He dressed in my clothes, even wore some of my jewelry and he went prowling around by night to tempt an attack. Harding tried to knife him just before you arrived."

"That's what threw me off," Riggs admitted, with one eye on Harding who still lay limp on the floor. "I dressed the wound. When I saw the dressing on the shoulder of the dead man, I knew there couldn't be any mistake in identity. I never thought of a substitute then. I merely accepted the man who met me at the gate as Bertram Drake."

"But I should have known better. Cooper—that was his name, wasn't it—led me through a bed of your precious tulips. He called them 'blasted lilies'. You'd never have done that. Either tramped on them or berated them. You loved flowers too much. Very well, Cooper took your place and went to the greenhouse. What then?"

"I became more and more worried," Drake said. "And sorry I hadn't taken you into my confidence. I intended to. I was just leaving the cellar when the shot came. I sprinted across the clearing to the barn. Mike was there. I told him not to move until I said so."

"Then I raced to the greenhouse and found Cooper. I knew he was unrecognizable. No one except Mike even knew he was here. I decided that Cooper had given his life to serve me so his corpse might as well go on doing the same thing. If the murderer thought I was dead, he wouldn't try to kill me again, would he?"

"But the sign?" Riggs asked.

"I was confused. Terribly so. I wanted it to seem as though I was dead, but I didn't want you—especially you—to think I'd killed myself. So I wrote that sign and hung it around his neck. I was back in the barn before any of you arrived. I told Mike to tell that story. To back up the fact that the dead man was I."

"Mike did an excellent job of it," Riggs said. "Harding is coming out of it. I think we ought to tie him up."

"Leave that to me." Mike Walsh disappeared for a moment and returned with rope. He did another excellent job. Harding moaned and cursed alternately. Nobody paid much attention to him. Andy Riggs took Kay's arm and guided her out of the house.

"Let's go down and meet the cops." He



was smiling now. "And talk of many things. You, mostly. Are you glad you turned Harding down?"

"Delighted." She smiled up at him. "For more than one reason, Andy."

"Oh, oh," Riggs chided her gently. "You're rushing things. In two or three weeks I'll ask you to marry me, but I haven't known you long enough yet. As a private detective I have to check up a bit. I'm very good checking up at dinners, dances and in hallways. Your home does have a hallway?"

"It's cozy," Kay said softly. "And not too brightly lighted."

## BALDY AND THE DEAD SOUTHPAW

(Concluded from page 75)

"Wait a minute!" says Baldy. "I am now about to show that the medical examiner is wrong! You admit, Mr. District Attorney, that, if murder is committed, the facts point toward Whispering Jones?"

"Yes."

"Then, get the handcuffs ready. Dr. Wippenberger says the wound is in the left temple, and the pistol lying by the left hand. This is perfectly natural, because Lefty Waldron is a southpaw pitcher. But, what Whispering Jones either does not know, or forgets, is that Lefty does everything else but pitch with his right hand. I am able to bring you every member of the Pink Sox to prove this, if necessary. So, if he shoots himself, he does it with his right hand, and not his left!"

"You dope!" says Pony McCoy, glaring at Jones. "I tell you not to forget anything!"

"Take 'em away," says the District Attorney. He turns to Mr. Simmons. "Baldy, you do it again. These people who try to commit a perfect crime always seem to forget something. Which reminds me," adds the D.A., "that I forget to call my wife and tell I am unable to meet her for lunch, and I shudder to think of the bawling out she will give me."

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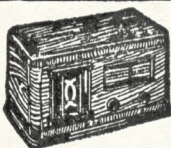
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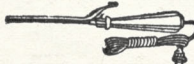
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## OFFICIAL BUSINESS

(Continued from page 10)

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enough! Let's leave the two partners, Foley  
and Taylor, as well as that heroic young man  
from the Merchant Marine, in that weird,  
spooky and creepy old deserted house amid  
the Georgia pines, while the rain beats down  
on the shingles and the wind howls outside.

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Hold everything, friends — William J.  
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This rip-roaring howler by Joe Archibald  
deals with the murder of a taxidermist—and  
it's stuffed with laughs!

Satchelfoot Kelly will be in it, too. When  
Willie calls on Kelly, the latter is about to  
wrap himself around a T-Bone steak with all  
the fixin's. And all Willie can have according  
to Satchelfoot, is consomme, two crackers  
and some weak tea!

It is then that Willie finds that ace of  
spades—on the back of the card bearing the  
picture of the pinup girl with the mark on  
her knee. And it is through this that Willie  
learns of Peruna Wigginbottom—and the  
strange case of the murdered cat. There are  
those two nephews of Peruna's who find out  
she is going to leave all her lettuce to the  
cat, instead of to them. Have they a motive  
—? Terrific!

Now, if only Gertie Mudgett would pay  
his phone bill, or Satchelfoot could lend him  
three dollars, he could get to work on the  
case! But by hook or by crook, Willie not  
only gets to work on the case—he actually  
solves it, in his usual dumb cluck way, with  
plenty of fireworks along the route. As for  
the pear—who sunk his tooth into that, not  
knowing it was wax?

To Gertie Mudgett we can only say—you'll  
be sor-r-r-e-e-e! And you'll be sorry if you  
don't read this hilarious adventure of the in-  
comparable Willie!

Naturally, in addition to these headlines,  
there will be our usual galaxy of thrilling  
short stories to round out a tip-top issue!

## LETTERS FROM READERS

NOT much room for letters this time, folks,  
as we were so enthusiastic about the  
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Thank you Lorraine. We shall convey your yippee to Mr. Hopper and hope we can have more of his efforts for you in the near future. A gentleman a long way away from you likes us, too.

I can hardly wait until **POPULAR DETECTIVE** gets on the news-stands. I read lots of detective stories and think yours are tops. They have a certain something that seems to be lacking in many of the others. The Willie Klump stories also have the saving grace of handing us a laugh.—*Phil Horn, Miami Beach, Fla.*

Thank you Mr. Horn. So we can bow out this time with two boosts and no knocks. However, if you have a brickbat to hurl at us, send it along. We'll print it just as quickly as if it were a bouquet if it's an interesting letter. Incidentally, although we can't hope to publish excerpts from more than just a few of the scores of letters received, we read every epistle carefully and profit by all your suggestions, opinions and ideas when we plan future issues. So keep them rolling in—we're ever so grateful for them!

Please address your letters and post cards to The Editor, **POPULAR DETECTIVE**, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y.

Until we see you next time—happy reading to you; and many, many thanks to everybody!

—THE EDITOR.

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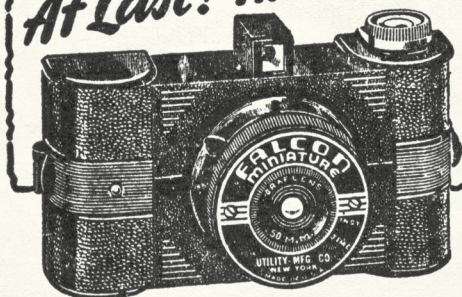
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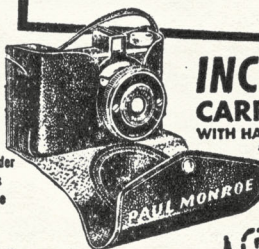


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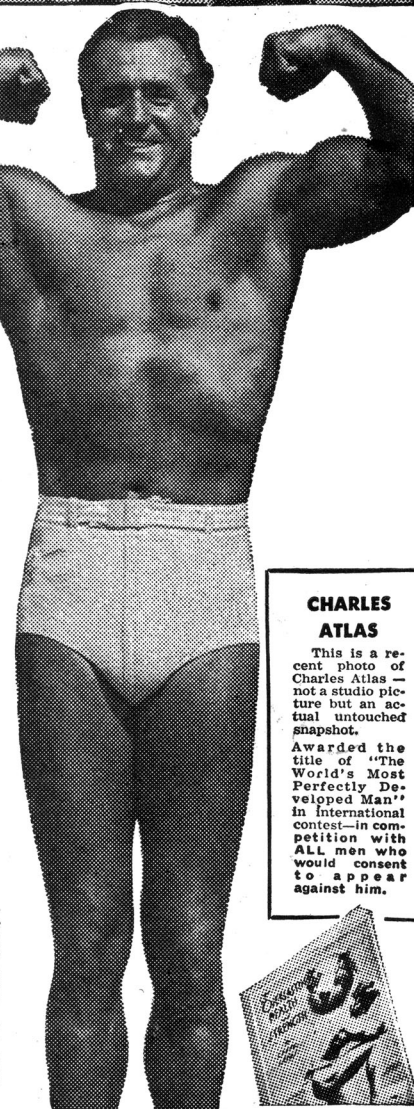
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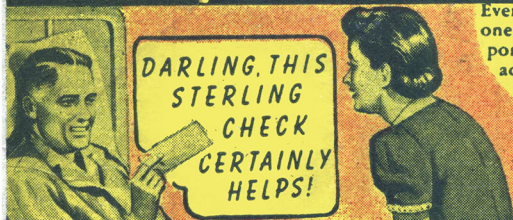


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