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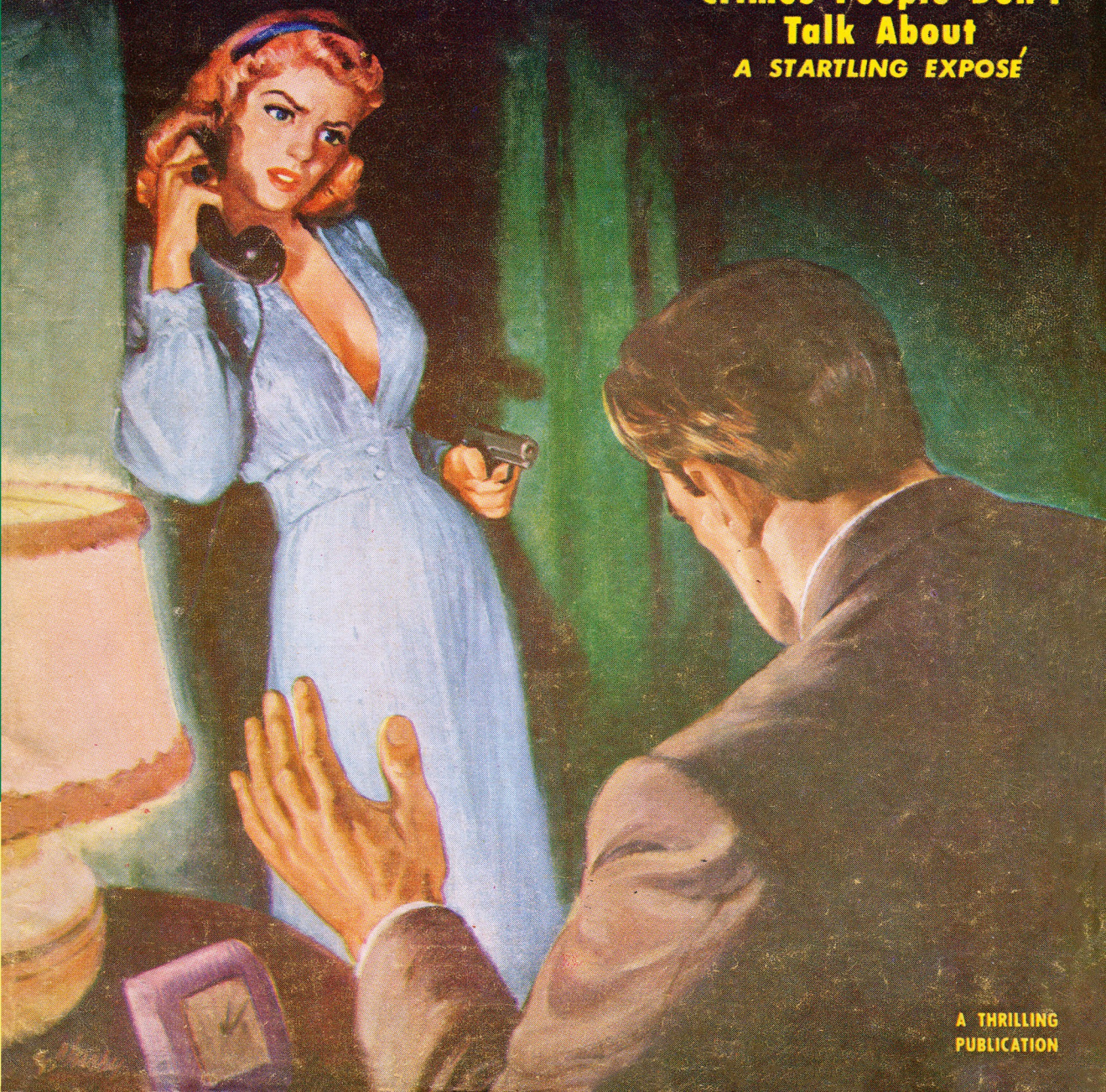
Not Dead Enough

A NOVEL OF FLIM-FLAMS
AND FLOOZIES

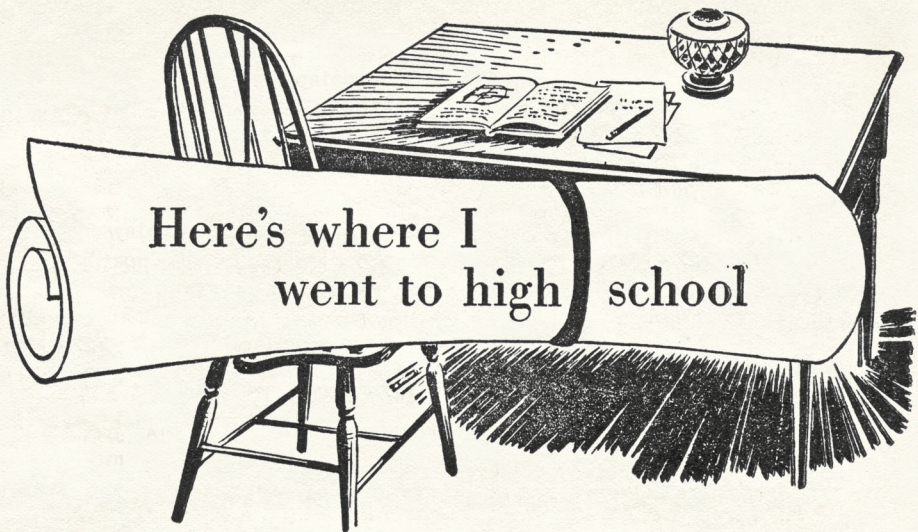
By STUART BROCK

Crimes People Don't Talk About

A STARTLING EXPOSÉ



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POPULAR Detective

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

MARCH,
1952

VOL. XLII
No. 2

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NOT DEAD ENOUGH

By Stuart Brock

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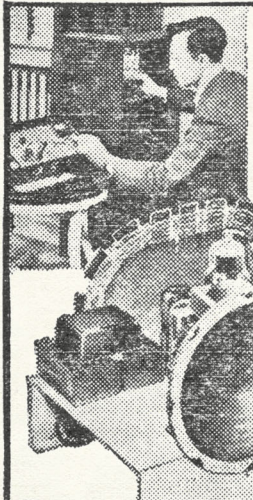
DAVID X. MANNERS
EDITOR

ALL STORIES IN THIS ISSUE ARE BRAND NEW

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), \$3.00; single copies, \$.25. 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 1952 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 envelopes 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 is used, it is a coincidence. March, 1952. Printed in U.S.A.



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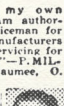
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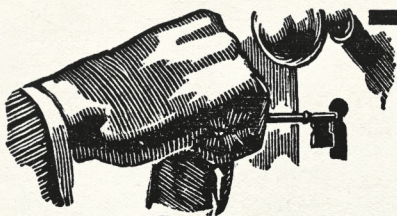
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INSIDE STUFF

CRIMES PEOPLE DON'T TALK ABOUT

THERE are certain crimes nobody is supposed to talk about, in public or in print. We think it's time to talk about them and for a good and sufficient reason. Let's name names first; the reason for so doing will appear shortly.

The inclusive term generally used to cover these unmentionables is *sex crime*. This loose, mealy-mouthed description covers everything from rape to "obnoxious display of the person," from homosexuality to the "molestation of a minor child."

To the average person who has seldom or never visited a night police court in a big city or read the case reports of social workers or parole officers dealing with such juvenile (and sometimes senile) delinquents, sex crimes are frequently associated with "orgies" in "dens of iniquity," meaning, in plain English, bawdy houses or places of prostitution.

Getting the Right Picture

If the vaguely defined sex crimes mentioned in newspaper columns don't fall in the orgy classification, readers are usually given the impression that they are committed by lascivious lunatics, drooling maniacs, or mental monsters and that they invariably occur in (1) gloomy cellars, (2) dim-lit alleyways, (3) deserted rubbish dumps, or (4) behind shadowy clumps of bushes in public parks.

What is wrong with this picture—as with most stereotyped misinformation—is that by its falsity it contributes to the very sort of thing a disclosure of the truth is presumed to prevent. What is wrong with it, specifically, is that it just isn't so.

A great majority of individuals convicted of what are so prissily lumped together as sex crimes are otherwise reasonably normal individuals who impose no more threat to person or property *most of the time* than you who read this now. The homicidal brute who kills after assaulting the victim of his sex impulses is the exception which proves a very rational rule; i.e., that at some time during the average individual's life he or she comes into contact with one of those characters our courts call sex criminals and emerges none the worse for the brief, though perhaps frightening, experience. Nor will the approach of the so-called criminal have been made in one of the places listed above; it is much more likely to take place in a theatre, a railroad station or a department store, particularly the latter.

What are judicially termed "indecent" or "unnatural" proposals are most likely to be made in obvious places: lavatories and powder rooms, theatres and stations, escalators and fitting or try-on rooms in stores.

The Mirror Worker

Some of these approaches may be startling but otherwise harmless, except to the nervously susceptible. Take, as a typical example, the *mirror worker* in a crowded department store. Every big store protection staff picks up one or two of these a week, the year round. The mirror boy gets on an escalator behind a woman, and not necessarily a young and pretty one, either. The only requirement from the viewpoint of the mirror worker is that the female be wearing skirts, not slacks.

(Continued on page 128)



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CROOKS ARE THE C R A Z I E S T PEOPLE

WHEN AN EGYPTIAN was released after serving twenty years for murder and returned to his village near Cairo, he found his alleged victim still alive. He promptly strangled the man and took the body to the police. He was turned loose.

AN ARCHER calling himself "The Catman" is annoying housewives in the Parow area of South Africa. The women mistake the thud of an arrow for a knock on the door and answer only to find an arrow with a message: "The Catman will come again."

WHEN A YOUNG MAN was caught stealing a pair of shoes from a Karachi, India, mosque while the congregation was praying in their socks, a garland of old shoes was put around his neck, and he was paraded through the main streets of the city.

ELEPHANT RUSTLING is increasing in Burma, Commerce Minister Kyaw Myint complained.

POLICE of Ciudad Trujillo, capital of the Dominican Republic, do not have a beggar problem. Alms-seekers stay off the streets until Saturday, which has been officially designated as "beg day," and the mendicants then are allowed to "go on their beat" and make the rounds of the merchants.

SIX MEN broke into a concern at Dartford, England, and made off with 700 teddy bears.

IN BOISE, IDA., a woman pleaded guilty to prostitution charges, explaining she had resorted to this because her husband was a minister and didn't make much money.

PARIS OFFICIALS, seeking the hoarded wealth of a Madame Sockaski after she was sent to a lunatic asylum, discovered that she had attracted poisonous spiders to the wall space where she kept stocks, a collection of gold coins, and many jewels. The "guards" attacked one of the officials but brooms and insecticide finally won the day.

CITIZENS of Monostui, Italy, learned that the masked bandit who had harassed them with twelve robberies was—their mayor Francesco Calverari. The No. 1 personage of the town by day and a ruthless thug by night, Hizzoner also admitted seven burglaries.

ESSEX, ENGLAND, always has been a kind of ritzy place, and now the police there are using chromium-plated handcuffs.

WHEN A COW broke into the garden of A. Clayton at Launceston, Tasmania, he phoned the police station. The police referred him to a suburban police station, which referred him to the pound ranger, who referred him to the health inspector, who referred him back to the police station. The police got there, but the garden had been stripped.

TWO CITIZENS of Kingwilliamstown, South Africa, were arrested for stealing, killing, and boiling a cat and using its bones for witchcraft purposes.

IN HELSINKI, FINLAND, Nestor Kirppu decided to stop the noise of buses going past his house. He set up a roadblock and waited for a bus with an ax. Kirppu was taken where there were no buses around—only bars.

—Cellblock Sam

NOT DEAD



ENOUGH

A Novel by **STUART BROCK**

How could Bert Norden stay out of trouble in the snowbound mansion, when a lovely lassie with a streamlined chassis was passionately trying either to make him—or murder him?

CHAPTER I

GOING IT BLIND

BERT NORDEN stretched his long legs and regarded the Boss skeptically. "I don't know whether I want the job or not," he said. "I'm a lousy actor."

"It's worth big money," the Boss said. "This client knows what he wants and is willing to pay for it."

A grin flickered briefly across Norden's face. "So the client is a he?"

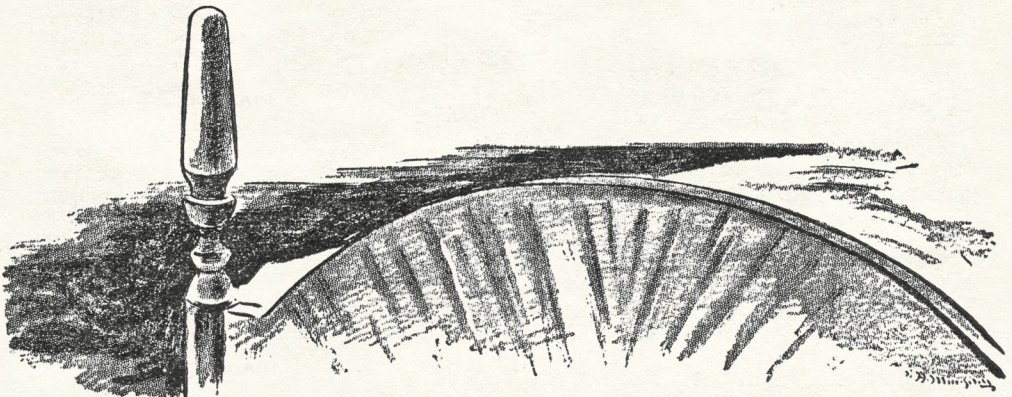
The Boss waved a thick hand. "Just an expression."

Norden paused in the act of lighting a cigarette and threw the match angrily in the direction of an ash-tray. "Damn it," he said, "if I'm going to work for someone I should know who it is."

The Boss put his hands on the top of the desk and scowled down at them. When he looked up at Norden the last of his patience was leaving his eyes.

"I put up with you," he said, "because—"

"I know," Norden interrupted quickly. "Because I'm the best operative you've got."



He made no attempt to conceal his irritation. He didn't feel particularly good; what he wanted was an ice pack, not an argument.

The Boss ignored him. "Because you usually get the job done," he went on. "But this is a different kind of deal. This time you keep away from the rum bottle and the women."

"I don't want a discussion on morals," Norden said stubbornly, "I want to know who I'm working for."

The Boss was unperturbed. "Ostensibly you'll be the secretary of Jonathan Decker. That's all you have to know. He thinks he's hiring a trained secretary."

"I am a secretary," Norden said smugly.

"You *were* a secretary," the Boss corrected. "Only this time you don't get drunk with the servants, and you don't make passes at the maids."

Norden could feel the impatience in the Boss' voice. He said, almost meekly, "What do I do then?"

"Just be a secretary—and report to me once a week."

"And I don't get to know who I'm working for? Or what I'm supposed to be doing?"

"It was stipulated that you don't function as a detective. If you're needed for that kind of work I'm to let you know. In plenty of time."

Norden got up. "Yah," he said. "Like always in plenty of time. Ten minutes before the cops break in and find me with a corpse and a gun in my hand."

"Don't predict," the Boss said somberly. "It isn't safe."

He rose and followed Norden toward the door. Norden wondered about such solicitousness. The Boss seldom stood beside other people. He was too conscious of his own abnormal shortness, the thick long trunk and the almost dwarfish legs. Norden was equally conscious of his own height but he didn't often let it bother him.

The Boss put out a hand, and Norden took it almost suspiciously. "Decker is an old man and a rich one. He needs a secretary. If we do a satisfactory job there's a bonus. Got everything now?"

"Everything," Norden said, "except what

I need to know." He ducked automatically as he went under the door frame. The Boss shut the door behind him.

He paused a moment to leer at the red-headed secretary in the front office. She looked up from her typewriter, regarding him coldly.

"How do you feel, Amy?"

"Remarkably well, considering that I was out with you," she said.

"When I get back from this case we'll blow my bonus, huh?"

"I'll blow my brains out first," she said succinctly, and returned to her typing.

Norden went on out. His car was in the basement garage of the building. His bags were packed and behind the seat of the car. He had come prepared because he knew the Boss would have things too well lined up to be argued out of anything. Whether or not Norden actually wanted the job was immaterial. The fact that there was big money in it was as far as the Boss' interest went.

Waiting for the elevator, Norden took a final look at the rough map the Boss had given him. He would be fifty miles from Seattle as the crow flies. Only he wasn't a crow. By highway and ferry it was a four-hour trip.

Sighing resignedly, Norden went on down to the basement. . . .

THE setting was beautiful. And weird. That was the first thing to strike Norden as he topped the last sharp rise in the road.

It was a rare day for winter, clear and cold, with good visibility. Below snowline he could see fold on fold of lush green timber running down to the blue waters of Hood Canal. Beyond that was a peninsula and more water sparkling under the frosty sun. It was swinging low now but cast enough glow to light up the Cascades far to the east. South and east, Rainier hung above a mushroom of clouds exactly like a pink cone of ice cream floating in space.

Norden appreciated beauty. It pleased him to think that the house, set on a slightly higher eminence than this part of the road, would have an even better view.

It was quite a house ahead, he had to admit. Set against the magnificent backdrop of the Olympics and framed in firs and snow it looked like an ancient baronial estate dropped here in the wilderness.

The building was of stone and logs, a huge, rambling, two stories with an almost alpine pitch to the roofs. Numberless chimneys poured lines of thin smoke straight into the air. The drive wound between two heavy stone pillars that supported open gates, then past firs and cedars bent under snow, up to the house.

As Norden reached the covered walk that



Private-eye BERT NORDEN, whose job was to help a wacky millionaire fake his own murder

led from a massive front door to the drive, a bony-faced man came out of the house toward him. Norden rolled down the right-hand window.

The men bent to look in. "Will you be here long, sir?"

Norden grinned. "Fifteen minutes or fifteen years. Who knows? He added, "I'm Norden."

"Yes, sir. Boyle is my name, sir."

The man's attitude was one, Norden thought, of waiting to see just how obsequious he would have to be.

"If," Boyle said, "you'll take the car to the parking area at the side, sir—"

Norden bobbed his head and rolled up the window. The parking area, he discovered, contained enough room for a fleet of trucks. At the rear a garage created an additional wing of the house. Over it appeared to be a number of rooms.

The parking area was as well cleared of snow as the road. Norden saw a small but efficient-looking snow plow parked off to one side. As Norden pocketed his car keys and slid out from under the wheel, a side door in the house opened and Boyle appeared.

Norden thought he himself was tall but, standing beside Boyle, he felt almost insignificant. The man was at least six feet eight and even thinner than Norden. His long, bony face was set off by a lantern jaw and topped with a poor toupee. He wore a dark suit and his wrists stuck out of his coat sleeves so far that he had a gangling, rustic appearance. Noticing his eyes, Norden decided he would be anything but rustic. They were narrow and set deep. There was no friendliness in them, but a good deal of appraisal.

Norden ducked automatically as he went in through the doorway. Boyle, behind him, said, "That won't be necessary, sir. This place was built for him. He's tall, too, sir."

"Ah," Norden said. "I think I'm going to like this place." He wasn't sure he was going to like Boyle. The man's humorless formality irked him.

Boyle led the way along a pine-paneled hallway to a foyer. There were three closed doors besides the massive front door, and a narrow, twisting staircase went up in semi-darkness.

On the wall beside one door were a button, a small light, and a telephone. Boyle pressed the button and when the light went on lifted the telephone.

"The gentleman is here, sir. —Yes, sir." He hung up the phone. "If you'll go in, sir."

Norden said, "Don't you ever get tired of saying 'sir'?"

"It's part of my work—sir." Boyle's eyes were still hard, still appraising.

NORDEN grinned faintly. A mirror was on the wall near him and he adjusted his green and white striped tie. He noticed that his gray suit hung with its usual correctness and his shoes were sufficiently well-polished. His hair, a useless brown, only highlighted the present sallowness of his complexion. Shadows of last night's binge still lay under his grayish eyes. The bruises from Amy's determined fist still showed on his square jaw.

Boyle had the door open. Norden said, "Thanks," and went past him.

His first impression was one of overpowering warmth. His second, that he had stepped into the past.

The massive, high-ceilinged room faded into the distance so that the most prominent feature was a huge fireplace at the far end. The only light outside of the fire was from a lamp on an ornate center table. It cast a radiant pool on the heavy Victorian furniture near it.

The heat was thick, humid; it made Norden sweat.

He didn't see the old man until he spoke. "Well?"

The voice was sharp and strong. Norden located the man in a wheel-chair near the fireplace.

Jonathan Decker was incredibly old. The veins in his hands were knobby lines under a thin parchment skin. The same skin covered his face up to a heavy mass of white hair. His mouth was thin under a thick, old-fashioned mustache. The eyes were not old, but sharp and clear. They were a deep blue, without the red rims of age around them.

A blanket covered the man from the waist down. He wore a broadcloth shirt and a string tie under a velvet smoking jacket. Even though he was seated Norden saw that he was exceptionally tall and straight.

"Mr. Decker?"

The old man said, "You're Norden."

Norden agreed. The old man lifted a hand from his lap long enough to indicate a chair. His other hand covered an open book.

Norden sat down and waited. The chair

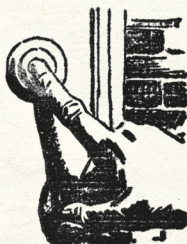
was hard and stuffed with horsehair; he could feel it come up through the plush and stick him.

Decker said, "Smoke if you wish."

Norden lit a cigarette and tossed the match into the fire. He noticed how Decker's nose hooked down over his lips like a predatory beak. His chin jutted, adding to the sharpness of his appearance.

CHAPTER II

SINISTER HOUSEHOLD



THE long silence bothered Norden. The heat from the four-foot log burning in the fireplace plus that already in the room was making him uncomfortable. He realized that Decker was appraising him and wished he

would get it over with.

"You were recommended to me as an excellent secretary," Decker said suddenly. "What is your background for this kind of work?"

"I've had accountancy training," Norden said. "I can type and take shorthand."

"Bah! Any clerk can do that."

Norden waited again. He wasn't sure how to act.

He said, "What qualifications do you want in a secretary then?" His voice was slightly irritated.

Decker smiled as if the irritation pleased him. "Discretion, observation, loyalty."

Norden took a final drag from his cigarette. "Insofar as those things don't conflict with my—conscience."

"Good," Decker said. "I don't want an obsequious man. 'You aren't to be treated as a servant. The family understands that. See that they remember it. Report infractions to me.'"

Norden stood up abruptly. It had sounded as if it might be a fine job. He was to get a hundred a week and all expenses, besides his regular salary and a possible bonus. He was sorry he couldn't take it.

"Family squabbles aren't in my line. Nor is spying."

Decker brought his hand down sharply. "Don't be quixotic. The only spying you will do is for your own protection." Decker seemed to feel he had done enough explaining.

Norden said tentatively, "Just what are my duties?"

Decker took a cigar from a table. He took a long time to light it, using an old-fashioned kitchen match. It smelled good, a rich man's cigar. He leaned back his head in the fashion of a very tired person. For a moment he closed his eyes and Norden could see the fine blue veins on the lids. Then Decker looked up again.

"I'm a wealthy man, Norden. I once ruled a lumber town from this house. When I moved my mills I tore down the town and moved it, too. All but my home. I sold my interests and stayed here. I made more money than any individual has a right to—unless he earns it. I earned it." His head came forward suddenly. "How old am I?"

Decker was at least frank and blunt, and that Norden could match. "Between eighty and a hundred."

Decker's chuckle was like oiled paper crackling. "Eighty-seven. The point is that a man of my age can die at any time."

"It's ten to one against you," Norden said. There was more strength here than he had at first suspected.

"My daughter likes to say I'll outlive her." Decker puffed his cigar. "Perhaps I will. My daughter is a terror, Norden. A sleek, overfed, opinionated holy terror. She's typical of the self-satisfied type your civilization has produced. Suffrage! Bah!"

Obviously Decker didn't consider this his civilization. He had, apparently, except for certain modifications for comfort such as electricity and motor vehicles, kept himself in a past era.

"My son-in-law," Decker was saying, "is a fool. His father left him a fortune and he lost it. He can't see why I won't let him lose mine for me. They are both dependent on my charity, my whims."

Norden was glad that he wasn't dependent on the old man's whims.

"My grandchildren," Decker went on, "are both spoiled. The boy, Arthur, cannot

make his own living. He's twenty-five. I doubt if he ever will be able to. He married the only decent person in this household."

"I rather liked Boyle," Norden suggested.

Decker's smile was thin. "Boyle is a servant."

Here was a man Norden could admire for his strength and bluntness, but could not like. He said, "If your granddaughter-in-law is decent, why did she marry Arthur?" Decker's eyes opened wide. Norden went on, "If I take this position I'll want to know these relationships. As I said, I won't get mixed up in any family squabbles. I want to know what to avoid. Mysteries irritate me."

"You're a dictatorial son of a bitch," Decker said, without rancor. "Linda—my granddaughter-in-law—was my secretary. I found her singing in a night club. I brought her here to teach her manners and graciousness. They were in her fundamentally, just as intelligence was. She still resorts to occasional crudities, but they're not assumed to arouse comment. I had hoped she would make Arthur human. I ordered them to get married. The experiment failed."

NORDEN reserved his opinion on a girl who would acquiesce unless she wanted to marry. But there was a lot of money involved here.

"Arthur's mother objected," Decker said. "But she agreed after I spoke with her—My granddaughter, Alene, is an incompetent and always will be. She is not quite twenty-one and under the impression that her 'store' beauty will get her everything she wants. She reads too many magazines, sees too many pictures, and does too little work." The old man leaned forward to drop cigar ash into the fireplace. "Alene," he said, "will use her 'sex' on you. I'm of the opinion she doesn't know what she is doing. If she makes a pass at you, return it."

The use of the term coming from the old man in this setting startled Norden. He said sharply, "I have no desire to make a human being of your granddaughter." He wondered idly what kind of a figure this Alene had.

The old man laughed. "Part of your job is to help me decide to whom I shall leave my money, Norden. I won't live much longer."

"Nonsense," Norden said. "You aren't senile."

"I'm not speaking of my health," Decker told him. "I've cut them down this past year. They aren't rich. They want to be rich. One of them will kill me for just that reason. . . ."

Norden met part of the family before dinner. It took him only a short while to understand what old Jonathan Decker had meant. Maybe under normal circumstances Arthur Pitman and possibly his sister, Alene, would have been average people. Arthur could never be nice but he could hardly have been so thoroughly rotten in a different set-up. It took leisure and the idea of big, unbelievable money to be as he was. About the girl, Norden reserved judgment.

He met them first over cocktails in a room called the small drawing room off of the also small dining room. Boyle told Norden they were now the only drawing and dining rooms in the house. Formerly, Decker's quarters had been for more formal affairs but when he had withdrawn from the family he'd had them remodeled into a suite for himself.

The "small" dining room was quite large enough for Norden. It could have held over thirty people comfortably. As Boyle escorted Norden through the hall toward the drawing room, Norden said, "All these halls and doors bewilder me."

"For fire protection, sir. Each room can be cut off from the others."

It was a good idea, Norden agreed, but it took him some time to learn the floor plan of the rambling house.

In the drawing room Arthur Pitman was at a small bar, shaking cocktails vigorously. A girl, seated on a bar stool, was watching him. Boyle led Norden to them and coughed gently.

"Mr. Norden, Mr. Decker's new secretary. Mr. Pitman—Miss Pitman, sir."

Norden said, "Hello."

Arthur Pitman did not offer his hand but

he stopped shaking the cocktails long enough to nod. He was, Norden thought, of the definitely unpleasant type, handsome in a pretty-boy fashion. His features were even but with little of the strength that characterized his grandfather. His complexion was pasty, as if he breathed too much night club air, and his large dark eyes were set quite close to his nose. His hair was brown, wavy and long.

In the girl was little resemblance to her brother. Her features were too sharp for beauty, but it was a different sharpness from that of old Jonathan Decker. Her lips were full and sensuous, startling in her narrow face. Her eyes were like her brother's, although not so deep-set. Her hair, curled loosely on the ends, was shoulder length.

Norden noticed that she had fine hands, long-fingered and smooth, but her wrists were fragile-looking.

She half lowered long eyelashes and looked Norden over thoroughly. Norden hid a smile; it was amateurishly done. Her voice was languid.

"Oh yes, the new man." She turned back to watch Arthur.

WINKING at Boyle, Norden took a stool at the end of the bar. Boyle retreated, without expression on his long face.

"Make mine rum and water," Norden said conversationally.

"Help yourself," Arthur Pitman said.

"Really," the girl said.

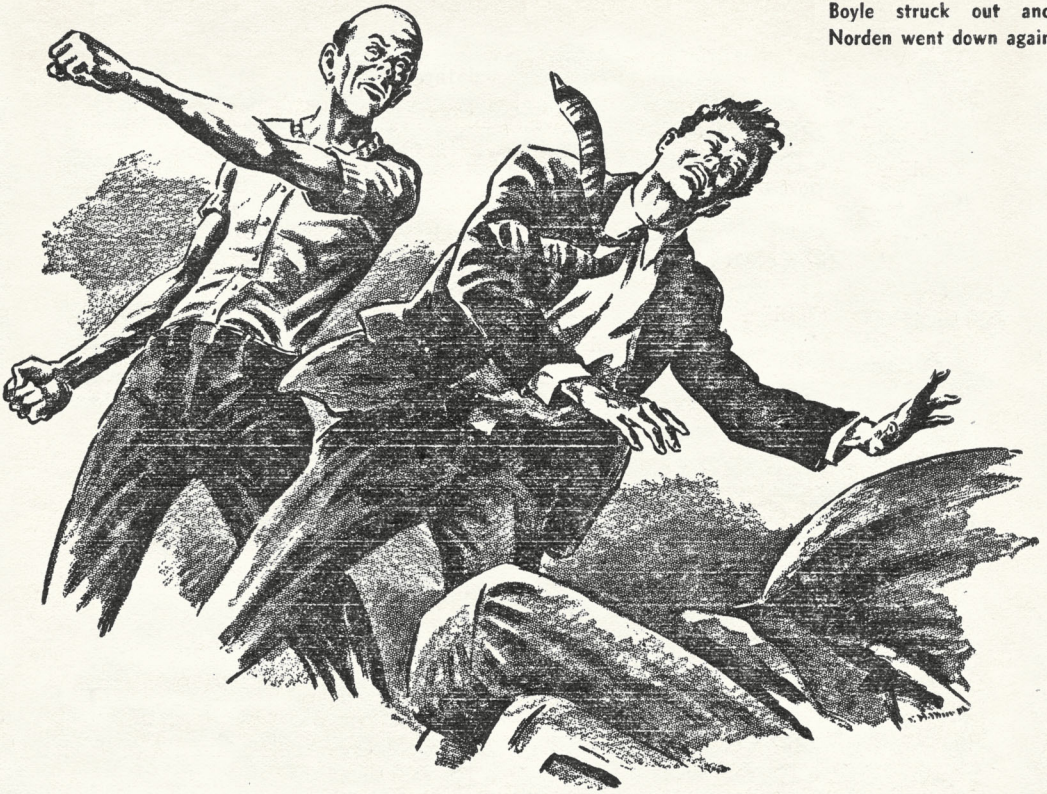
Norden slid off the stool. "Remember, I'm just one of the family. Grandpop says so."

She opened her mouth as if to answer, then clamped it tightly shut. "Hurry that drink, Arthur."

Norden located the rum bottle, poured three stiff fingers of rum and added water. He returned to his stool.

Alene drank her first cocktail quickly and held out her glass for a second. She sipped that more slowly. Suddenly she began to talk to Arthur.

"You filthy sneak!" she said in a harsh voice. "Telling Dad I didn't get in until four this morning."



His smile was slow and nasty. "I'm usually the one he blames around here. It's time you took your share. He accused me of stumbling all over the upper hall."

"Wouldn't you like to know some of the things I could tell!" she said, suppressed rage in her voice. Norden could see them both clearly in the bar mirror. Alene looked and sounded like a petulant child.

"Such as?" Arthur spoke with amused tolerance, but the hand that held his glass had gone white at the knuckles.

The girl's color rose quickly. "Such as, how did your wife get that bruise on her shoulder?"

Arthur sipped and glanced toward Norden. "My sister is by way of being a bitch, old man."

Norden said nothing. Arthur went on in the tone of voice usually reserved for discussing the weather. "She prefers to sleep with the chauffeur rather than with people of our own class."

Alene Pitman slipped off the stool, and

deliberately threw her glass, cocktail and all, into her brother's face. She walked from the room with short, hard-hitting steps.

The situation would have been ludicrous if it hadn't been so disgusting. Arthur took a napkin and placidly wiped himself off. Only his eyes showed the cold anger Norden knew he must feel. Having wiped the worst from his gray tweed suit and his face, Arthur poured himself the remaining contents of the shaker.

"You'll have quite a bit to tell the old man, eh, Norden?" His voice shook slightly and he tried hard to steady it.

Norden said, "Just what do I take that to mean?"

"Don't tell me you weren't hired as a spy?" He raised one eyebrow and took a confident sip of his drink.

"Don't tell me you want something harder than a cocktail in the face," Norden said. He left the stool, still carrying his drink, and walked toward the rear of the room.

CHAPTER III

"WHO HIRED ME?"



A DOOR in the drawing room opened into a dining room, but Norden turned back and went out the way he had come in. Following the hallway toward the parking area entrance, he saw a door on his right and tried it.

He looked into a serving pantry. Beyond it was a gleaming kitchen. He closed the door hastily as a trim, uniformed maid glanced up from a table where she was working. Then his mind registered the fact that she was young, and he opened the door again.

"Hi. I'm lost."

She had a ready smile. Her face was pretty in a conventionalized pattern, and she had nice legs. He liked the way the upper part of her starched uniform was pushed out. She came toward him, brushing lettuce from her fingers.

"Where do you want to go, sir?" she asked. "The conservatory?"

Norden indicated his helplessness. She led the way back to the foyer, and down the hallway toward the rear of the house. She tried to orient him. The first door on his left was, she said, the entrance to the servants' sitting room. A flight of wide, carpeted stairs led to the family bedrooms. The door opposite the foot of the stairs led to the library. The one just beyond it opened onto stairs leading to the upper part of the garage.

"Is your room up there?" Norden asked.

"All of *our* rooms are there, sir," she said. She opened a door at the end of the hall. "This is the conservatory," she said, and took off.

Norden sighed and went in, shutting the door behind him. His first impression was of the same, humid heat in Decker's quarters. But here was a reason for it. The room, huge and glassed in, was filled with heavy tropical plants.

There was no air stirring except what

his own movements created. Around him were trees ranging from palms to figs with other dozens he had no name for. Jonathan Decker was not exaggerating when he said he had a good deal of money. The cost of heating this conservatory alone would have supported Norden for life.

He wound along a pathway to a doorway, went through and found himself on the edge of a swimming pool with glass walls and a roof of glass panels. On a terrace were wicker chairs and tables.

Norden stopped, suddenly aware that he was not alone. Alene Pitman sat in a chair a short distance away.

She beckoned to him, patting a couch beside her. "Come and join me, Mr. Norden." He saw that her smile was genuine. "I promise to drink my liquor this time."

Norden took the seat she indicated. A silver decanter was on a table beside her. It was beaded with moisture. The goblet in her hand matched it. He offered her a cigarette. She accepted and they smoked in silence.

Norden said, "Do you always act like a spoiled brat to impress people?"

"I didn't ask you here to lecture me," she said. "I wanted to get acquainted. I had to be rude in there, or Arthur would make nasty remarks."

"Are you trying to tell me you aren't as bad as your brother wants me to believe?"

She lowered her long eyelashes to half mast and stretched languorously. She was a small girl, with shapely legs. A tight blouse stretched over her sharp, pointed breasts. The blouse was white; her red skirt was equally as tight.

"Are you always rude, Mr. Norden? Or can I call you Bert?"

"Delighted," Norden murmured, and wondered how she had picked up his first name so quickly. He was remembering what Decker had told him, but decided he had no right to take his feelings out on the girl until he knew her better. He said, "This conservatory is an amazing place."

"It was grandfather's hobby," she said. "He used to spend a lot of time with the plants—before he took to his wheel-chair

last fall." She wrinkled her nose at Norden, but it was too sharp to be cute. "Now we can use the swimming pool. He wouldn't let us when he worked in there."

DESPITE his bluntness, Norden always moved cautiously around any subject which interested him. And the old man was one of those subjects. So was the answer to the question—who had commissioned the Boss to hire him?

He wondered about Alene. She was definitely spoiled, but that didn't necessarily mean she was stupid. She could have hired him; so could her brother. So could a lot of people. It was easy enough to see that when the old man had decided on a secretary some member of the household had gone to Seattle for the purpose of getting his own man on the job, someone with the right training and ability to handle it.

It was getting pretty clear to Norden that someone had him in a box. If he made a report to the Boss on what the old man had told him then some member of the family would soon know about it. Filing that report would be the same as breaking faith with Decker. Yet he couldn't hold out on the Boss—not in all honesty.

If he could find out just who had hired him he might be able to plan and keep things on an even keel. As it was, he was walking in darkness and liable to stumble over something at any moment.

The girl poured herself another drink from the silver decanter.

She said casually, "You'll be in here quite a lot, inventorying, I suppose?"

"Is that part of my job?"

Her laugh was light. "You don't know your job yet? I just supposed he was hiring a business manager."

"Your brother seems to think I was hired as a spy," Norden said.

She blew a fat smoke ring and pushed one long, maroon-tipped nail through it. "Arthur has a vile mind."

Norden made no comment; there was none to make. The conversation languished again. He supposed she was wondering what gambit to try next.

Before either of them could speak a

side door opened and a girl in a pale yellow bathing suit stepped onto the terrace. She was striking. Norden took an extra long look.

Her skin was creamy with overtones of a rich bronze that let her get away with a yellow suit. She was tall, long-legged and full-busted. She was as graceful as a deer as she stepped to a low diving board and stood poised.

It was plain that she had not yet seen Norden or Alene. Norden felt sudden hostility in the girl beside him.

He murmured, "Arthur's wife?"

Alene's answer was a short nod. The girl on the board stretched on tiptoe. Every muscle flexed perfectly as she jack-knifed into the water. Her yellow cap bobbed into view, then her face appeared. Norden could see her surprise as she shook water from her eyes and focused them on the terrace. She took a few smooth crawl strokes and came out of the pool near Norden.

Close up, she was as lovely as Norden had thought from a distance. Her features were regular; the smile on her lips and in her eyes was warm and real.

"Hello," she said. "You're Mr. Norden."

"Admitted," Norden said, rising. "Mrs. Pitman?"

"Linda Pitman," she said, and held out her hand.

"I see," Alene said, "you still have that bruise on your shoulder."

On Linda Pitman's left shoulder were the fading marks of a blow. Or the bruise might have come from the grip of heavy fingers. She touched the marks self-consciously.

"I bruise so easily," she said.

Norden tried to be casual. "Thin skin always does."

Alene's laugh was too abrupt. "I'd say thick skin does, too," she said. She stood up, and again Norden watched her walk away with her sharp, hard-hitting stride.

Norden kept up his casual pose. "Won't you have a drink?"

Linda accepted with a nod. Norden found a small water tumbler on another table and poured her a drink. His own goblet

was empty and he half-filled it. He decided it was whisky and water.

NORDEN offered Linda a cigarette. If Alene's remark had made any impression, she wasn't going to let him know it. She refused the cigarette.

As she talked Norden had the feeling that there was no dissimulation here. She was keeping the conversation on the table top.

He learned a little more about the conservatory, the names of some of the shrubs, the pleasure the old man had got out of it, and that he was a dear. She was emphatic about this.

Norden also learned that he was vulnerable again, though he had found no particular reaction to Alene. It was possibly the combination of the rum and the heat; more likely, it was the bathing suit. Besides, he liked Linda's voice. It was soft and rich. He liked the nice friendly way she had of smiling with her gray eyes.

"You seem to know a lot about this place," he observed.

"I used to work for Mr. Decker."

"He told me."

"All about me?"

Norden grinned. "As much as he knows, I suppose. He briefed me pretty thoroughly about the whole family."

"He's a dear," she repeated. "But he's inclined to be cranky." A shadow rippled across her face, touching her eyes briefly, then fading away. "And when he is he's liable to be—" She paused as if searching for the right word.

"Vindictive?" he supplied.

She nodded. "Yes. It's hard on them. They really aren't that bad."

"They," Norden thought. She evidently classed herself in a separate category from the family. He said, "They aren't, or you wish they weren't?"

She froze. There was no other word for it. One moment she was friendly and natural; the next she was stiff and formal.

"They happen to be my family, too—now."

The fact that Norden could tell she didn't mean it made no difference. He had lost more ground than he had gained. He stood up.

"Maybe I'd better let you get back to your swim. There shouldn't be much time before dinner."

Her answer was a nod. Norden started back the way he had come. . . .

The small dining room, Norden found when he went in to dinner, had it all over the small drawing room. It was not quite as large, but it was even more ornate. The table was long enough to seat twenty persons, and a fire burned brightly in the fireplace at the far end. The sideboard could have served in the entertainment of an ambassador at a formal function. The family was huddled at the end near the fireplace. As if, Norden thought, for mutual protection.

Jonathan Decker was not there. David Pitman, the old man's son-in-law, sat at the head of the table. He was a much less prepossessing sight than his son. Arthur was tall, nearly six feet, while his father would have trouble touching that height with his fingers if he stood on tiptoe. He was growing bald, with a fringe of salt and pepper hair over his ears. Baldness gave him a moon-faced appearance. He had myopic eyes behind thick lenses, and a set of dentures that pushed his whole lower jaw forward. He looked a little like a bewildered rabbit. After a while, Norden decided that he also acted like one.

Pitman's wife was a terrific contrast to him. There was nothing backward about Cora Pitman that Norden could see. She was obviously the leader of that household, and would have been formidable anywhere. With all that money behind her she was a dreadnaught.

Except for her beak nose she was a good-looking woman. But her mouth had gone thin and taut with age and disapproval, and her chin jutted determinedly. Her eyes were a dark brown but there was no hint in them of the softness usually associated with dark brown eyes.

Norden admired, reluctantly, her direction. She handled the servants and the family firmly. Sergeants, the investigator thought, could take lessons from her.

The meal, before the rare beef was served, passed with only the lightest of table talk. Norden, seated between Alene and Linda

Pitman, spent his time watching the little maid with the pretty face move around the table. Once she let a fork slip from a salad plate to the top of the sideboard. Cora Pitman's disapproval was wordless but eloquent. Norden offered the girl an encouraging smile.

CHAPTER IV

GATHERING CLOUDS



FOR some time, as dinner progressed, Norden had the feeling that steam was being stored here under pressure. Then Cora Pitman looked toward her husband and, indicating Norden, said: "David, will you request

this young man to arrange for an appointment with Father?"

Pitman sighed. "My dear, I explained—" "Explanations! Ask him."

Alene's knee found Norden's under the table. He wished it were Linda's instead. He looked directly across the table at Cora Pitman. Her cold stare bothered him not at all. He had been looked at by the Boss.

"When do you want this appointment?" he asked.

"I don't want it," she snapped. "Mr. Pitman does. At father's convenience, of course." She let her eyes slide past Norden to her daughter. "You realize that you smashed another fender on the station wagon, Alene?"

"She was too drunk to know," Arthur said.

His father straightened his shoulders. "This is no place for—"

"Well," Arthur cut in, "she was so stinking that Linda had to help her to bed."

"Your grandfather will expect you to pay for the fender, Alene," Cora Pitman said.

"With what? My God, my allowance won't buy lipstick any more."

"But it keeps a chauffeur," Arthur put in.

Alene slammed down her fork. "If you don't make him stop, I'll shut his dirty mouth—for good!"

"I can think of other interesting things,

too," Arthur said, his voice heavy with innuendo.

David Pitman had been simply sitting and blinking and looking occasionally at his wife. But when Arthur spoke he gave his son a look that made Norden shiver.

Cora Pitman was still calm. "This conversation must seem crude to you, Mr. Norden."

Pushing back his chair, Norden said, "If you'll excuse me, I'm having coffee with Mr. Decker."

He met Boyle in the hallway. "Mr. Decker wishes you to join him at the swimming pool, sir."

"Say," Norden said, "do they always go on like that?"

Boyle's long face was expressionless. "I couldn't say, sir."

The hell he couldn't, Norden thought, and located the pool after two false starts. Decker was on the terrace. His wheel-chair had wide flat arms and on one of these was a brandy snifter. A bottle of brandy and another snifter were on a table close to him.

He was savoring his brandy as Norden walked up. With a soft sigh, he set down the snifter and nodded toward the table. "Help yourself."

A glass coffee maker sat on a hotplate beside the brandy bottle. Norden poured coffee for himself. He hated to disappoint Decker but he ignored the snifter and poured the brandy into his coffee.

"This is fine," he said, and sat down.

Decker's chuckle again reminded Norden of paper crackling. "I see you've met the family. You look angry."

"They're a bunch of spoiled idiots. Especially Arthur."

"Linda?"

Norden looked at him frankly. "She's real. I hope I can keep my head, that's all."

Decker's laugh boomed out. "I'd like to see a set of horns on Arthur!"

For a man eighty-seven and steeped in Victorian ways, Norden thought, Decker was an old reprobate. He seemed to be a mixture of eighteenth century licentiousness and nineteenth century correctness, and it was hard to know just when he would be which.

"But it takes two," Decker said. "And Linda is as square as that tile under your feet."

Norden rose and said, "Mr. Pitman wants an appointment with you."

"Ah," Decker said. "I was waiting for that." He looked smug. "I cut off their money just before Christmas. One month, and they can't stand it any longer." He puffed on his cigar. "What else did you learn?"

NORDEN countered with a question of his own. "What point was there in Mrs. Pitman letting me know that Alene had crumpled a fender on the station wagon and would have to pay for it?"

The old man waved his cigar. "She probably wanted to be sure you were aware how harshly I treated her children. Cora is a fierce and protective mother."

"And yet," Norden said reasonably, "she allowed Arthur to accuse Alene of sleeping with the chauffeur."

Decker grinned at him, looking wolfish. "Cora never does anything without a good reason—good as far as she is concerned."

"I'll remember that," Norden said. He tasted his coffee. The brandy was smooth. So was all of the liquor here.

Decker's deep-set eyes studied him closely. "You were undecided about working for me. Have you made up your mind yet?"

"I'll work for you," Norden said. "But I don't intend to embroil myself in family gossip or in family feuds. I don't intend to spy for you."

Decker chuckled softly and leaned back. "Fair enough. Then we're agreed?"

Norden knew there was a possibility of getting caught in a squeeze here, but he said, "Agreed."

"Then we'll have to work fast," Decker became abruptly businesslike. "They're getting impatient—go to the doors, Norden."

The door Linda had come through for her swim was just behind Decker. Norden drew it open and looked down another hallway. Boyle stood a few feet down the hall. Norden waved to him and ducked back, shutting the door. The only other entrance to the pool led into the conservatory. Norden made

a brief survey. He was about to turn back when the branch of a thick bush moved.

Norden started for it. Decker called, "It may be Grierson, the gardener."

A man slipped silently out. He was short and chunky, with heavy black hair and a dark olive complexion. He wore coveralls that stretched over a broad chest.

"Grierson," the man said.

Norden returned to his chair. Decker, he thought, was peculiar. He took precautions such as these and yet he had hired Norden without much checking. It could be age, or the old man might think he was a shrewd enough judge of character to be sure of the men he picked.

"The family wants my money soon," Decker said. "Since I cut them off, they've been getting edgy."

"What do you mean, cut them off?" Norden asked.

"Each one now gets an allowance of only fifty dollars a month. For everything. I feed and shelter them, but they buy their clothing and their entertainment. I furnish the cars but they have to pay for gasoline and repairs."

"Linda, too?"

"Linda, too," Decker said. "Why not?"

"She's worth more," Norden said. "But why cut them off?"

Decker's smile showed the edges of his teeth. "Because I want one of them to go overboard. One of them won't be able to wait until I die naturally. One of them will try to kill me soon."

"That would be too obvious for the police to miss," Norden suggested.

"Oh, whoever does it will be clever about it," Decker said. He took the cigar from his mouth and blew a thin line of smoke. "Idiots you might think them, Norden. But only my son-in-law is stupid. I would as soon suspect my daughter as anyone. Once she makes up her mind to anything she will carry it through. But it may be any one of them. And that's where you come in."

"What do I do—sleep outside your door?"

"No, we find out how the murderer plans to work. Then we set a trap—with me as bait."

The old man was completely serious. He

actually believed that some member of the family wanted to kill him.

"How—as bait?"

"We kill me off," Decker said. "Then we sit back and see what develops."

CHAPTER V

LOYALTY BELOW STAIRS



NORDEN found that there would be no actual secretarial work except for the sake of appearances. His job was to do just as Decker had explained, and no more.

"I wound up the last of my affairs after I had my stroke," Decker told him. "I'm completely retired now, Norden. Boyle takes care of the household bills. And that's all there is to do."

Norden finished his coffee and brandy. "Since there's no work, I think I'll go to my room."

Decker nodded. "Have someone show you up," he said. As Norden started for the doorway, he added, "Watch them, Norden. Remember, they're clever."

"I'll remember," Norden said. He thought, if anyone needed watching it was probably the old man himself.

The passageway led to another, and Norden found himself at the foot of the main stairs. He was oriented now and he set out for the servants' sitting room.

He found the maid there talking to another girl in uniform and to a large woman in white, who must be the cook. He nodded to them all.

"Sorry to break in," he said. He looked directly at the maid. "But Mr. Decker said for you to show me the way to my room."

She went out with him. As they started up the stairs, he said, "I can't go on calling you 'hey' all the time." He sounded aggrieved.

"I'm Beth, sir."

"Do you like it here?"

"It's far away from everything, sir."

Norden wished she wouldn't walk so far from him so obviously. "We both work for the same guy. There's no point in being

formal, is there?"

"No—I guess not."

Norden gave up. They reached the top of the stairway in silence. The hall was wide, dimly lighted, and deeply carpeted. There was a confusing number of doors. Norden discovered that his was the first one on his right.

"This is it, sir," Beth said. "I'm sure you'll find everything comfortable."

Norden paused with a hand on the knob. When he looked down at her she moved back a few steps.

He said, "What do I do if everything isn't comfortable?"

The question apparently puzzled her for a moment. "Why, ring, I suppose, sir."

"Will you come if I do?" Norden said fatuously.

"No, sir. I'm the downstairs maid."

"Is the upstairs maid as cute?" Norden asked.

He felt he had won a slight victory. She looked as if she might smile. "I think Mr. Boyle will answer the ring, sir."

Norden opened his door. "Thanks," he said drily, and by the time he had the lights on, the girl was gone. He sighed. Beth was the most unapproachable maid he had yet found. It wasn't all pleasure with Norden, either. He had always found servants handy when he wanted to learn things about a place and the people in it.

Norden liked the room. It was one of the few things besides Linda Pitman that he did like about the place.

Someone had unpacked for him after bringing his luggage from his car. He located his pajamas in the top drawer of a massive chiffonier, and found his dressing gown alongside his four suits in the closet. It was a closet large enough to hold a bedroom set. On a dressing table his comb and brushes were laid out neatly.

The bedroom was on the same scale as the rest of the house. The bed was a good seven feet long. For once, he wouldn't sleep with his feet drawing more air than his face.

IN a period secretary Norden found an ample supply of writing materials, complete with postage stamps. He decided it

might be a good idea to write to somebody to find out if all mail here came and went freely.

He put on his maroon dressing gown, wriggled his feet into maroon leather slippers, and sat at the secretary. He wrote.

Dear Amy: It has been less than twenty-four hours, but already I miss you more than I can say. Each minute is infinity; each mile that separates us is like an endless distance across empty space.

Norden rose and went to the windows. Drawing aside the draperies, he found that he had the view he wanted. He could see out across blackness to Seattle, faint but clear. He went again to the desk.

From my room I can see Seattle. I like to believe I can find the very light glowing in your apartment window.

Norden stopped. If Amy ever got this letter she would probably have more to say on the subject of Norden's character than she had last night. Reminiscently, he rubbed the bruises on his chin.

Rising, he found the bell and rang for Boyle. He carefully adjusted the letter so that it was in plain sight on the secretary.

Boyle appeared almost too quickly.

"I was wondering," Norden said, "about the routine of getting a nightcap."

Boyle's eyes fastened momentarily on the desk, then flicked away quickly. He said, "I can bring a drink, sir."

"Show me once and I can do it myself."

"There's a liquor cabinet in the library, sir."

Norden said, "I'm glad to find a library that's good for something." He started for the door, stopped, and snapped his fingers. "Before I forget, what's the address here?"

"Post Office Box Seven-seven-two in town, sir."

Norden wrote the address on his letter, then preceeded Boyle down the hall.

The library was a small room, and wholly functional. There was a cold fireplace and a few leather chairs scattered about. A chess board with the men in position ready for a game was near a big old-fashioned desk. Beside the chessboard was a small cabinet. Norden lifted the lid and drew out a bottle of rum.

Norden said, "Join me in a drink?"

If he couldn't get information from a maid

he might get it from the major-domo. Besides, despite Boyle's stiffness, Norden found something likable about him.

Boyle said, "If you say so, sir."

Norden got two glasses from the cabinet, and led the way to his room. Once there, he went to the bathroom and put a little water in each glass. He added a stiff shot of rum to each and returned to the room. Norden couldn't tell whether Boyle had been over by the secretary or not.

Norden held out a drink. Boyle moved stiffly, as if he needed oiling. He wrapped long fingers around the glass and lowered himself onto a divan with which the bedroom had been thoughtfully provided.

Norden sat in the easy chair and took a long pull at his rum. Boyle sipped cautiously once, then took an amazing gulp.

Norden said, "Smoke?"

BOYLE brought a huge, curved pipe from some inner pocket, filled it, and applied a match.

"Beth showed me up here," Norden said. "She's a cute kid."

"She's young," Boyle said. He had finally dropped the "sir." "Men bewilder her."

"So I noticed," Norden said. "Does she go with anyone in particular?"

"Cole, the chauffeur, occasionally takes her to a dance. I escorted her to a movie once." Boyle's head waggled. "She chatters too much."

"She didn't chatter to me."

Boyle wound up his first drink with another deep gulp. "She's probably afraid of you, thinks you're like—Mr. Arthur."

Norden got up to take Boyle's glass. He said, "Arthur made a pass at her?"

Boyle swiveled his head, following Norden's progress to the bath. "He's a gay young man," he said.

"Is that what you call it?" Norden said, and stepped out of sight. Boyle, he thought, was certainly not feeling his liquor already. That meant the information about Arthur had been deliberately passed on to him. And Norden figured there must be a reason. He poured Boyle a stiffer shot than before.

"You know," he said, sitting down, "a man in my position isn't in a pleasant spot."

Boyle sampled his fresh drink, and nodded, "It's one thing or another for all of us," he observed lugubriously.

"What's it with you?" Norden asked.

"A man like me," Boyle said suddenly, "is a bit of a freak. How tall are you?"

"Six-six," Norden said.

"I got nearly four inches on you," Boyle reported confidently. "I look like something that escaped from a circus. Who wants to hire a guy so tall and skinny?"

"Someone else tall and skinny," Norden suggested.

"Ex-actly!" Boyle bobbed his head with enough vigor to cause his toupee to slip. He adjusted it with a quick movement of his long fingers. Norden went into the bathroom and filled a water carafe, brought it and the rum bottle back into the room. At the rate Boyle was going, it would save a lot of steps to have the ingredients handy.

Boyle was still talking. "Yes, only someone else tall and skinny would hire me. I do a good job here. I manage enough servants to staff a hotel. I'm—" he drank deeply—"I'm the best damned butler I know."

"And who appreciates it?" Norden murmured sadly.

Boyle came back promptly. "The old man—and only the old man."

Norden said shrewdly, "And Mrs. Pitman—Linda."

"Ah, her. She's human. Maybe we should ask her in."

"She's sore at me," Norden confessed. "I made a crack about her husband."

"She's loyal," Boyle agreed. "Loyal and foolish. But I'll tell her you're a good joe."

Norden said, "Thanks," and handed Boyle the water and rum. Boyle mixed himself a massive drink.

"I can't figure this place out," Norden said. "Why doesn't Decker make his tribe get out and work?"

Boyle's bony face began to twitch, then split wide in a genuine grin. "They hate it here," he whispered. "They go nuts stuck off up here. So he makes 'em stay."

"Makes them?"

Boyle nodded. "What would you do if staying gave you a chance to inherit ten million dollars."

"Stay."

"Ex-actly."

"Is that why you stay, to inherit?" Norden asked.

Boyle scowled. "You think I'm a heel?"

Boyle grunted and worked on his liquor. When he came up for air, he said, "The old man's been good to me. He got me when I was down and out. He trained me to this job. Whatever he does is okay with me. All of us would go a long way for the old man."

Norden said, "Decker sounds like a nice guy to work for."

"If you don't cross him," Boyle said. "Nobody better. You work for old Jonathan Decker you work for him all the way." He nodded his head and nearly followed it forward. He offered Norden a foolish grin.

"All the way," he repeated. "Or else." He drained his glass in one swallow.

"Or else what?" Norden wanted to know.

Boyle stood up, carefully set the glass on the arm of the divan, grinned wolfishly, and drew a long finger across his prominent Adam's apple. He took one step forward, turned, and collapsed in sections onto the divan.

CHAPTER VI

ONE SUSPECT NAILED



SWEARING in surprise, Norden got up. Boyle was definitely out. He was breathing stertorously and his arm hung as limply as a dead fish. Norden put Boyle's cold pipe into a pocket.

Who would have thought that a character with so much length to pour liquor into could succumb like this? Norden was irritated. He had been working nicely up to the questions he wanted answered—and now this.

Disgusted, he turned off the lights, crawled into bed, and stretched out full length. He sighed lustily. He could hear Boyle's heavy breathing, but that was the only sound, except once when a tree cracked outside in the cold, and a coyote howled from somewhere

below. He could feel himself reaching out for sleep.

With painful suddenness, Norden came wide awake. He lay listening. The sound that had roused him came again. Far off, someone was kicking a wall. The thick walls muffled the noise, until it was almost as much vibration as sound.

The room was black dark and he fumbled for the night light. It cast just enough light for him to see his robe and slippers. Putting them on, he started for the door.

He stopped, one hand on the knob. There was something off key. Flicking the light switch for the overheads, he stood and blinked. Boyle was gone! Only the glass and the smell of stale, strong pipe tobacco was left to tell of his presence. Norden glanced at the secretary. The letter lay as he had left it.

The thumping noise came again, more distinctly. It still sounded like someone kicking a wall. Opening the hall door Norden could hear it plainly.

He judged the sounds to come from downstairs. The hall was in semi-darkness, with only a night light burning. Norden saw no signs of anyone having been awakened.

His slippered feet made no noise beyond the faint sibilance of leather on carpeting. At the foot of the stairs, the sound vibrated strongly; it was almost beside him. He put his hand on the library wall. He could feel the thumpings.

Norden opened the library door and stepped in. The lights were on. By the liquor cabinet feet showed from behind a leather chair. The feet were clad in gray suede loafer shoes, with gray silk socks and gray silk pajamas above them. While Norden watched, one foot lifted and stiffened spasmodically, striking the wall in two sharp blows. Then the foot, as if weary, dropped back to the floor.

Norden had started across the room when both feet lifted together. There was a convulsive kick that barely scraped the wall, then the legs and feet fell limply back and were still.

Norden rounded the chair and stood looking at the back of a man's head. He could see wavy dark hair. A blue silk dressing

gown over the gray pajamas was wrinkled up to the waist. In the middle of the man's back was a knife.

The hilt had gone deep. The wooden end of the haft was mashed as if someone had taken a hammer and driven the knife as if it had been a nail. Norden felt sick.

Someone had nailed Arthur Pitman to the floor!

Arthur was dead. Norden knelt beside the body, and arose with the realization that he had witnessed Arthur's last kicking.

What position did this place him, Norden, in? What position did it place his client in? After a moment, he realized he had no client. Ostensibly he was working as a secretary for Jonathan Decker. He checked an impulse to see the old man. This would take a little figuring.

He walked quietly and carefully about the room. He didn't know what he was looking for, but anything out of key would be worth finding before the police came.

Only there was nothing. The desk was bare. The same books seemed to be on the shelves. The leather chairs were in much the same positions they had been. The liquor cabinet was unchanged.

ONLY Arthur spoiled the quiet serenity of the room.

Norden started for the door. Hesitating, he drew a handkerchief from his robe pocket and wrapped it around his fingers. He switched off the light, turned the door knob, and stepped into the hall. He closed the door and carefully put the handkerchief away.

"Oh!"

Norden's head came up sharply. There was someone on the broad bottom of the staircase. Linda Pitman! She must have come down without his hearing her. It she had just come down.

She wore a pale green negligee over pajamas of the same color. Her feet were in green slippers. Her blonde hair fell in loose, soft ringlets to her shoulders. Despite her fright, Norden thought she looked lovely. Too damned lovely.

"That noise," she whispered. "I heard a funny—thumping sound."

"Maybe I made it," Norden said.

"In there?" She pointed toward the library.

"I was looking for a book," Norden said.

She stood gravely on the step above him. Here was a momentary silence. As if, it seemed to Norden, they were trying to see how much each could trust the other.

"I'm being foolish," she said, and made a move to turn away.

Norden wanted to find out if she had just come down the stairs. He wished her negligee were more transparent. He would like to see if her pajamas were sleep-wrinkled.

"I'm sorry I waked you," he said.

"I sleep lightly." She took a step past him, one hand reaching for the doorknob. "You didn't get your book. Maybe I could help you find one."

She was within inches of the door when Norden came to life.

"Not necessary," he said brusquely.

His hand went out and turned the knob. The tips of her reaching fingers just brushed the back of his hand. He went past her almost rudely and reached around for the light switch.

If her prints were on the knob or the switch now he wouldn't be able to determine whether or not she had been in here before. Maybe that was what she had meant to do—put prints on things in the presence of a witness.

He stepped aside.

"Thank you," she said, in an odd, surprised voice. She blinked a little at the brightness of the lights. Norden watched her closely. She moved toward the bookcases, not looking specifically toward the other side of the room but not seeming to avoid it, either. He was acutely conscious of Arthur's gray suede shoes and gray silk pajamas against the dun of the carpet.

"Most of the books were taken away by Mr. Decker," she said. "He moved them into his wing when he abandoned this."

"When did that happen?" Norden asked.

"Last fall when he got sick," she said. A faint smile touched her lips. "He never did use this part much, anyway. If we had kept it hot enough here for him the rest of us would have suffocated."

"Considerate of him to leave it for the rest

of you," Norden said. It struck him that such an action was not in character with Jonathan Decker. And he thought, "Maybe she's the one who got the Boss to hire me. She's loyal to old Decker. Maybe she was trying to protect him."

Maybe she had done this to Arthur for the same reason. Norden wouldn't have blamed her. But it was hard to visualize this quiet, self-possessed girl in such a rage she could drive a knife into a man and then hammer on it until he was skewered to the floor.

"I don't seem to find anything particularly interesting," she said, at the bookcase. She straightened and turned toward him. He moved in an attempt to keep her view cut off from the other side of the room.

"Is it important?" he asked.

"No," she said, "but—" She broke off. "Are you ill?"

"No," Norden said.

"You're acting peculiarly."

SHE stepped around him. Norden tried desperately to move and yet remain casual about it. He was too late. She had taken a single step past him and now she could not help seeing the far side of the room. Norden saw her become motionless, her body rigid. Her mouth twisted in quick fear and she darted forward.

Norden reached out a long arm and caught her by the waist when she was within three steps of the body. He held her until she stopped fighting.

Her spasm was brief. She gasped and pushed at his arm, then was still, except for a quivering in her muscles. Norden took his arm away.

"I wouldn't want you to mess up anything," he said.

She looked at him uncomprehendingly. "It's Arthur. He—I suppose he's drunk again." Norden felt that there was something in her voice that didn't ring true.

"When did you see him last?" he wanted to know. "Does he leave your room to come down here and do some solitary drinking?"

She shook her head. Her fright was slowly ebbing, and a little color was coming back. "He's usually in a chair," she said. "Or he makes it to the upstairs hall."

Norden repeated his question.

"Why," she said, "I saw him last just after dinner."

"Not at bedtime?"

"We have separate rooms," Linda said stiffly. "Mr. Norden, if you'll let me go so I can get him to bed—"

Norden was watching her closely. "No," he said. "He's dead."

She stared at him as though he had offered a comment on the weather. Then she turned and took three steps to the nearest chair, sitting down carefully. Her head came up.

"Dead? Arthur — Mr. Norden," — she spoke with sudden sharpness—"you knew this when we were outside. You—you let him lie here and—"

"I let him lie here," Norden said, "because the law reads that way."

He could hear the slow intake of her breath become quick and startled. Comprehension seemed to reach her all at once. She started out of her chair.

She said, "He's been murdered! That's what you mean!"

"Yes," Norden said, "that's what I mean."

"And that's why you've acted so—so oddly."

Norden was trying to understand exactly why *she* had acted as she had. She was quiet, but not shocked. It was almost as if she had accepted something inevitable. Norden wished he knew her better. She might, he thought, be a skillful actress.

Her tongue touched her lips. "How was he—killed?"

"With a knife."

She did not change expression but Norden saw an almost imperceptible relaxing of tension. "Then that thumping I heard was Arthur?"

"Yes," Norden said. "That's what brought me down here."

"A knife," she said softly. "Who—"

"I don't know," Norden said. "You could answer that better than I."

"I could? You don't think I killed him?"

"I don't know," Norden said honestly. He took cigarettes and matches from his pocket. She refused and he lit a cigarette for himself. "The police will think of you first, since

you're his wife. What I meant was that you know the people here better than I do. You can judge them more accurately."

She shook her head. "I can't conceive of anyone."

"Not even Alene? She threatened him tonight."

"I've threatened him, too, when I was angry. That doesn't mean I killed him."

"Where are you going?" Norden asked.

She had got up and was walking toward the door. "To tell Mr. Decker."

CHAPTER VII

FACING DISASTER



BERT Norden stopped Linda at the door. "I'll take care of this," he told her. He looked at his watch. "It's four in the morning. You can't wake up the old man now."

Norden had put his hand on her arm and she shook it off abruptly. "We can't just let—him lie there."

"We can and will," Norden said. "It's a matter for the police. They'll have to be called at once."

She was looking at him closely. "You seem to know a great deal about it, Mr. Norden." She paused and added, "About murders, I mean."

"I know what the procedure is," Norden said. She was sharp enough to see that he was functioning much more efficiently than a private secretary normally would. He added lamely, "Most people do."

Linda put her hand on the door knob. "I don't care what most people do," she said. "This is Mr. Decker's house. It's up to him to call."

Norden saw no use in arguing. He said, "All right," and took the key from the door. He locked the door from the outside and walked silently with Linda to Decker's door.

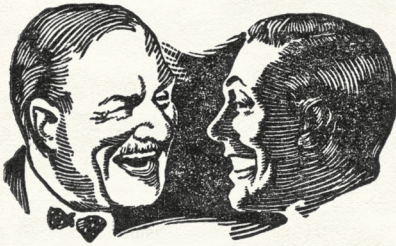
Linda pressed the buzzer. The red light blinked and she lifted the phone.

"It's Linda, Mr. Decker. And Mr. Norden."

There was a sharp sound, unintelligible to Norden. Linda replaced the phone and opened the door. Norden followed her into the stifling heat of the odd Victorian drawing room.

Norden followed Linda to the far side of the room and through a wide doorway into a smaller room, a Victorian library. Walls on both sides were lined with book shelves. Beside a massive desk, on which was an ornate lamp, Decker sat in his wheel-chair. A book rested on his lap and his hands were folded over it. He regarded them quietly. The old man looked wide awake, and not at all tired.

His eyes moved past Linda to Norden. "Pajamas," he observed. "Don't tell me you've fallen in love already."



LAW BUSINESS

by SAM L. MANN

*"I've got a case," the lawyer said,
"Although you wouldn't think it."
"Okay, my friend," I said with glee,
"Let's go, I'll help you drink it!"*

Linda flushed. Norden said, "It's more of a problem than that."

A faint smile worked on the old man's thin lips. "It must be to get you both up at this hour of the morning."

Linda said shortly, "It's Arthur, Mr. Decker."

Norden said, "He's been murdered."

Jonathan Decker's hands moved slightly, rising, then settling back on the book in his lap. His expression remained questioning.

"I'm surprised it hasn't happened before this," he said.

Linda took a sharp breath. Her control was going. "Don't you understand? Someone stabbed him! He's—dead!" She took a quick forward step. "Someone in this house killed him! Someone—"

Norden caught her arm. "Sit down a minute," he suggested.

She tried to shake free. "You all act so—so much as if it didn't matter!"

Norden was gentle but his grip was firm. He drew her toward a chair and half pushed her into it. She stared up at him. "You do!" she accused. "You—"

"Get her a glass of wine," Decker said. "Over there."

On top of a small cabinet stood a decanter and six crystal glasses. Norden poured a glass of dry sherry and took it to Linda.

"Don't break down now," he said in a low voice. "Coming here was your idea!"

FOR an instant a flash of anger lit up her eyes, and then the starch went out of her and she slumped. She sipped the wine apathetically.

Norden turned to Decker. "Someone," he said, "got to Arthur during the night. In the library." He recounted the details briefly. "I don't think he would live long after being stabbed that way, so he was killed about an hour ago. Three o'clock, perhaps."

When Norden was through talking, Jonathan Decker said:

"Take Linda to her room and come back."

Linda stood up, moving jerkily. "Mr. Decker, don't you understand? Arthur's been killed. Someone here—Mr. Norden wanted to call the police right away. But it's your house and—"

"Then," Decker said, "let me handle it."

Norden took the half-empty wine glass from Linda's hand. Setting it aside, he gently led her from the room. But outside the hall door she pulled away from him.

"I can go by myself."

Norden stayed beside her. "You don't like me, do you?"

"I neither like nor dislike you," she answered. "I simply want to be alone—now."

"I was told to escort you to your room," he said.

She was silent as they ascended the stairs,

as if she accepted the old man's word as law.

They stopped before the door of her room, which was on a corner. The room was dark except for a small lamp on a stand beside the bed. The house was incredibly still.

"Can I get you anything before I go back?" he asked.

"No. I'm quite all right." The rigid lines under her jaw showed that she was fighting for control. Norden understood why she wanted to be alone—she was ready to break down.

He said, "Of course you're all right," and walked past her into the bedroom. She made a startled sound of angry protest but Norden kept going. The door to the bathroom stood open and he went in, snapping on the light.

Opening the medicine cabinet over the washstand, Norden ran his eye quickly over the contents on the shelves. He picked up the sedative bottle dubiously. It was a prescription and the label read: "One only at bedtime."

It would have to do, though he would have preferred something milder. Norden unscrewed the cap and shook a small tablet into his palm. The mirror in the door of the medicine cabinet revealed his shock of recalcitrant hair standing in all directions, but it failed to interest him. Behind him Linda was also caught in the mirror. She was standing in the doorway, one hand holding to the door jamb for support.

"Aren't you being very forward, Mr. Norden?"

Norden filled her bathroom glass with water and turned to her. "Very forward," he admitted. "Take this." He held out the pill and the water.

"I don't need that." She held herself straight.

Norden was tired. He said roughly, "You'll take it or I'll push it down your throat, Mrs. Pitman."

SHE had spirit. She drew herself up and stared at him defiantly. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself!" she said evenly.

"Of course," Norden said.

Setting down the water glass, he put the tablet between a thumb and forefinger and

stepped toward her. Then she started to turn, but it was too late. Norden's long arm caught both of hers and pinned them to her sides. Her mouth came open and she gasped.

Norden pushed the pill into her mouth, caught her nose and chin between his thumb and forefinger and pressed. Her mouth closed. Tears started from her eyes and she made a violent motion to free herself.

He wasn't enjoying himself. He disliked using force on a woman, especially one like Linda Pitman. And he disliked, at the moment, the sensation of her body pressed so tightly against his.

The struggle was unequal. She was strong, but he was stronger, and his determination was equal to hers. She swallowed.

Norden released the hand that held her mouth shut. He got the water glass and held it to her lips. She drank with a gulp that made her choke a little.

He removed his arm. "I'm sorry," he said.

She stepped away from him. "If you'll go now—" she said frigidly.

Norden said, "No. Not until you're asleep."

She shrugged, and walked back into the bedroom. Norden followed her.

CHAPTER VIII

COMPETITION



LINDA removed her negligee and paused to throw back the bed covers that had been folded down at one corner. The lamp on the bedstand revealed a good deal more than Norden wished to see right then. The bed had not been disturbed. The pillows were smooth and plump, the sheets unwrinkled.

The light caught Linda in profile, and revealed the pristine appearance of her pale green pajamas. They were satin and would show sleep wrinkles plainly had there been any.

She paused with one knee on the bed. The movement drew the pajama top tautly over her high, full breast, and Norden could see

the sharp rise of it as she took a sudden breath.

She said, "You'll think a lot of things now."

Norden knew then that she was aware of the discrepancy between her earlier story of having been asleep and the present smooth condition of the bed and her pajamas.

"Things that aren't my business, perhaps," he said carefully.

"When the police come they'll ask you —"

"They don't have to know I was in your room," Norden said.

She slid under the covers, drawing the blankets close to her chin. Her hair spread out against the pillows, like old gold.

"Why should you protect me?" she asked.

He could hear the first suggestion of sleep coming into her voice and see the slow, inevitable drooping of her eyelids. He sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Why should I condemn you?" he countered.

A brief flash dispelled the sleepiness momentarily. "You were hired to spy on us, weren't you?"

"*Et tu, Brute,*" he said. "Who is 'us'?"

"Mr. Decker and me."

"Oh," Norden said. It was the one answer he hadn't expected. "Where did you get that idea?"

She opened her eyes with an effort.

"I heard Arthur talking to his mother," she said. "I—"

Norden wished she would stay awake for at least another minute. He leaned toward her. "What did they say?" he demanded.

She spoke sleepily, her eyes closing while she talked. "Arthur said he would—like to get—to get something—"

Norden realized she would say no more. She lay quietly, her slow, rhythmic breathing raising and lowering the covers gently. Abruptly he arose and snapped off the light.

Opening the door, he stepped into the hall. He drew the door gently shut behind him, wondering how long it would be before the old man called the police.

His watch said a quarter to five. He looked up from it to see Alene Pitman staring owlishly at him from the other side of the hallway.

There was one inescapable fact. Alene had seen him coming from Linda's room at this hour, in a robe and pajamas, and she would have no idea of what had actually happened. In similar circumstances he would think much the same she was thinking.

Alene's sharp features looked rather fuzzy as Norden stared silently back at her. He realized quite suddenly that she was wearing the white blouse and red skirt of the afternoon, but with a matching red jacket over the blouse now. And she seemed quite drunk.

She pressed her finger to her lips with an exaggerated motion, then beckoned to him. Norden went to her.

"Arthur won't like that," she said. Norden was noncommittal. "Won't he be sore!"

"It isn't what you think," Norden said, and realized the futility of it as he spoke.

SHE laughed and swayed a little. "I won't tell—maybe."

Norden said, "I think you'd better get to bed, Miss Pitman."

She pouted. "Don't you tell me what to do. I'll go to bed when I want to. Come an' have a drink with me."

"It's nearly five o'clock," Norden pointed out.

She waved a hand airily. "What's five o'clock? Come have a drink with me."

Norden said, "No," and started away.

"I'll scream!" she threatened. "I'll tell what you been doing. I'll—"

"All right," Norden said wearily. He wished the killer had done a more thorough job on the Pitman family. "Where?"

"My room," she said, and tucked her arm through his.

It was directly across from Norden's. "Convenient, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes," Norden said.

She opened the door and walked in, Norden after her. There was no light at all after she pushed the door shut. Norden felt her press against him in the darkness, a blatant action. If there had ever been any subtlety in her the liquor had removed it.

Her arms crept up about his neck. He could feel her breasts against him. He remembered what Jonathan Decker had told him about Alene. She was playing with fire

without knowing what it was. Arthur's opinion had been the opposite.

He bent his head and kissed her. She responded so thoroughly that he began to think Arthur's opinion was much closer to the truth than her grandfather's.

Norden allowed himself to be drawn to the divan. He was beginning to make out objects in the gloom, though Alene's face was an indistinct whitish blur. He knew he had come to a divan because it hit him just below the knees. He sat down. She followed, folding suddenly into his lap. Norden put an arm around her.

"What about that drink?"

"In a minute," she murmured. He could feel her lips searching for his. They were full and soft as they slid across his chin to his mouth. Her kiss was almost violent in its hunger.

This was getting to be more than Norden had bargained for. Jonathan Decker was downstairs waiting for him to return, a man was dead in the library, and the police must be called. Alene felt his lack of response.

Abruptly she got to her feet.

"Damn you!" she said angrily. "I suppose I'm not as good as *she* is." Her voice took on a spitting sound. "I know her—don't think I don't. She's not so innocent. Ask Ray Cole if you don't think I'm right."

"You're 'don't thinking' me dizzy," Norden said, and forced his voice to a caress. "Look, honey. I'm in no position to do what I might want to. You're the old man's granddaughter. I'm only his secretary."

"If I can be democratic about it, you can," she said.

"Sure, but give me a chance to get used to it, won't you?"

She laughed softly. "All right. One more kiss."

NORDEN bent to kiss her and when she pulled her lips away he said, "I think I'm going to like this job."

"Just don't get too many reasons for liking it," she said.

A light came on. She was standing by a floor lamp at the end of the couch. She smiled at him, showing her sharp, even little teeth.

"Just have one reason, Bert," she said.

"One's all I want," Norden assured her. He wished she would get that drink; he needed it now.

Instead she walked to him and turned her back. "Unbutton my blouse," she ordered.

Norden looked at the buttons down the back of the blouse and started in. Fortunately they were simple buttons. He kissed her neck where the blouse fell away from it.

"And since you know where I was until five o'clock this morning," he said, "maybe I should know where you were."

He felt her stiffen slightly. He wondered if he had misjudged her drunkenness. As the last button came loose, with a twist she pulled the blouse off. She wore nothing at all beneath it.

"Oh, the jealous kind," she said, and tugged at the zipper of her skirt.

Norden fled.

In the hall, he sucked in a breath of air, and made for the stairway. He could hear sharp swearing from the bedroom.

He slowed at the foot of the stairs, pausing to wipe his forehead with a handkerchief. He was about to go on when he heard a noise. He stopped, one foot half raised. The noise was repeated, a scraping, rather sibilant sound. And it came from the library.

Norden took the key of the library door out of his pocket, then dropped it back. He took out his handkerchief and wrapped it around the door knob. He put on pressure slowly and quietly, feeling the knob give as he turned it. It should have been locked; it wasn't.

He swung the door open quickly and stepped into the darkness of the room. His hand was reaching for the light switch when he heard the sound again, right beside him this time. There was a rush of sound in his ears as some object was driven through the air toward him.

He tried to dodge. But he was too slow. The blow caught him on the temple. He went sideward, reaching out with his long arms. The next blow caught him as he was falling.

Whatever had hit him, it felt soft like a leather-stuffed bung-starter.

The darkness was soft as it enfolded him.

CHAPTER IX

DISAPPEARING CORPSE



OPENING his eyes, Norden was aware of dull gray daylight. He tried to lift his head. Groaning, he let it fall gently back to the pillow.

He decided he must have the great-grandfather of all hangovers. His head

throbbed from the back to the front, the pulsating waves of pain banging up against his eyeballs and bounding merrily to the rear, where they started all over again. His mouth had a taste reminiscent of the inside of a bat's cave.

He lifted his hand to his head and gingerly felt of a sore lump on his left temple. He could feel another tender spot where his head pressed into the pillow. And slowly remembrance of what had happened returned.

Someone had been in the library and had sapped him. Someone else had found him and hauled him up to bed. That much was simple to deduce. Then he heard a sound beside him. Slowly he let out his breath and turned his head.

He wasn't alone. He was not in the least alone. There was a form beside him, a head on the other pillow.

Norden froze. He felt as if every muscle had become locked in ice. He looked at the cascade of blonde hair on the pillow beside him, then at all of the room he could see from the alcove in which his bed was set.

It was obviously his own room. He could see the buff divan with the two empty glasses on the arm. The smell of Boyle's strong tobacco still clung tenuously in the air.

Equally definite was the fact that he was sharing the room in a most intimate fashion. He had started to get up when there was a discreet knock on the door. Norden opened his mouth to tell whoever it was to go away and stay away. Before he could get his throat muscles organized the door opened and Boyle came in.

"I came to wake you, sir," Boyle said. "Mr. Decker is expecting you downstairs.

It's past eleven o'clock."

Norden hoped that Boyle was nearsighted. He said, "I'll be right down. Give me fifteen minutes. I—"

Beside him, Linda Pitman stirred. Boyle's eyes focused on her.

Boyle said, "Yes, sir. Is that all, sir?"

Norden couldn't tell whether Boyle was sorrowful or angry. "Listen," he said, "this is a frame-up." He knew he must look like the dregs of a badly misspent night. "I was sapped sometime this morning."

"Yes, sir," Boyle said again.

His expression shaded toward the contemptuous. Norden felt like shaking a little sense into the man.

"Just don't shoot off your mouth, that's all," Norden said. "It would go hard on the lady. Remember that."

"Yes, sir," Boyle repeated, and turned to go out.

Norden locked the door viciously as soon as Boyle was through it. He regarded one outstretched hand. It was shaking badly, and his head throbbed unmercifully. But after a moment it calmed down enough for him to concentrate. He would have to get Linda Pitman out of here before she awoke.

Good Lord, what if the police already had arrived, and they found her here! Surely the old man had called them by now. He blessed a new fall of snow that most likely had more completely blocked the highway.

He went in the bathroom and dressed quickly.

IN THE bedroom, he looked once more at the bed. Linda apparently had not moved; it had been a powerful sleeping pill.

He unlocked the door and looked cautiously into the hall. There was no one in sight. Opening the door wide, Norden hurried back to the bed, threw back the covers. Linda wore the same green pajamas, but they were sleep-wrinkled now. He scooped her up and started for the door.

He stopped just short of the hall. He said foolishly, "Oh." Cora Pitman stared back at him from outside the door. Norden backed into the room, kicked the door shut, returned Linda to the bed, and covered her up.

Norden was disgusted with himself for having retreated so ignominiously, as he again jerked open the door and stepped into the hall. It was empty. Swearing sulphurously, he locked the door from the outside and turned away.

At the foot of the stairs he stopped before the library door. He tried the handle, using his handkerchief. The door opened easily. This room seemed as public as a railway station.

The library was quiet. The curtains were drawn, and Norden snapped on the light. There was no sign of any disturbance except for a crushed cigarette on the floor near the door. It had burned a small black spot on the rug.

There was no sign of Arthur's body!

Norden dropped to his knees and studied the floor behind the chair. There should have been blood, or at least a mark where the knife had gone through Arthur and into the rug. There was nothing.

Norden stood up. He pulled the chair forward. He saw the slight indentations the feet of the chair had made on the rug. Carefully he set the chair with all four feet covering the indentations. Then he could see the slight discoloration, and the slit where the knife blade had penetrated the rug.

Norden looked around. Something had been used to drive the knife into Arthur. Books were too soft to have battered the wood on the handle of the knife. Slowly he walked about the room, but saw nothing that could possibly have been used.

When he reached the desk, he began opening drawers. There was nothing in any of them but a few sheets of blank paper.

He was shoving them back in when the top right-hand drawer stopped abruptly. Norden pushed on it and heard the sound of wood breaking. He pulled the drawer free of the desk, examining it.

One side was battered as if it had been used to hammer something. A large splinter stuck out at an angle. Norden returned the drawer to the desk with a vicious shove that broke the rest of the splinter.

Arthur's murder had been more than the result of an angry impulse. It had taken time for his killer to get the drawer for use

as a hammer, and to wiggle the drawer back in past the splintered place. And while that was going on, Norden thought, Arthur had been kicking the wall.

He strode angrily from the room and went down the hall to Jonathan Decker's door. His finger hit the button hard. The red light came on almost at once. Norden lifted the phone.

"Norden here."

"Come in." The old man's tones were sharp, commanding.

Norden hung up the phone and went into the room. The heat hit him, adding to his irritation. He found the old man in his library, his wheel-chair drawn up before the desk. A pot of coffee was on a hotplate on a nearby table. Decker pushed aside a sheaf of papers as Norden approached.

Norden stopped in front of the desk. He said flatly, "I quit—as of now. You haven't notified the police, and I refuse to help cover up a murder."

DECKER stretched out a thin, clawlike hand and took a cigar from a humidor. "You insist on the police, I suppose?"

"Not even you can buy concealment forever," Norden told him.

The old man's bushy eyebrows rose. "Concealment? Norden, I don't care to be accused of something I know nothing about." His voice became imperious. "Explain yourself!"

Norden said, "Last night after I gave Linda a sleeping tablet, and succeeded in getting free of your predatory granddaughter, I heard a noise in the library. I went in and someone sapped me. When I came to, I was in bed. So was Linda—with me. But that's secondary. I just left the library a few minutes ago. The body was gone. A chair had been moved to cover the blood-stain and the cut in the rug."

Decker's eyes were fixed coldly on Norden's face. There was no smile on his thin lips.

"And you think I did that?"

"I think you had it done. To avoid scandal. You think you're big enough to handle this affair without outside help."

"I do—but I have no intention of trying

to handle it that way."

"You've made no attempt to call the police. They like to know about such things." Norden added caustically, "Sometimes they even solve murder cases."

Decker waved away the sarcasm. "I think I can rely on you for that," he said. "I was given to understand that you're a clever detective. At least you have that reputation."

The old man chuckled. "I never hire a man until I investigate him thoroughly, Norden."

"I wondered about that," Norden admitted.

Decker's lips curled contemptuously. "Someone in this family thought he or she was being clever. I knew before you did that you were being sent here."

"And hired me anyway?"

"Because of it, perhaps," the old man told him.

"Then you didn't want a secretary at all," Norden went on. "You wanted someone like me—but perhaps with fewer scruples than I have?"

"No. Your scruples have uses. For one thing, I understand that you can't be bribed."

"As far as I know, I can't," Norden said. "But then no one has ever offered enough to tempt me." He got out his cigarettes. "It was a fortunate coincidence that whoever hired me fell in with your plans," he remarked. "Just how did you get it across to the right member of the family to be so helpful?"

"I know my family, Norden. It was enough at first to say that I was thinking of getting a new secretary. I asked my daughter to do a little inquiring for me when she visited Seattle."

"Then your daughter hired me," Norden said quickly.

Decker showed annoyance. "Unfortunately I can't answer that. Because I don't know." Norden raised his eyebrows. "I've found out everything but that," the old man explained.

"And who killed Arthur," said Norden sharply.

"And who killed Arthur," Jonathan Decker admitted.

CHAPTER X

CUL DE SAC



NORDEN was skeptical.

"But you did know someone had made arrangements with my boss, Mr. Decker," he said.

"Yes. That arrangement was made by letter. My—someone here noted

the fact for me. It was simple enough to get the information from your office. All but the name of the person who dealt with your boss." He looked steadily at Norden. "I had hoped you'd know the answer to that."

"No," Norden said. "And I wouldn't tell you if I did."

"Then your first loyalty is not to me?"

"I can tell you this much," Norden admitted frankly. "I'm to make a weekly report. I don't know any more about it than that."

"And that report?"

"Is to be all-inclusive, yes."

The old man was silent a moment, then he said abruptly, "What's your salary?"

"When I work I make thirty-five a day and expenses."

"Plus what I pay you, of course."

"Yes."

"I can pay you more than that."

"I'm aware of it," Norden said.

"What would you say to twenty thousand dollars?"

"For what?"

"Working for me exclusively. But hardly making out your reports as you'd planned."

Norden shook his head. "I'll stick with the Boss."

Decker looked from his bony hands to Norden. "So you're going? And of course you'll report to the police? The moment you can get through the snow-blocked roads?"

"I wouldn't have my license long if I didn't. I could put in a call from here."

Decker's thin lips twisted a little wryly. "You didn't know that since last night's snowfall the wires are down?"

Norden hadn't known. He shrugged. "Sorry I can't use skis or snowshoes," he said. "But surely someone here can."

"We have no such things here," old Decker said blandly. "Nor do we have a radio—especially one of those two-way abominations. I wouldn't have a radio on the place."

He wouldn't, thought Norden. That wouldn't be Victorian enough. It was a wonder that he had electric lights, or a telephone at all.

The old man was silent a moment, then he murmured thoughtfully, "The police—it's going to be hard on Linda."

Norden stared at him, and slowly a smile touched his mouth. He said, "What's Linda to me?"

"An albatross," Decker said, and his smile matched Norden's.

The old man was a chess player. Right now he believed he had found the one spot where Norden was vulnerable, that to protect a woman the detective might sacrifice his scruples—at least until the old man could carry out whatever plan he had in mind.

Decker pressed a button on his desk. In a moment Boyle appeared. Norden noted that disapproval was still apparent in Boyle's bearing.

"Bring my lunch, Boyle. And get Norden some breakfast."

Boyle walked out quickly and quietly.

Norden looked at Decker. "I was sapped and Linda was put in my bed. Now I see its purpose. The police will conclude that Linda hired me to help her get rid of a husband. Or that she made love to me and talked me into it."

"Don't misjudge me, Norden. That I'm perfectly capable of taking advantage of a situation doesn't mean I created it. And if any member of my family—er—framed you, rest assured they will use that frame."

"Even as you are."

"I'm offering you a chance to beat them to the punch—and to unmask the real killer."

"By working for you?"

"Yes."

"Thereby saving Linda's reputation."

"And possibly your own."

Norden's voice was level. "And make twenty thousand dollars." He added bitterly,

"Don't forget to return me my scruples when you hand me the check."

HE ENJOYED his breakfast even if he did have to eat it on Decker's desk. He mopped up ham and scrambled eggs, toast, grapefruit, and coffee.

Decker consumed a salad, a small steak, and milk. Norden was amazed at the old man's appetite.

"Your doctor wouldn't approve of a meal like that," he remarked.

"My doctor," Decker said, "is twenty miles down the snow-bound road. I'm older than he is and healthier." He pushed aside his tray, and reached for a cigar. When it was lighted he said, "For the time being your status will remain the same."

"As your secretary?"

"I don't want to reveal just yet that I know you were planted on me."

"What about my report?"

"When that's due," Decker said, "things may be cleared up."

"What about Arthur?"

Decker rolled his cigar carefully in his fingers. "Let's say that neither you nor Linda saw him. Then we can determine who puts up what excuse for his absence."

"Can we get Linda to agree to this?" Norden asked drily.

"I'll speak to Linda."

Norden said doubtfully, "I suppose by now it's common knowledge that she was in my bed."

"Boyle won't say anything."

"Mrs. Pitman may. She saw me."

"I'll speak to Cora," Decker said.

Norden got up. "What do you want me to do first?"

"Learn all you can as fast as you can."

"I want to look the place over thoroughly."

"All right. Make me an inventory. See me again after dinner at the pool. I reserve it for my use for two hours after dinner."

When Norden reached the foot of the stairs, the library door was open and the hum of a vacuum cleaner came from inside. Investigating, Norden found Beth, the maid.

"Who told you to clean this room?" he asked. She didn't even turn around.

"Damn!" Norden shouted.

Beth jumped and looked toward him. She backed off, dragging the vacuum cleaner with her.

"Shut that thing off," Norden bellowed. Nervously she did, and he repeated his question.

"I clean this room every day, sir," she said. She looked at Norden as though he might be slightly crazy.

"Hold still," Norden said. "I won't bite—not right now, anyway. Didn't anyone tell you *not* to clean this room?"

"No, sir," she said. "I always clean this room."

Norden said, "But if you were told not to clean this room, who would give the order?"

"Oh!" she said. "Mr. Boyle."

Norden said, "Thank you." That answer could mean a lot—or it could mean nothing. He said suddenly, "When did you see Arthur last?"

She jumped. "Mr. Arthur, sir?" she said. "I haven't seen him since dinner last night."

This girl was without guile, Norden was sure. Her only reaction was to twist the handle of the vacuum cleaner nervously.

"Relax," Norden told her, as he left the room and started up the stairs.

He wanted to lie down and do a little thinking. A great deal of thinking. He was not pleased when Alene's door opened and her head popped out.

"Darling!" Her voice was a carrying whisper. To Norden it sounded unpleasantly like a hiss.

"I ran out on you because I thought you were too drunk," he said inanely.

Her hair was tousled, but her make-up was on. She pouted at him.

"Not that drunk. Come in a minute. I want to talk."

Norden walked resignedly toward her.

The pajamas Alene wore were evidently for lounging rather than sleeping. They were of a Chinese design, the red blouse fastening high at the neck and the black trousers loose and straight. A silver dragon of intricate design sprawled over the left breast of the blouse.

She said coolly, "Don't look as if you've never seen me before. It was just last night."

She was pouting again. "And you needn't have run out, you know."

CHAPTER XI

RELUCTANT ALLY



CALMLY Norden helped himself to a cigarette from a box, and folded himself on the divan. As he snapped a lighter, Alene asked:

"Must you shake so?"

Norden grinned feebly.

"I get that way sometimes."

"Like when you unbutton blouses?"

"Like then," Norden said. "I told you I needed time to get used to things."

She sat beside him, close. "How much time, Bert?" Her lashes were lowered, and he could think of the peculiar expression on her face only as predatory.

He said, "If your mother should happen onto me here she might not appreciate it. I'm a little old and a little—broke—for you."

She made a sighing sound and drew her legs up under her. "I like a little maturity in a man. Don't try to make me dislike you. It won't work." Her upper lip curled back over her small, sharp teeth. The lower one was full and red and moist.

Despite her obviousness, there was something about Alene that Norden liked. But he found a great deal to dislike as well.

Stubbing out his cigarette, he got up. "Sorry, but I have to get to work."

"Without even kissing me?"

"I never kiss women before cocktail time." Norden made it to the door in three rapid strides.

"Be sure you have your cocktails with me, then."

"And Arthur again—like yesterday?" he asked casually, but caught no off-guard reaction.

"Not unless you want to listen to his nasty remarks," she said. "Let's have our drinks by the pool." She smiled brightly. "And take a swim."

"Fine," Norden agreed, opened the door, and shut it carefully behind him.

There was no one in sight, and he made it to his room quickly. Someone had made his bed, and taken away the liquor glasses. Norden glanced toward the desk. His letter was on the top now. It could have been moved by the maid while dusting, of course.

But, remembering Decker's saying he had got wind of the plan to hire Norden via letter, he went to the desk and read what he had written. He would have quite a reputation if all his amatory escapades, real and supposed, came to the attention of Decker's informant.

Seating himself, he picked up the pen and began to add a little more to "Amy."

A number of puzzling things have happened since I came, darling. Very strange things. It's almost as if my coming had started a series of events that—

Norden's pen stopped. He stared down at what he had written. He had slipped in that line straight from the feed bag without realizing it. Without having been aware of his own idea until now.

It was definitely something to think about. Possibly it was just the thing for someone to see.

He was about to resume writing when there was a knock on the door. It was a brisk sound, authoritative.

Norden thought, "Here it is." He called, "Come in," and added to himself, "Mrs. Pitman."

Only it wasn't. The door opened, David Pitman came in, and shut the door with a decisive gesture. The little man still looked like a rabbit. But he wasn't. Unless he was a very angry rabbit.

Norden rose. "Sit down," he offered politely. "What can I do for you, sir?"

Pitman clicked his teeth. He seemed to be trying to talk and having a little trouble. He finally managed, "I—Damn it, Norden, I've heard things about you."

Norden decided that the little man wasn't angry after all—just full of Dutch courage, injected by his wife probably. Norden felt sorry for Pitman; he would have felt sorry for anyone who had got himself entangled with a wife like Cora Pitman and had developed offspring like Alene and Arthur.

Norden said, "Won't you have a drink?"

"Young man, I said—" Pitman broke off and stared at Norden. The normal red of his face deepened several shades. "Are you mocking me?"

Norden shook his head. "I always figured a couple of guys can always talk better with a bottle between them."

Pitman seemed to sense Norden's sincerity. He said, "Make it light."

NORDEN made both drinks light, his experience with Boyle being a warning. He handed Pitman his drink.

Pitman took the couch, Norden the chair.

Norden smiled helpfully. "Mrs. Pitman suggested this, I suppose."

Pitman colored again. "Yes, she did. She—"

Norden helped him out. "It's about Linda, then?"

"Linda?" Pitman's eyes blinked rapidly behind his thick glasses. "No, it's about Alene, Norden. Cora says—Cora says you—Damn it, you came out of my daughter's room after five o'clock this morning! In your pajamas!"

Norden couldn't tell whether Pitman's outraged Victorianism was genuine or the result of his wife's prodding. He said, "Mrs. Pitman saw me?"

"She just said you were seen." Pitman's eyes and face reflected misery. "I don't suppose she saw you. It sounds more like one of Arthur's stories." He finished his drink. "Damned brat!"

It was the first genuinely forceful statement he had made. Norden wondered just how much faith he could put in it. Even so, his obscure liking for Pitman grew. He said, "I can explain it, if you want me to."

Pitman looked belligerent. "I don't know if I want you to, Norden. I'm not at all sure that I do."

Norden said, "Tell your wife it was a pipe dream." He took a deep breath. "At five this morning I was—very busy. She may know what I mean."

He felt like a heel as he said it, but since Cora Pitman would put only one interpretation on Linda's being in his room it didn't really matter.

Pitman got up. "All right." He started for the door and stopped suddenly. "I didn't come because I wanted to. Damn it, I don't want to know." He paused, and blurted, "Alene's a little—well, wild." Norden could see tears behind his heavy glasses. "I never want to know how wild. There's some good in her—that's the part I want to know about." He went out, slamming the door after him.

Norden stretched out on the couch. "That poor guy's lonesome as hell," he thought. . . .



"I listed the \$5,000 I got for bumpin' off Bug O'Neill on my income tax and here I am."

Norden had no intention of falling asleep. But when he heard the knock on his door he realized that he was struggling awake. He made it and got to his feet.

"Come in," he called, and yawned.

The door opened. Linda stood in the doorway, not entering the room. She was wearing a plain green dress without ornamentation of any kind. Her hair was in a bun, giving her face a slightly drawn look. She wore little make-up but lipstick. She was still too damned beautiful.

"I'd like to talk to you," she murmured.

"Where?" Norden asked.

"The library, I suppose. We won't be disturbed there."

Norden took her elbow as they started down the staircase. She pulled free of him and went on one step ahead. Norden

shrugged and followed in silence.

As they went into the empty library Norden saw Linda's glance go automatically toward the chair across the room. He said, "Nothing there."

She looked at him. "I know. Did you—" "Hardly."

Linda pushed the door shut and walked toward the bookcases. She turned to face him, resting her hands on the back of a chair. "Mr. Norden, I—"

Norden lit a cigarette and dropped the match into a nearby ash stand.

Linda bit her lip. "I've been talking to Mr. Decker."

Norden nodded. "So have I."

"I understand you—resigned."

"I don't like frame-ups," he said.

A flush warmed her creamy skin. "Are you referring to my being in your bed?"

IT HADN'T been easy for her to say it. He was surprised at so much modesty in a modern woman.

"That's some of it," he admitted. "The rest is this." He waved his hand at the chair across the room. "I came downstairs shortly after five this morning. Someone was in here. I poked my head in and nearly got it knocked off."

"I know," she said, "and you woke up with me."

"You don't have to sound so skeptical," Norden told her.

"Mr. Decker told me."

Norden perched on the wide, rounded arm of a chair. "But you don't choose to believe it."

"I choose to remember that you gave me a sleeping tablet."

A smile flickered across Norden's face. "Under protest, too," he said, and repeated a question of the night before. "You don't like me, do you?"

"That's beside the point," she answered.

"How much did Decker tell you?" Norden asked.

She seemed a little surprised. "All there was to tell, I suppose. That for the time being we won't say anything about—about Arthur."

"Not even to the police," Norden added

for her. "And you agreed?"

"Certainly."

"You have a lot of faith in Decker," he said.

"I have a great deal of faith in his judgment."

Norden remembered her insistence on going to Decker before calling the police. "But none in mine?" he asked.

She said a little contemptuously, "I hardly know you, Mr. Norden."

"There's little to know," Norden said lightly. "I'm tall and skinny. I drink too much at times. I have a nasty habit of speaking my mind if I don't watch myself. And I can be a Grade-A heel if I think I'm being handed a doublecross."

Her face was impassive. "Meaning you think that now?"

"I'm not sure," Norden said. "Did Decker say anything about your cooperating with me?"

"Yes."

"Do you accept his judgment in that, too?"

"You needn't mock me, Mr. Norden."

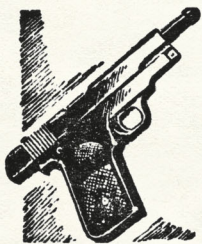
Norden threw his cigarette in an ashtray. "For cripes sake, I'm not mocking you! If we're going to do anything about all this, we'll have to work together, not fight."

"I agreed to that."

"Sit down," Norden said.

CHAPTER XII

LIKE A DETECTIVE



JUST a moment Linda hesitated, then sat down in the chair she had been leaning against.

"All right," Norden said. "Have you any idea who put you in my bed?"

She said, "I thought you did."

"Since I didn't do it, can you think of any reason for anyone doing it?"

"None," she said.

"You know that Mrs. Pitman—discovered it."

"Mr. Decker told me."

"I'm sorry about that," Norden said. "I was trying to smuggle you back to your room."

"Thank you." She sounded as if she meant it.

"You have no recollection at all of being moved?"

"No. Those are strong sleeping tablets."

Norden prompted, "When you woke up—?"

She flushed again and spoke in a low voice. "When I woke up and realized where I was, I was furious, then I was frightened, and then I was angry again. Then I ran to my own room."

"And you decided I had done you dirt?" He dropped his voice to a more serious note. "Last night, when you were nearly asleep, you said something you didn't finish. You said you'd heard Arthur talking to his mother and it gave you the idea I had been brought here to spy on you and Mr. Decker. And Arthur said he would have like to get something— That's where you went to sleep."

"I overheard them—oh, nearly two weeks ago. He said, 'I would like to get something on Linda and the old boy, too. Maybe we could do something then.' And his mother said, 'Just be patient.'"

"So you thought I'd been brought here through them to work for Decker?"

"Presumably to work for him but actually to spy on us." She nodded slightly.

"What makes you think they could have foisted someone like that off on the old man?"

"He commissioned Mrs. Pitman to find someone for him," Linda said. "It would be easy, wouldn't it?"

"Okay," Norden said. "One more question: You told me you'd been awakened by a noise—Arthur's kicking. But you hadn't been asleep."

"No," she said.

"Where were you then, if you weren't in bed?"

She looked down, then up at him. "I'm sorry. I can't tell you that?"

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't," she said. "It's not—well, it's just that I can't."

Norden crossed the room and looked into the liquor cabinet. He found a bottle of bonded rye.

"Drink?"

"No—yes. Yes, please."

Taking a drink of whisky and seltzer to her, Norden sat down on a nearby chair.

"I would like," he said, "a sort of general briefing on the household. For instance, I don't even know yet how many servants there are here."

"Six at present. They come and go." Linda seemed relaxed now. She sat with her head resting against the back of the chair, the drink untouched in her hand. "It is rather isolated."

"Six," Norden said. "Boyle and Grierson—what does Grierson do?"

"I suppose you'd call him a general handyman and gardener," she said. "He runs the snow plow, helps Mr. Decker in the conservatory, fills in here and there."

"Okay," Norden said. "That's what he does. I want to know what he is."

HER voice was matter-of-fact. "He's nice. Young and clever in his line." She stirred a little. "Oh, I don't know. He's just pleasant, that's all."

"How does he get along with the family?"

"All right, I suppose." Linda lifted her head and took a sip of her drink. "Relationships of that kind aren't easy to determine, Mr. Norden."

"I thought," Norden said, "you might know a little more than the others since you were once a sort of liaison officer between the servants and the family."

"Grierson just came late last fall."

"Oh, since you were married."

He saw a fleeting smile on her face. "Arthur and I were married nearly a year ago, Mr. Norden."

It wasn't a long time to be married, Norden thought. Not long enough to move to separate bedrooms and to act as Arthur and Linda had toward each other.

"Is Grierson the most recently hired servant?"

"Yes. The two maids have been here about a year, but the cook and Boyle were here before I came."

"How long has that been?"

"Almost three years."

"Then you were Decker's secretary for two years before you married Arthur."

"Just about."

"Did you love him?" Norden asked bluntly.

Once more he felt her drawing away from him. Her voice was flat and her eyes avoided his. "I married him."

Norden let it pass for the moment. "If you could just sketch out the servants for me—their relationships and so on to the family, it would help."

She spoke quickly, as if glad to get away from the subject of Arthur. "The cook has been with Mr. Decker for almost ten years now."

"Does she get along with the other servants?"

"As far as I know," Linda said.

"What about the maids?"

She shrugged. "They seem to be efficient. I don't know much about them."

Norden said, "And how much do you know about the chauffeur?"

Linda's fingers grew tight around her glass. "Ray Cole? Ray Cole is a skilful driver."

Norden said, "What else does he do besides drive skilfully?"

"He's a mechanic, of course. And he helps Grierson around the yard in the summer."

"How do they get along?"

"And how did Arthur and I get along, I suppose you'll want to know next." Linda rose suddenly. "I can understand your interest in Arthur, Mr. Norden, but I assure you there's no reason for suspecting me. Arthur and I didn't get along, but there was no hard feeling between us. We simply separated." She started for the door.

Norden watched her until she had gone out and closed the door. He liked the grace of her walk and the way her body moved under the green dress. The girl was a paradox to him. He found himself drawn to her warmth, then thrown offtrack by her sudden brusqueness.

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT DEEP-DYED PLOT



WHEN Norden found Grierson and Ray Cole in the garage, they were polishing a custom-built sedan that looked like thirty thousand dollars' worth of automobile.

Norden whistled. "Some boat!"

Both men turned as he came forward. Norden counted five cars and an empty space where oil drippings marked the regular parking of a sixth. His own coupé, at the far side, looked drab along the expensive monsters housed with it.

Grierson, whom Norden had seen before, was a young man, fairly dark and smooth shaven. He wore coveralls that strained across his thick chest and back. He was well under six feet.

The other man, Cole, seemed on first sight to be a reedy blond, but a closer look showed that he was about as reedy as a lifeguard. A thin line of blond mustache was on a heavy upper lip. His face was handsome, and in his gray eyes was a cool, steady look. He was about twenty-five, a few years younger than Grierson.

Norden lifted his inventory pad and tried a grin. "One land yacht, thirty thousand. Am I right?"

Neither man seemed to find the remark amusing. Grierson snapped his polishing rag, and Cole just stood rocking on his toes, watching Norden without expression.

"Let's start over," Norden said. "Whose car is this one?"

"Mr. Decker's," Grierson said, his voice dry. "They're all Mr. Decker's."

"He means," Cole said heavily, "who uses this car."

"Yah," Norden said, "that's what he means."

"Mrs. Pitman prefers this Cadillac."

Norden scribbled on a pad, as if he were taking inventory. He poked his pencil toward a station wagon. The right front fender was crumpled almost against the tire.

"That belongs to Miss Pitman—Alene?"

"She uses it," Grierson said.

"Exclusively?"

"Yes."

Norden wondered if he might get more information with a club. "What about these other two sedans?"

"Mr. David Pitman uses this," Grierson answered, pointing to the smaller of the two. "The other is for the servants. And that station wagon, we use to bring supplies up from town."

Norden scribbled industriously again. "What sits there?" He looked at the empty space.

"Mr. Arthur's car."

"He's out, then? Bucking this snow?"

"I presume so," Grierson said. "His car is gone."

"What was it?" Norden asked.

"A convertible. Gray Cad." He gave Norden the license number.

"It started to snow again about seven this morning," Ray Cole offered. "There wouldn't be any tracks after that to show which way he went."

Norden asked for a list of the other equipment in the garage. There was a grease pit, a supply of lubricants, and a complete assortment of tools, including a chain hoist. Grierson showed him the snow plow and the gasoline pump. It had, he told Norden, a thousand-gallon storage tank.

Cole had gone back to his polishing, leaving Norden and Grierson by the door they had opened. Norden said, "Anything else I should know?"

Grierson pulled the door shut, closing them into the big garage and shutting out the thin gray daylight.

"Yes," Grierson said. His dark face was unpleasant. "We like the old man. He's a good joe—considering everything."

"Meaning what?" Norden's voice was equally quiet, equally low.

"Meaning maybe we don't like snoops."

COLE, about twenty feet away, out of hearing range, had stopped his polishing and was standing in an attitude of listening.

"Who's 'we'?" Norden asked.

Grierson took a deep breath, then let it out and rocked a little on his toes. "Linda and—us."

Norden said, "Boyle, too?"

"Boyle, too."

"Decker hired me," Norden said.

"For a secretary."

"That's right," Norden agreed. "But you figure I'm a snoop." He sounded curious. "Where's you get that idea?"

Grierson looked disgusted. "Private cop. Lousy snoop."

Norden said, "That doesn't answer my question."

Grierson swung his heavy shoulders and stepped around Norden. "Look, fella. Just keep out of our way. Do your secretary job—and that's all. We like the old man. Anyone tries to get in his hair just might—"

"Might what?" Norden prompted.

But Grierson walked away.

Norden shrugged and went back the way he had come. He found Boyle at the sideboard in the dining room. Boyle had his long back to Norden and when he heard Norden's footsteps he made a few rapid, half dancing movements before he turned around.

Norden figured it out with little trouble. Boyle's breath had a familiar odor. The sideboard contained liquor. It was not in sight when Boyle stepped away from the sideboard.

Norden said, "Give me a drink of that. This is a rough life."

Boyle reached down and brought up a fifth of Bourbon. Norden poured a little in a glass and handed the bottle back to Boyle. "Help yourself," he invited cheerfully.

"I suppose you'll go to the old man about this?"

"No more than I will about your playmates getting tough with me," Norden said.

"Playmates?"

"Grierson and Cole out in the garage. They ran me out of the game."

"They think you're a spy. Trying to get something on the old man and—"

"Don't you?" Norden asked bluntly.

Boyle hesitated. Before he could answer Alene Pitman came through the open door.

She saw Norden's glass.

"Oh, so you started early," she said. "I thought I'd beat you to it before cocktail time."

She sounded gay. He said to Boyle, "Don't let her scare you off."

But Boyle was already walking stiffly from the room. It made Norden wonder even more about the man. For he had just made an interesting discovery.

Decker's butler carried a shoulder holster and a gun!

ALENE wore a long terry-cloth beach robe in red and white candy stripe, and rope-soled sandals. She carried a cap in her hand.

"That's a poor costume for a snowy day," Norden said.

She came up to him smiling brightly. "I thought we were going swimming."

Norden thought of the pool and that lazy, steamy atmosphere, and cool drinks between plunges.

"Sounds good," he said.

Alene told him where he could find swimming trunks and left him. Norden went to the pool and discovered three small dressing rooms off it. The trunks were where she had said they would be and inside of ten minutes he was on the terrace.

Alene came in, carrying a tray on which were two frosted silver goblets and a large silver flagon.

"Now?" she asked.

"Now is fine," Norden said. He noticed she had set the tray on a table which had but one seat near it, a short wicker couch. There was barely enough room for the two of them to sit together.

Alene shrugged off her robe, revealing a blindingly white and closely molded bathing suit. Her skin against it was rather dusky, as if she had a bit of Indian blood. With her dark skin and hair, the white suit was startling.

Norden accepted a drink of rye and water. He contemplated the small roll of flesh over the top of his trunks. He felt definitely blue and depressed.

Alene said tartly, "Is your navel that interesting?"

Norden raised his head and grinned a little. He lifted his goblet. "To more interesting navels."

She clicked the rim of her goblet against his and sipped. "You weren't interested in mine," she said.

Norden wondered if he blushed. He said, "Speaking of interesting things, I was out in the garage. That's quite a line of cars you have there."

"Did you see what I did to the fender of the station wagon?"

"Yes," Norden said. "Do you wreck everything you drive?"

She lowered her eyelashes. "Not if I get cooperation," she said.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BODY IN THE POOL



IT WAS difficult for Norden to keep his voice casual. Alene grew on him. He could feel the impact of her strongly, and he hadn't early this morning. He didn't think he would object even to kissing her now.

He said, "Is Cole the chauffeur Arthur mentioned?"

He could feel her stiffen. "Arthur hates me," she said. "He says anything he can to make other people dislike me, too."

"Why should he hate you?" Norden asked.

"He thinks Grandfather likes me better than he likes him," she said. "He's jealous. Only he's mean about it—vicious."

Norden experimented with her knee. It was smooth, the skin taut and firm. He said, "Why does your grandfather like you better?"

Her eyes were on his hand. She tipped her goblet, draining it. "Let's swim!"

Standing up, Norden held out his hand and drew her to her feet. She took three short running steps and dived cleanly into the water. Norden's dive was closer to a disjointed effort, but he made it. The water was almost too warm. He came up blowing.

Alene was swimming to the shallow end of the pool. He struck out after her, caught up before she reached the end.

Hooking her elbows over the edge of the pool, she kicked idly at the water with her feet. "You don't do much work, do you?"

"I'm taking inventory today," Norden said. She looked at him dubiously. "And if I choose to inventory the liquor first, who's to say I'm wrong?"

Her lips twisted into a grin. "You're cute."

"Not cute enough to stack up to the local competition."

She lowered herself into the water. "What do I take that to mean?"

"After all," Norden said, "you were out somewhere until five this morning, before the snow piled up too high for you to get home."

"I get restless here. I like to go to town and just drive around and things."

"Was Arthur gone when you got home?"

She stood up, waist deep in the water. "Gone?"

"According to the characters in the garage, he went out some time before it started to snow again at seven," Norden said. "At least his car did."

She splashed water idly. "I didn't notice. I was a—little tight."

"A little," Norden agreed. "Then you didn't notice if his car was gone?"

"No. What difference does it make? If Arthur wants to go off somewhere it isn't my affair. He's over twenty-one."

"I just thought," Norden said, "you might like to get even with him for reporting the smashed fender to your grandfather."

"Oh, you're on my side."

Norden got to his feet. "Not unless I'm invited."

She laughed and kicked out, swimming away. Norden followed leisurely. When she reached the point opposite their drinks, she clambered to the terrace.

She poured second drinks. Handing Norden one end of a towel, she dried her hands and face on the other, took off her cap, and fluffed out her hair. Norden wiped off the excess water and picked up his goblet.

Alene dug cigarettes and matches from the pocket of her robe. Norden bent for the light she struck for him. "Am I invited?"

She took her drink to the edge of the pool and sat with her feet in the water. "I don't know," she said when he joined her. "You might get mad at me."

"Why would I get mad?"

She laughed a little. "People do—jealous people especially."

"You know how to keep me from being jealous," Norden said.

He felt like doublecrossing someone right now. Preferably Decker. It rankled that the old man had pulled such a neat squeeze play on him.

Alene's shoulder and thigh touched his. "What if someone offered you—money?" she said.

Norden said, "I'm not in any position to do anyone enough good."

"I've heard differently," she said.

"Oh?" Norden finished his cigarette and drink and rose. Plucking her goblet from her fingers, he went to the table and refilled both. He handed her drink to her.

"Things are in a hell of a mess!" she said suddenly.

HE LOOKED at her closely and she didn't seem to be putting it on now. The coy pout was gone. Her lips were trembling and tears were forming in her eyes. She might be acting, but he doubted it.

"That damned Arthur!" she said.

"Is that all?"

"Isn't he enough?" She dabbed at her eyes. "And he isn't all, anyway. I—" She closed her mouth suddenly and looked away from him.

"I offered to be on your side," Norden said in a low tone.

"Could I trust you enough?"

"What would happen if you couldn't?" he demanded.

All the lightness was gone from her voice. "But if I trusted you and you backed out on me, I'd—"

"Go on."

"I'd lose everything."

"What's everything?" Norden wanted to know.

She finished her drink at a gulp, lifted her arm and threw the goblet. The light caught the silver and spattered it into the air, then the goblet hit the water and disappeared.

"Everything," she repeated. "Money."

She finished Norden's drink. He was amazed at her capacity. She seemed totally unaffected by the liquor, and their drinks had not been light.

He caught the goblet from her hand before she could toss it into the water. "I might want another one," he said.

He stood up and held out a hand. She came up heavily, and when she moved she staggered a little. She gave him a silly smile.

"I want 'nother one."

"I think—"

She walked to the couch and sat down rather heavily. "You're just like the rest of them," she said. "You're—"

Norden said quietly, "This is no place to talk. We've said too much as it is."

She nodded slowly. "Go see," she said.

Nodding, he walked to the door. The hallway was empty. He tried the conservatory. He could see no one there. But that didn't mean no one was there. He wouldn't have known about Grierson before if he hadn't moved deliberately.

Norden returned to Alene.

"All right," she said. "One more drink and we'll go somewhere else."

Norden poured the drink. She drained her drink quickly, reached for her bathing cap, and tucked her hair under it.

"What now?" he asked.

"I'm going to dive for my goblet," she said. "That's why I threw it. I like to dive for things."

She smiled her silly smile again, caught him behind the neck, and stood on tiptoe, brushing her lips across his. They went past, along his cheek, to his ear. She sank her teeth into his ear-lobe.

Norden swore. She laughed, took two wobbly steps, and dived into the water. He was not sure she could handle herself after that much liquor.

The warm water and the depth obscured the lower reaches of the pool. He lost track

of her and poised himself to go in.

She broke water at the upper end of the pool. She came up fast. Her white cap burst out, then her shoulders. One hand, flung high, held the goblet. He could see her mouth, open and twisted, sucking air. She let the goblet fall into the water and struck frantically down with both hands.

Her mouth stayed open and a wild scream rose, ricocheting off the glass dome of the room and bouncing back and forth in shrill, harsh echoes. Norden started for her as her scream was cut to an insane burbling and the water closed over her head.

"Mother of God!" he whispered, and went in with a long dive.

He found her struggling and got an arm around her waist, then kicked upward. He half threw her clear of the water onto the edge of the pool. She turned over, her legs dangling. He put a hand on her rear and pushed, sending her skidding over the tiles. She lay gasping and retching, her whole body shivering.

Before Norden could get out of the pool she was sobbing, and jerking, with each intake of breath.

"For God's sake!" he said. "Alene!"

SHE made a gulping sound and swung her hand toward the pool. Getting to her hands and knees, she teetered there, her head hanging.

Norden dived back into the pool. The light was murky but he could see the silver goblet resting on the bottom. He picked it up, and strained his eyes to see.

He knew what he would find. He had known the moment Alene's scream had shattered the quiet.

He found him by the outlet. Arthur's curly hair floated with the current Norden's movements had created. It took Norden less than a moment to see that Arthur's ankle and foot had been jammed into the grating over the outlet, effectively imprisoning him.

Norden reached the surface and climbed out. Alene was still on her hands and knees, but she seemed quieter now.

He realized he still held the goblet, and let it fall. It made a tinkling sound on the tiles.

Norden could hear footsteps. The screams had finally penetrated into the house. He looked at Alene and back at the water. If this had been an attempt to make the murder look accidental, it was foolish, he thought. No man, not even a drunk one, would get himself in that predicament. Besides, the knife wound would have to be explained.

Norden lifted Alene to her feet. She clung to him, burying her face on his chest. He held her lightly, waiting for the shock to ease.

The footsteps came closer. Norden looked over Alene's head.

"Am I intruding?" Linda Pitman asked.

Norden said, "No. It's—"

The door to the hall swung open and Mrs. Pitman and her husband came into the room.

Alene said in a low, surprisingly steady voice, "Are you on my side?"

He barely heard the words and his answer was equally low. "All right."

"Then," she said, "get me out of here. And hurry!"

She went limp so suddenly that Norden nearly lost his grip on her. He got her under the arms, pulling her up again. Her head lolled. He lifted her, got one hand under her knees, started toward the others.

"Alene!"

Norden looked at Cora Pitman. "She's had a shock," he said. "I think we'd better get her to her room."

Linda was watching him and he could tell from her expression that she had guessed. Her eyes went toward the pool and Norden nodded.

Linda said quietly, "May I help?"

"That scream?" Pitman asked, bristling.

Norden said flatly, "There's a dead body in the swimming pool."

Cora Pitman cried out, "My son!" and Norden saw all the blood drain from her face. He knew she was going to crumple. Pitman sprang for her but all he could do was break her fall. When he raised his eyes to Norden, they were stricken. Stricken like the eyes of a terrified rabbit.

Norden went on by, carrying Alene's limp form.

CHAPTER XV

CHECKMATED



DECKER stretched his ancient hands toward the fire. "So the cat's out?"

Norden rolled his brandy snifter between his palms. "All the way out," he said. "It was a foolish place to hide

him."

"Damned inconvenient," Decker said. "I like to take my brandy by the pool after dinner. Now I suppose it will be shut off."

Without expression Norden remarked, "Until the police get through with it. The snow plows should have cleared a way for them by tomorrow. And Cole is doing his share in repairing the telephone wires."

"So you intend to have the police, after all?"

Norden looked at the old man unbelievably. "It's inevitable. The whole household knows now. They all know Arthur was murdered, too. You can't hide that knife wound." He added drily, "Nor the knife."

Hardly the knife. It was still in Arthur. When the body had been brought from the pool, the knife point had stuck out of Arthur's chest nearly two inches, and the handle showed that the weapon had been deliberately pounded into him.

"The police will have to be called at once. I'm sorry."

Decker made no attempt to hide his thin, brittle smile. He said, "I gave the order to Boyle some time ago. But unfortunately, as you surely must realize yourself, with the heavy snow—it's increasing, too—and with the telephone wires down, we still can't reach outside."

Norden said quietly, matching Decker's dry tone, "Grierson has the snow plow."

"Naturally, I gave Grierson that order." Decker lifted one hand to his mustache, stroking it pensively. "The snow plow won't run. Certain parts of the motor must be replaced." He sounded pleased. "No, Nor-

den, I fear that for the time being we're still completely marooned."

Norden could have predicted this before he had joined Decker for brandy.

"It's time," Decker said now, "for you to let everyone know who you are."

"And what I'm here for?"

"You're here," Decker said, "to find a murderer."

"Oh," Norden said, "and no longer to help you fake your own death?"

"That will be part of it. I haven't changed my plans." Decker breathed in the fragrant, expensive smoke and settled himself a little in his wheel-chair. "I still want to know who hired you, Norden, and their reasons for it. I want to get these inter-relationships between the family and the servants straight."

Norden sat up straight. "That's a new one."

"You haven't noticed it?"

Norden said drily, "All I've noticed is that you have a loyal following. Grierson and Cole, Boyle and Linda."

He told of his visit to the garage. He couldn't tell whether or not Decker was pleased. The old man took his cigar from his mouth and rolled it between his fingers in a slow, thoughtful fashion.

"And you drew from that?"

"That you pay more than your family can."

"So you base loyalty on money?"

"Don't you?"

The old man smiled his thin smile. "I'll let you draw your own conclusions, Norden. Let's just say that you tell them who you are now—and watch what happens."

"I don't know whether I like the idea or not."

Once again Norden sensed the old man's cold, calculating, chess player's ability.

"You have no choice," Decker pointed out.

That's the second time, Norden told himself. Outside of deliberately killing Decker there was no way for him to keep his true status quiet. He rose to leave.

Irritated, he walked down to the pool and stood on the terrace. Arthur's body lay on the tiles, covered decorously with a canvas.

The pool lights were on and steam rose in thin lines from the water, adding to the heaviness of the air.

NORDEN tried to check his anger, knowing it would keep him from thinking clearly and logically. But the more he tried, the more it maddened him. He could see only too plainly that Decker had coldly and deliberately maneuvered him into this spot.

The police would accept the neat skein the old man had woven around him. From his original hiring through his being found in bed with the dead man's wife, down to the present, he was neatly hamstrung. Country cops would like nothing better than to see in a private detective the simple and obvious solution.

As for revealing his true status, it would only convince the very people from whom he most needed help that their suspicions about him were justified. When he needed cooperation, Decker had engineered it so he would get just the opposite.

"To hell with them!" Norden said.

He glared at the lump that had once been Arthur Pitman and strode from the terrace. At the top of the stairs he hesitated momentarily. The hallway was dimly lighted, as usual; there was no one in sight, no sound at all. Determinedly he walked to Alene's door and rapped sharply.

"Who is it?"

He said, "Norden."

He heard her footsteps. In a minute or two the door was opened a crack. He had a glimpse of her face, white and drawn, and her eyes, looking enormous and dark, and then the door was opened wider.

Norden stepped in. Alene turned the key. He said, "It's about time someone locked a door around this place."

"I'm scared," she said. "I'm scared as hell."

The draperies were drawn tightly over closed windows. The doors to her bathroom and closet stood wide, and every light blazed brightly.

There was a blanket lying crumpled on the divan, showing where Alene had been sitting. She wore a loosely belted housecoat, and from the way it clung to her he

doubted if she wore anything beneath it. She was shivering.

"That's smart," Norden told her. "Stay scared and keep smart."

She started for the divan, and he could see now that she was plastered again. A bottle and glass were on the floor beside the divan. An ash-tray next to them, was full of half-smoked cigarette butts.

"On an empty stomach," he said severely.

She stretched out on the couch and drew the blanket over her. "I'm hungry, too," she said. "But I'm damned if I'll go get anything."

"Boyle would bring it."

Her laugh was sharp and bitter. "Boyle! Boyle's hers, not mine."

She lifted the whisky bottle and poured the glass half full. Her hand shook so that the neck of the bottle rattled against the glass. She had it bad, all right. It could be shock; seeing Arthur hadn't been the pleasantest experience in the world. It could be shock and fear combined. It certainly wasn't grief.

He said, "What has Boyle's friendship for Linda got to do with it?"

She jerked her head up. "You've let her fool you, too?" She gulped at the whisky. "If she can get rid of us all, she's set, isn't she?"

"With Boyle's help,"

Alene's head jerked sharply again. "That's it."

"And there's no one you can call on?" "Just you."

"How do you know you can trust me?" Norden asked.

Her eyes widened and he saw stark fear twist her face. "I can, can't I?" Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "For God's sake, you said you were on my side!"

Norden helped himself to a cigarette. "On one condition," he said. "I want to know the works."

"What do I know?"

"Maybe a lot," he said. "Maybe things you don't even realize you know."

"And if I tell you, you'll protect me?"

Norden said sincerely, "I'll do the best I can."

She seemed to be hesitating, but finally

noddled and set her glass down. "All right," she said. "Anything I can do."

Norden sat on the edge of the divan where he could look into her face. She said, "I'm starved!"

He got up again and went to the door. "Lock me in," she pleaded.

NORDEN took the key, locked the door behind him, and crossed the hall to his own room. He reached around the jamb and flicked on the light switch before going in. The light was brilliant and as far as he could tell his room had not been disturbed. The letter was still on the secretary. The glass from which Pitman had drunk was on the arm of the couch.

Norden opened the closet door. His three bags were stacked in the rear and he flipped open the lid of the middle-sized one. His hand went down, feeling for the catch that released the false bottom of the bag. It came up with his shoulder holster. The holster was empty.

Slowly his expression changed from dulled surprise to cold, rigid anger. He dropped the holster on top of the suitcase and walked from the room.

Norden headed for the rooms above the garage. He rapped hard on a door. The door opened and Boyle, like a bald crane, peered down at him.

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE OPEN



USUALLY Norden would have laughed at Boyle without his toupee and in his undershirt. He was all bone and skin without meat.

But Norden had no desire to laugh. He said levelly, "Give me my gun!"

Boyle stepped back a pace. "Your gun, sir?"

Norden said furiously, "The gun you took from my suitcase, damn it!"

"I saw no—"

Norden swung, chopping up at the long, bony face with a hard fist. Boyle's head seemed to tilt and Norden's fist went by his ear. Boyle's long arms moved. Norden's arm seemed to be coming out of its socket. The leverage was more than he could take.

He lit on his back, across the room. He tried to get to his knees, pulling air into his deflated lungs. His head rang and he shook it to clear it.

Boyle faced him, still without expression. "I don't know anything about your gun."

Norden got to his feet and took two weaving steps toward Boyle, tried to come in close. Boyle sidestepped and struck out. Norden went down again, sitting this time.

Again he got up and moved in. He could see Boyle only dimly now; the man was like a wraith, all height and no thickness. He couldn't see Boyle's hand and arm at all, but felt it when his chin got in the way. He went down again.

He could feel Boyle's big hands catching his collar and dragging him. He thumped when he struck the wall of the hallway. A door farther down the hall opened. Through the haze of anger and pain Norden saw Grierson's bulky body and Cole's lithe form coming toward him.

"Trouble?"

"Not much," Boyle said. "The snoop wants his gun back."

Grierson said, "You got it?" in an interested voice.

"I told him no. He didn't believe me."

Norden got to his feet. The effort was like pulling a tooth with roots that ran from his jaw to the soles of his feet. "Which one of you skunks has my gun?" he demanded thickly.

Grierson slapped him, open-handed. Norden's head hit the wall. Cole said, "Leave some for me."

Norden swung both arms wildly. Cole's laugh was high and light. Norden felt knuckles against his teeth. He went down again. Someone used the toe of a hard shoe on his ribs. A hand got his collar and jerked. Norden felt himself lifted and flung. He knew he hit every stair on the way down; the walls shook when he hit the bottom.

He lay sprawled out, not wanting to do anything but lie there. But in the back of his mind was the knowledge that he had started out to do something he definitely had to do.

He dragged himself to his feet and looked groggily up the stairs. "To hell with you!" he said, turned, and folded up on the floor again.

This time he lay still. . . .

It was like coming from a deep, drugged sleep, like rousing out of painful nightmare. Only the bad dream was still there, crystallizing into painful reality.

Norden hurt all over. He tried to open his eyes as he felt a wet cloth. And he smelled a faint fragrance.

He managed to get his eyes open. Linda was kneeling beside him, wiping the blood from his face. She looked like the proverbial ministering angel in her white robe, drawn high about her throat. Her blonde hair framed her face. Norden sighed and shut his eyes. She was so damned beautiful.

As she rose from her knees, his eyes opened again. His jaws worked, too. He said, "Thank you."

"Are you all right now?"

"Fine," Norden said. "There's a patch of skin just inside one elbow that doesn't hurt a bit." He made it to his knees, stayed that way a moment, then got to his feet. The newel post on the stairway helped. He stood swaying, smiling down at her.

"You're very foolish," she said. "Or very brave."

He said, "Just a sucker for a left, that's all."

"Maybe you'd better go to your room. Can I help you?"

HE PRESSED his hand to his temple to help his thoughts sort themselves. "I came downstairs for something."

"A drink?"

Norden said, "No. For some food. Alene is hungry."

He thought she smiled at him, but couldn't be sure. "The kitchen," she said, "is there." She pointed to his left.

"Thank you," he said, and turned.

Linda said, "I'm sorry, really."

Norden looked back at her. "I'll bet you are," he said. "About Arthur, too!" He opened the door and went through it, hearing it slam behind him.

His head was clearing a little, and he was getting pleasure out of being mean. He wanted to get all the enjoyment out of it he could.

There was no one in the kitchen. Norden located the refrigerator and went to work.

When he went upstairs he carried a heavily loaded tray. He set it down long enough to rap, say, "Norden," and unlock the door. He carried the tray inside, deposited it on the floor, and locked the door again.

Alene lifted her head from the couch. "You took long—My God!"

"Yah," Norden said. "Next time you want something, make it easier to get."

SHE was off the divan. She got him by the arm and pulled him to where she had been lying.

"You're the one that needs to lie down."

"No," Norden said, struggling free. "You eat that damned food."

He walked into the bathroom and shut the door. He could hear her lifting a plate from the tray. He stripped and stepped under the shower.

The cold water helped a lot. He dried himself on a black bath towel with a white monogram, put on his clothes, and studied himself in the bathroom mirror. Outside of a cut lip and a number of beautiful bruises he didn't look so bad. He wished he felt as well as he looked.

He found Alene drinking coffee and wolfing a large ham sandwich. She was on the third one.

He had brought two cups and he poured himself some coffee. She said, "This is good."

"I'm glad," he said.

She was considerably sobered by the time the food was gone and the coffee pot emptied. Lighting a cigarette, she leaned back and sighed.

"Still feel the same way about cooperating?" he asked.

"If I could believe you—yes."

Norden pointed to his face. "I didn't get those from playing patty cake, you know. Someone lifted my gun. I went to get it."

"Your gun?"

"Yes," he said. "They don't want me to be able to shoot back."

"Do you always carry a gun?"

"I thought you knew," he said. "I'm a private detective." He smiled ruefully. The Boss would have comments on that right now if he were here.

Her eyes widened. He wished he could tell when she was acting and when she wasn't. "A detective? You—What did you come here for?"

"I thought," Norden told her, "you might know that. I thought maybe you hired me."

She shook her head slowly. "Hardly. Why would I?"

Norden couldn't figure out right now why anyone would have hired him. He said, "Let's see just what we can learn."

She leaned toward him, holding out her cigarette for him to light his. He steadied her wrist with his hand, and could feel her pulse jumping under his fingers. She leaned forward, enough so that her robe fell away from her shoulders.

Norden shut his eyes and settled back. Women, he thought, had no sense of proportion. This was hardly the time to play games; he was hardly in any condition to play games.

He opened his eyes and said, "How drunk were you last night?"

"You know," she said. "You saw me."

"Can it," he said roughly. "We work together or not at all. I *want* your help; you *need* mine."

"I do?"

She annoyed him. She was just sober enough to be wary, just sure enough of him to feel safe.

"So did Arthur—only he didn't ask for it in time."

By the way the color drained from her face, Norden knew he had struck pay dirt. He swung the pick again, hard, burying it deep.

"Unless you killed him, you aren't safe, baby. Because whoever got rid of Arthur

might want to get rid of you for the same reason."

She rocked a little as if trying to hold herself together. "I didn't kill him."

"Once you said Linda did. For the old man's money."

"Yes."

"You're an heir, too?"

"I suppose so."

HE COULD see how the idea was crystallizing in her mind. He said deliberately, "It was Boyle and his pals who beat me up."

She said, "Do they know who you are?"

"It looks that way." Norden got up. "But that grief came through trying to help you." He moved toward the door. "I can't afford to stick my neck out and take another loss."

Her voice was almost a wail. "What can I do? Don't go!" She followed him, almost stumbling in her haste. "Don't run out on me now, Bert!"

He stopped and let her grab his arms in a tight, frightened grip. He looked down into her twisted face. He thought, "How ugly fear makes people. Fear and greed."

He said again, "How drunk were you last night?"

She whimpered. "You'll think—"

Norden said brutally, "Would you rather I think it of you alive—or dead?"

She said, "God!" and deep breaths shook her small body. Suddenly she seemed to come to a decision. She straightened, and forced the words out.

"I wasn't drunk. I—I had only two. Enough to tell on my breath. I wasn't drunk at all."

"Why?" he said. "Why did you fake being drunk?"

"I—" She stopped and swallowed. He realized she wouldn't want him to think what this revelation would make him think. "I—I went to see Ray. Ray Cole. I wanted him to go to town with me. That was before the last big storm."

"Then what Arthur said was true?" He spoke carefully.

Her lips curled back over her teeth. "No. I tried—but no."

CHAPTER XVII

HOUSE OF HATE



EVERYBODY probably used the hard-to-get technique on Alene, Norden decided. He felt a vague sympathy for her. It struck him that she craved affection she had never got from her family, and sought this way of

getting it.

He said, "Go on."

"So Ray wouldn't go to town with me, and I went alone. I tried to get drunk, but I couldn't. Not even a decent-looking man tried to pick me up. So I came home. Cold sober."

"When was this?"

"About two-thirty," she said. "I put the car in the garage and was on my way to my room, and as I was passing the library door, it was opened. It was Ray. He saw me, came out, and slammed the door shut behind him. He scared me, he looked so wild. I thought I heard someone in the library, but Ray grabbed me and—"

The scene shaped up as her words tumbled out faster and faster. Norden felt as if he were seeing the whole thing.

In his mind's eye he saw Cole catch her by the shoulders. "What are you doing here?"

He saw Alene draw herself up. "I happen to live here."

If Cole remembered he was the chauffeur he seemed willing to ignore it. "Looking for me again?"

"I was. I'm not now."

His gray eyes were close to hers. Suddenly he smiled. "I'm sorry, I was restless, and I came down looking for a book."

"So did I," she said haughtily, and put a hand on the door knob.

Cole caught her and drew her to him. Angrily she tried to free herself, but he pressed her against the corridor wall. "Damn you!" he said. "You've teased me long enough." His lips came down hard on hers. For the first time he was kissing her

as she had wanted to be kissed.

She knew he wasn't doing it just because of what he thought of her. He had another reason. But it was easier to believe he was kissing her because he felt that way. And nicer. Her anger dissolved like ice in an oven and she strained closer to him.

He broke away first. His voice was shaky. "Let's go—up."

Silently she put a hand in his and they went to his room. Inside the door he kissed her again and said, "I'll go get us a drink."

"We don't need a drink," she said.

"I do," he told her. His face looked strange as he left the room.

She sat on the bed and waited. She didn't want to believe that Cole had brought her here for any other reason than that he liked her, but when she went into the bathroom for a drink of water and found a bottle of whisky, nearly full, she could no longer fool herself. She was humiliated and furious, then she began to wonder. He had acted so strangely. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

Alene poured a drink into a water glass and took it back to the bed to drink it. It was just something to do. She knew she was foolish, staying now—and she felt a little cheap.

Then she heard a noise. It came from below, a soft sound that was not identifiable. She strained to hear, but could only think of the garage doors being opened and a car taken out. The car wasn't running, just moving.

Alene went to the window and drew the curtain aside a little. She could see down to the parking area. Two men were pushing Arthur's big convertible out into the yard. She couldn't recognize them in the darkness.

The car disappeared around the corner of the house, ghostly in the snow-covered yard. Alene continued to squint into the darkness. In a little while the men came back. When the garage doors were shut this time, the sound was easy to identify.

Footsteps came up the stairs. There were two pairs. The door of the room next to Cole's was opened and shut quietly. Cole came into his room. His face was flushed and he looked as if he had been sweating.

HE SAW her with the whisky glass. He said, "I forgot about that bottle."

"Who took Arthur's car?"

She sat waiting for him to answer, to explain what all this meant. She was not frightened; she was angry. She had never before felt cheap and shoddy; it was not a pleasant experience.

Cole walked across and stopped in front of her. He shrugged. "Why should I protect the guy? He took the car. He was stiff again and . . ."

"And?" she prompted as he hesitated.

When he didn't answer, she studied him as if he were a stranger. It was funny, she thought. For a long time she had chased Ray Cole. Now she knew that she had him. He wanted to keep her here, so he would even make love to her. But it wasn't at all flattering. She suddenly wanted him no longer. Not at all. She said, "And?" again.

"We pushed his car out of the garage so he wouldn't wake everyone in the house," he said. "Boyle and me."

She got up and started for the door.

"Thanks for the drink."

He stepped between her and the door. His hand went out for her wrist. "Not yet," he said.

"I'm tired," she said. She smiled. "And sleepy."

She could see it in his eyes. Not fear so much as annoyance. He tried to return her smile, but he wasn't adept at leering.

He caught her, drawing her hard and quick against him. She turned her head away. She said, "You were hired as a chauffeur, Cole. And only as a chauffeur."

She could not have been more effective had she hit him across the face with a whip. He stepped back and opened the door. She could feel him watching as she went down the hall. . . .

As Alene stopped abruptly, Norden was silent for some time. "So that's it!" he said finally.

"That's it," she said wearily.

"And then you went to your own room?"

"No." Her smile was faint. "I was half-

[Turn page]



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"JEFF HITS the headpin right, but he'll never make a hit with that unruly hair. He's got Dry Scalp. Dull, hard-to-manage hair . . . loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic. . ."



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way down the stairs when I saw you and Linda going by. When you went up the stairs. I slipped after you and saw you going into her room. So I went into mine and tried to figure it out. I thought I had it, only Ray didn't fit very well."

"You thought Linda and I—."

"Yes. But when I heard you leave her room, I came out. I hoped you might explain what was happening."

"That was your interest in me?"

Weariness took none of the edge from her smile. "At first."

Norden put down his empty coffee cup. He said, "Now you know."

She shivered. "I can guess. Linda killed Arthur, and they hoped to get his car out of the way."

He said, "I'm damned if I can see why they left him there in the library while they took the car. Why didn't they move the body then?"

Her tone was emotionless. "Maybe he wasn't dead enough . . ."

It was no good, Norden decided, when he stood outside Alene's door after locking it. Despite what Alene had told him, there were too many loose ends, too many things that fit no one of the theories he had.

Norden had to grin faintly, wondering if he was going to spend every night putting women to sleep. Alene though, had been a much easier subject than Linda. There had been no need for sleeping tablets or force. The mere suggestion that she go to bed had been accepted with alacrity. Her own emotional outburst had caught up with her. She had barely managed to lift her arms to draw him down to her when sleep had shut her eyes.

Norden swung away from her door, pocketing the key. As he started across the hall to his own room, from the corner of his eye he caught a flicker of movement.

HE LOOKED down the dim length of the hallway toward the Pitmans' rooms. Cora Pitman stood near the head of the stairs, one hand gripping the balustrade, the other holding a voluminous robe tightly about her heavy figure.

Norden said bluntly, "How long have you

been standing there?" He went closer to her.

She was pallid. The flesh on her face sagged at the cheeks and jowls. Her features were empty as if shock had drained her completely of emotion.

"For some time," she said. Her usually strident voice was flat and colorless.

Norden felt a vague sorrow for her obvious distress. No matter what he had thought of Arthur, his death had brought grief to Cora Pitman.

She said, "I'm not concerned with the relationship between you and my daughter, Mr. Norden."

Norden couldn't hide his surprise. "You have it wrong again, Mrs. Pitman."

She lifted her hand from the balustrade long enough to rub her face. "No—I said it makes no difference. Alene is no concern of mine that way."

Norden's sympathy evaporated under a flush of irritation. "She's your daughter." He added deliberately, "Just as Arthur was your son."

She came away from the bannister and for a moment she was her former strong self. Her head lifted imperiously. "Arthur was my son. I don't care to consider Alene my daughter."

Two spots of color formed in Cora Pitman's cheeks and her eyes were wild.

"Murderess!" she said.

Norden wished he had the bannister to hold to. "Alene?" he asked. He tried to be calm about it.

"She's greedy," she flung at him. "She wanted his share."

He looked at her face, white and ugly with naked emotion. Stark, bitter hatred for Alene ran through her voice like poison.

He said carefully, "Is that why you hired me—to check on Alene?"

Her voice was amazingly controlled. "My father hired you."

"After someone else recommended me to him."

Her head went negatively from side to side. "I didn't. I don't know you."

"I'm a detective," Norden said. "A private detective."

"Father hired you to—" The hand clutch-

ing the front of her robe went white across the knuckles. Her voice trailed off and rose again sharply. "To watch us!"

"He hired me as a secretary," Norden said. "Someone else hired me to watch *him*. I thought it was you."

"No!" She spoke sharply, roughly. "No!" The hatred flowed back into her face. "Alene. It would be that—"

"Wrong guess," Norden interrupted. He was weary of this. Of Cora Pitman. Of hatred foaming and bubbling like witches' brew through this monstrosity of a house.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE OLD CHESS PLAYER MOVES



HOUSE of hate! A house that bred murder, Norden thought. An atmosphere that created death. Killing and hatred were not things that came suddenly, without cause. They had built up here, over a long period of time,

built and built like poison in a festering sore.

"Not Alene," he said to Cora Pitman and himself.

Her grip was strong on his arm; it hurt him. "If you're a detective—" She held to him, pausing. "How much do you want, to prove that Alene killed my son?"

"She didn't kill him," he said.

Her whole body shook with the force of her trembling. Her hand dug into him. "She did! She did, I tell you! Prove it! I'll pay—what you ask."

He said wearily, not trying to hide his disgust, "What if I proved it was someone else?"

"I want to know that, too. But it was Alene."

"Five thousand dollars," Norden said, and hoped she would let him go now.

She dropped his arm and stepped back, once more the tall, commanding woman who ran things. "I'll get you a check."

She turned and walked briskly down the hall. Norden was still standing there when her door swung shut behind her.

She came back, a green check in her fingers, thrust it at him.

It was drawn on a Seattle bank, signed "Cora D. Pitman."

"If you prove it was Alene, I'll double that, Mr. Norden."

He looked into her face and what he saw there made him want to get the hell out. Fast.

Norden went to his room and sat there finding his bruises all over again. Each one hurt without mercy.

He was surprised to find that it was barely past midnight. It seemed weeks since Alene had come bursting from the pool, her scream breaking wildly over the water.

He thought of the check in his wallet. Five thousand dollars. And five thousand more if he was willing and able to frame Alene.

Mother love had its variations.

His mind went to Alene, and he couldn't understand why Cora Pitman was so sure of the girl's guilt. Beyond sheer hatred, Norden could think of no reason. He might be wrong, of course. But somehow Alene as her brother's killer just didn't fit.

But who did? Momentarily, Norden thought of trying to pin it on Grierson and Cole. He enjoyed contemplating them, hanging from a scaffold. But that idea would involve Linda.

Rising, Norden walked restlessly about the room. He had a hundred questions, none of which he was able to answer.

As far as he could understand, Arthur had been killed because he was a damned nuisance. Either as an heir to Decker's estate or as a husband.

Linda could be involved any way you looked at it. And her choice of friends didn't appeal to Norden. But he couldn't fit her into the picture as standing over Arthur and hammering a knife viciously into his back, pinning him to the floor.

She seemed too gentle, too sweet. Not that sweet women weren't capable of the most brutally astounding murders. He just didn't want it to be that way.

GGRIMACING, Norden went into the hall and headed for Arthur's door. The han-

dle gave and he stepped into the room.

It was quiet and dark once he shut the door. Norden remained still until he was certain he was hearing only his own breathing, then he located the light switch, and snapped it down.

The room was much like his and Linda's. He went to the closet. A number of suits were hanging there. Norden went carefully through all the pockets but found nothing of interest. The bathroom and the chest of drawers revealed nothing, nor did the contents of the secretary.

He moved disgustedly away. He had not found anything that would indicate why Arthur had been killed, and at that particular time.

He stopped finally at the connecting door to Linda's room. The door was locked, as he had expected it to be. He was about to go when he saw the remnant of a stain on the edge of the rug, the woodwork and the bottom of the door. He dropped to one knee.

The rug had a heavy nap. It was taupe, and even though it had apparently been scrubbed at, the signs of a stain were unmistakable. Someone had bled here.

He rose and studied the door and the floor minutely, checking angles. If it had been Arthur doing the bleeding, then he could not possibly have lain wholly inside this room. The wound was in the center of his back and that part of his body could not have pressed against the base of the door.

Norden created a picture: The door was open. Arthur, stabbed, lay in the doorway. When he was taken away the blood was thickish on the rug in this spot. The door, drawn to, touched the nap of the rug and a little blood came off on the wood.

It put Linda in an ugly position.

Norden left the room and went downstairs to the conservatory. Making no effort at concealment, he opened the door to the pool, and stepped onto the terrace. Not ten feet away Jonathan Decker sat in his wheel-chair, smoking a cigar. He was alone. Very much so. Where Arthur's body had lain under canvas there was nothing.

Decker turned his head slowly, and his thin lips formed his cold smile around his cigar. "Any results?" he demanded.

"What happened to the body?" Norden asked bluntly.

Decker's thick eyebrows rose. "I preferred not to have it here when I was in here."

"Where is it?"

Decker puffed on his cigar. "In the cold storage room." His smile came fleetingly. "Separated from the food, of course."

"I can see it?" Norden asked calmly.

"Certainly. May I ask why?"

Norden said bluntly, "I'm trying to find out if he was killed in his own room." He fumbled cigarettes from his pocket, took one from the pack and stood with a match unlighted in his fingers.

Decker's eyes closed for a mere fraction of an instant. Then he raised his eyebrows again.

"How could that be?"

NORDEN told him. He lit the cigarette and dropped the match to the terrace floor.

"You're a capable man, Norden."

Norden's voice was dry. "Thanks." He started away. "If you don't mind, I'll go to the cold storage room now."

"Not now," Decker said. "I wanted to see you. I've been thinking that it will be an excellent time soon to perform—our experiment, shall we say?"

Norden said, "When?"

"When no one has an alibi," Decker said, and gave a rasping chuckle. He bent forward, looking closely at Norden. "Now that Arthur is gone," he said, "why don't you marry Linda?"

Norden said, "She might have something to say about it."

"Linda will do as I tell her. I think it's a fine idea." Decker nodded again. "I can arrange it for—tomorrow."

This was fantastic. Norden said, "Besides, we can't get in or out."

"That could be arranged, too."

Norden stretched his long legs and looked at his bright socks. "I have one more reason. I don't want to marry Linda."

"That's no reason at all," Decker said.

"And your reason?" Norden said. He finished his cigarette, dropped it to the tiles,

and stepped on it. "A husband can't testify against his wife. Isn't that it?"

"Partly," Decker answered blandly. He leaned still closer to Norden. "When I die Linda will get a lot of money. I don't want them—to have it." His breath came short, heavy. "I want Linda to have it. You will be there to protect it for her."

CHAPTER XIX

COLD STORAGE



QUIETLY Norden sat down and lit another cigarette. He said, "Let's talk about the experiment."

Decker regarded Norden with faint amusement. "As you wish," he said politely.

"How do you intend to go about this?"

"Some shooting. A trail of blood going outside and over the edge of the ravine just north of the house. You can let it be known that the shooting was witnessed. Then watch the nerve strain build up. Watch for the guilt of the person who has been planning to kill me."

"It won't work. It's childish." For a moment Norden thought Decker would rise in irritation to the bait, but he stayed relaxed and puffed on his cigar.

"Reasons?"

"The blood. Where do we get it?"

"Any number of ways. There's frozen blood in the cold storage room. It can be thawed—and used."

Norden felt his stomach twist at the flat, callous voice. He said viciously, "Maybe we can squeeze some out of Arthur," and stood up. He started off.

Decker's voice stopped him. "You're being maudlin. Have you a better suggestion?"

"Yes," Norden retorted. "Call the cops in."

Decker said sharply, "This isn't part of your job. Go to bed, Norden, and think about that. By tomorrow night I'll expect an answer—a solution."

"If I don't have one?"

"Then," Decker said, "not even the fact that you'll be Linda's husband can help you."

The cold viciousness of the voice left no room for doubt. As far as Decker was concerned there was but one answer. He had moved the pieces and Norden was checkmated or not, as Decker chose.

It was an unpleasant sensation, this weaving of strands tighter and tighter around him—as a killer!

Definitely, he was going to disobey one order. There was no time now to go to bed.

A little later, Norden stood in the cold storage locker, shivering. This outer room was eight by ten or so in size and around forty degrees in temperature. A tightly insulated door led to the other rooms. They would be for freezing and would be close to zero or below.

A canvas stretched across the far end of this room cut off a small section. Norden knew he would find Arthur behind the canvas.

He walked to the curtain, drew a corner up.

Arthur was lying on a bed of slatted wood. He was an unpleasant sight, even though he lay mostly in shadow. Norden slid the canvas along the improvised rope line that had been strung for it.

The light flooded in on Arthur. And as Norden straightened, he realized that Arthur was not alone behind the canvas.

A long meat hook hung from a pulley in the ceiling. It had been driven viciously into the back of a man's head, then raised so that he hung with his feet off the floor, his body dangling like a frozen beef carcass.

The man was Grierson.

When he got a grip on himself, Norden deliberately grabbed Arthur's body and turned it over.

His survey was cursory but conclusive. Arthur had been struck before he was knifed. There was an abrasion at the base of his skull, just inside the hairline, and the skin was broken. He had worn his hair long, so it had not shown before.

Straightening up, Norden went to the wall where the chain that lifted the meat

hook was looped. He released it and lowered Grierson's body. He was almost sick when he saw the way the angry sharp point of the hook had gone into the man's head.

THE rounded back of the hook had been freshly battered and Norden looked around until he found a mallet nearby which showed signs of having been used as a hammer. It was steel-faced and he could see someone raising it and driving the hook into Grierson until it was deeply set.

A child could have done it once Grierson was unconscious. It took no strength to hammer a weapon into a man. Nor did it take strength to lift Grierson. The pulley would do the work with only a light tug on the chain that ran over it.

Norden found a thickened lump on Grierson's head, to one side of the right ear. A microscopic examination of the mallet would probably reveal blood and hair.

He made a hurried search of Grierson's pockets. Everything but one card from the man's wallet he put back. He studied the card, said, "Well, well," and walked out of the storage room.

The bright, shining cleanliness, the gleaming order of the kitchen mocked him, and he could smell the rankness of death in spite of the heavy door that shut it away from him. His anger came back and he knew he had to hurry. His mind worked slowly, uninking as if it, too, had been cold. He fought to speed it up. He must hurry; that was the most important thing.

He went upstairs, rapped on Linda's door. It seemed a long time before Linda answered it and stood framed in the soft light from her bed lamp. She was quiet and self-possessed and incredibly lovely. He decided he was a sucker.

Norden bowed. "I could tie you to a chair and poke hot cigarettes at you," he said. "Only I'm a damned gentleman so I can't. But you'll answer questions anyway, won't you?"

She stood still and her voice was quiet. "Go away, please."

Norden stepped toward her. She raised her arm. He ducked under it and into her

room. He heard the door shut and her footfalls on the carpet. When he turned, she had a gun in her hand. It looked like a .32.

"Is that what you hit Arthur with?" he asked.

She stood still, the gun held unfamiliarly in her hand. She looked down at it, then up at him. He saw the shadow of consternation cross her face and touch her eyes.

She said, "So you know that. Ray told you—you made him."

"No, I figured it out," Norden said. He pointed to the connecting door. "I'm a detective, lady. I deduct." He smiled again. "Then I was right?"

She lowered the gun and laid it on the secretary. "I didn't kill him."

Her calmness bothered him. It was, he thought, almost as if she were sleepwalking.

"What else do you want?" she asked.

"Answers," Norden said. "Shall we sit down?"

She sat on the bed and he chose a chair, drawing it near her.

"Decker wants us to get married tomorrow," he said.

"He told me."

"And you agree?"

Linda said, "I'm under obligation to him."

"Because you married Arthur?"

Her head jerked. She said, "No!" Norden waited for it to come out, but she said no more.

"Why did you marry Arthur? Because you were under obligation to Decker?" She still gave no answer but Norden could see in her face the merest suggestion of surprise that he had put his finger on the answer. "What was the obligation?"

"My private affairs—"

NORDEN'S voice was flat. "You have no private affairs, Mrs. Pitman. Not in a murder case. Is it the same obligation that made you agree to marry me?"

"I'm sorry," she said.

Norden stood up. His voice lashing out at her. "Did you know that Grierson is dead?"

She started up, her breath coming in with a hoarse, startled gasp. Then she fell back.

"That wasn't necessary!"

"It happens to be true." Norden went on, describing in sharp detail how Grierson had died. All the color in her face drained away as she stared at him.

She spoke only once. "I'm sorry. There's nothing I can tell you."

"Not even tell me that Grierson was a private detective?" He waved the card he had taken from Grierson's wallet.

She said, "I didn't know that."

Norden could tell she was lying but he couldn't think of anything to do about it. He put the card carefully back in his pocket.

Bowing, he turned toward the door. He looked back at her as he went into the hall. She was still sitting on the bed, not moving.

CHAPTER XX

ALL THE ACCUSED



ROCKING back and forth a little on his toes, Norden stood by his closed door. He felt the urgent need for hurry. He pressed his hands to his temples, trying to think.

In a moment he walked down the hall to David Pitman's door. With one hand raised to knock, he paused.

"What the hell," he muttered, and tried the knob.

The door opened and he pushed his way in. David Pitman was seated as the secretary bent over a sheaf of papers. When he saw Norden he pushed nervously at the papers with both hands, thrusting them as far as possible out of sight.

He looked a little frightened, but not annoyed.

"Working late?" Norden asked politely.

"I—yes. I couldn't seem to get to sleep. Won't you sit down?"

"Do you always act this way when people bust in at this time of day?" Norden asked.

"This is a strange place," Pitman said. Norden could see the worry on his face.

Norden walked deliberately to the secre-

tary. Pitman made a move as if to intercept him, then stopped, misery on his face.

"It isn't very good," he said.

Norden took another step toward the secretary. "What isn't very good?"

"My play," Pitman said. "I've been having trouble with the second act."

Norden picked up the papers and looked through them. He felt foolish, because Pitman was telling the truth. The sheets of paper in his hand were scenes from a play.

"You're writing a play?" he said. What for?"

"I hope to produce it some day." Pitman still looked embarrassed, faintly pink, very much like a rabbit caught in the wrong lettuce patch.

Norden was not feeling like mincing words with anyone. "It costs money to produce plays."

"I know."

Norden was exasperated. Pitman was too damned abject. If anyone had talked to him like that he would have pitched the guy out of his room. Of course, though, he hadn't been under the domination of a woman like Cora Pitman for twenty-five or thirty years. He said, "But some day you might have money."

Pitman said frankly, "When Mr. Decker dies I expect to."

Norden put Pitman's play back on the secretary. He went with his long stride to an easy chair and folded himself into it.

"Did you know your wife had five thousand dollars?"

Pitman drew the secretary chair near Norden and perched on the edge. He looked down at his hands. "She has some money," he said. "Mr. Decker occasionally gives expensive presents. Cora would turn hers into cash. She put the money away for Arthur."

"It still is for Arthur," Norden said. "She gave me five thousand dollars to find his murderer."

"You *are* a detective, then? I heard—"

"Yes," Norden said. He paused. "She offered me five thousand more if I could prove it was Alene."

Pitman sprang from the chair. "No!" All his mildness was gone and anger made

his soft jowls quiver. "She isn't—she doesn't." He sat down again as abruptly as he had got up. His courage seemed gone and he looked as if he wanted to cry.

"Alene's mother hates her," Norden said. "Isn't that unnatural?"

Norden saw tears in Pitman's eyes. "She isn't Alene's mother," he said and looked down at his hands.

Norden stared at him. "Now wait a minute—" he said.

Pitman worried his fingers, one around another. "This isn't generally known, Mr. Norden. I wouldn't tell you, only I know Alene didn't kill Arthur. I want you to understand."

"I'm listening," Norden said.

PITMAN hesitated a moment, then spoke rapidly.

"Cora ran away from a domineering father as a girl," he said, as if trying to make his voice impersonal. "She wanted to go on the stage; he wanted her to marry. She went on the stage. And met me." There was faint laughter in his voice, faint mockery. "She thought she saw possibilities and married me to bring them out.

"I resented her, Mr. Norden. After Arthur was born and she turned everything but her consuming ambition to him, I resented her more. But by that time the money I had been left was gone. I tried to produce plays—and failed. I met a girl. She was quiet and understanding. She—" He lifted a pudgy hand and dropped it. "To be brief, she died bearing Alene. I took the child home."

"My God!" Norden said, thinking of Cora Pitman.

"Cora took her" Pitman continued. "To have another hold on me, I suppose. Arthur was nearly five then. And Cora decided to return to her father. She wanted Arthur to have the advantages of money. She was willing to give in to her father for Arthur. Everything was for Arthur. And she wanted me to go into business. Backed, of course, by her father. But Mr. Decker is—odd. He just kept us around him, dribbling out bits. This last Christmas he stopped even the dribbles."

"Does Decker know about Alene?"

"Cora says she never told him. No one knew."

"Not even Alene?"

Pitman said in a low voice, "I told her today—after she found Arthur's body. She said she was glad. It bothered her to hate her mother."

"Now she can hate to her heart's content," Norden said and rose. "But Arthur was your son?"

"Yes."

"And you hated him like Alene hated Mrs. Pitman."

"No," Pitman said, "I didn't hate Arthur. I hated—hate my wife, Mr. Norden. She flaunted Arthur in my face. There was nothing for me from either of them."

"You realize you're giving me a motive for murder, Mr. Pitman."

Pitman smiled faintly. "I suppose I am. Yesterday Arthur boasted to me that he knew about Alene being illegitimate. He threatened to tell Mr. Decker." The anger drained from his voice, leaving it flat and empty. "I suppose he found out from Cora."

"Why would she tell him?"

"Perhaps to get the information indirectly to you. She thought you were spying for her father, and that you would give him the information."

"So he would disinherit Alene?"

"Cora's mind works that way," Pitman said.

Rising, Norden said, "Does Alene think you killed Arthur?"

Pitman lifted his head long enough to smile. "I don't think she does."

"She's frightened of something."

Pitman demanded with surprising bluntness, "Wouldn't you be frightened, with a madwoman hating you?" Pitman's voice was low and harsh. "You're a capable detective, Mr. Norden. You wouldn't have been hired if you weren't."

Norden said, "Did you hire me?"

Pitman shook his head. "Mr. Decker hired you, didn't he?"

"Someone else did, too."

"I don't know who." Pitman waved it aside and drew in a deep breath. "How much," he said, "will you take to prove

Mr. Decker guilty of murdering Arthur?"

NORDEN shivered, because of what he saw suddenly in the eyes of this mild, meek man.

"That," he said, "would be hard to prove."

"Not hard at all," Pitman said. "Mr. Decker is a strange man, a thorough egocentric. He disliked Arthur."

"He is also crippled," Norden pointed out.

Pitman moved restlessly and came to a stop, facing Norden. "He had a stroke—he said. None of us saw him have it. We simply knew that one day Boyle informed us Mr. Decker was ill. Next we saw him in a wheel-chair. How do we know he is crippled? And even if he is, what is there to prevent him hiring things done? He has Cole. He has Boyle—"

"He had Grierson," Norden said. "Grierson was killed tonight."

"Oh, God!" Pitman said and looked sick.

"Did you hire Grierson?" Norden wanted to know. Pitman looked at him blankly. Norden said, "He was a private detective, too."

"Don't you see?" Pitman cried. "If Grierson got wind of what Decker was doing, or hiring done, then Grierson had to be killed!" His flabby hands gripped Norden's arms. "There's your proof! Find out what Grierson learned. Prove it on Mr. Decker and I'll pay you—"

"What with?"

Pitman said, "When Decker dies we'll be rich."

Norden pulled away. "Look, you say Decker has Cole and Boyle on his pay-roll. But just money won't buy murder."

Pitman smiled. "There's something. I don't know what. But they work for him because they have to. They're afraid of him. I don't know why."

"Is that why Linda is so obligated to him?" Norden asked. "Something to do with Cole, perhaps?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. Will you—prove it?"

"On the killer," Norden said flatly. "If I can." He thought of Grierson. "If I live

long enough to try."

He went out, shutting the door behind him. He stood staring at the opposite wall, reminding himself that David Pitman was an actor. A good actor, maybe.

CHAPTER XXI

A LITTLE GENTLE PERSUASION



TAKING the stairs to the servants' quarters above the garage two at a time, Norden rammed to a stop before Cole's door.

He hammered on the door. There were sounds as of someone getting out of bed, then the snap of a light switch. The door swung open and Cole blinked at him.

Norden had an impulse to laugh. Cole slept in only the tops of his pajamas. His legs stuck out below, and they were thick and slightly turned in at the knees.

Instead of laughing, he raised a rum bottle he had grabbed up on his way, and brought it down on Cole's head with all the strength he possessed.

Cole couldn't duck fast enough. His knees gave way and he pitched out toward Norden. Norden put his free hand on Cole's face and pushed. The man catapulted back into the room and hit the floor with a thud. He rolled over and lay still.

Norden turned as another door to his left opened. He saw Boyle's face, surprise twisting its homely length, and again the impulse to laugh came to him.

Boyle wore a nightcap that dangled precariously to one side. Then Norden caught the warning sign in Boyle's eyes. He came around in as Boyle started for him and he brought up the bottle in an arc that caught Boyle's chin.

Boyle's face again registered surprise, and he pawed out at Norden, his long arms flailing, his pajama pants flapping against his scarecrow legs. Norden danced away, letting Boyle come on into the hall at him. Boyle hit the wall with his head tucked into his shoulders, bounced off, and stretched

out on the floor.

Norden got Boyle by the neck of his pajamas, and slid him into Cole's room. He shut the door and went swiftly to work.

When he was done Cole and Boyle were neatly roped to chairs, Cole's neckties and belt having doubled for cords. Norden then went to the bathroom, got a tumbler of water, threw it in Cole's face, and repeated the process.

Cole began to show signs of life. Norden wet a towel and started slapping him not too gently with it. Cole's eyes came open, and when he spoke, his voice was thick with hatred.

"All right, you evened it."

Norden sat down on the bed and regarded him thoughtfully. "The hell I did. I just started." He talked slowly, making each word distinct. "Who is Grierson?"

Cole spat at Norden and shut his eyes. Norden said, "Who are you to be so damned solicitous of Linda?"

Cole spat again. Norden rose and went to the bathroom again. He came back with a razor in his hand.

"Don't be a sucker," he said. "I'm not playing, friend."

"Lousy copper."

"Sure," Norden agreed. "Lousy copper. A drunken, stinking copper. But who hired me? Do you know?"

Cole looked at him contemptuously.

"I don't know, either," Norden said. He studied the razor blade a moment. "But I do know two people have been killed." He saw Cole's head come up. "Arthur was no damned good. Maybe Grierson wasn't, either. I don't know. But if he had been my pal, I'd do something about it."

"You lying—" Cole began to curse him.

Norden said, "He's in the cold storage room with Arthur. Someone drove a meat hook into the back of his neck, Cole, then hoisted him into the air. Hung him like a piece of lousy meat."

Cole began to swear again, but Norden slowly became aware that the chauffeur wasn't swearing at him. He was swearing at Boyle and Jonathan Decker.

"Did they do it?" Norden asked.

"Get out of here!" Cole raged. "Get out!

I'll handle this myself. Grierson was my pal. Get out!"

NORDEN stood up. "That's enough," he said. "Answer my questions or I'll cut you to ribbons. You crummy two-bit hero. You think I came here to play games with you?" His hand closed over the wet towel on the bed and he swung around again. "You sonofabitch!" he said, and hit Cole across the face with the towel. "In the eyes next time! Who was Grierson?"

Cole's mouth was a tight, stiff line. Norden flicked the towel. His aim was not good and he hit Cole on the nose with it. Cole's eyes watered. Norden got the towel ready again.

"A private detective," Cole said reluctantly.

"I know that. Who hired him?"

"Boyle."

"Why?"

"How the hell do I know? Ask him!"

The towel hit Cole's eye and he made a crying sound through his teeth. "Why?"

"To help Boyle protect the old man. I suppose it was on Decker's orders."

Norden said, "What's your angle with Linda?"

"She's my cousin."

"Oh," Norden said. "Does anyone else know that?"

"No—not that I know of."

Norden dropped the towel and sat down on the bed. He was getting somewhere. He said:

"Let's go right on chatting, friend. Did you take Arthur from his room after he was hit?"

Cole's mouth clamped down again. Norden sighed, got the towel and snapped it. Cole's cry was spontaneous.

He said, "Yes. Grierson helped me."

"On whose orders?"

"Linda's." Cole stopped, then blurted, "She didn't kill him. He forced his way into her room. He was drunk. She hit him. He went limp like drunks do. She thought she'd killed him and she got me. She was scared. We planted him in the library, that's all."

"What about his car? Why did you

move that out of the garage?"

Cole said, "We thought his neck was busted. His head was funny. We figured he was going to die and we were setting up a disappearance gag."

"But he didn't die from that?"

Cole shook his head vigorously. "No. And we didn't shiv him, either! None of us did."

"Who's us?"

"Me or Grierson—or Linda."

"What about Boyle?"

"If he did, he was slick. He was with us most of the time."

"You don't know who could have done it?" Norden asked.

"No. We left Arthur. We got Linda to her room. You started bumbling around and



we ducked. So help me, that's all I know."

"How did Arthur get into the pool?"

"I don't know. We didn't put him there."

Boyle began to stir. Norden wet the towel again and wiped Boyle's face with it. The long jaw dropped and Boyle began to show signs of life.

While Boyle pulled himself together Norden said, "Cole, who was Alene messing with here besides you?"

"Not with me—Grierson, damn it." His voice dropped. "But leave him out of it. He's dead. She threw herself at him. He was human. The guy had a wife, a couple of kids. Don't be a lousy copper and—."

Norden began to have a good deal of respect for Cole. He said, "I won't mention it."

Cole mumbled thickly, "Poor devil, he was planning to see his family tomorrow."

"How?" snapped Norden.

Cole shrugged. "He'd have got through all right. Grierson had a radio, hidden in his room—the old man wouldn't have one

on the place. We all knew the county snow plows had been clearing the highway—fast—would get this far any time. Our private driveway—Grierson had kept it cleared till the last snow fall, when Mr. Decker stopped him. Any of our cars could get to the highway, with the snow plow on the job a while."

Norden snorted. So the old man hadn't been talking through his hat when he had said it could be "arranged" to get away from this supposedly snowbound place!

Boyle groaned and opened his eyes. Norden said sharply, "Did you kill Grierson?"

Boyle's ugly face looked mottled. "No—sir."

"You knew he was dead? Norden said levelly.

"No—sir."

Norden said patiently, "Did you put Arthur's body into the pool?" Boyle said, "No."

Norden showed him the towel. "I'm mean enough to take this and hit you in the eyes and in the crotch. Ask Cole."

"He ain't kidding."

Norden said, "Did you put Arthur's body in the pool?"

"Accident," Boyle said.

It came out then. It was funny, only Norden didn't feel like laughing. Boyle had, on Decker's orders, tried to get rid of the body, hide it for a time. He had been dragging Arthur past the pool and slipped. Arthur went in. It was easier to fix him to the grating at the drain than to fish him out. Besides, it seemed like a good hiding place.

"Did you help move Arthur into the cold room?"

"No."

Norden said, "That's fine. You boys talk nicely. So just keep on talking."

He asked questions. They answered. Both men kept their eyes on the towel.

Finally Norden got up, bowed, and went to the door.

"Have a good time untangling yourselves," he said and went out.

From what he had gathered, no one but David Pitman or his wife could have killed Arthur. He wondered if the two men had decided to lie a little. But remembering the

look on Cole's face he knew that Cole had not been lying.

CHAPTER XXII

FUGITIVES



UNDER the shower in his room, Norden let the cold water sluice over him. He shivered as he dressed.

He crossed the hallway to Alene's room, unlocked the door, and stepped in. He could

hear her breathing, faintly ragged in the darkness. His fingers found the light switch and snapped it on. The overheads blazed down and she stirred.

He walked over, jerked back the covers, and shook her roughly. Her eyes came open, fluttered, and focused. She sat up.

"What is it?"

"Let's get out of here," Norden said.

She said, "What—where? How?"

"Out, both of us," Norden said. "You want protection, don't you?"

"God, yes!" She clambered out of bed. "But I don't understand."

"There's no time now," Norden said harshly. "Get dressed and meet me in the garage. Get your car warmed up. The county commissioners are digging us out. We've got to get to the highway before they start up the private driveway."

Her mouth opened as if to question him. But all she said was, "All right," and went into the bathroom.

Norden left and hurried back up to Cole's room. He could hear thumpings as he stopped outside the door. Opening it cautiously, he saw that Cole and Boyle had not succeeded in untying themselves. They had worked their chairs around back to back and were attempting to untie each other, but that was all.

"I forgot something," Norden said.

Cole swore at him. His lean face was streaked with sweat, and Boyle's bald head glistened with it.

Norden said, "I want my gun. Where is it?"

There was no answer and Norden picked up the towel off the bed. Cole said, "In the bathroom cabinet."

Norden found the gun, also a pair of scissors. He cut Cole free. Cole stood up slowly, rubbing at his wrists.

Norden hefted the gun. "I'll use it, too," he said.

Cole shifted nervously. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning I want you to get that snow plow going—on the private road. I'm leaving here—fast."

Cole looked at the gun, then at Norden. He laughed. "The faster the better."

Norden said suspiciously, "Decker doesn't want anyone to leave. What about that?"

Cole headed for the door. "I didn't hire out to fight a goofball copper."

Norden followed him into the hall, leaving Boyle still tied, still silent. In the lighted garage Cole looked with surprise at Alene sitting behind the wheel of her station wagon, the motor pulsing softly. He said nothing but rolled back the doors.

Norden said, "No games, pal."

"No games," Cole said, took something from a drawer in the work bench, and went outside. Norden followed, motioning for Alene to drive after them. She made it out of the garage, then stopped. Over a foot of snow lay on the drive.

Norden watched as Cole worked over the engine of the plow. Someone had merely removed the rotor from the distributor. Once it was in place, Cole climbed into the cab and started the motor. He swung the big machine around and scooped a path for Alene, then started down the drive. Norden climbed into the station wagon beside Alene. She moved slowly after the plow.

WHEN they broke onto the paved State highway the road was clear. Cole pulled his plow to one side and Alene gunned past him.

She drove faster than Norden liked, but her hand was steady and sure on the wheel.

"Is there anything open in the town ahead?" Norden asked.

"The hotel," she said briefly.

A short time later they reached the small, sleeping town and drew up in front of the

one lighted building, a two-story frame hotel.

Getting out, Norden escorted Alene into a lobby. A man who looked like a truck driver was sitting at the lunch counter drinking coffee.

Norden helped Alene onto a stool. The waitress came over.

Alene said, "Coffee."

"Make it two, please," Norden added.

Alene took a cigarette from Norden and said, "I still don't know what this is all about."

The waitress brought their coffee, but Norden waited until the girl was at the far end of the counter and the truck driver was gone before he answered Alene.

"There are some questions I couldn't get answers to up there," he said. "That's all."

Alene tapped her cigarette against the edge of her saucer. "What kind of questions?" Norden thought she underplayed her interest a little.

"Such as," he said, "why did Linda marry Arthur?"

Alene turned to him, her smile light and brittle. "I can answer that," she said. "Because Grandfather told her to."

"Obviously," Norden said drily. "But you don't do things like that just because someone tells you to."

Alene shrugged. "Linda did."

He said, "How did Arthur take to it?"

She laughed again. "He sulked." A definite hardness slid into her voice. "Because his mother didn't think it was a 'good' marriage."

"Financially," Norden added.

"What other kind is there for people like that?"

Norden said quickly, "You don't classify yourself with them?"

"Do you classify me with them?"

Norden was honest. "No," he admitted. "But then, blood ties and all that—"

She made no effort to pick it up. Finally he said, "Of course, if I can believe what I hear—"

She picked that up quickly enough. "What did you hear?"

"That Cora isn't your mother. Arthur wasn't your full brother."

"She told you that?" She swung toward him, her face working, twisting. He was reminded of her father. "She told you so you'd run to Grandfather!"

"No," Norden said. "Your father told me."

The twisted hatred went from her. She was silent for some time, then she turned her head long enough to take a sip of coffee. Her hand shook it little. "Why?" she asked.

"Because," he said casually, "I told him that Cora tried to hire me to find a murderer. And she offered me a bonus if I could prove you killed Arthur."

Alene's hand jerked, slopping coffee into the saucer. She slid from the stool.

"So that's what you meant," she said hoarsely. "About protection! You were afraid she would kill me!"

She turned and ran. Norden caught her near the door.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

Alene seemed dazed. "Where is there to go?"

Norden took her arm. "A little rest wouldn't hurt you," he said.

She allowed him to lead her to the desk. The gloomy-looking clerk stepped forward.

"Your usual room, Miss Pitman?" he asked.

Alene nodded. The clerk took a key from the rack and handed it to her. Norden took the key from her and started toward the stairs.

The clerk called after them, "Is that a double or a single charge?"

Norden said, "Single," and led her up the stairs.

IN THE room, small but clean, Norden said, "Get some sleep if you can," and started for the door.

"I'm still scared," Alene said. She tilted her face. Norden kissed her, went out, and returned to the lobby.

It was just past five. He asked the clerk, "Any chance of getting a phone call out of here at this hour?"

The clerk looked injured. "Sure," he said.

Norden gave him the Boss' home number

in Seattle. While he waited for the call to go through, he said, "Does Miss Pitman stay here often?"

"Couple of times a week," the clerk answered.

"Alone?" Norden asked.

The clerk's gloomy look turned sour. "Your call's ready," he said, and pointed toward a booth.

CHAPTER XXIII

MURDER AHEAD



NORDEN lifted the receiver. A voice squawked at him in irritation. Norden identified himself, then said, "Stop complaining about being awakened. I haven't been to bed yet."

The Boss' voice became serious. "Where are you?"

"I'm not at Decker's," Norden said. "There's been trouble. Everything you told me was so much hokum. That it was a soft job. That there was nothing to it. Two people have been murdered. Old Decker is half nuts. The rest of them are completely crazy."

"All?"

"All but one," Norden said.

The Boss' voice was shrewd in appraisal. "I told you not to get drunk."

"That didn't cause any murders."

"And I suppose you fell for some dame again," the Boss said.

Norden forced himself to say, "All right, I fell for someone. And Decker wants me to marry her. And help spend ten million bucks."

"Why not marry her?"

"She might," Norden said, "be a murderess. But there's something I've got to know. Who hired me besides Decker?"

The Boss told him. Norden wasn't surprised. He said, "Did you know Decker was aware that I was a cop?"

"Certainly."

Norden was angry. "And you stuck me in the middle?"

"You always get out," the Boss said. "What else do you want to know?"

Norden listed his questions. When he had finished the Boss said, "How do I get in touch with you?"

"Don't phone me," Norden said. "Send someone with the answers." He told where he was.

"I'll try to get them there by five."

Norden left the booth. At the desk he got a room and said, "If Miss Pitman should come down while I'm in my room, I want to be told about it immediately."

The clerk said, "Just who are you, bud?"

"Her boy friend," Norden said. "And I'm jealous as hell." He took the key the clerk handed him, walked to the lunch counter.

With breakfast inside him, Norden went up to his room. He stripped to his shorts, and crawled between the covers. He was asleep almost at once. . . .

When Norden awoke it was nearly three o'clock. He jumped out of bed and took a quick sponge bath in the wash basin. Dressing, he hurried down to the lobby. There was a new clerk on duty.

"Has Miss Pitman come down?" Norden wanted to know.

"Miss Pitman has," Alene said from behind him. She seemed more animated since her rest. "What do we do now?"

Norden rubbed his fingers over his chin. "We get me shaved," he said. "And then we eat."

By the time they were through, it was nearly five o'clock. As they were leaving the lunch counter, Alene said, "How long are you going to hang around here?"

"Quite a while, probably," Norden said. "Why?"

"I want a drink," she said.

Norden had been wondering how to get rid of her temporarily. He said, "Go to it. I have a little business, then I'll join you." He didn't expect to have any trouble finding her since there seemed to be only one cocktail bar in town.

HE WALKED with her as far as the street and watched until she disappeared into the bar a few doors away. He

returned to the lobby and had smoked two cigarettes when the clerk called him to the telephone.

It was the Boss; he was a few miles away. "How safe is it for me to come there?" he asked.

"Make it quick," Norden said. "I'll be at the curb."

Inside of fifteen minutes the Boss' familiar sedan drove up. Norden climbed in and they moved quickly away. Norden said, "Just cruise around. I want to keep an eye on that road up that mountain—What about my answers?"

"It looked pretty hot, so I came myself. Your hunch was right. Old man Decker isn't worth ten million dollars. He isn't worth—net—over a half million. He's been living on his capital for years."

Norden asked, "What about Grierson?"

"Grierson was hired by the old man's butler, Boyle. I don't know why. Grierson was a Portland private operative. He had a reputation that smelled from Vancouver to Los Angeles."

"What was his trouble?"

"He played both ends *and* the middle."

"And Cole?"

"Cole is in the same boat as Boyle. Both paroled from the pen to Decker. Only Boyle's time was up long ago. Cole got hooked for a fur loft job about five years back. He claimed it was a frame, of course. Decker got him paroled and took him up there."

Norden said, "So one slip, and Cole goes back."

"Yeh," the Boss said. "Funny, too, because Cole is related to this Linda Pitman who married the old man's grandson. They're second cousins."

"Oh," Norden said, "second cousins." And a lot of things became clear to him.

The Boss drove aimlessly. Norden talked in jerky sentences. "Do you see it yet? Alene hired me to watch her half-brother and his mother. She knew they were planning to tell the old man her true status. And I was to come in handy to blacken Arthur's character enough to even things up.

"Only I didn't get around to it fast enough because someone got the cute idea

of getting rid of Arthur while I was there. Linda hit him with a gun when he got obstreperous. I imagine he had a load on and had decided to tell his wife a few things. Probably about Alene and the money, and maybe he had learned about Ray Cole."

He paused to light a cigarette. "Anyway," he went on, "she bopped Arthur after he got the door open between their rooms. And she got Cole to help her clean up the mess. Cole knew Boyle was supposed to be trying to get information out of me and he found Boyle in my room." Norden had to grin wryly. "Only Boyle wasn't drunk, like I thought. No man with that much length to pour liquor into could get so stiff so quick. Cole got Boyle and they carted Arthur to the library.

"They thought Linda had killed Arthur. Probably he was just limp drunk. So they decided on the disappearance deal and pushed his car over a cliff. I imagine their idea was to put Arthur in it before they gave it the final push. Only when they got back to the library Arthur was not dead, but kicking like hell—and he had a knife in his back. That panicked them and they ran."

The Boss grunted. Norden said, "Grierson was Boyle's man, but he saw a chance of squeezing something extra out of it. After I gave Linda the sleeping pill and went to the library and got sapped, he loaded me into bed and put her in there, too. A nice set-up for blackmail. Boyle was in the library, trying to get Arthur out. Old man's orders, I'll bet on it. Decker didn't want any murder cluttering up his place. It interfered with his plans. So I got clipped for going in at the wrong time. Boyle got Grierson to take me upstairs and he saw his chance and unloaded Linda on me.

"Unfortunately for him, Mrs. Pitman saw me trying to smuggle Linda back to her room. Decker used that information to pressure me.

"Cora Pitman tried to pressure me, too. She let me think Alene was sleeping with Cole—that was Arthur's little joke. Cora wanted me to be sure to know who were the rats around the place."

"No," the Boss said, "that isn't the way I see it."

THEY were cruising at the edge of town. Bright headlights leaped at them and a car went by, fast—a station wagon.

"That was Alene," Norden said. "Turn this heap around."

The Boss made an expert U-turn. "She got tired of waiting for you," he said drily.

Norden said only, "Step on it."

When they reached the road that turned up the mountain, they could just make out the tail-lights of the station wagon winking around a curve above. The Boss settled down to some serious driving.

"That isn't the way I see it at all," he said again.

"It's the way I see it," Norden argued. "Look at a man like Decker. All pride. A dictator all his life, making his family toe the mark waiting for him to kick off. And all the time he hasn't anything to leave them."

"A half-million bucks isn't hay."

"What's that, after they expect ten million? For the old boy, a half-million was the same as being broke. Even after he died, he wouldn't want them to think that. He got me up there to find which one was after him, sure. But more, he got me up there to help him find a way to disinherit them—all but Linda.

"He thought she killed Arthur and he wasn't going to let her take a rap for it. He was going to marry her off to me. Not only would I be safe then, but she would have someone to help fight for her dough."

"But what about Decker faking his own murder?" the Boss asked.

Norden snorted. "Sure. He fakes it, then he rigs up something to throw suspicion away from Linda and onto someone else. I'm supposed to figure that person killed Arthur, too. I think he may have planned to kill Arthur or have it done. I think he wanted to cut down the heirs, one way or another. But someone beat him to the punch on Arthur, so he took advantage of the situation. He was good at that."

"How did he take advantage of Grierson—with a meat hook?"

"That," Norden said gloomily, "doesn't fit in."

He leaned forward, straining his eyes to

see beyond the headlights. There was no sign of the car ahead.

"Step on it," he urged again.

"What's your hurry?" the Boss said.

Norden told him where to go and how to get there. But the Boss continued to drive cautiously. Obviously he was not going to take chances for Norden or anyone else.

Norden leaned farther forward, as if his straining could make the car move faster. Alene, he knew, was a good distance ahead of them and gaining all the time.

He knew, too, that unless he could do something and do it quickly murder wasn't ended up on the mountain.

CHAPTER XXIV

NO PROTECTION—FROM HERSELF



THE Boss inched his car up the last rise of the driveway. Swinging around the corner of the house, he skidded and stopped.

The garage doors had been pulled shut. The snow plow rested where it had been before. The tracks Alene and Norden had made going out were indistinct but those of her car coming back were sharp and clear cut.

Lights were on over the garage and, coming up, Norden had seen lights in Decker's part of the house. Norden got out of the car and the Boss swung in a big circle and started back down the drive. Norden yelled, "Hey," and started for him on a run.

The Boss popped his head out the window. "It's your baby," he said. "You nurse it."

Norden cursed him until his tail-lights were out of sight. Then he went into the garage and shut the door after him. By the small night-light he could see that Alene's car was back in its slot.

He made his way into the house. By the library door he saw Boyle. Boyle said without expression, "Mr. Decker is waiting by

the swimming pool, sir."

Boyle was as impassive as ever but seeing him reminded Norden that he had forgotten something. He went back to the garage.

He felt in the glove compartment of Alene's car where he had left his gun. His hand came out empty.

"The damn little fool," he said, and walked rapidly back to the pool.

Deck was in his wheel-chair, sipping his inevitable brandy. Norden took a seat beside him. He was shocked to see how age had crept up on Decker in the last few hours.

Decker's voice had the slightest hint of a quiver in it now when he spoke. "You had a satisfactory trip?"

"Very," Norden said.

"The police are on their way, I suppose?"

"Not that I know of," Norden said.

Decker rolled the brandy snifter in his thin fingers. His eyes stayed on Norden's face. "I learned a number of things while you were gone." The dry, brittle smile came across his thin lips. "Whatever else you've accomplished, you brought the poison here to a head."

Norden was weary of the whole thing. He wanted only to get this over. But he waited for Decker to go on.

"Grierson is dead," Decker said.

"In the storage locker," Norden agreed.

"Do you know who killed him?"

Norden said slowly, "Yes, I know."

Decker set the glass on the table beside him and felt for a cigar. "You found out about Ray Cole, I suppose."

"Yes," Norden said. "And about Alene, too."

For a brief instant Norden saw incomprehension on Decker's features, then it was gone and he nodded with the air of a man who knew, too. "I heard," he said, "that my daughter, Cora, offered you ten thousand dollars to prove that Alene killed Arthur."

"Yes," Norden said.

"Do you intend to do that?"

"I can," Norden said. He smiled a little.

"Or I could prove it on you."

Decker showed amusement. "Anyone else?"

"Cole," Norden said. He was feeling his way, making sure before he went into the last act.

"He'd be the best," Decker said coolly. "I think now he would be the best of all." He put the cigar between his lips and struck a match. "It would solve your problem with Linda."

"My problem with Linda?"

"She's fond of him," Decker explained. "They were brought up together. I'd say that she is in love with him. Second cousins have married before, you know."

Norden couldn't keep the irritation out of his voice. "So I get Cole put away for murder and when the stink dies down I marry Linda. Is that it?"

"Not quite," Decker said amiably. "A trial is messy, and a nuisance. Once the proof is given to Cole, he'll destroy himself."

NORDEN wondered what it would feel like to strangle a man nearly ninety years old. With an effort he kept his voice level. "That would clear Linda, of course. But it wouldn't solve your problem."

Decker's bushy eyebrows rose slightly. "My problem?"

Norden said quietly, "Of getting rid of the heirs to the estate you haven't got."

Norden saw the effort it took for Decker not to let Norden know how close he had come to the core of the infection.

"I changed my will," Decker said. "Today. Boyle and Cole witnessed it. The bulk of the estate is being left to Linda and her husband."

Norden thought he heard a sound from the conservatory. He said, "Your family will prove senility."

Decker laughed rustily. "They're provided for. They have this house and a small trust fund to run it. And that's all."

It was a cruel trick, leaving them only this white elephant. Norden stood up. "There's nothing more I can do here, then. I'll send the police up. They can make the arrest."

Decker said sharply, "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Norden said, "that I'm tired of sitting on a time bomb. You have the key

to the murders, so take care of yourself till I get the police here."

"I have the key?"

Norden started off, and turned. "Yes. You. I have nothing but theories. You have the proof." He went out.

He saw no one as he took the stairs to his room. His hands were sweating. If he was wrong, there would be hell to pay. But Decker had given him until tonight to fake his murder. Okay, he'd fake it.

He tried Alene's door; it was locked. He hammered and got no answer. He went to Linda's and there was the same result. He looked down the hall toward the end where Cora and her husband slept. He saw no sign of anyone. Going into his own room, he slammed the door.

He gave it thirty seconds and started out again, moving quietly now, his feet barely whispering over the carpet. He was halfway down the stairs when the lights went out.

He had expected it. Or something similar. Hesitating only briefly, he plunged on down in the dark. He swung down the corridor leading to the pool, hurried now. As he jerked on the door a shrill, high scream rose in the air, trembled under the vaulted roof, and was drowned in the sound of something plunging into the water.

The darkness was not quite absolute. Norden could make out vague forms. The water was in motion, throwing waves against the sides of the pool.

Off to Norden's left a dim shape raced toward the conservatory door. Norden moved in the direction of the conservatory. His feet pounded heavily on the tile. A bullet whined past his ear.

He kept on going, weaving, and the gun went off again. There was a sudden thrashing as of someone running heavily through the plants in the conservatory. Norden drew up. He knew better than to go through that doorway. There he was a perfect target.

He pressed against the wall into the darkness. His eyes focused on the pool and he shuddered. It was a hell of a way to die. The old man had faked it too well.

Norden slid himself along to the edge of the doorway.

"I'm coming in," he said. "You can't get out. It's blocked off there."

The only answer was the rustling of a bush.

"The lights will be on in a minute," Norden said.

"Damn you!"

Norden didn't relish this. Not because he was afraid; he didn't mind being afraid. He just didn't like what he was going to have to do.

He crouched and jumped across the doorway in a blur of movement. He heard the breath of the bullet. He thought, "That's four."

Now he could hear movement outside. At the corridor door. It opened and a flashlight beam struck the water and moved across it to the wall.

Norden said, "Get those lights fixed!"

Boyle's lugubrious voice answered, "They are being fixed."

THE flashlight touched Norden, held on him for a second, and went on by. Boyle moved onto the terrace. Norden yelled. The gun went off again. Norden saw the light arc up and back as Boyle dived against the wall.

Norden said, "You can't get out. You have only two shots left."

The voice from the conservatory had a sob in it now. "Damn you!"

From the far end of the conservatory Norden saw a brief flash of light as someone opened a door and moved cautiously in. The gun roared again.

Norden rolled into the bushes. A final shot nicked dirt near his feet.

"That's all," he said. "Watch the door, Boyle!"

He could hear deep, ragged breathing. The breathing of fear and frustration, of utter helplessness. He said more gently, "It's over," and moved toward the breathing.

Something struck him explosively. Nails raked his cheeks and a fist caught him above the eye. He grabbed, getting slick cloth under his fingers. A foot kicked at him frantically. Norden caught the kick on his hip and fell over heavily. There was a

grunt from the person underneath him. Teeth caught Norden's neck, drawing blood.

He lifted his fist. "Sorry," he said, and drove it down hard.

There was no more movement. Norden stood up, brushing his clothes. He felt like hell. When Boyle came over, his flashlight making a moving blob of light in the darkness, Norden felt even worse.

Boyle stopped beside him, the light pointing down. "Oh," he said. "It wasn't—"

"No," Norden said, "It wasn't Linda."

Alene lay on her back, her lips drawn up over her small teeth. Blood from Norden's neck still showed on them; a bruise was beginning to form on her chin where Norden had struck her.

From the other end of the conservatory a flashlight moved hesitantly in. Norden caught Pitman a few feet away.

"Let's go back out, he said. "There's nothing here."

Pitman said, "She—she couldn't take it any longer."

"No," Norden agreed. "You knew?"

"I guessed from the beginning," Pitman said. "But I knew after you told me about Grierson." His voice was dull, aching. "She and Grierson, you know."

"I know," Norden said. "She was so damned hungry for affection that she latched to Grierson. He was looking for something to turn to his own advantage. He found out she wasn't Decker's granddaughter and he tried to sell the information. To you?"

"To me—and Cora."

"You told Alene, and she killed him."

"Yes," Pitman said. "But Cora had told her about it long ago, torturing her with it. Alene would have killed Cora, too, only you took her away."

Norden said somberly, "That's why I took her. For protection from herself."

At the door the lights came on with startling suddenness. Both men stood blinking. They saw a group of frightened, curious faces.

Norden said, "The excitement's over. Go back to your rooms."

Ray Cole, with grease and dirt on his face, wiped at it vaguely and stared at Norden. "Someone poured sugar in the gas tank

of the power plant. I had to put on the auxiliary. It won't carry too much of a load."

"Okay," Norden said. "Where's Linda?"

"In my room," Cole said. He looked defiantly at Norden. "Someone had to protect her."

"Sure," Norden said. "We've got to drain the pool."

CHAPTER XXV

RETRIBUTION



AS NORDEN started back into the conservatory he saw Cora Pitman coming. Her face was old and lined and tired.

Pitman had gone.

Norden said to Cora, "You get out of here.

You've done enough damage."

She had stopped, was staring past Boyle at the ground. Her head came up. "I?" Her voice was high and sharp.

"You—You spent twenty years at it. Get the hell out of here."

She turned from Norden's cold fury and went out, walking quickly, holding up the hem of her dressing gown. Beside Norden, Cole said, "I didn't know."

Norden took the flashlight from Boyle's hand and snapped it off. "You all thought it was Linda. You all—as well as Decker. And when you figured it couldn't be, you didn't know what to do." His lips twisted in a faint, bitter grin. "So you pushed me around. As if I had to have something to do with it. I could have been the fall guy for the police, even if I'd called them in myself.

"Okay," Cole said.

"I found out," Norden said, "what Linda wouldn't tell me. What Decker used to make her jump through his hoop."

"You think I liked that?" Cole demanded. "But she wouldn't have it any other way."

"It's all over now," Norden said. "Let's get that pool drained."

Cole and Boyle opened the big valves and emptied the pool. As the water neared bot-

tom it rushed out with a steady roar. Norden stood on the edge, smoking and watching the water level creep relentlessly downward.

He wanted a drink. He wanted a whole flock of drinks. He thought about getting one, then decided that he would wind it up sober.

The water was nearly out when a footstep sounded beside him. He turned. It was Linda Pitman. She wore a street dress and little make-up.

Her face was drawn and pale, her eyes dark in its whiteness.

Norden said, "You shouldn't be here."

She said nothing. But when the water pulled away from the shallow end, creeping down until first a foot and then the framework of the wheel-chair began to show, she made an odd sound in her throat and hurried away.

Norden watched Jonathan Decker and his wheel-chair appear. The blanket around Decker's useless legs had tangled him, and one foot had caught in the spokes of a big wheel, holding him down. His face was contorted and, with all the life gone from it, very old. . . .

AN HOUR later, Norden was in his room packing his suitcases, stopping now and then to drink from a glass beside him. Linda was sitting on the divan and Boyle had the easy chair.

The door opened and Ray Cole came in. "I fixed the doors and windows like you told me," he said to Norden. "She won't get out of her room now." He paused. "She couldn't, anyway. That sleeping tablet you gave her knocked her cold." He sat down beside Linda.

Norden went on with his packing. "You can stop worrying, Cole," he said. "With all that dough, Linda can keep you out of the pen."

"My parole time's about up anyway," Cole said.

He looked down at his grease-stained hands.

Norden thought, what the hell. Cole wasn't the kind to get in a jam with the law again. He said, "I should have known the truth sooner. You were too scared of

cops. But Grierson was the one for you to be afraid of. After he was killed, I was almost sure you had done it. Then I got to thinking. Alene had told me you made a pass at her the night Arthur was murdered, and I supposed you had done that to keep her from seeing what was going on in the library. And as I looked at it closer, I saw that Arthur's murder was made to order for Alene. When you were out pushing Arthur's car she wasn't in your room waiting for you, as she told me, and you hadn't even taken her to your room. She had been spying when you and Boyle had taken Arthur to the library after he had been hit, and when you left him there and were getting his car ready for him she was in the library hammering the knife into him. From the library window she must have seen you and Grierson pushing the car."

He paused a moment to take another swallow of his long delayed and much needed drink.

"When I remarked to her that it was funny you and Grierson hadn't put Arthur in his car before they pushed it over the cliff," he went on then, "she said maybe it was because he wasn't dead enough. I got to thinking it over and realized that was the truth. He wasn't dead enough when she found him in the library. But she fixed that. I can see now that everything she told me was to throw suspicion on you and Linda as Arthur's killers. Or on his mother."

NORDEN saw Cole squeeze Linda's hand comfortingly. He said, "She wasn't interested in you, Cole, except to find out how much you knew. She did fall for Grierson, though, but when she found out he was trying to sell her story, that wound it up. She followed him to the storage room where he was fixing Arthur, and let him have it."

He took a gulp of his drink to forget the sight of Grierson strung up like a beef carcass.

"I was the sucker. She fooled me more than once." He grimaced. "She inherited a lot of acting ability."

Linda said hollowly, "She didn't have to kill Mr. Decker."

"She did," Norden answered, "because she was in the conservatory, listening—as I knew somebody would be—when I told the old man I knew he had proof of who had killed Arthur, and that I was going for the cops. That was all it took. He had wanted me to fake his murder. I faked it, but good."

Cole said, "You took a hell of a chance, going off and leaving him alone."

Norden turned his head and looked into Cole's gray eyes. They stared at each other for a long moment, then Norden lifted his glass and drank.

Cole looked away. Norden went back to his packing. "That's all of it," he said.

He left them suddenly, and went to Cora Pitman's room. She answered his knock, standing stiff and straight, and looking at him coldly. He said drily, "I came for my other five thousand dollars."

Without speaking, she turned and went back into her room. In a moment she returned and handed him a check. Norden said: "Your daughter-in-law gets the bulk of the estate. She and her husband."

"You made a lot on this, didn't you, Mr.

Norden?" Cora said.

"No," Norden said. "Ray Cole did."

H HE WENT back to his room and got his bags. From the doorway he looked back at Linda.

She was still too damned beautiful.

"Keep the guy out of trouble," he said, and walked out.

Putting his luggage in his coupé, he backed it into the yard. He left the motor idling and went up the stairs to the rooms over the garage. He knocked on Beth's door. She peered out. Her face showed fright.

Norden said, "Decker's dead. Mrs. Pitman owns this place now. You don't want to work for her, do you?"

"No," she said. "No, I don't, sir."

Norden grinned.

"My car's in the driveway, ready to go. So am I."

Beth shook her head.

"I'd rather take a chance on Mrs. Pitman, sir," she said.

Norden sighed and turned to go. It was too bad, he thought. Too damned bad. She had such a slick chassis, too.

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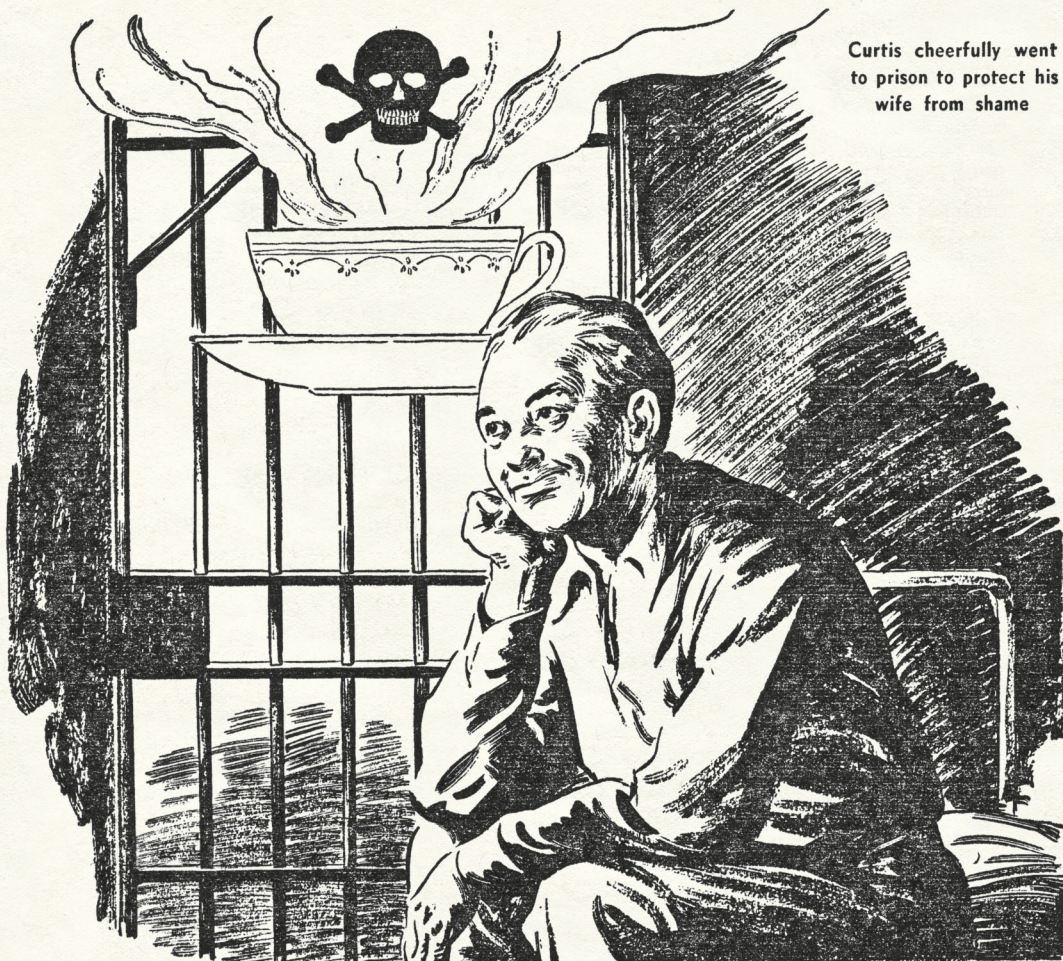
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Curtis cheerfully went
to prison to protect his
wife from shame

*Would you like to know how to commit a perfect murder?
You would? Well—*

HERE'S HOW

CURTIS BEWICK didn't mind being in state prison. In a real sense, he was glad to be there. Almost grateful, you might say.

"The evenings do get a bit lonely here, however," he thought, as he lay on the bunk in his cell. "Especially when one's cellmate despises one."

He looked reproachfully at the bulge in the bottom of the mattress of the bunk above him. "Ah, well," he mused, "the day will come when George Hellebore will respect me; when he'll be proud of having shared the same cell with Curtis Bewick."

George Hellebore cannot be blamed for having been somewhat dissatisfied with the

by RUFUS BAKALOR

circumstances that had led Mr. Bewick to state prison. There were others who wondered at his conduct, among them his wife, Evelyne. She wondered most of all. Mr. Bewick thought of Evelyne frequently in prison, and it amused him to know she was puzzled over his being there.

After fifteen years of being married to her, Mr. Bewick knew Evelyne as no one else ever had or would. Other people thought her demure and helpless, and, if they had been asked to describe her in one word only, they would surely have chosen "sweet." With regret, Mr. Bewick knew better. Around the house she was as sweet as stale beer.

When they went out, Evelyne coyly declined alcoholic beverages and ordered root beer. But, every night before retiring, she gulped four pudgy fingers of brandy in a tumbler, sweetened with a single cube of sugar.

She had the knack, common to her sex, of seeming to suffer silently. Everyone felt sorry for poor, sweet Evelyne. Except Mr. Bewick, that is. He knew that she needed no pity.

IN THE Bewick household, Mr. Bewick had rarely seen Evelyne in the morning. Usually, he got up and made his own breakfast while Evelyne stayed in bed. Then he put the coffee pot over a low heat on the stove and went off to work on the bus, leaving the car in the garage.

Therefore, he was rather, though unpleasantly, surprised one morning when Evelyne got up before he left. Clutching her kimona around her ample frame, she whimpered, "You stop off at a drugstore and get me some oxalic acid, Curtis. I got some ink stains on my linen dress and it's to take them out."

"Yes, indeedy," said Mr. Bewick. "Oxalic acid."

"Now don't forget—oxalic acid. You'd forget your head if it wasn't tacked on."

Mr. Bewick thought happily, "Oh, I'll remember, all right. I'll think of you and then of ox and then of oxalic acid."

On the way home from work, he stopped at a drugstore and asked for some.

"Comes in a two-ounce box," said the pharmacist. "You'll have to sign for it."

"Sign for it?" asked Mr. Bewick. "Why?"

"Why?" repeated the pharmacist testily. "Because it's poison, that's why." He held up the red-labeled container. "Yes, sir, there's enough poison in here to kill off all of them people sitting at the soda fountain, plus both soda jerks."

"My goodness!" exclaimed Mr. Bewick. "Imagine that!"

The pharmacist entered Mr. Bewick's name and address in the poison register and then asked, "Purpose of poison?"

"Oh, it's for my wife."

The pharmacist studied him with curiosity.

"Oh, goodness, I didn't mean it *that* way," Mr. Bewick explained. "I meant that it was for my wife's linen dress. She's got some ink stains on it."

"Of course," said the pharmacist with understanding, "I knew you had no murderous intent." He paused reflectively and shut one eye. "Although, it's a funny thing, you know. A divorce costs from \$300 up and then there's the alimony payments and all. On the other hand, oxalic acid runs you about seven and one-half cents per ounce. Makes a man stop and think, don't it?"

Homeward bound on the bus, Mr. Bewick remembered with dismay that Evelyne didn't have a linen dress.

Mr. Bewick gave Evelyne the oxalic acid, cautioning her to use it carefully because it was poisonous, and thereafter never mentioned it again.

Several nights later, Mr. Bewick had due notice that something of importance was going to happen on the following day. Evelyne shampooed her hair and put it up in curlers, humming as she did so.

The next morning, after her husband had left for work, Evelyne rose and took a bath. She applied her cosmetics profusely, arranged her hair, put on her embroidered house slippers and her black lace negligee, and went downstairs to the kitchen. She emptied the whole box of oxalic acid crystals into the coffee that was warming on the stove and stirred them until they were dis-

solved. She paused to take a generous swig out of her brandy bottle and then poured herself a cup of the lethal coffee.

She took a dainty sip of it, made a wry face, and rushed to telephone the doctor hysterically.

The doctor arrived at the Bewick residence to find Evelyne writhing in pain on the floor and holding her stomach. He pumped it. Then he examined the contents of the coffee pot, determined the poison, and administered a lime antidote.

"We've caught it in time," he said. "Luckily, you didn't get very much of it. Have any idea of how the oxalic acid came to be in the coffee pot?"

"I'm sure I don't know, doctor," said Evelyne, making her eyes big and helpless. "Curtis—my husband—always makes the coffee in the morning and leaves it on the stove to keep warm for me."

"I'm afraid it's my duty to report this matter to the district attorney at once," said the doctor apologetically.

"Do you have to?" asked Evelyne, indicating that she was agreeable to suffering in silence.

"My dear child," the doctor said with pity, "what you don't seem to realize is that you're very lucky to be alive at this moment. It looks very much like someone has tried to murder you."

Evelyne's mouth hung open in disbelief.

SOMETIME later in the day, a deputy sheriff came for Mr. Bewick at work and took him to the district attorney's office.

They were all there—the district attorney, the sheriff, the doctor, the pharmacist, Evelyne, and a stenographer who wrote everything down.

When Mr. Bewick saw the pharmacist, who threw him a smile of commiseration, he knew pretty well what was up. He nodded politely to each of them and took the chair that the district attorney indicated.

"Is this about the oxalic acid?" he inquired mildly of the group, and when his gaze met Evelyne's, she turned her head.

"I'll ask the questions around here, Mr. Bewick, if you don't mind," said the dis-

trict attorney, placing his hand on the bound volume of Wisconsin State Laws.

"Not at all," said Mr. Bewick.

"Now—did you or did you not put a lethal dose of oxalic acid into the coffee pot at your home, knowing that your wife would subsequently drink coffee from it?"

"Yes, indeedy," said Mr. Bewick, noting with satisfaction that Evelyne's jaw dropped lower and more rapidly than the others.

"And with the knowledge that the aforementioned oxalic acid was poisonous?" pursued the district attorney.

"That is correct."

The district attorney thrust his face close to Mr. Bewick's. "And with intent to murder your wife?"

"Oh, goodness, no! Just to teach her a lesson."

"So? What kind of a lesson?"

"Just to teach her a lesson. Just to show her who wears the pants in the family. But I wouldn't dream of murder. Oh, goodness, no."

"There was enough poison in that coffee pot to kill a judge, jury, and clerk of court," said the district attorney.

"Imagine that!" said Mr. Bewick. "Still, I didn't intend to kill Evelyne. Not Evelyne."

"You seem to take this whole crime very lightly," said the district attorney with a scowl. "It's really quite serious, I assure you. On the basis of what you've said here, I'll have to charge you with attempt to murder or injure by poison."

"Oh, I'm guilty of the 'injure' part, all right."

"You can get from one to ten years," said the district attorney darkly.

"Imagine that! Well, I'm perfectly willing to make a full confession," Mr. Bewick said with an air of being the only reasonable man present. "All I ask is a speedy trial and speedy justice."

Evelyne fell into a fit of hysteria. "No! No! you can't send him to prison. He didn't do it, I swear it! It's all a mistake! He didn't do it. I did it myself!"

The sheriff whispered, "Courageous little woman!" to the pharmacist and took Mr. Bewick into custody.

Mr. Bewick wondered, of course, why Evelyn had done it to him. To get him in trouble? To obtain grounds for a divorce? For excitement? To evoke more pity for herself? The reason didn't matter much, really.

UNDER the circumstances, the trial was speedy. The judge, a married man himself, took into consideration the facts that no great harm had been done, that it was unlikely that Evelyn could have drunk enough of the coffee to be killed, that Mr. Bewick was very cooperative. He sentenced the prisoner to serve no less than one and not more than two years in the state prison.

It was then that Mr. Bewick first met George Hellebore and it was with rue that he recalled their first meeting.

"Here's your new roomy, George," the guard had called. Mr. Bewick had been pushed gently from behind, and the cell door had clanged shut.

His cellmate jumped off his bunk, shook Mr. Bewick's hand with extravagant cordiality, and announced cheerfully, "Hellebore's the name, George Hellebore. Up for a thirty-year stretch and worth every minute of it! Poisoned the missus. Arsenic. Deserved it, too. What you in for?"

Mr. Bewick tried valiantly to maintain the pace. "Bewick's mine, Curtis Bewick. Attempting to poison my wife. One to three years. Glad to meet you, Mr. Hellebore."

"What kind of poison?"

"Oxalic acid."

"Never heard of it. You should of used arsenic. Never miss with arsenic. Best in the west."

Mr. Bewick said in a confidential whisper, "Well, to be perfectly truthful, I didn't give her the oxalic acid. She fixed things up so it would look like I did, but I really didn't. I only confessed to doing it."

"Eh? Don't get you; come again!"

Mr. Bewick whispered louder, "She tried to frame me and, was she surprised when I actually confessed? Yes, indeedy! You should have seen her face."

"Hold on, said George Hellebore with a willingness to understand. "Now, let me get this straight. You were sent up for trying to poison the missus?"

"Yes, indeedy."

"But you didn't try to poison her. She only set things up so it would look like you tried to poison her."

"That is correct."

"But you confessed to trying to poison her. But actually you never did any such thing."

"That is also correct."

"It may be correct, mister, but it ain't right. You want to know what I think? I think you're off your trolley. I think you don't know if you're afoot or a-horseback."

"Perhaps I had a reason," Mr. Bewick put in.

"Awh!" said Hellebore and dismissed Mr. Bewick with a gesture of disgust.

After this exchange, George Hellebore, who was noted in the cell block for conviviality, never had anything but contempt for Mr. Bewick. He limited his conversation to the bare essentials because they occupied the same cell and otherwise conducted himself as if Mr. Bewick simply did not exist.

FIVE months after he had come to state prison, Mr. Bewick was summoned to the warden's office.

The warden joined the ends of his index fingers and placed them on the bridge of his nose. "I have some rather sad news for you, Bewick. Your wife passed away yesterday and—"

Mr. Bewick blinked his eyes rapidly and gave a short, agonized sob.

"There, now, get a grip on yourself, old chap," said the warden. "Perhaps we can arrange for you to attend the funeral. You've been a splendid prisoner."

"That's very kind of you, Warden," said Mr. Bewick in a small voice. "How did it happen?"

"Well, it's a funny thing, Bewick. Looks like she might have committed suicide by taking poison, although it's impossible to trace the poison. For that reason, they think it might have been aconite in some form.

Anyway, there's no sign of any more of it around, nothing else is contaminated, and there's no indication of how or when she took it."

"My goodness! Imagine that!"

"I'll make no bones about it, Bewick. Since you once attempted to poison her, suspicion naturally fell on you. But, of course, you couldn't have had anything to do with it because you've been in prison for the past five months. Not many alibis better than that, is there?"

"Poor Evelynne," said Mr. Bewick, clucking his tongue. "Suicide. Well, she threatened it often enough. To tell the truth, Warden, that's what happened the other time. She put that oxalic acid in the coffee herself and then she got cold feet. I confessed and took the blame so as not to injure her good name."

The warden rose. "Mr. Bewick, I admire a man of your unselfish calibre!"

That night, in the cell, Mr. Bewick ran his tongue around inside his mouth and said, "Hellebore, the warden had some rather interesting news for me today."

"Yeah?"

"About my wife. She poisoned herself yesterday. Of course I'm above suspicion because I've been here in prison." Mr. Bewick gave him an exaggerated wink.

"Yeah, yeah, go on," said Hellebore.

"Well, Hellebore, of course, I knew this might happen and I hadn't intended telling anyone. But long ago, I resolved to tell *you* when the event took place. This is, of course, in strictest confidence."

"Yeah, yeah," said Hellebore, putting his hand to his heart.

"I don't believe you ever gave me the chance to tell you that Evelynne was a kind of secret drinker. Every night before going to bed, she'd have a liberal glass of brandy sweetened by one sugar cube."

"I'm following you."

"There are about one hundred and fifty cubes of sugar in a box, you know, Hellebore, and—"

"Yeah, yeah."

"And—well, who would ever notice a half grain of aconitine in one of the cubes on the bottom layer?"

George Hellebore rose and firmly gripped Mr. Bewick's hand.

His eyes misted over and he said in a husky voice, "I owe you an apology, Curtis. I've misjudged you."

"Forget it, George," said Mr. Bewick with assurance. "You see, arsenic's not really the best in the West. You're up for thirty years. But, take my case. Half a grain of aconitine judiciously used, and I'm up for parole in another month. Yes, indeedy."

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Gals, Guns and Gore Mingle Pleasantly In

THE LOVELESS DIE FIRST

A Sizzling New Novel

by Dale Bogard

Special!

THE UNSPEAKABLE CRIME, by Frank Talker

A daring expose of the "sex frameup"—and how to beat it

PUZZLE PAGE

Answers to puzzles appear
on page 127

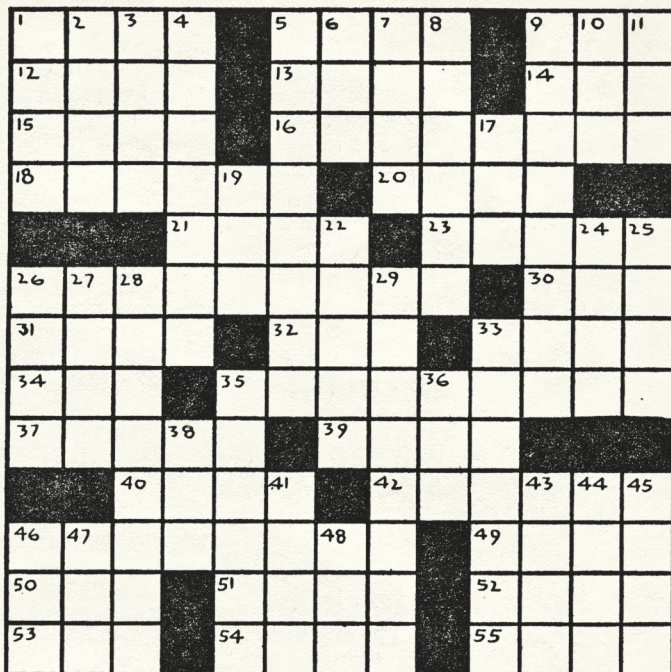
* * *

DETECTAGRAM

by A. F. Schroeder, Jr.

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CRIME WAVE

Four crooks met last New Year's Eve to talk shop. Business, it turned out, had been bad for them—so bad, in fact, that they finally decided to rook one another. Therefore—

Butch gave Spike a phony \$10 bill and got a good five-spot and a bad five-spot in exchange. Spike gave Porky a good \$20 bill and got a good ten and a counterfeit ten. Porky gave Slats a homemade twenty and got a good ten and a bum ten in return. Slats handed Butch a good ten and received a good five and a phony five.

Came the dawn—New Year's Day—and the boys all made their good resolutions. Consequently, each destroyed the counterfeits he held.

How much in good United States currency did each gain or lose?





When Chafey made the remark about "his fancy babe," Fordyce hit him

UNGUARDED MOMENT

by LOUIS L'AMOUR

ARTHUR FORDYCE had never done a criminal thing in his life, nor had the idea of doing anything unlawful ever seriously occurred to him.

The wallet that lay beside his chair was not only full, it was literally stuffed. It lay on the floor near his feet, where it had fallen.

His action was as purely automatic as an action can be. He let his *Racing Form* slip

from his lap and cover the billfold. Then he sat very still, his heart pounding. The fat man who had dropped the wallet was talking to a friend on the far side of the box. So far as Fordyce could see, his own action had gone unobserved.

It had been a foolish thing to do. Fordyce did not need the money. He had been paid a week's salary only a short time before and

It seemed like a harmless little theft—but the murder that came on its heels wasn't so harmless!



had won forty dollars on the last race.

With his heart pounding heavily, his mouth dry, he made every effort to be casual as he picked up his *Form* and the wallet beneath. Trying to appear as natural as possible, he opened the billfold under cover of the *Form*, extracted the money and shifted the bills to his pocket.

The horses were rounding into the home stretch, and when the crowd sprang to its feet, he got up, too. As he straightened, he shied the wallet, with an underhand flip, under the feet of the crowd off to his left.

His heart was still pounding. Blindly he stared out at the track. He was a thief . . . he had stolen money . . . he had appropriated it . . . how much?

Panic touched him suddenly. Suppose he had been seen? If someone had seen him, the person might wait to see if he returned the wallet. If he did not, the person might come down and accuse him. What if, even now, there was an officer waiting for him? Perhaps he should leave, get away from there as quickly as possible.

Cool sanity pervaded him. No, that would never do. He must remain where he was, go through the motions of watching the races. If he were accused, he could say he had won the money on the races. He had won money—forty dollars. The man at the window might remember his face but not the amount he had given him.

Fordyce was in the box that belonged to his boss, Ed Charlton, and no friend of Charlton's would ever be thought a thief. He sat still, watching the races, relaxing as much as he could. surprisingly, the fat man who had dropped the wallet did not miss it. He did not even put a hand to his pocket.

AFTER the sixth race, several people got up to leave, and Fordyce followed suit.

It was not until he was unlocking his car that he realized there was a man at his elbow.

He was a tall, dark-eyed, handsome young man, too smoothly dressed, too—slick. And there was something sharply feral about his eyes. He was smiling unpleasantly.

"Nice work!" he said. "Very nice! Now, how about a split?"

Arthur Fordyce kept his head. Inside, he seemed to feel all his bodily organs contract as if with chill. "I am afraid I don't understand you. What was it you wanted?"

The brightly feral eyes hardened just a little, and although the smile remained, it was a little forced. "A split, that's what I want. I saw you get that billfold. Now let's bust it open and see what we've got."

"Billfold?" Fordyce stared at him coldly, although he was quivering inside with fear. He *had* been seen! What if he should be arrested? What if Alice heard? Or Ed Charlton? Why, that fat man might be a friend of Ed's!

"Don't give me that," the tall young man was saying. "I saw the whole thing. You dropped that *Racing Form* over the billfold and picked it up. I'm getting a split or I'll holler bull. I'll go to the cops. You aren't out of the grounds yet, and even if you were I could soon find out who used Ed Charlton's box today."

Fordyce stood stock-still. This could not be happening to him. It—it was preposterous! What ever had possessed him? Yet, what explanation could he give now? He had thrown away the wallet itself, a sure indication that he intended to keep the money.

"Come on, Bud—" the smile was sneering now—"you might as well hand it over. There was plenty there. I'd had my eye on Linton all afternoon, just watching a chance.

He always carries plenty of dough."

Linton—George Linton. How many times had Ed Charlton spoken of him? They were golfing companions. They hunted and fished together. They had been friends at college. Even if the money were returned, Fordyce was sure he would lose his job, his friends—Alice. He would be finished, completely finished.

"I never intended to do it," he protested. "It—it was an accident."

"Yeah—" the eyes were contemptuous—"I could see that. I couldn't have done it more accidentally myself. Now, hand it over."

There was fourteen hundred dollars in fifties and twenties. With fumbling fingers Fordyce divided it. The young man took his bills and folded them with the hands of a lover. He grinned suddenly.

"Nice work! With my brains and your in we'd make a team!" He pocketed the bills, anxious to be gone. "Be seeing you!"

Arthur Fordyce did not reply. Cold and shaken, he stared after the fellow.

Days fled swiftly past. Fordyce avoided the track, worked harder than ever. Once he took Alice to the theatre and twice to dinner. Then at a party the Charltons gave, he came face to face with George Linton.

The fat man was jovial. "How are you, Fordyce? Ed tells me you're his right hand at the office. Good to know you."

"Thanks." He spoke without volition. "Didn't I see you at the track a couple of weeks ago? I was in Charlton's box."

"Oh, yes! I remember you now. I thought your face seemed familiar." He shook his head wryly. "I'll not soon forget that day. My pocket was picked for nearly two thousand dollars."

Seeing that Alice was waiting, Fordyce excused himself and joined her. Together they walked to the terrace and stood there in the moonlight. How lovely she was! And to think he had risked all this, risked it on the impulse of a moment, and for what? She was looking up at him, and he spoke suddenly, filled with the sudden panic born of the thought of losing her.

"Alice!" He gripped her arms. "Alice! Will you marry me?"

"Why, Arthur!" she protested, laughing in her astonishment. "How rough you are! Do you always grab a girl so desperately when you ask her to marry you?"

He released her arms, embarrassed. "I—I guess I was violent," he said, but I just—well, I couldn't stand to lose you, Alice."

Her eyes were wide and wonderfully soft. "You aren't going to, Arthur," she said quietly. "I'm going to stay with you."

"Then—you mean—"

"Yes, Arthur."

DRIVING home that night his heart was bounding. She would marry him! How lovely she was! How beautiful her eyes had been as she looked up at him!

He drove into the garage, snapped out the lights and got his keys. It was not until he came out to close the doors that he saw the glow of a suddenly inhaled cigarette in the shadow cast by the shrubbery almost beside him.

"Hello, Fordyce. How's tricks?" It was the man from the track. "My name's Chafey, Bill Chafey."

"What are you doing here? What do you want?"

"That's a beautiful babe you've got. I've seen her picture on the society pages."

"I'm sorry. I don't intend to discuss my fiancée with you. It's very late and I must be getting to bed. Good night."

"Abrupt, aren't you?" Chafey was adopting a George Raft manner. "Not going to invite an old friend inside for a drink? An old friend from out of town—who wants to meet your friends?"

Arthur Fordyce saw it clearly, then, saw it as clearly as he would ever see anything. He knew what this slick young man was thinking—that he would use his hold over Fordyce for introductions and for better chances to steal. Probably he had other ideas, too. Girls—and their money.

"Look, Chafey," he said harshly, "whatever was between us is finished. Now beat it! And don't come back!"

Chafey had seen a lot of movies. He knew what came next. He snapped his cigarette into the grass and took a quick step forward.

"Why, you cheap thief! You think you

can brush me off like that? Listen, I've got you where I want you, and before I'm through I'll have everything you've got!" Chafey's voice was rising with some inner emotion of triumph or hatred. "You think you're so much! Figure you can brush me off, do you?"

He stepped close. "What if I got to that fancy babe of yours and told her what I know? What if I go to Linton and tell him? Why, you're a thief, Fordyce! A damned thief! You and that fancy babe of yours! Why—"

Fordyce hit him. The action was automatic and it was unexpected. In the movies it was always the tough guy who handed out the beatings. His fist flew up and caught Chafey on the jaw. Chafey's feet flew up, and he went down, the back of his neck hitting the bumper with a sickening crack. Then his body slipped slowly to the ground.

Arthur Fordyce stood very still, staring down at the crumpled form. His breath was coming in great gasps, and his fist was still clenched hard. Some instinct told him the man was dead.

"Mr. Fordyce?" It was his neighbor, Joe Neal, calling. "Is something wrong?"

Fordyce dropped to one knee and touched the man's head. It lolled loosely, too loosely. He felt for the heart. Nothing. He bent over the man's face, but felt no breath, nothing.

Neal was coming out on the lawn, pulling his belt tight. "Fordyce? Is anything wrong?"

He got to his feet slowly. "Yes, Joe. I wish you'd come down here. I've been held up and I think—I think I've killed him."

Joe Neal hurried up, flashlight in hand. He threw the light on the fallen man. "Good heavens!" he gasped. "What did you hit him with? What happened?"

"He was waiting there by the tree. He stepped out with his hand in his pocket—you know, like he had a gun. I hit him before I realized."

That was the story, and he made it stick. For several days it was the talk of all his friends. Fordyce had killed a holdup man. That took nerve. And a punch, too. Didn't know he had it in him. Of course, it was the

bumper that actually broke his neck. Still—Had there been any doubts—and there were none—a check of Chafey's record would have removed them.

He had done time and was on parole at the moment. He had gone up for armed robbery and had been arrested a score of times for investigation. He was suspected of rolling drunks and of various acts of petty pilfering and slugging. A week passed, and a second week. Arthur Fordyce threw himself into his work, never talking about what had happened.

Others forgot it, too, except Joe Neal. Once, commenting on it to his wife, he looked puzzled and said, "You know, I'd have sworn I heard voices that night. I'd have sworn it."

"You might have. They might have argued. I imagine that a man might say a lot when excited and not remember it." That was what his wife said, and it was reasonable enough. Nevertheless, Joe Neal was faintly disturbed by it all. He avoided Fordyce. Not that they had ever been friends.

ARTHUR FORDYCE had been lucky. No getting away from that. He had been very lucky and sometimes when he thought about it, he felt a cold chill come over him. But it was finished now.

Only it wasn't.

It was Monday night, two weeks after the inquest, the first night he had been home since it had happened. He was sitting in his armchair listening to the radio when the telephone rang. Idly, he lifted it from the cradle.

"Mr. Fordyce?" The voice was feminine, and strange. "Is this Arthur Fordyce?"

"Speaking."

There was an instant of silence. Then, "This is Bill Chafey's girl-friend, Mr. Fordyce. I thought I would call and congratulate you. You seem to be very, very lucky!"

The cold was there again in the pit of his stomach. "I—I beg your pardon? I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"He told me all about it, Mr. Fordyce. All about that day at the track. All about what he was going to do. Bill had big ideas, Mr. Fordyce, and he thought you were his

big chance. Only he thought you were scared. He got too close to you, didn't he, Mr. Fordyce?"

"I'm sure," he kept his voice composed, "that you are seriously in error. I—"

She interrupted with a soft laugh, a laugh that did not cover an underlying cruelty. "I'm not going to be as dumb as Bill was, Mr. Fordyce. I'm not going to come anywhere within your reach. Two murders are no worse than one, so I'll stay away. But you're going to pay off, Mr. Fordyce, you're going to pay off like a slot machine. You're going to pay off with a thousand dollars now and five hundred a month from now on."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but you are probably insane," he said quietly. "What you assume is ridiculous. If you are a friend of Chafey's, then you know he was a criminal. I am sorry for you, but there is nothing I can do."

"One thousand dollars by Friday, Mr. Fordyce, and five hundred a month from now on. I don't think you were scared when Bill went to you, but how about the gas chamber, Mr. Fordyce? How about that?"

"What you assume is impossible." He fought to keep his voice controlled. "And you are absurd to think I have that kind of money."

She laughed again. "But you can get it, Buster! You can get it when it means the difference between life as you live it and the gas chamber."

Her voice grew brusque. "Small bills, understand? Nothing bigger than a twenty. And send it to Gertrude Ellis, Box X78, here in town. Send me that thousand dollars by Friday and send the five hundred on the fifth of every month. If you miss by as much as ten days, the whole story goes to your girl friend, to your boss, and to the police." The phone clicked, the line buzzed emptily. Slowly, Fordyce replaced the phone.

So there it was. Now he had not only disgrace and prison before him, but the gas chamber.

A single mistake—an instant when his reason was in abeyance—and here he was—trapped.

He could call her bluff. He could refuse. The woman was obviously unprincipled and

she had sounded vindictive. She would certainly follow through as she had threatened.

For hours he paced the floor, racking his brain for some way out, some avenue of escape. He could go to Charlton, confess everything, and ask for help. Charlton would give it to him, for he was that kind of man, but when it was over, he would drop Fordyce quickly and quietly.

Alice—his future—everything depended on finding some other way. Some alternative.

If something should happen to this woman— It might. People were killed every day. There were accidents. He shied away from the idea that lay behind this, but slowly it forced its way into his consciousness. He was considering murder.

No. Never that. He would not—he could not. He had killed Chafey, but that had been different. It had not been murder, although if all the facts were known, it might be considered so. It had been an accident. All he had done was strike out. If he killed now, deliberately and with intent, it would be different.

He ran his fingers through his hair and stared blindly at the floor. Accidentally, he caught a glimpse of his face in a mirror. He looked haggard, beaten. But he was not beaten. There was a way out. There had to be.

MORNING found him on the job, working swiftly and silently. He handled the few clients who came in, talked with them and straightened out their problems. He was aware that Charlton was watching him. Finally, at noon, the boss came over.

"Fordyce," he said, "this thing has worried you. You're doing a fine job this morning, so it looks as though you're getting it whipped, but nevertheless, I think a few days' rest would put you right up to snuff. You just go home now, and don't come in until Monday. Go out of town, see a lot of Alice, just anything. But relax."

"Thanks." A flood of relief went over Fordyce as he got up, and genuine gratitude must have showed in his eyes, for Charlton expanded. "I do need a rest."

"Sure!" Ed put a hand on his shoulder.

"You go call Alice. Take her for a drive. Wonderful girl that. You're lucky. Good connections, too," he added almost as an afterthought.

The sun was bright in the street, and he stood there thinking. He would call Alice, make a date if possible. He had to do that much, for Ed would be sure to comment later. Then—then he must find this woman, this Gertrude Ellis.

He got through the afternoon without a hitch. He and Alice drove out along the ocean drive, parked by the sea, and then stopped for dinner. It was shortly after ten when he finally dropped her at her home.

He remembered what the police had said about Bill Chafey. They had known about him and they had mentioned that he had been one of several known criminals who frequented a place called Eddie's Bar. If Chafey had gone there, it was possible his girl did, too.

It was a shadowy place with one bartender and a row of leather covered stools and a half dozen booths. He picked out a stool and ordered a drink. He was halfway down his second Bourbon and soda before the first lead came to him.

A tall Latin-looking young man was talking to the bartender. "Gracie been around? I haven't seen her but once since Chafey got it in the neck."

"You figuring on moving in there?"

"Are you crazy? That broad gives me the shivers. She's stacked, all right, but she'd cut your heart out for a buck."

"Bill handled her."

"You mean she handled him. She was the brains of that setup."

"Leave it to Bill to try to pick up a fast buck."

"Yeah, and look at him now."

There was silence, and Fordyce sipped his drink unconcernedly, waiting. After a while it started again.

"She's probably working that bar on Sixth Street."

"Maybe. She said the other day she was going to quit. That she was expecting a legacy."

"I'll bet. She's got a take lined up."

A few moments later, Fordyce finished

his drink and left the place. He went to Sixth Street, studied the bars as he drove along. It might be any one of them. He tried a couple but without luck.

The next morning he slept late. While he was shaving he studied his face in the mirror. He told himself he did not look like a murderer. But, then, what did murderers look like? They were just people.

His face was long, his cheek bones high, and he had a quick, easy smile. His hair was straight and brown, his eyes a light blue. He was nearing thirty and had the assured manner of any young professional man. Despite the fact that he had always held good jobs, he had saved no money to speak of, had always looked ahead for a better position and better chances at money.

He dressed carefully, thinking as he dressed. To get the money Gertrude Ellis would have to go to the box. She would not expect him to be watching, since she would probably believe he would be at work. Even so, he would have to be careful, for she would be careful herself. She might walk by and merely glance in, at first. He would have to get her to open the box. He considered that, then had a hunch.

Shuffling through his own mail, he found what he wanted. It was an advertisement of the type mailed to Boxholder or Occupant. He withdrew the advertising matter to make sure his own name was not on it. Then he carefully removed the address with ink eradicator and substituted the number she had given him.

Her true name would probably be not unlike Gertrude Ellis, which was obviously assumed. The first name was Gracie, and it was a fairly safe bet the last would begin with an E. Unless, as sometimes happened, she used the name of a husband or some friend.

Considering the situation, he had another idea. Eddie's Bar and Sixth Street were not far apart. Hence, she must live somewhere in that vicinity.

HE RETURNED to Eddie's that night, and the bartender greeted him briefly. They exchanged a few comments, and then Fordyce asked:

"Many babes come in here?"

"Yeah, now and again. Most of 'em are bags. Once in a while something good shows up."

He went away to attend to the wants of another customer, and Arthur Fordyce waited, stalling over his drink, listening. He heard nothing.

It was not much later, when he had finished his third drink and was turning to look around that he bumped into someone. She was about to sit down, and he collided with her outstretched arm.

"Oh, I'm sorry! Pardon me."

"That's all right." She was a straight-haired brunette with rather thin lips and cool eyes. But she was pretty, damned pretty. Her clothes were not like those Alice wore, but she did have a style of her own.

She ordered a drink, and he ignored her. After a minute, she got up and went to the ladies' room. The bartender strolled over. "Speaking of babes," he said, "there's a cute one. Should be about ready, too. She's fresh out of boy friends."

"Her? How come? She's really built."

The bartender shrugged. "Runs with some fast company sometimes. Her boy friend tried to make a quick buck with a gun and got killed. Chafey. Maybe you read about it."

"Chafey?" Fordyce looked puzzled, although inside he was jumping. "Don't recall the name." He hesitated. "Introduce me?"

"You don't need it. Just buy her a drink." Then the bartender grinned. "But if you go home with her, take your own bottle and pour the drinks yourself. And don't pass out."

"You mean she'd roll me?"

"I didn't say that, chum. I didn't say anything. But you look like a good guy. Just take care of yourself. After all," he added, "a guy can have a good time without making a sucker of himself."

The girl returned then and sat down on her stool. He waited out her drink and as she was finishing it, he turned. "How about having one with me? I feel I owe it to you after bumping you like that."

She smiled quickly. "Oh, that's all right! Yes, I'll drink with you."

Her name was Gracie Turk. She had been divorced several years ago. They talked about dance bands, movies, swimming. She liked to drink, she admitted, but usually did her drinking at home.

"I'd like that," he said. "Why don't we pick up a bottle and go there?"

She hesitated, then smiled. "All right, let's go."

Fordyce glanced back as he went out. The bartender grinned and made a circle of his thumb and forefinger.

Not tonight, Fordyce told himself. Whatever happens, not tonight. He will remember this. They got the bottle and went to her apartment. It was small, cheaply furnished with pretensions toward elegance. Bored, he still managed to seem interested and mixed the drinks himself. He let her see that he had money on him, and suddenly, recalled that he was expecting a business call at night.

"From back East, you know," he said by way of explanation.

He left but with a date for the following evening. An hour later he called back and canceled the date. His call had come, he said, and he would be out of town.

He made his plans with utmost care. He drove out of town and deliberately wound along dusty roads for several hours, letting his car gather dust. In town, at the same time he carefully chose a spot at which to dispose of the body.

At eight, he drove around and parked his car near the entrance to the alley behind the girl's apartment. There was a light in the window, so he went into the front entrance, hoping desperately that he would meet no one. Luck was with him, and he reached her door safely. It was around a corner in a corridor off the main hall. At the end was a door to the back stairs.

He tapped lightly, and then heard the sound of heels. The door was opened, and Gracie Turk stepped back in surprise.

"Al!" That was the name he had given her. "I thought you were out of town?"

"Missed my train, and I just had a wild idea you might not have gone out."

"Come in!" She stepped back. "I was just fixing something to eat. Want a sandwich? Or a drink?"

He closed the door behind him and looked at her shoulders and the back of her head. That coldness was in the pit of his stomach again. His mouth felt dry, and the palms of his hands were wet. He kept wiping them off, as if they were already— He shook himself and accepted the drink she had fixed for him.

SHE smiled quickly, but her eyes seemed cold. "Well, drink up! There's more where that came from! I'll go get things ready and then we'll eat. We'll just stay home tonight."

She had good legs and the seams in her stockings were straight. He was cold. Maybe the drink would fix him up. He drank half of it at a gulp. It was lousy whiskey, lousy— The words of the bartender at Eddie's came back to him. "Take your own bottle," he had said, "and pour your own drinks." He stared at the glass, put it down suddenly.

Suppose it was doped? He had had only half of it. What would that much do to him? He might not pass out, but would he be able to carry out his plans if—

He sat down abruptly. She would be coming in soon. He glanced hastily around, then took the drink and reaching back under the divan, poured it, little by little, over the thick carpet. When she came back into the room, he was sitting there holding his empty glass. "Lousy whiskey," he commented. "Let me get some for you."

She smiled, but her eyes were still cold and calculating. She seemed to be measuring him as she took the glass from his hand. "I'll just fill this up again. Why don't you lie down?"

"All right," he said and suddenly made up his mind. He would not wait. It would be now. She might—

If he passed out she would open his billfold, and in his billfold was his identification! He started to get up, but the room seemed to spin. He sat down, suddenly filled with panic. He was going, he— He got his hand into his pocket, fumbled

for the identification card. He got it out of the window in the bill fold and shoved it down in another pocket. The money wasn't much, only—

He had been hearing voices, a girl's and a man's for some time. The girl was speaking now. "I don't care where you drop him. Just take him out of here. The fool didn't have half the money he had the other night! Not half! All this trouble for a lousy forty bucks! Why, I'd bet he had— What's the matter?"

"Hey!" The man's voice was hoarse. "Do you know who this is?"

"Who is it? What does it matter?"

Fordyce lay very still. Slowly but surely he was recovering his senses. He could hear the man move back.

"I don't want this, Gracie. Take back your sawbuck. This is *hot*! I want no part of him! None at all!"

"What's the matter?" She was coming forward. "What have you got there?"

"Don't kid me!" His voice was hoarse with anger. "I'm getting out of here! Just you try to ring me in on your dirty work!"

"Johnny, have you gone nuts? What's the matter?" Her voice was strident.

"You mean you don't know who this is? This is Fordyce, the guy who knocked off Bill Chafey."

There was dead silence while she absorbed that. Fordyce heard a crackle of paper. That letter—it had been in his pocket. It must have fallen out.

"Fordyce." She sounded stunned. "He must have found out where I was! How the—" Her voice died away.

"I'm getting out of here. I want no part of killing a guy."

"Don't be a fool!" She was angry. "I didn't know who the sap was. I met him at Eddie's. He flashed a roll, and I just figured it was an easy take. How did he locate me?"

"What gives, Gracie?" The man's voice was prying. "What's behind this?"

"Ah, I just was going to take the sap for plenty, that's all. Now what happens?" She stopped talking, then started again. "Bill saw him grab a wallet some guy dropped. This guy didn't return it, so Bill

shook him for half of it. He figured on more, and this guy wouldn't stand for it."

"So you moved in?"

"Why not? He didn't know who I was or where I was. What I can't figure is how he found out. The guy must be psychic."

Arthur Fordyce kept his eyes closed and listened. While he listened his mind was working. He was a fool. An insane fool. How could he ever have conceived the idea of murder? He knew now he could never have done it, never. It wasn't in him to kill or even to plan so cold-bloodedly. He would have backed down at the last moment. He would have called it off. Suddenly, all he wanted was to get out, to get away without trouble. Should he lie still and wait to find out what would happen? Or should he get up and try to bluff it out?

"What are you going to do now?"

GRACIE TURK did not reply. Minutes ticked by, and then the man turned toward the door. "I'm getting out of here," he said. "I don't want any part of this. I'd go for dumping the guy if he was just drunk, but I want no part of murder."

"Who's talking about murder?" Gracie's voice was shrill. "Get out if you're yellow."

Fordyce opened one eye a crack. Gracie was facing the other way, not looking directly at him. He put his hands on the floor, rolled over and got to his feet. The man sprang back, falling over a chair, and Gracie

turned quickly, her face drawn and vicious.

Fordyce felt his head spin, but he stood there, looking at them. Gracie Turk stared, swore viciously.

"Give him his ten," Fordyce told her, "out of the money you took from me."

"I will like—"

"Give it to him. He won't go for a killing, and you don't dare start anything now because he'd be a witness. For that matter, he would be a witness against me, too."

"That's right," the man said hastily. "It was the same Latin-looking man he had seen in Eddie's. 'Give me the sawbuck and I'll get out of here—but fast.'"

Gracie's eyes flared, her lips curled. "What do you think you're pulling, anyway? How'd you find me? Who told you?"

Fordyce forced himself to smile. "What's difficult about finding you? You're not very clever, Gracie." Suddenly he saw his way clear and said with more emphasis, "Not at all clever."

The idea was so simple that it might work. He was no murderer, nor was he a thief. He had only been a fool. Now if he could assume the nerve and the indifference it would take, he could get safely out of this.

"Look, Gracie," he said quietly, "like Chafey you walked into this by accident. He misunderstood what he saw and passed it on to you, and neither of you had any idea but making a fast buck.

THE ADVENTURES OF

IT SMELLS GRAND



IT PACKS RIGHT



"Bill—" and he knew it sounded improbable—"stepped into a trap baited for another guy. You know as well as I do that Bill was never very smart. He was neither as smart nor as lucky as you. You're going to get out of this without tripping."

"What are you talking about?" Gracie was both angry and puzzled. Something had gone wrong from the start. That was Bill for you. And now the easy money was glimmering. This guy hinted that Bill had blundered into something, which was just like him.

"The wallet I picked up—" Fordyce made his voice sound impatient—"was dropped by agreement. We were trying to convince a man who was watching that I was taking a pay-off." The story was flimsy, but Gracie would accept a story of double-dealing quicker than any other. "Bill saw it, and I paid off to keep him from crabbing a big deal."

"I don't believe it!" Her voice was defiant, yet there was uncertainty in her eyes. "Was murdering Bill part of the game?"

He shrugged it off. "Look, Gracie. You knew Bill. He was a big, good-looking guy who couldn't see anything but the way he was going. He thought he had me where the hair was short when he stopped me outside my garage. Once away from that track I was clean, so he had no hold over me at all. My deal had gone through. We had words, and when he started for me,

I hit him. He fell, and his neck hit the bumper. He was a victim of his own foolishness and greed."

"That's what you say."

"Why kill him? He could be annoying, but he could prove nothing, and nobody would have believed him. Nor," he added, "would they believe you."

He picked up his hat. "Give this man the ten spot for his trouble. You keep the rest and charge it up to experience. That's what I'll do."

The night air was cool on his face when he reached the street. He hesitated, breathing deep, and then walked to his car.

AT THE Charlton party, one week later, he was filling Alice's glass at the punch bowl when George Linton clapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, Art!" It was the first time, he thought suddenly, that anybody had called him Art. "I got my money back! Remember the money I lost at the track? Fourteen hundred dollars! It came back in the mail, no note, nothing. What do you think of that?"

"You were lucky," Fordyce grinned at him. "We're all lucky at times."

"Believe me," Linton confided, "if I'd found that fourteen hundred bucks I'd never have returned it! I'd just have shoved it in my pocket and forgotten about it."

"That," Art Fordyce said sincerely, "is what you think!" ● ● ●

UNCLE WALTER

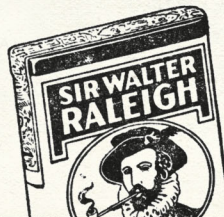
IT SMOKES SWEET



IT'S THE PIPE-BLEND CHAMP
YOU MUST ALLOW

IT CAN'T BITE!

A BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS,
EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE
BITE. SIR WALTER RALEIGH STAYS LIT
TO THE LAST PUFF — NEVER LEAVES A
SOGGY HEEL.



*It costs
no more
to get
the Best!*



Murder in

WHILE the ringmaster was introducing him in thundering superlatives over the public address, Kenyon entered the big cage. He went to the center in a brisk, choppy stride that covered his limp, faced front and signaled the handlers. The handlers wheeled the individual cages up and let the twelve big cats into the arena one by one. The band set a nervous mood with muted horns playing in a quick tempo.

Kenyon took a casual stance, black boots apart, the thumbs of his claw-scarred hands hooked in his belt. The big cats passed near enough to brush his white breeches and leaped to their perches on the pyramid of pedestals across the rear of the cage. The barred door clanged shut when the last cat entered. The quick, muted entrance music ended and the fanfare, cuing Kenyon for a bow, began. Abruptly the fanfare stopped.

Kenyon turned an arrogant, angry gaze toward the bandmaster. Outside the bars a cage boy tried frantically to get Kenyon's attention. A warning murmur, edged with angry resentment, rose from the crowd. Kenyon appeared to be concerned only in showing his displeasure with the band.

Kenyon finally saw the cage boy, agitatedly pointing behind him. He turned around and surveyed the explosive mixture of natural enemies, lions and tigers, sitting in the pyramid like an assembly of ancient gods. With maddening deliberation he continued in blind arrogance to see only what was right about his act. When the crowd was thoroughly irritated with him, he condescended to note that the last cat into the arena had not mounted its

pedestal but had been staring at his back.

The cat, a young male lion not six months out of the African jungle, stood in front of its pedestal at the far right of the big cage. As Kenyon's gaze locked with the lion's the animal waved its tufted tail in a sinuous motion of defiance. Kenyon turned, went to the front of the cage, got a whip and a straight chair.

He headed for the young lion, making the whiplash crack above and to one side of the tawny head. The lion shook its mane in annoyance, wheeled and ran past Kenyon around the perimeter of the cage. Kenyon went across the cage. The lion came up short when it approached the end pedestal on the opposite side where a big, blackstriped Bengal tiger sat. With the tiger ahead, and the cage bars on its left, the lion spun to the right toward Kenyon. Kenyon thrust the legs of the chair at it.

THE LION snarled, bit and struck at the chair. Kenyon backed away, jabbing with the chair. The lion, hooking first with one paw and then the other like a boxer, came swiftly across the arena. At the far side Kenyon turned, began to worry the big cat back to the empty pedestal. The lion stopped, lowered its head and sent a roar, worthy of the boss lion on the apex of the pyramid, reverberating from the floor. There was a wake of silence in the big tent.

Kenyon nudged the pedestal back until it was on a line with the others in the row. Without further ado, the lion jumped up. The band struck up a fanfare, and the crowd burst into applause. Kenyon took

a Cage

By Stuart Friedman

a bow. It had all been contrived, mock trouble.

But there might be real trouble, as there had been the past two nights. Someone had shot pellets into the cage during the act. Private police and city detectives had been alerted and were on guard. But a small, quiet weapon, such as a pistol powered by air or carbon dioxide, could be concealed in something as innocent as a popcorn box. Just one hit at a crucial moment in the act could turn the arena into a raging hell. Cats could be conditioned to routine and trained, providing it didn't violate instinct. They couldn't be tamed.

After his bow, Kenyon flicked the pedestal of the lioness, Saccharine. She jumped down and began chasing her tail. Simultaneously the band struck up a waltz. She moved,

*There was a killer loose in the circus
—but it wasn't one of Kenyon's jungle
tomcats that was spilling human blood!*

Then he saw the half-
dried blood on her cheek



in the immemorial manner of felines, at her own pace. The band carefully followed her tempo to give an illusion of a lioness dancing. After the young lion's display it was relaxing for the crowd.

Kenyon was taut because this lioness was the boss lion's mate. The sting of a pellet might make one of the other lions jump. The big lion would interpret it as a move toward his mate and all five hundred deadly pounds of him would come flying and there would be a dead lion. Kenyon kept a wary eye on the apex. The big devil was watching and waiting, as always, for one false move out of the other males. Stopping such a fight was next to impossible.

All Kenyon could hope to do was anticipate a leap and try to divert the rage toward himself. His body was already a topographical map gouged out by fangs and claws over the years. He didn't relish the prospect of another layup in a hospital, or a dead \$5,000 cat, or the smashing of the complex, precise pattern of the act.

Kenyon relaxed visibly when Saccharine finished and returned to her perch. The handlers came in with a painted barrel, and Kenyon called one of the tigers down. The tiger circled, moving in a menacing slither like a legged serpent. Kenyon maneuvered the cat until it took the path of least resistance and mounted the barrel. The barrel was rolled beneath the tiger which fought to maintain its footing. Presently the flurry of footwork had the barrel speeding across the cage. The drummer caught up the tempo of the spectacle with staccato beats.

There was a sudden clink of sound that hadn't come from the drum.

Kenyon's mouth tightened, his dark eyes flinched. Sweat broke out on his forehead. His glance flicked over the cats. None were disturbed. He scanned the floor, but he didn't see the pellet. Through unmoving lips he spoke to one of the handlers outside the cage.

"That lunatic is here. Signal Rafferty. Put my pistol inside on the floor where I can get it."

"Where'd the shot come from, you know?" the handler whispered.

"No."

RAFFERTY and the other police would try to protect him. Tomorrow night he wouldn't work without a glass screen. The rapid timing of the act caught him up, diminishing the sense of slow terror. Now and then the fear threatened to overwhelm him, and for a moment his nerves came alive, as if needles were being jabbed in the ravaged areas of his body.

Twice more he heard the sound of a pellet. The second was hollow, wooden. It had struck the back of one of the pedestals. He called out that information. It seemed to locate the firer in Section L, opposite the back of the cage. He had to assume the police were acting; he couldn't spare any attention for anything but his cats.

Finally the nine-minute eternity of the act was done, and the cats returned to their individual cages. The clowns came on, carrying clubs, whips, guns, overstuffed chairs, and swords to tame a tiny beribboned white kitten in an enormous gilt cage. Kenyon headed for his quarters.

A whistle shrilled, a voice barked, and the two-wheel chariots burst forward blocking Kenyon. There were a driver in a toga and two girls in brief dancing costumes on each chariot. The speed forced the girls to hold with a string-steel tension, but they arched their supple bodies back, held one arm aloft and one leg forward in a strut.

Their attitudes of triumph gave him an electric sense of exultance. Fear be damned! He waved at the star equestriennes as they passed in the last chariot. The salute wasn't to the artistry or femininity, but to their hauteur.

He crossed the roadway and went outside into the comparative dark and quiet of the summer night. During the openings of his act he had exaggerated his arrogance in order to aggravate indifference out of an audience, and he exaggerated it now, alone. He thought again: Fear be damned!

He expected to see Rafferty or one of the other police, but no one was near his trailer. He went in, planning to have a much needed smoke and bottle of beer before going to the animal area to see that his charges were tucked in. He snapped on the lights and stopped in his tracks.

Coralee sat against one end of the bunk, her legs, partly covered by a full black skirt, extended along the cushions. The shock of seeing his wife after all these months shattered Kenyon's inner defense. He felt a brief flood of joy, seeing only her loveliness and his long-ago idealization of her. Then he turned to acid.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, starting toward her.

Then he saw the ugly hole in her temple, the scorched pale hair, the serpentine line of half-dried blood on her cheek. He lowered himself on one knee beside her. Her brown eyes were lusterless and there was no pulse. The top of her off-the-shoulder white frilled blouse was stained. Some of her careless mass of curly blond hair, matted with blood, clung to her bare shoulders.

An obscure impulse to preserve her loveliness made him try to free the hair of the blood. But it was stuck. He ground his teeth, got up and went out of the trailer.

The doctor wasn't in his trailer. Kenyon hurried on to the general manager's office. Winton, the general manager, sat at his desk; an assistant stood by him. Standing in front of the desk were Rafferty and the publicity chief, Abbott. The four of them shifted their attention from something on the desk to Kenyon as he said:

"Will you locate Dr. Moltley and send him to my trailer? My wife is there and she's been shot. I think she's dead."

WINTON'S assistant moved to the switchboard. Winton, a gray-faced, starved looking man, raised mournful eyes to Kenyon.

"I didn't know she was here."

"I didn't either," Kenyon said. "I had no idea. She wasn't there when I left an hour ago for the opening grand march."

"Well!" Winton twisted around, looked at his assistant. "Locate the doc, Jim?"

"He's coming to the phone . . . Dr. Moltley? . . . Will you go to Kenyon's trailer? It's on lot seven. His wife's been shot; he thinks she's dead."

"Call the city police too, Jim," Winton said. He turned back to Kenyon. "This is terrible, Tom. I'm awfully sorry."

Rafferty, more diplomat-trouble shooter than cop, compressed his suavely handsome face. "Sorry, fella. This hits you on top of everything—" He broke off, gesturing aimlessly.

Kenyon acknowledged their sympathy. Then Abbott, a coarse red-faced man with a booming laugh and cynical gray eyes said something unctuous. Kenyon looked at him coldly and turned away. Coralee had thought Abbott exciting. She'd thought that about a lot of men. She'd even thought it about him, Kenyon, at first.

Rafferty eased toward the door. "I'll get down to your trailer, Tom," he said, and went out. Kenyon was about to follow when he noticed the air pistol on Winton's desk.

"Rafferty found it," Winton answered his unspoken question. "It was under the seats in Section L. Rafferty got a glimpse of a man going out under a tent. He went after him but lost him. He didn't get much of a look at him. That was just before your act closed. Now, with this other, I don't know what to make of it."

"It rules out the theory of a crackpot," Kenyon said. His eyes slid involuntarily to Abbott, who was glowering. "It's a personal enemy."

"I know you don't like me," Abbott protested hoarsely, "but don't look at me like that. I didn't any more know she was around than you did, Kenyon."

Kenyon shook his head impatiently. "I'm not accusing anybody." He turned and went to the door. "The doctor will be there. I want to get back."

"We'll come with you, Tom," Winton called.

Kenyon kept ahead of them, wanting to be alone. As a kid with a limp he'd known the pain of ridicule and abuse as well as the almost equally odious pity. He'd made his life a defiance of fear, and succeeded. But the years of working against the implacable hostility of the big cats had given him a yearning for tenderness that was almost a sickness.

Coralee had been beautiful and soft, someone to cherish. She hadn't wanted that. She'd married a lion-tamer. She hadn't realized he left the kind of toughness she

thrilled to in the cage. He could have held her if he'd pushed her around, and he hated knowing it.

Whoever had been right or wrong, he'd loved her once. She had still been his wife and now she was dead. It was logically impossible to lose what you didn't have, he thought, but there was an awful, aching sense of loss in him.

Rafferty stood smoking, blocking entrance into Kenyon's trailer. A group of acrobats, a clown in costume, an ice cream butcher and two roustabouts stood near by.

"I don't think anybody should go in there till the police come," Rafferty said to Kenyon with a note of apology.

"I understand. But I need a smoke."

Rafferty held out a pack. Kenyon took a cigarette and lighted it. "Did Winton tell you I spotted the baby with the air gun?"

Kenyon nodded. "Said you only got a glimpse. But you'd have recognized anyone connected with the show, wouldn't you?"

"I think so. This was just a nut rube."

KENYON pointed his cigarette toward the trailer where Coralee was. "That was done by a personal enemy."

"You figure the same guy back of both things?"

"Yes. Someone who knows us. Maybe someone who was with the show last season. That's why I asked if it was anyone I would know."

"He might be an enemy without your knowing him. I mean—" Rafferty looked away from him—"somebody she knew from some place."

"That's probably it." Kenyon compressed his mouth, drew a breath through pinched nostrils. His eyes were dark and bitter.

The doctor arrived from one direction, Winton and his assistant from the other. As the doctor entered the trailer Winton veered toward the ice cream butcher.

"Jings," Winton said tiredly, "what are you doing back here?"

Rafferty called, "I told him to get back here when he emptied his tray, Mr. Winton. He was working Section L and saw the air-gun nut."

"You saw the man who fired into my cage?" Kenyon asked, going toward the ice cream butcher.

"Yessir," Jings said, nodding. He swallowed, shifted his empty tray. His eyes slid nervously to Rafferty who had come up beside Kenyon. "The guy wore a tan suit and had his program up in front of him. Then Mr. Rafferty came running up the aisle toward his row, and the fellow he got on the floor boards and dropped under the seats."

"Dark-haired man, wasn't he?" Rafferty said.

"That's right."

"Medium height, about thirty?" Rafferty asked.

"Yessir, I'd say just about that."

Kenyon put in, "You ever see him before?"

Jings hesitated. He was a scrawny little man with huge ears. A tic kept the upper lid of his right eye in spasmodic movement. His face was pinched in a tight, almost desperate scowl. Noting all this, Kenyon sensed the ridicule the fellow had suffered and felt a bond of sympathy.

He said quickly, "Take your time, Jings. It's always hard to remember when too many things happen too fast."

Rafferty and Winton exchanged quick startled glances. They had never heard that particular soft tone from him. But Jings knew an ally when he heard one.

"I never saw him, Mr. Kenyon."

"That's good, Jings. Wait over there," Rafferty said, motioning him away impatiently. He added in an undertone that Kenyon heard, "You go hitting that jug and getting blotto so you can't talk straight to the cops, and I'll peel your ears."

The doctor had come out and was talking to Winton. A steady trickle of people came, swelling the crowd. Two city detectives assigned to duty earlier and three of Rafferty's men grouped around Winton, the doctor and Kenyon. The doctor was saying: ". . . so I would say she has been dead less than an hour . . ." when the first squad car rolled up and stopped. A uniformed sergeant got out, demanding:

"This lot seven? Where's the woman that was shot?"

Rafferty and a city detective hailed him. An excited babble broke through the crowd as though most of them hadn't known before what had happened.

DURING the next two hours it seemed that dozens of cars and scores of officials came. There were state, county and city men, coroner, ambulance men, a swarm of technicians from an awesome rolling laboratory. The area was cleared and roped off for fifty feet in each direction and lighted with mobile batteries from the circus's equipment. After fifty viewings, including sketch men, police and news photographers, by everyone from patrolman to inspector, Coralee's body was removed.

Meanwhile reporters gouged at Kenyon while he winced to flashbulbs. A leathery woman reporter clucked about "that adorable child" and asked venomous questions about the cruelty required to deal with cruel animals. Winton, before going with detectives to his office, ordered Abbott to handle the press. Abbott stood by puffing at a cigar, saying nothing. That silence from a man whose job was to create good will for the show and its people wasn't lost on the reporters, or on Kenyon.

During the next few hours, the police set up headquarters in the mess tent and questioned dozens of circus people. Kenyon was questioned three times. Several times he went to the animals' quarters, looked at the big cats, talked aimlessly to keepers, handlers, his own assistants. Wherever he went a detective followed.

It was past two in the morning when Kenyon again seated himself across the plank table from Inspector Pantages. There were two men on either side of the Inspector, one of them a stenographer. An extension phone had been set up; there were empty coffee cups, filled ash trays. A pair of uniformed men stood impassively behind the seated men; another uniformed man was stationed on Kenyon's side.

"As I told you before," Pantages said, removing his glasses and beginning to clean them on a handkerchief, "anything you say may be used against you." He looked up, peered near-sightedly at Kenyon. The in-

spector was in his fifties, a large graying man with a scoop of baldness in front. His brows rose, corrugating his forehead questioningly.

"You told me."

"Thought I'd remind you." Inspector Pantages put on his glasses. A messboy came with more coffee and began filling the cups. Pantages reached for the canned milk, watched himself pour as he spoke. "I don't want to trick you into incriminating yourself by letting you think we're chatting informally over coffee. You won't be shocked to know you're suspect number one." His glance met Kenyon's.

"Obviously I'm a suspect. But number one?"

"She was killed by one of the guns you use in your act to fire blanks."

"Yes, you told me that before. But you said she was killed between eight-fifteen and nine o'clock. My time is accounted for."

"There's a gap of ten minutes. Between the end of the opening grand march and the beginning of your act you were alone in your dressing tent."

"I always spend a few minutes alone before the act."

"You could have gone to your trailer."

"But I didn't," Kenyon said emphatically. "I had no reason to. I didn't know my wife was within a hundred miles."

Pantages reached down the table for a stack of folders. He fingered through them, opened one and nodded. "Kenyon, you said you'd had no contact with your wife for three weeks, at which time you mailed a monthly check."

"That's true." He sensed something dangerous. It was like a moment before the charge of one of the big cats when its tail stiffened and the pupils of its eyes widened, showing that it was not bluffing but meant business. Pantages stared at him.

"You made a long-distance phone call to your wife three nights ago."

"I didn't!"

"They say you're tough and independent like the big cats," Pantages said in a flat, imperturbable voice. "But you were alone, afraid and human then, just before your act. In a few minutes, you would be risking

your life. You thought about your woman, and—"

"The one thing I decidedly don't think about before my act is my wife," Kenyon interrupted sharply. "When I enter the arena, I have to be composed."

"You left your dressing tent, went to Winton's office. It was empty. You phoned your wife. There's a phone company record of the call from that number to your wife's home at that time. In response to your call, which resulted in an argument, your wife took a train next day. She was coming here to ask for a divorce."

DOUBLING his fist, Kenyon slammed the table. "I tell you I didn't call her."

"Save the theatricals. Her mother and sister told us, in telephone conversations, that you phoned your wife."

Kenyon stared incredulously. He shook his head slowly. "I see you're not bluffing. Her mother really told you that. She wouldn't lie, I'm sure. But Coralee would!"

Pantages said drily, "We didn't talk to Coralee."

"I mean she wouldn't have admitted she received a call from a man who wasn't her husband. She'd have concealed that from her mother," Kenyon said earnestly. "Don't you see?"

Doubt flickered across Pantages's face. "We'll know more when we question her family more fully in person," he conceded. "There remains, meanwhile, the fact that you created a mythical man whom you claimed was shooting BBs at your lions."

"Mythical!"

"Mythical. After phoning your wife and getting in an argument, you knew there was no hope of reconciliation. To free her would have been intolerable to your vanity. You knew one certain way to deal with a creature you couldn't tame and master."

"Can't you get the melodramatic stereotype of liontamer out of your head. I'm not a figure on a billboard. She was my *wife*. I couldn't have planned to harm someone who meant what she once did to me. . . . But to hell with that. I have witnesses that there was a flesh-and-blood man who was firing an air pistol."

"You have *one* witness. Missing."

"Rafferty's missing?"

"You wish!" the Inspector said with a sour laugh. "No. It's your poor addled-witted, drunken ice cream vendor named Jings who's missing. Good heavens, I can't understand why you risked your neck on such a weak link."

"Inspector, I don't understand. I swear it!"

"If your wife was to be killed, there had to be a killer. For two nights you claimed there was a lunatic firing at your cats from the audience. To substantiate his existence you dropped a few pellets on the cage floor. Tonight you planted an air pistol under the seats in Section L. During your act you told your assistants a shot had come from there. That sent Rafferty to Section L. The ice cream vendor, Jings, excitedly described a man in a tan suit who vanished under the seats. Rafferty gave chase, found the gun. Reviewing it calmly afterward, Rafferty realized that he hadn't actually seen anybody. If only your Jings hadn't got cold feet before talking to us, we might've been looking for your wife's mythical, jealousy-crazed boy-friend as the killer."

"You believe I bribed Jings to lie to Rafferty?"

"Something like that."

Still incredulous, and a little frightened, Kenyon demanded, "Would I risk my neck by depending on a witness who might break down under questioning or else blackmail me? If I only wanted to make it credible that someone shot at the cage, all I needed was the gun planted there under Section L. I'd have seen to it that the gun was discovered." He added slowly, earnestly, "I believe one of those pellets is embedded in the wood of a pedestal."

"We'll check that right now," Pantages said, getting up. "Let's go. Mac, get the air pistol. We'll see if there's a shot embedded. If so, we'll fire comparison shots from various distances, check depth of penetration, and see how far away the shot was fired from. Kenyon, we can tell if the shot was fired from inside or outside the cage. Still want us to check?"

"Certainly."

FIVE minutes later they were at the door of the cage in the big tent. The big tent was cavernous, empty and dim, with only a few beads of light showing in aisles and at the exits. Kenyon pulled the switch, throwing on the blazing lights in the cage. The group entered.

Almost at once Kenyon sensed that something was wrong. One of the pedestals was slightly turned and out of line. He heard a dull buzzing sound and stopped abruptly, tilting his head in an attitude of listening. The others glanced at him suspiciously and looked toward the point at which he was staring.

Pantages said uncomfortably, "What do you hear? There wouldn't be a lion back there?"

"Oh, of course," Kenyon said scathingly. "So often we leave a spare around loose." He went quickly to the pedestal, tipped it up. A man's shoe and pantleg showed. He upended the pedestal as the others gathered around.

Jings, who had been propped in a sitting position against one corner of the pedestal, rolled limply onto his side. He had a bottle clutched to him. The reek of whiskey rose thickly from him as he continued to snore. Two of the detectives crouched and began to shake his shoulders.

"That's Jings," Kenyon said.

"Yeah, and dead drunk," Pantages said. "A funny place for him to be. Boys, get him awake and on his feet."

They shook, shouted, slapped, but Jings snored on. His body was like fluid, but a pair of detectives finally got him suspended between them, hung by his arms around their shoulders, and started with him toward the infirmary.

Pantages followed them out, talking to another detective. Kenyon went to the back of the cage, followed by a detective and a uniformed man. He saw a tiny hole in the painted back of one of the pedestals, crouched to inspect it.

"Here's the embedded pellet," he exclaimed. "Look."

Frowning, the detective squatted beside him. Pantages, hearing, turned to come back across the cage. He had taken but a

step when there came, in swift succession, two cracking rifle shots. Kenyon's attention snapped to the detectives who had Jings. Crimson splotches showed on the vendor's white jacket and his body hung loosely between the detectives.

Pantages, the two detectives in the cage and the uniformed men drew their guns and set out at a dead run. They had not reached the door of the cage before all the lights went out.

The beam of a flashlight showed near the point where Jings had been allowed to slump to the ground.

"Shut off that flash!" Pantages roared. "One of you get out for help. One of you get to the master switch and give us some light. Watch it, because the killer is near that master switch."

The flashlight went out. Kenyon strained to see through the darkness toward the end of the tent where the master switch was located.

"Inspector!" he cried sharply. "Look to your right."

THE group went motionless. Kenyon could hear their breathing. They all saw the luminous dots moving toward them through the dark. A moment later they heard the nervous *puk-puk* sound in the big cat's throat.

"It's a tiger," Kenyon whispered. "The cages are near the master switch. He's heading for the big cage here. He's in a bad temper, because he's been waked up. The only place of safety he knows is the big cage here. Get clear of the doorway."

Pantages whispered hoarsely, "Move, men. Keep your guns trained on that baby."

"Don't shoot!" Kenyon warned. "One shot will never kill him, but it'll turn him into a raging killer. Now, get out of his way, outside the cage. Give me a flashlight. I'll stand in my usual place in the cage center and throw the light on my upper body so he can see me. He ought to just trot on in and take his seat on the pedestal."

"Ought? You mean he maybe won't?" Pantages' voice was trembling.

"You're damn right he maybe won't. This isn't show time. It isn't light. It isn't the

proper setup at all. Also, he's short on sleep and ornery about it." Kenyon took the flashlight that was pressed on him. He watched the cat intently. Its coughing was louder, quicker now. Suddenly it stopped, swung its head.

"What's he stopping for?" Pantages demanded in a whisper.

"He's probably smelling Jing's blood. . . . Listen, whoever let him loose counted on his coming automatically to the cage. The killer let the cat out to divert us."

The cat's coughing had stopped. Kenyon held the flashlight at his waist, directed the beam upward. He called out sharply. The tiger paid no attention. Kenyon directed the beam toward the animal just in time to see it begin to stalk slowly in the direction of Jing's body.

An instant later the cat was running. Suddenly it left the ground in a thirty-foot leap and landed on the back of the man who was crouching over Jing's body. As a trio of flashlights focused on the action, a terrible bawl of human terror rose. It ended sharply with the neck-breaking slap of the tiger's paw against the side of the man's head.

Kenyon reached the scene at a run, just as the tiger got its jaws around the man's body, and slammed his flashlight against the big cat's tender nose. The tiger dropped the man, and Kenyon struck it savagely time and again on the nose, forcing it back in outraged pain.

"Get up on the top seats," Kenyon cried to the others. "He won't leap up on anything; you'll be safe."

The tiger backed and Kenyon forced his advance, not daring to stop or retreat. Suddenly the cage and aisle lights blazed on. The tiger, spotting a sanctuary, whipped around and headed for the big cage at a run.

Kenyon ran after it, slammed shut the door. The aisles were swarming with detectives, uniformed police and circus people when Kenyon returned to the dead men. Pantages and the others were coming down from the uppermost seats.

"Kay-rist, man!" Pantages said. "Thank heaven you're crazy."

Clenched in Rafferty's dead fist was a worn, imitation leather billfold. Pantages pried it loose, frowned. "It belonged to Jings. So this is what Rafferty wanted."

PANTAGES whistled. "Lookit! A candid camera snapshot of Rafferty shooting an air pistol."

"Even with that protection Jings was afraid of him," Kenyon said. "You see why Jings hid himself. When he found out there was a murder involved, he ran instinctively and hid. It's all he knew. Poor devil. I guess my cage seemed like a protection."

"I see why Rafferty so carefully built up Jings as a liar," Pantages said. "Rafferty must've phoned your wife."

"Yes," Kenyon agreed savagely. "You said they argued. I expect she was in love with him, but it didn't go double. If she came here to ask me for a divorce, it would have come out in the open. He knew, and he wasn't wrong, that this show wouldn't be big enough for him and me after that. But I expect Coralee was trying to force the issue. He shut her up, good."

"Just to keep from losing his job?"

Unexpectedly, a rough voice sounded from among the spectators. They all turned toward the roustabout. "None of us help got a job with the show unless we paid off that son. And we didn't hang onto our jobs without he got a cut. Now the lid's off, you'll find out that guy was raking down five-six hundred a week, anyways. Hey, Mr. Kenyon, what kinda meat does that tiger like best? Me and the boys would like to show our appreciation."

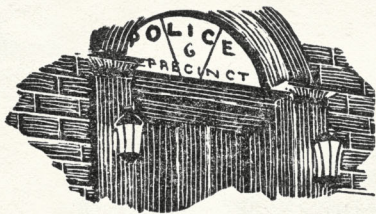
"All right, all right," Pantages said. "Let's break it up. Mac, get these bodies taken care of. Kenyon, I had you all wrong, tabbing you a killer." He frowned. "Or did you have a hunch the killer would be over by Jings? You said he let the cat out to divert us? Did you have a hunch?"

"A hunch, yes."

"But I don't guess you could've made the cat come to the cage instead of toward the blood, could you?"

"Don't you think that's a silly question?" Kenyon said, smiling slightly.

"I guess so. The answer is obvious."



BUREAU OF MISSING PERSONS

Are there any friends or relatives with whom you have lost contact through the years and whose whereabouts you'd like to determine? Perhaps there's some old war buddy or former schoolmate or sweetheart you'd like to locate. Let's have the facts and we'll publish them. Tell us the name of the person you are seeking, the last known address, and any other facts that will help in making contact. There is no charge of any kind for this service, but please let us know of your success.

I HAVE BEEN READING of your service to others in helping them locate missing loved ones. I am asking your service in locating my son, **JOHN JELLEY, JR.**, who has been missing for over two years, last seen by his wife and five small children at their address in Zeigler, Illinois, 403 Oak Street. Since that time the only way we know he may still be alive is by his tax returns from different parts of the United States. I'm sending the name of each company he's worked for, also Social Security No., hoping it may help.

He is a well built person, 5 ft. 10½ in. tall. When last seen his hair was dark brown. Has blue-gray eyes, was 38 yrs. old last Oct. 2. He has a small dark scar on forehead at center hair line, also a tattoo on left arm with initials J.F.J. on it. His left hand is crippled, little finger drawn up and stiff.

Under what circumstances or for what reason he left I do not know. To me and his family he has disappeared. We have worried, hoped, and prayed, until it seems he may be beyond locating. Since we are not able to hire an agency to locate him, I'm taking advantage of your free service hoping you will do as much for me as you have others. His small children are being neglected beyond reason. If he can't be located soon I'm afraid for them. His oldest

son now only 14 yrs. old misses his Dad so much he has tried to leave home to locate him.

Help us if you can. What information you need I do not know, but here is his last employer's address. In 1949 he worked for: Union Pacific Railroad Co., 1416 Dodge Street, Omaha 2, Nebr. Payroll No. 942. Also: The Chicago, Burlington and Quincy R. R. Co., Chicago 6, Ill. Payroll reference—Status Code 62207. In 1950: Espy Ice Company, 2101 31st Street, Denver 5, Colo. Social Security No. 342-03-3680.—**John R. Jelley, Sr., Box 293, Kincaid, Ill.**

I WOULD LIKE TO CONTACT or hear from anyone who has known or knows the whereabouts of **VERNON K. SOUTH**, age 47, brown hair possibly turning gray, blue eyes, height about 6 feet. Last known address: Oak Ridge, Tenn.—**M. V. Allen, 184 Front Street, Draper, N. C.**

MY FAMILY AND I have been trying to locate a boy we knew during the war. He was **2nd Lt. JAMES GORDON HENDRICKS**, Co. B, 128th Tank Destroyer Bn., Camp Hood, Texas. He was stationed there in 1943 and was discharged in '44 or '45. He left here and took a job in Portland, Oregon, in a shipyard as a guard. His home is in Charleston, West Va., where it is believed he attended college before he entered service. He is very well educated in shorthand and typing and some foreign languages.

Has a scar over right eye—which may be fading now. Has suffered from amnesia. He is now about 31. Blond, blue eyed—stands about 6 feet tall. Was last heard from in

about 1945. He was then in New Orleans, La., working at Higgins Aircraft. Would like information either about him or his family, though it is believed he was an orphan and raised in an orphanage. Has outstanding personality and sales ability.—**Juanita Thompson, 311 No. 12th Street, Waco, Texas.**

I READ IN POPULAR DETECTIVE that you help to locate people. I will appreciate it if you can help me. I have tried for years to locate a missing uncle. He is **RUSSELL MERRITT**, my father's youngest brother. The last I heard of him was about 29 years ago. He would be about 60 years old now.

After the first World War was over he re-enlisted in the Navy for another hitch. He came to visit me, then left to go back in service. I don't know what happened but he went to Portland, Oregon. Deserted the Navy. He married there. I only heard from him twice after he went to Oregon. I have kept in touch all these years with the Navy who recently wrote me saying all charges against him were dropped, but I can't find him to tell him. At one time some years ago I had an address of a Sue Merritt in a suburb outside of Portland. I wrote her asking if she was any relation to him or knew him, to please answer me one way or the other, but she never answered me. I have the feeling she is a daughter or wife. I have lost the address.

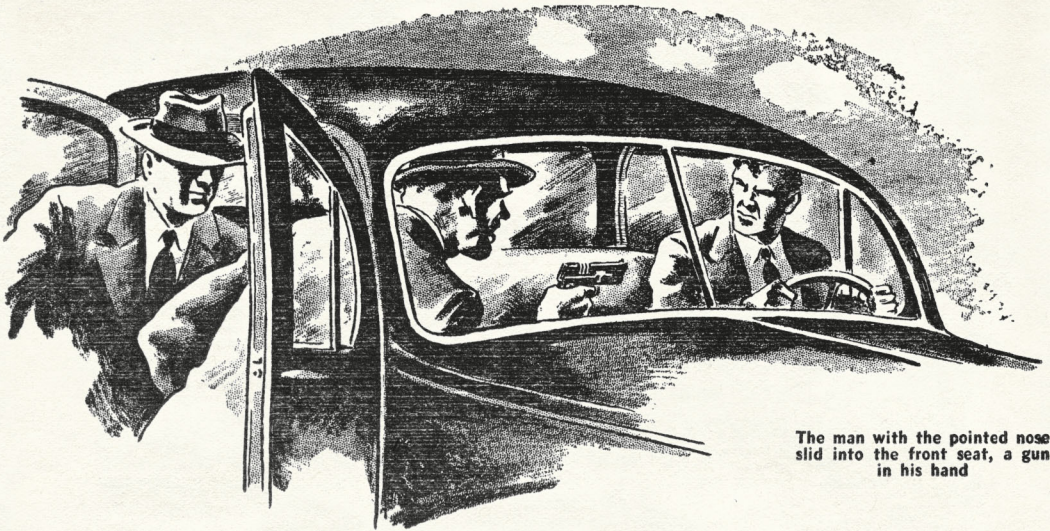
His brothers and sister would do anything to hear from or see him. My father is 75 years old and not too long to live. If we could locate him before anything happens, my parents will have 50 yrs. marriage anniversary in January and I would love to have him with us. Name, **RUSSELL MERRITT**. Age, 60 yrs. old. Height, close to 6 ft. Weight, last I know about—185. Eyes, blue. You can check with the U. S. Navy. That suburb had "sun" in the name some place. Family—Frank, Bert, and Flossie. Jos. deceased.—**Hazel Bruening (Merritt), 4448 Oregon, Detroit 4, Mich.**

I AM ANXIOUS to locate my father, **ANDREW STANDIFER**, whom I haven't seen since I was eleven years of age. He was

also known by the name of Curley. He has followed the barber profession. The last time I saw him he was working in a barber shop in Paris, Texas. However, I have reason to believe he has been in the navy in the last war. He is originally from Clayton, New Mexico, and may have relatives there who live in the rural area. I am now married and have three children and would appreciate help.—**Marvin Ray Standifer, 3338 W. 6th St., Ft. Worth, Texas.**

I WANT TO HEAR where my father went after he left Nashville, Tenn., about 1890, or if he died, where he is buried. **JOHN PIERRE PARK** was born in New Orleans in 1838, was a printer, and was last known to be foreman of the *Nashville Banner*. He had lost one eye about that time and went to a hospital, where he met the second wife and soon after left Tennessee. Mother obtained a divorce and remarried many years later. I will pay five dollars to anyone who can give me authentic information in this matter. I live in Crystal Springs and own a home here. I have a number of descendants living in Tennessee.—**George Parke, Crystal Springs, Florida.**

I HAVE A LOST BROTHER that I haven't been in touch with since I was a child. He is, if living, only three years older than I. I will try to the best of my knowledge to give you all the details: **WAYNE MERVIN (or MELVIN) HARWOOD**. Born in King City, California, Jan. 21, 1903. Father, Lucius Harwood. Mother, Mary Frances (Stevens) Harwood. Only sister, Lorraine Elizabeth, born Jan. 1, 1906. He was last heard of in either Oakland or Berkeley, California, either in 1914 or when he was 14 years old. I'm not sure of that. I believe he was committed to a boys school in one or the other of those cities. My mother and father separated when I was three years old and mother married a Mr. Kellogg, but I don't believe my brother would know that. If it is at all possible for you to locate this only brother of mine, I don't need to tell you that I'll be eternally grateful.—**Mrs. D. E. Jones, c/o Rose Auto Court, Santa Maria, Calif.**



The man with the pointed nose
slid into the front seat, a gun
in his hand

LUCK of the IRISHER

By NICHOLAS ZOOK

When a man must get some medicine to his sick daughter and two thugs order him to drive the other way, he's got to think fast!

I HADN'T seen Janey since Lolli died, and that was a year ago. But now she stood before me and I wondered how I had missed the strong resemblance. She had Lolli's firm mouth and gray eyes and the same impatient way of brushing back her hair.

Janey was Lolli's younger sister. I don't suppose many men notice the kid sister of the girl they marry. I didn't. My eyes and heart had all been for Lolli. Now I felt as though a year had flipped back and Lolli was with me once more.

But not for long. There was the urgency of running downtown to Mel's drugstore.

Janey unbuttoned her coat and her eyes were troubled as they studied mine. "What's wrong, John?"

"Catherine," I said. "She's feverish

and won't sleep. Doc says it's grippe and not to worry. But I am worried, Janey. That's why I telephoned you."

She had her coat off. She looked sympathetic and competent at the same time. She nodded to the bedroom.

"Is she in there?"

"Yes. I've got to go out for a while and I can't leave her alone. Doc gave me a prescription for a mild sedative. It may make her sleep more easily."

I hesitated, feeling awkward and apologetic. "If you could, I'd appreciate your keeping an eye on her until I get back. I won't be long. Maybe half an hour."

"Of course," she said. "You and Catherine are all the family I've got now, you big lug. I wish you'd called on me sooner."

Gratitude made me warm and big in-

side. I swallowed hard and reached for my coat. It was good to see Janey again.

I tiptoed into Catherine's room, but it was a useless gesture. She was sitting up in bed, bathed in the yellow spot of a night light. She looked thin and pale and much too small to be three years old.

"Janey's here to take care of you, dear," I said. "Daddy's got to go out for a while."

I expected her to cry, but she didn't. I don't think she remembered Janey, but she looked at her with interest as Janey came into the room.

I kissed Catherine on the forehead and went out.

THE night was dark and biting cold. I pulled up the collar of my coat and hoped the car would start. It took a little coaxing, but finally the engine sputtered.

I backed the car out of the garage and into the yard. I jammed on the brakes as the car thudded into something. Silently I cursed. I had forgotten to move a pile of logs I had cut for the fireplace. The car had backed into it. I didn't have time to survey the damage now. I just hoped the car would run.

It was about three miles into town. I stepped on the gas and watched the speedometer needle jump to fifty. It was

The man pawing the half-dressed girl might be the next president of the U.S.—if he weren't murdered first!

THE GLASS GUILLOTINE

by Stewart Sterling

This and ten other long stories—
144 pages of reading enjoyment for
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TOP DETECTIVE ANNUAL

a quarter to eleven. Mel closed shop right on the stroke of eleven and I didn't want to miss him.

The luck of the Irish was with me. Traffic was light, the signals were green all the way, and I didn't pass any cops. This was especially fortunate since the drive against traffic violators was very intense.

I made it in six minutes. Mel was putting his cash into a leather bag when I pushed through the door. He paused, while his bushy gray eyebrows shot up, and grunted.

"Howdy, John. How's the little girl?"

I shook my head. "Not so good, Mel. Grippe. Doc gave me a prescription for her."

I handed him the slip of paper. Mel adjusted his spectacles, scratched his bristly chin and studied the prescription. "Good thing it's a simple mixture," he said. "I was planning on going to bed early. Have this for you in a jiffy."

He dropped his money bag carelessly on the counter and shuffled into the drug cage. I heard the tinkle of bottles and the pouring of a liquid. And then I heard the door open and felt the brief gust of a cold wind.

Two men walked casually in, too casually. They were big men with broad faces and granite-cold eyes. Their features were unlike. One had flat features and a little chin, while the other had a sharp nose and jutting chin. Yet they had a definite resemblance as to type. Two of a kind, I thought. A pair of blackjacks.

The flat-faced man headed for the magazine rack and idly flicked the pages of a detective magazine. The other approached and came to a stop on the other side of the cash register. He took me in with narrowed eyes and glanced briefly at the cage where Mel was mixing the prescription. Then he leaned forward on the counter, as though studying the labels on the patent medicines.

Mel had seen them. His thin mouth jerked tight. But beyond this he gave no sign of recognition or interest. He

shuffled out of the cage with a bottle.

"This'll fix her up," he grunted. Casually he stuffed the bottle in a paper bag and just as casually put the leather money bag in with it.

"Pay me some other time," he said.

I took the package with hands that trembled slightly.

"Thanks, Mel," I said, and headed for the door. I expected any minute to feel a restraining hand on my shoulder, but I didn't look back once. I marched out, threw the bag on the back seat of the car and hopped in.

Maybe I was letting my imagination run away with me. And maybe Mel was becoming frightened or overcautious in his old age. But those two men meant a stickup to me. I hoped I could find a cop in time to help Mel, in case they got rough.

I thumbed the starter button urgently. I heard a familiar whirring, but no roar of the engine. I worked the starter again and again with mounting despair. At the same time, I fed the engine gas, hoping it would catch. It didn't. I only succeeded in flooding the carburetor.

I flicked off the key and decided to go back. I couldn't leave Mel in there alone.

AT THAT moment the car door opened on the passenger side and the man with the pointed nose and jutting chin slid in. He had a gun in his hand. I saw it for a moment and then felt it, jabbing my side.

The other one threw open the back door and clambered in. Neither of them so much as glanced back in the direction of the drugstore.

"Where is it?" the gunman demanded.

In the back seat, the other one spoke up. "I got it here, Sam. The old guy stuck it in the bag, just like he said."

The gun relaxed at my side. Sam said, "Then let's get out of here. At least we don't have to worry none about transportation." He jabbed the gun again. "Get going and keep going, straight down Front Street till I tell you different."

I sat quite still. "The car won't start," I said. "Don't know what's wrong with it."

His voice was a low threat. "Start it."

I flicked on the key and pressed the starter button. I gritted my teeth with anger as the engine roared. I put it in gear and rolled down the street.

Funny what you think of at a time like that. I thought of Mel, perhaps dead in the drugstore, of Catherine with her feverish brow and wide eyes, of Janey keeping a vigil for me. I didn't think of myself, or the possibility that they might kill me.

"The old man, what happened to him?" I finally asked.

"Lucky he didn't get a bullet in the bread basket," snapped Sam. "He talked, so we let him off easy. With a clout over the head that will keep him sleeping for an hour."

A weight lifted from my mind and my thoughts focused on the situation. If only I could attract the attention of some cop. But it would have to be done without the knowledge of the two gunmen.

We stopped for a red light. In the rear-view mirror I spotted the blue uniform of a cop, walking our way. Then the idea hit me.

[Turn page]

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THE MORNING AFTER MURDER

by William Irish

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FIVE DETECTIVE NOVELS

I lifted my foot from the brake pedal and dropped it quietly back. I did this again and again, hoping it would work. I knew enough Morse code to send an SOS signal. By pressing and releasing the brake pedal, I tried to flash dots and dashes through the flashing taillight. It was a fantastic idea, with probably a hundred-to-one chance of working. But right now anything was worth a try.

I was part way through my second set of signals when the traffic light flashed amber. The cop was nearer in my rear-view mirror, near enough to show that he was studying the car intently.

The traffic light turned green and I shot the car ahead with a jerk and a burst of speed. The gun was hard against my ribs, so I slowed to a normal speed.

"No tricks, wise guy," snarled Sam. "Not if you want to live long."

"Okay," I agreed meekly.

We traveled eight more blocks before another red light stopped us. Sam's eyes were on me. I didn't dare monkey with the foot brake. Another ten minutes, I thought, and it might be all over. I was surprised the prospect of death didn't frighten me more. I was calm, even resigned.

The dark car approached from the rear at high speed. I watched its headlights glow as it came alongside. The car halted and the blue uniform of a cop darted through the door.

The flat-faced man in the rear saw him first and leaped from the car. The cop shouted an order to halt and then started to run.

Sam lifted his gun and jerked the door handle with his free hand. I threw myself at him, forcing the gun hand against the dashboard until the weapon dropped.

He cursed and swung out with his fists. The narrow space of the car hampered him. The blows fell weakly on my shoulders. He twisted about, his face wrinkled into a snarl, and began to pummel my head and body.

I was taking the beating without much effective resistance when a second cop collared Sam. He pulled Sam out of the car and shoved a service revolver under his nose. The fight went out of him.

The other cop led Sam's partner, handcuffed, down the street in the direction of the patrol cruiser.

I POURED out my story, beginning with the prescription for Catherine and ending with my scheme of flashing an SOS signal.

"And it worked," I said proudly. "He caught the signal and got hold of you."

The cop shook his head. "He didn't get any SOS. Jenks wouldn't know Morse code from Greek. But he did spot the rear of your car. You don't have any tail lights. With the drive on against traffic violators, we got orders to nail anybody whose car isn't up to scratch. We were told to run you down."

I remembered how I had backed the car out of the garage and into the pile of logs. That had been the car damage. The luck of the Irish was with me, I breathed fervently. Now, if only Catherine would get well.

It was another half hour before I got away. I drove quickly home and let myself in with as little noise as was humanly possible.

The bottle was in my hands as I tiptoed to the bedroom. Janey was sitting by the bed and Catherine lay with closed eyes. A smile touched Catherine's lips as she said, "Please, tell me another story."

Janey began, in that voice that was so much like Lolli's, "Once upon a time—"

Catherine sighed, and her face was peaceful as she dropped off to sleep. I set the sedative on a table. Catherine didn't need that stuff. She needed someone like Janey.

Janey looked up suddenly. A smile flickered in her gray eyes and I knew the luck of the Irish had done me another good turn in calling her back to-night.

Weird and strange was the accident at Dead Man's Curve



THE MESSENGER

AT FIRST I thought it was my alarm clock on the night-stand which had awakened me, but a quick glance at the luminous dial—3:35—told me I was mistaken. I forced myself out of bed and staggered sleepily toward the telephone on the office

desk. Then I realized the ringing was too steady, too insistent. It must be the doorbell which was disturbing my much-needed rest.

I slid back the panel in the steel-plated outer door. Of course it would be Ezra Shields leaning on the bell; I

By E. MATHIEU TRUESDELL

just slid the panel back absently for a look-see because I hadn't come fully awake as yet. No one else would be waking me up at that hour of morning.

Ezra was our most conscientious deputy sheriff, spending most of his nights nabbing out-of-state speeders who didn't even see the wide place in the road which was our town, much less the speed-limit signs. Among my official duties was the booking of such prisoners and collecting an automatic \$22 bail. Naturally the bailed prisoners would continue on their ways and the mayor or the magistrate—according to where Ezra picked him up—would fine them ten bucks "in absentia" and Ezra and I would split up the left-over "costs." I needed the money, so I took it; but I hated myself more every day for my part in the petty graft of the party which had taken over the local government. I had served as one of the foremost campaign speakers for the Veterans' Reform ticket—they remembered my high school debating society awards, old "Silver Tongue" Jack Bryant—and this spot as jailer had been my repayment.

I hadn't expected the graft when I was smearing the old office-holders. Ezra explained it to me when I was handed the job of jailer and gave me a lecture on "to the victors belong the spoils"; and I had experienced much the same feeling as that which had twisted my insides when my third-grade teacher explained to me that there was no Santa Claus. Despite that feeling of utter loss of faith in humanity and despite the occasional twinges of conscience, I needed the job. I had been behind in my rent payments ever since I went off the 52-20. This apartment attached to the jail office went with the job and meals were on the county, too, even though I lived behind steel.

That steel outer door was my pet hated and it expressed itself in the savage way I unlatched the panel and jerked it open. The face which met my gaze through the peep-hole wasn't that of

Ezra Shields. Confronting me was a well-dressed stranger, though dirty and disheveled. He stood back from the door, against a column so that the glare of the light over the doorway was full upon him, and I could see that his features were twisted with apparent anguish, his touseled hair and forehead covered with wet blood!

I fumbled the big key in the lock, breathing profanity as the heavy door swung open reluctantly. The stranger stumbled inside past me and I grabbed a chair and slid it toward him.

"I want to report an accident," he began without preliminary. "On Route Twenty-three south of here there's a curving grade—"

"Dead Man's Curve!" I prompted. "You didn't make it?"

He shook his head, negatively. "There's a woman in the car—badly hurt. I didn't know where to find a doctor; then I saw the jail here—"

I was wondering where Ezra Shields could be. He usually got them before they hit Dead Man's if they were going at too fast a pace to negotiate it. Or even if they weren't, sometimes, as long as they had out-of-state plates and seemed in a hurry.

I seated myself on the desk and uncradled the phone. "I'll see if I can get Doc Peters." Doc was the coroner. "You could use a little medical attention yourself," I added as I dialed.

"Don't bother about me. Get to her before—I mean—" He left it hanging, but I understood.

Doc Peters was at home. He answered almost immediately and I told him in a few words what was up. They were playing poker over at his place and he was ahead and thankful for the excuse to quit. Ezra Shields was there too and was losing. "Suppose you pin a deputy badge on your nightgown and drive me out there," he suggested. "Most of the county's law is over here and that way we wouldn't have to break the game up. Your guests upstairs won't be going any place."

The injured man heard my agreement before I pronged the phone. "Hurry, will you," he urged.

"Can't I do something for you before I go?" I was pulling on pants and a heavy shirt over my pajamas.

"I'm all right," he assured me. "Get to her before it's too late."

As an after-thought, I pinned on my deputy badge and belted a pistol at my hip. That's spooky country around Dead Man's.

I pointed out the bathroom to him. "You'd better wash up and get some rest on my bed. I'll have the doc take a look at you when we get back."

I slammed the heavy steel door behind me. It wasn't until we were leaving Doc's place that I realized that I had locked the injured man in; but it didn't make much difference—we'd be back soon, I hoped.

We didn't have any trouble locating the place where the car had left the road. It must have been doing seventy-plus to have smashed through the barrier and jumped the drainage ditch before plowing down several small trees on its way down to the creek. It lay on one side with its radiator jutting over muddy creek water. The upper front wheel was turning slowly as if it had only been a matter of minutes since the accident, though it was a good hour's hike to town, even for an uninjured man, and the stranger hadn't said anything about getting a lift.

We went down the bank with bullseye lights, though there was a fair moon. I was thinking erratically that when the county finished charging the injured party for services rendered, he'd wish he'd have picked any place except the jail to seek aid. By his license plate he was a Yankee and there'd probably be an additional ten or fifteen bucks hidden in the costs just for that.

We clambered up on the side of the half-overtaken vehicle and I opened the rear door and dropped inside. Reaching over the seat, I felt the woman and played my light over her a second or so

before hooking it to my belt to leave my hands free. She was young, blonde and easy to look at.

Doc's light was sweeping over her too from above and he commented. "Nice legs. Is she living?"

I felt inside her blouse for a heartbeat. "Just unconscious, but she's bleeding at the mouth."

"Probably internal injuries. See if you can reach her up to me. Easy now! Easy!"

We got her up and out and down to the ground. Doc began a hasty examination, suddenly interrupting his work to look up at me. "There was somebody else under her, wasn't there, Jack?" he asked. "I thought—"

"I hadn't noticed." I was already climbing back atop the wreck. She had been propped up against the steering wheel and I had taken for granted she was the only occupant. I knew there wasn't anyone in the back seat because I'd stood there to get her out.

I played my light down along the front seat and I found what Doc had glimpsed. It was a man, huddling deep along the floor boards beneath the wheel. The front door on that side had been ripped away and he was only partly in the car, his head and shoulders pinned to the ground beneath the body.

I jumped down. "I think you've got a corpse on your hands, Doc," I told him. "We'll have to push the wreck upright to make sure, though."

"On our hands," Doc corrected me. "Let's get her up to the highway and make her comfortable first. She's got to get to the hospital right away, as soon as we can make certain if there's any hope for your friend down under there."

It was on my tongue to say: "Correction—our friend"; but the words turned sour and I didn't voice them. I hadn't quite got hardened to death off the battlefields as yet and I still have conscience pricks at joking at such matters.

We carried the girl up to the car and

made her as comfortable as we could on the rear seat. Blood seeped from her lips and her face was deathly pale. Doc counted her pulse for the second time before we left her.

Pushing the car over was a man-sized job. We had to find a couple of pry-poles to aid us, but we finally got it up-right.

I held a light while Doc straightened out the mangled figure hanging through the door opening. I frowned. The well-tailored clothing was vaguely familiar; then I saw the face and I let the exclamation rush from my lips: "Good God, Doc! He—why that guy's the image—they must be twins!"

"He's dead," Doc informed me in a casual tone. "Still warm; ain't been so long cashed in."

Then: "Who's twins?"

Him and the fellow at the jail." I didn't know quite how to say it. Even the blood covering his hair and forehead was duplicated.

Doc turned away and started uphill. I kept staring at the dead man and by some freak of chance the watch on his left wrist caught my eye. I bent closer and looked at the shattered crystal, then blinked and took a second look at the unmoving hands.

The smashed timepiece had stopped at 3:35!

Doc Peters was at the highway and I yelled: "I'm coming, Doc!"

I was, too, at as fast a clip as I could make.

I flipped on the siren and kept the accelerator pushed to the floor all the way to the hospital. Doc said something to me a couple of times, but I didn't understand the words. I was trying to think; yet not wanting to think. Afraid to allow myself to think the crazy thought my subconscious was urging upon me.

Somewhere, unnoticed by me, Ezra Shields had fallen in behind us and he drove up alongside as I braked the car at the emergency entrance of the hospital. He helped us to get the injured girl

out of the car, then turned to me as Doc and the attendants rushed her inside, asking: "What gives?"

"Accident," I muttered. "Dead Man's Curve. Let's get over to the jail."

I CLIMBED into his car. I didn't feel like driving.

At the jail, I unclipped the keyring from my belt and tried several wrong ones in the lock before Ezra took them from my trembling hand. "What ails you, Jack?" he wanted to know. He had the steel door open in a matter of seconds.

I brushed past him and through the office, through the apartment. I came back to the office feeling suddenly tired. I unbuckled my gunbelt and dropped it atop the desk; it had become an unbearable weight.

"What ails you?" Ezra repeated, frowning.

I let myself slump into the desk chair, staring straight ahead at the heavy steel door. The door which, once it was slammed shut and automatically locked, no one could open from either side without the proper key. I had been carrying the only key.

"I must have been dreaming," I mused aloud.

My jitters must have been contagious for Ezra gave a nervous start as the telephone jangled. Doc Peters was calling. "That you, Jack? Our girl-friend'll pull through, we reckon. Got her here just in time, though. How's your patient making out?"

I sat staring at the door, wondering what to say.

"Are you still there, Jack?" Doc prompted. "Hello!"

"Yeah, I'm here," I told him. "He's dead. . . ."

"Oh . . . I'll ring the morgue and have the boys get the body out of your way." His tone was callous, joking.

"It's not in my way," I said into the mouthpiece. "It's out on Route Twenty-three"—and dropped the phone into its cradle.

DETECTIVE MOVIE NEWS

The Racket

On Dangerous Ground

The Whip Hand

The Family Secret

FOR mystery fans the actor of the month is Robert Ryan, who stars in two of the most exciting films around, ruthlessly breaking the law in one of them and doggedly upholding it in the other. The studio which deserves your cheers is RKO, who comes up with three dramas of mystery and adventure.

First to arrive at your theater will be *The Racket*, a story of organized crime and corruption. It rips the lid off America's billion-dollar combine of gangsters and government. It's as timely as today's headlines, and yet *The Racket* was first presented on the stage in 1927 and was made into a movie the following year. It was regarded then as a hot expose of racketeering, just as it is today. We may have a new crop of gangsters around now, but gangster methods haven't changed in twenty-five years.

Mob Leader

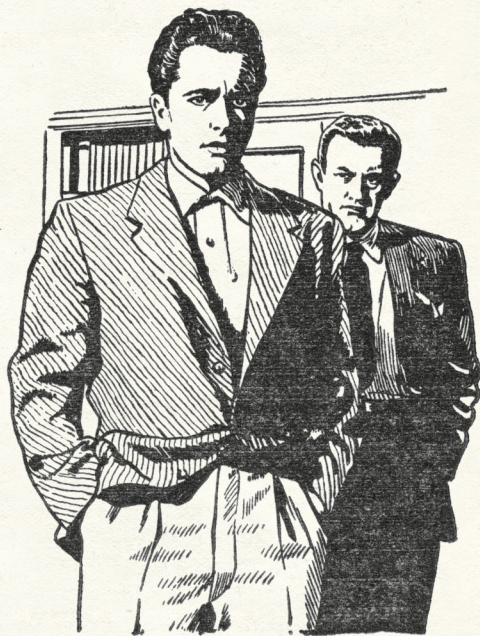
As Nick Scanlon, the mob leader, Robert Ryan has a lot to live up to. Edward G. Robinson originally played the role in New York, and Louis Wolheim gave an unforgettable performance in the same part on the silent screen. Bob doesn't have to worry about comparisons being odious, however, because he makes Nick as real as the underworld characters who've been lately populating our television screens. In *The Racket*, Bob has finally come the full circle in movie roles. He started off with a tremendous impact of evil in his first hit, *Crossfire*. Since then his characters gradually improved, but now he's hit the bottom of villainy again and shows off his powerful ability to make audiences really hate him.

Hero of the film is a crusading police cap-

tain, also a pretty powerful fellow, Robert Mitchum. The girl is that blonde charge of dynamite, Elizabeth Scott, playing a nightclub entertainer who tips off the cops about her knowledge of the underworld. Three top stars were cast in this red hot story because *The Racket* is a pet project of Howard Hughes. He produced the silent film hit and he was determined that the present version would be equally terrific if money and stars could make it so.

Big City Detective

On Dangerous Ground also is laid in a



© Columbia Pictures

Lee J. Cobb and John Derek in a scene from Columbia Pictures' "The Family Secret"



© RKO Radio Pictures

Police Captain McQuigg (Robert Mitchum) figures in a spine-tingling gun fight with mobsters—one of the highlights in RKO's "The Racket"

big city, but the emphasis is entirely different. Ryan plays Jim Wilson, a metropolitan detective, a bitter, disillusioned man who despises everything he sees on his daily rounds—the squad room, the dingy hide-outs of racketeers, the streets and alleys where crime breeds. He hates the underworld with such passion that he tries to fight it with his fists. A petty crook he questions is almost dead when Wilson finishes with him.

While investigating a murder in a near by small town, Wilson finds that there are decent people in the world, too, and that even a murderer can be a pitiful rather than a loathsome creature. *On Dangerous Ground* tells the story of a killing, a chase and a capture; but more than that, it's a look into the heart of a cop, a guy who never knew he had a heart until he meets a new kind of murderer.

It's a tough, exciting movie, but it's a tender one too. It had to be, because it was directed by Ida Lupino, the only woman director in Hollywood. She also plays in the movie as a blind girl who shields a killer and who shows Wilson that a guy can be a cop and a human being, too.

A Fishy Tale

In its third offering for mystery fans, RKO presents an adventure melodrama as far removed from big-city crime as a fishermen's paradise is from a precinct station. *The Whip Hand* has a setting that could be any tiny village with a lake full of fish, except that Winnoga's lake has suddenly become fishless. This is not simply an angler's excuse for a day of bad luck, but an actual, mysterious fact, and it intrigues the curiosity of a wandering magazine writer, who is de-

terminated to get to the bottom of the puzzle. He very nearly lands at the bottom of the lake before he uncovers a sinister plot and gets his greatest story of all time.

If you like fresh faces in your movies, you'll enjoy seeing two relative newcomers, Elliott Reid and Carla Balenda, in the leading roles. Elliott's a veteran of radio and the Broadway stage, and Carla had been appearing in summer stock when RKO signed her to a contract. Both seem likely to make Hollywood their permanent address.

Crime and Conscience

Columbia's candidate for crime honors stars that young heart-throb, John Derek, in *The Family Secret*, the story of a young man who commits murder—and gets away with it. David Clark kills a friend accidentally and in self-defense, but he lacks the courage to make a clean breast of it, even to save the life of an innocent man. His father, played by Lee J. Cobb, is a respected

attorney, who urges David to confess, but his adoring mother persuades him to keep still. When a bookmaker is accused of the murder, David's father is persuaded to take his case in court. Thus he is defending a man he knows is innocent, but to protect his son, he must withhold the one piece of truth that would clear his client.

David goes to the DA's office again and again to confess, but something always intervenes to give him an easy out, to keep him silent. Finally the accused bookmaker dies of a heart attack before he can be sentenced. David is in the clear, except for the disappointment in his father's eyes, except for the question in the eyes of the girl he loves, and except for the guilt in his own heart.

So there's your entertainment for some long winter evenings, mystery fans, excitement enough to keep your blood racing, suspense enough to keep your spine tingling.

—Ann Kennedy

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G-MEN DETECTIVE



A True Story
by HAROLD HELFER

Why did he stab

Mabel eight times?

DEATH OF AN OLD MAID

THE tongue probably has sent more murderers to the gallows than bloody hands.

Take the case of Charles Lewis Tucker. A young, somewhat ineffectual, man, no one would ever have taken him for a killer.

When the petticoated body of Mabel Page was found in a pool of blood on the bedroom floor of her suburban Boston home, no one gave 23-year-old Tucker, an unemployed stationery clerk, a thought, though he lived in the neighborhood.

Boston Sensation

The murder of Mabel Page was one of the most sensational in Boston's history. Forty-one years old and unattractive, she was about as respectable as an old maid could be. It had been years since she'd been seen with anyone resembling a boy friend.

Why would anyone have wanted to stab her in the throat eight times?

Mabel's father, Edward, had been wealthy once but he'd lost his money. Now he and a son, Harold, and Mabel lived in modest circumstances in a modest house. Neither the elder Mr. Page nor Harold was at home on the March day in 1904 when the murder was committed. Harold was at his job as a railroad auditor; the father was out taking a stroll.

Police soon found themselves at a dead end. They had come upon only one clue, a mysterious scrap of paper with the words, "J. L. Morton, Charleston, Mass.," written on it. It had been lying on the floor near the body. A thorough check of Charleston, however, failed to reveal anyone by that name.

Reporters covering the story were soon

so hard up for new angles that they began going up and down talking to the different people in the neighborhood, getting their slants. So it was that one journalist button-holed Charles Lewis Tucker. Now almost all the people in the neighborhood were very reluctant to say anything. Murder is a nasty business and makes most people squeamish.

Talkative Tucker

But young Tucker was different. He spoke with abandon and gave a detailed account of his whereabouts during the period of some two hours when the murder was committed, the time between the elder Page's going out for his stroll and his return to find the body of his spinster daughter.

The journalist told police about the garrulous young man. The officers talked to him and searched his home, but found nothing suspicious. Tucker told about having hitched a wagon ride during the "murder time." Sure enough, the police found the man who had given him the ride. Not that it couldn't have been possible, by a margin of a few slim minutes, for Tucker to have committed the murder and picked up the ride.

But, with nothing against him except a gabby tongue, the police let him go. As the case wore on and they found themselves getting nowhere, the only person who kept coming to mind was the young man who talked so much. So they had another tête-à-tête with him. Again they searched his place. Again—nothing. They turned him loose once more.

Perseverance Pays Off

It was after the desperate police, having no other leads, talked to the talkative Tucker still another time and, out of routine, searched his place once more, that they at last struck pay dirt. This time, in the pocket of a coat that hung in his closet, they found a knife that seemed to have bloodstains on it. The blade of the knife fitted the wounds in the murdered girl's throat. Moreover, in the same pocket was found a postcard that

was postmarked Charleston and had the name "Morton" on it among some other words.

Police then took Tucker into custody, charging him with Mabel Page's murder. They surmised that he probably had written "J. L. Morton, Charleston, Mass.," on the scrap of paper that had been found and had purposely left it behind to throw police off his track. They figured that the "Morton" and "Charleston" had subconsciously come to his mind because of the postcard. They figured, too, that Tucker had entered the Page house either bent on pilfering or on getting fresh with Mabel and that he killed her either because Mabel, who was getting dressed to go out, had found him burglarizing her home or because he had attacked her and she had resisted his advances. Police experts said that the handwriting on the scrap of paper found by Mabel's body matched other writing known to have been done by Page.

But Tucker maintained his innocence. His lawyer said the stains on the knife found in his pocket was rust, not blood. Public sympathy, aroused by his youth and because the case rested on circumstantial evidence, swung his way.

A petition with 125,000 names was got up in his behalf.

Sudden Silence

At the trial the young man whose tongue had got him into the trouble to begin with suddenly elected to shut up. There are indications that his lawyer and his family wanted him to take the stand. But young Tucker, whether out of a strange quirk or because of a guilty conscience, decided not to testify.

That was his privilege, but to the jury his silence must have removed all doubts of his guilt, and they returned a verdict accordingly.

Many students of this case believe that if Tucker hadn't been so loquacious at the beginning and so silent afterward at the wrong time he might have escaped scot free. As it is, he remains just another example of a man who was hanged by his tongue.

The CASE of the REFLECTED MAN



by **DON SOBOL**

Timothy thought he'd die if he didn't get that little blonde dancer—but the price of her love was \$20,000!

TWICE in his fifty years of order and restraint, Timothy McElvoy had been drunk. The first time, six months ago, Georgette Norris had danced into his life. The second time, last night, she had explained the only terms under which she would stay. He had no apparent means of meeting her terms. At least, not last night. So he'd drunk heavily and got sick in her apartment.

"It's a quarter to eight," Georgette an-

nounced, rocking his shoulder. "You don't want to be late for work, honeybun."

"I've never been late, not in twenty years," he chattered, only partly awake.

Georgette planted his stockinged feet on the rug. He let her hoist him to a sitting position on the ancient, shiny davenport. She patted his face. "I'll get you some things."

His toes curled and poked into his shoes. The morning light burned his eyes. He

hooked on his spectacles, and the empty bottle of Scotch on the coffee table leaped into focus. The bottle gathered to it memories of last night.

Last night she had said: "You're a honeybun. I got a real weakness for intelligent honeybuns. But I just can't stop seeing everybody else." She'd nestled her cheek in a fur cape—a courtesy from a gentleman in oil, she told him often. "A girl likes to get comfy things."

Comfy things were expensive. They'd wrangled, and Timothy McElvoy's desperation had pushed it to a pretty high tension. Georgette's ultimatum had ended it. Her price was twenty thousand dollars.

She might as well have made it twenty millions. As a rewrite man on the *Telegraph-Press* he earned a hundred and ten dollars weekly. In twenty years he'd failed to achieve one merit raise. He was a "3 Killed, 4 Hurt in Crash" mechanic. Accurate and dependable, yes, but devoid of the imagination to cope with the less easily packaged news.

Georgette re-entered the room. A mauve kimona—a courtesy from a gentleman in hardware—shrouded her full-blown figure. She handed him a clean towel and a lady's razor. The razor she used to shave her sturdy legs. He liked to watch her do that.

"You'll feel better after you wash, honeybun," she coaxed.

He stumbled toward the bathroom, the aches of his fifty years bunching in his knees. In the bathroom, he twisted the faucet on full blast and ducked his head in the cold water. After shaving and combing his sparse hair cleverly, his spirits lifted. He ventured a strain of "Some Enchanted Evening"—their song.

Georgette waited by the door, holding his jacket at shoulder height. He tried to kiss her, but she refused to bend.

"You will let me see you, soon?" he pleaded. "You know how I feel!"

Her eyes closed, and she shook her bleached head once, but with finality.

Furtively he took her hand. She submitted as he kissed the pink knuckles, the fingertips, the lotioned softness of the palm.

"Twenty thousand," he whispered as

though leaving for a few minutes to fetch the bills from a safety deposit box. "Adieu."

"Adieu, honeybun," Georgette smiled briefly, expressionlessly, and closed the door.

OUTSIDE in the hard morning sunshine the fraud of his ridiculous, whispered promise shone naked. The jauntiness eddied and disappeared. His bank account held exactly three thousand dollars and twenty-two cents.

Objectively, as he did so often, he reviewed the bizarre relationship: Timothy McElvoy, dignified college graduate—Miss Georgette Norris, aging taxi dancer. Yet, objectively, the intellectual approach, never alleviated the plight of his emotions. Indeed, his emotions pleased him. He loved her. He had never dared hope for anyone as beautiful. It was that simple, that iron-clad.

He was convinced that she was intrigued by his learning and moved by his genuine desire for marriage. Providing the twenty thousand would be an act of faith. A girl in her circumstances had every right to ask it in lieu of good looks and youth.

Buoyed somewhat by the active process of reasoning, he walked down the block. At the corner bus stop he halted, feeling unequal, after all, to holding the pace over to Broadway and the subway. It was only five past eight. The bus would get him to work on time.

He stood facing the corner lingerie shop and fitted into his gold holder a cigarette he was never to smoke. For suddenly, startled, he pressed his nose against the glass of the lingerie window. The cigarette and holder were knocked flying.

Was there really a man stuffing money into a pair of blue crêpe drawers?

Crimson, Timothy McElvoy stepped back, aware of the spectacle he must certainly have provided the others at the bus stand. He retrieved the cigarette holder. From a crouch, a darting glance assured him the lingerie window was quite normal. What a preposterous trick his eyes had played on him!

A bus grumbled noisily to the curb. He boarded it in confused haste and sprinkled

his fare into the coffer. First, however, he dropped his change and collected it while choking out apologies to a row of inconvenienced shoes.

The bus lurched. A woman shrieked into his ears. Timothy McElvoy squirmed off the woman's lap and scrambled after the asparagus he'd upset. "I'm sorry. Dreadfully sorry," he murmured, grabbing limp stalks from the dirty floor. He floundered self-consciously up the aisle, falling into an empty seat under the concentrated looks of watchful eyes.

"Bourbon and eggs—nothing better for breakfast," a man across the aisle commented wryly.

In the Telegraph-Press Building he rode up in the elevator, still prickling with humiliation. Eddie Simpson, who wrote headlines in the financial department, scrutinized him with twinkling eyes. "Rumpled shirt, bow tie askew. . . ." Eddie Simpson's blunt forefinger probed each piece of apparel named. "Last time I lamped the immaculate McElvoy minus a razor press 'n da p'nts was nigh six months ago. The night you waltzed and waltzed and waltzed in the arms of the big blonde dish."

The elevator doors clanked open. Eddie Simpson roughed Timothy McElvoy's back affectionately. "Say, that big babe took a shine to you."

"I don't even remember her name," Timothy McElvoy denied.

"I'll bet she remembers yours—*honey-bun*," Eddie Simpson parted, waving broadly.

At his typewriter, Timothy McElvoy discovered that his fingers were stiff, tense. Why had he disclaimed remembering Georgette? To the others she was merely a buxom taxi dancer whom Eddie Simpson had playfully deposited on his lap as the jukebox played "Some Enchanted Evening."

That was six months ago. Simpson and four other old timers, and a likable young legman with whom he worked via the telephone, Finch Comer, had tossed a party to celebrate his twenty years with the *Telegraph-Press*. They'd succeeded in getting him tight: his "bacchannalian baptismal,"

Eddie Simpson called it. Then, later, against a hazy backdrop of music, laughter and shadowy, swaying couples, Eddie Simpson had pushed Georgette across his skinny thighs.

Of his continuing relationship with Georgette, none of them could know or guess. Timothy McElvoy sensed safety in their ignorance of this and a vague danger in their finding it out now. Why, he did not know exactly.

Somehow, it was connected with the seventeen thousand unattainable dollars. Timothy McElvoy tossed in bed for two nights. The specter of a man squatting in the window of a lingerie shop, a parcel of bills in his hand, burned in his brain.

He telephoned Georgette. No, her decision stood. No, she could not stop him from buying dance tickets at the Silver Palace Ballroom.

Such recourse, however, repelled him. Once since their first meeting he'd revisited the Silver Palace. Uncomfortably, for ten seconds, he had managed a puritanical disdain for the pictures of the hostesses, fifteen years old, which paneled the entrance. He'd almost found enough nerve to enter when the doorman had smirked. "Don't be timid, Pop. The girls inside ain't." But "Pop," with a look that was a milestone in suppressed indignation, had hurried away.

Eventually, he brought himself to ringing her doorbell. "Well?" was all she said, all she needed to say. He had neither the money nor any way to obtain it.

There, on the stoop, in the thickening darkness, he cursed his impetuosity. He'd exposed the sham of his promise. Abjectly he walked down the block and a few moments later was passing the lingerie shop again.

He perceived no stooping man, no money. Elaborate panties and form-fitting brassieres rewarded his sneak look. Nothing more.

On the three succeeding days, after quitting the office, Timothy McElvoy's gaze sideswiped the window. Except for the manikin midriffs, busts and disembodied, transparent legs, he discerned nothing resembling the human form.

(Please turn to page 118)

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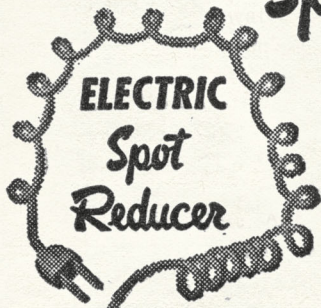
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Nevertheless, he *had* seen something in the window once. As a professional observer, as a journalist trading in confirmable facts, he knew this absolutely. But only as he lay slumberless, exhausted into relaxation, did the answer find a way into his mind.

MORNING was unendurably long in coming.

At a few minutes past eight he stepped to within a foot of the lingerie window, duplicating the conditions by which he had first seen the image.

A man was there in the window. He saw not only a man stooping before a safe but an entire room.

The man closed the safe and walked about the room. The man, Timothy McElvoy was to learn during the month of observing him daily, was Jacob Seymour, owner of a check cashing service whose rear room was reflected faithfully by the window of the lingerie shop.

Investigation disclosed the reflection's source. The glazier next door to the lingerie shop had hung a giant dummy window by way of advertisement. Through a trick of optics, the dummy pane, projecting at a right angle out over the street between the first and second stories, reflected the interior of the check cashing service's room which fronted the street directly above the lingerie shop. This reflection was passed down to the lingerie shop window. By standing close to the lingerie window when the sun slanted just right, the image was perfectly shown.

Watching Jacob Seymour's reflection, Timothy McElvoy felt like a poker player who can see his opponents' cards without fear of detection.

Until now he had hardly dared analyze his purpose in returning to the window. The knowledge that there was money here he'd half frightenedly submerged in the generalized goal of solving the mystery. Yet the idea now roaming unbridled in his mind caused but the mildest shock. Robbery seemed natural, inevitable. The reflection itself seemed but to suggest and facilitate theft.

With the methodical, tireless patience that characterized him, Timothy McElvoy got down to his task. Nightly, in his small, fastidiously groomed bachelor apartment, he sipped his glass of French coffee over a stack of true crime magazines. From histories of other crimes he compiled a folio of police procedure. He did not intend to be trapped by an elementary, avoidable mistake.

The most persistent obstacle, his conscience, he quelled by passing Georgette's closed door each morning on his way to his vantage post.

Seymour's routine was simple and unvaried. The old man came to work at a quarter to eight and picked up his newspaper which was delivered to the door. He read it until eight. Then he removed enough money from the safe for the day's business and distributed it in the drawers before the two tellers' windows. These windows were fixed in the wall which divided the firm into two rooms.

On his days off, Timothy McElvoy established that Jacob Seymour's two assistants arrived at about eight-thirty. He also tried to cash a personal check. Since the firm did not cash these—only payroll, city, state and federal checks, as he'd already predetermined—he departed without relinquishing his identity. But he had obtained knowledge of the entrance room, which contained three writing desks and a number of posters bearing instructions on how to fill out checks properly.

The time to act would be when Seymour, alone, laid aside his newspaper and opened the safe.

There remained the risky business of acquiring a gun. Quite opportunely, this undertaking was removed from his initiative. A cocker spaniel was killed thirty-seven miles away in Huntington, Long Island, and Timothy McElvoy fell heir to six assorted weapons.

HIS sister's son, a twenty-seven-year-old infantry veteran, put the bullet through the dog's throat when he missed the practice target in his back yard. The gun was confiscated and the nephew, Dick Kelly, was

fined. However, Kelly kept six more war trophies in the basement which he neglected to inform the judge in Mineola.

"I lied to my wife, said I'd turned these in, too," Kelly confessed, depositing a chamois shag bag on the bed of the surprised Timothy McElvoy one midnight. "I know you won't tell, Uncle Tim. In a couple of months this'll blow over, and I'll pick 'em up."

Kelly overrode Timothy McElvoy's feeble pleas with appeals to "my favorite unc." Timothy McElvoy agreed, reluctantly, to keep them "... only if you promise never to discharge them at home again. I trust you've learned your lesson. It might have been an innocent child you killed."

The elated Kelly slipped from the apartment, pausing for a manly handclasp to clinch the pact of secrecy.

In the bag were a Mauser, two P 38s, two old 1900 Mannlichers, and a Luger. The Luger was loaded.

Timothy McElvoy examined the Luger carefully. His finger curled across the trigger. The sensation was not disagreeable. He strode to the full-length mirror in the bathroom door. With the gun in his inside pocket he pulled a fast draw. "Hands up!" he growled. He donned gloves, topcoat and a hat and swashbuckled to the mirror for one more fast draw.

Then, soberly, he replaced the guns in the chamois bag. The bag he stored in the rear of his clothes closet shelf under three cigar boxes of stamps he had not gotten around to sorting, and which Katie, the cleaning woman, had strict orders never to touch.

He was almost ready.

The first reverse in his scheme struck like a bomb the very next morning.

He didn't see Jacob Seymour reading his newspaper. The reflection was gone. Only lingerie—

A spasm of panic racked him. Dizzy, he leaned against the building for support. In this position his eyes found the glazier's window. A coat of whitening had been smeared on the inside of the glass. He stared up at the dummy pane. It, too, was gone.

(Turn page)

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Only three iron clamps embedded in the brick wall remained.

A sign was pasted on the glazier's window. It read: Store to Rent. Timothy Spears and Co., Renting Agent. Inquire Within.

He tried the door. Too early; it was locked. The sight of his own given name had jarred him alert. Timothy McElvoy stamped the sidewalk triumphantly. The absence of a reflection would prevent anyone's inadvertently witnessing the holdup. More vital, here was the key to unlock the final dilemma: Gaining admission to the check cashing service without arousing Jacob Seymour's suspicion.

AT SIX-THIRTY the next morning, Timothy McElvoy stole Jacob Seymour's newspaper. The planning stage was over.

He waited outside Seymour's door, listening to his heart thumping seemingly hours after the bell's strident buzz had faded. Jacob Seymour opened the door, but did not unfasten the safety chain.

"What is it please?"

"My name is Anderson," Timothy McElvoy replied. "I'm with Timothy Spears and Company next door. We ordered a morning paper, and I'm afraid we took your delivery yesterday by mistake. We got ours this morning. I want to apologize."

Timothy McElvoy pushed one of the newspapers he carried at the slim opening. It bumped the jamb and dropped apart on the floor.

"Ach! I'm sorry." Jacob Seymour undid the chain and came out helpfully. Their faces were together as they rose. Recognition flashed on Seymour's. Timothy McElvoy already had the Luger pointed at his belt buckle.

"Keep quiet. Walk with your hands up to the other room," Timothy McElvoy directed. Seymour obeyed.

"The combination!" Timothy McElvoy demanded, hunkering before the safe.

"One click right, five left, two right, one left," Seymour answered huskily.

Timothy McElvoy caught the look Seymour shot at the wall. On the wall was an

alarm. There was another inside the safe, a white button, too, which by luck he had not hit.

Methodically, Timothy McElvoy looted the safe. He counted each block of five hundred as he fitted it into the satchel. Seymour's dash for the alarm came when he buckled the satchel, now bulging with seventeen thousand dollars. The attempt was desperate, foolhardy. Timothy McElvoy stopped the old man an arm's length short of the button. Seymour twisted about groggily. Blood trickled from the spot where the Luger had thudded above the ear. He didn't fall. Timothy McElvoy smashed the bald head again, very hard. Jacob Seymour collapsed.

The air on the street chilled Timothy McElvoy, and he realized he was soaked with perspiration. In a minute he had hailed a cab.

"Grand Central Station," he said breathlessly.

By virtue of a dozen rehearsals, he needed less than twenty minutes in the station. He shoved the satchel into a quarter locker and stuck the locker key under a seat in the waiting room with a piece of chewing gum.

He reached the office two minutes early. His record for punctuality he could break tomorrow, but not today. Tomorrow he looked forward to overhauling all his habits.

After work he'd pick up the key and money and telephone Georgette. A little celebration was in order. Timothy McElvoy chuckled gleefully to himself. He had no regrets, just exciting expectations.

In the staff coatroom he shed his hat and overcoat and gloves. An impulse to swagger lifted him upon his toes. His co-workers had nicknamed him Timorous Timothy. He'd heard the epithet at unguarded moments in the lavatory. They thought him that. St. John, the city editor, and the rest of them must always think that.

He refreshed his bow tie, hurried to his desk and sat with his hands cupped in his lap.

A copyboy charged over and left a wire story. Timothy McElvoy boiled it down. Over the phone he took a five-line fire in

Brooklyn and a drowning in the East River. He was thankful that this was routine, formula stuff that he could do almost by reflex.

THE first edition came up. A copyboy slapped a paper on his desk. Timothy McElvoy leaped to his stories. The city desk hadn't altered so much as a comma. They seldom did. The desk made allowance for his shortcomings. No front-page bylines. But the desk couldn't deny how heavily they relied on him for rapid and accurate copy on inside-the-paper shorts.

St. John was shouting, "Are you clear, Mac?" Timothy McElvoy nodded. The city editor said, "Pick up forty-four."

He listened to the two-pitched click as the operator transferred the call from forty-four to his extension. Mechanically he arranged pencil and paper at hand.

"McElvoy," he spoke into the horn.

"A holdup in a check cashing service this morning." It was Finch Comer, the young police reporter.

"I'll take it for the five star," Timothy McElvoy said. He said it casually. A unique twist, certainly. Although hardly expected, he had not overlooked the possibility. There were two other rewrite men on city for the second edition. "What've you got?"

Comer read off the facts. "Any questions?"

"None," Timothy McElvoy answered. "You don't have a lot. Another ulcer for the cops, eh?"

"The yegg used his brains. It might have been an inside job. He knew Seymour's routine cold."

"Don't editorialize," Timothy McElvoy cautioned.

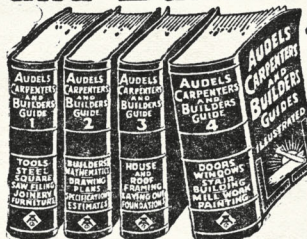
"Right," young Comer laughed good-naturedly, and hung up.

He thumbed two sheets of copy paper, rolled them into the typewriter. His note sheet showed only angular doodlings. No matter. The facts of his own hold-up were freshly etched in his memory. Quickly he wrote:

The Seymour Check Cashing Service, located one flight up at 788 Seventh Avenue was held up early

[Turn page]

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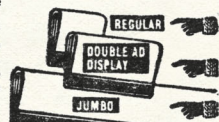


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this morning and looted of \$17,000.

Jacob Seymour, the owner, was alone in the store when the gunman entered. Police believe the crime was engineered by a man familiar with the routine of the office.

Satisfied, Timothy McElvoy sent off the story. He smoked two cigarettes, calmly dallied until the five star edition came up. When it did, he tucked a copy under his arm and went to lunch.

When he returned, he found Finch Comer at his desk. The handsome young police reporter grinned oddly.

"What I admire *second* most about you is your punctuality," Finch Comer remarked. "Five minutes before one, and you're back at the desk, ready to give the boss sixty minutes every hour."

Queer words. And the grin—phony as a paper mustache. Tiny hammers, a faint warning, beat in Timothy McElvoy.

Finch Comer's lips spread wider in the pasteboard grin. "But what I admire *most*," he said, getting up, "is your accuracy."

The hammers began to pound. Timothy McElvoy liked Finch Comer. He liked him because Finch Comer, right out of journalism school, was a hard worker, a sober, nice guy, and honest when he didn't make enough money to make honesty convenient. The obvious dishonesty of his manner now caused Timothy McElvoy to ask uneasily, "What's the point, Finch?"

"We can't talk here." Finch Comer didn't wait for Timothy McElvoy. He went into the clubroom, a hall furnished with three leather couches and a dozen checkerboard-top card tables. Half a dozen men from the composing room, munching sandwiches, huddled around a pair of checker players.

FINCH COMER settled slackly on a couch at the opposite end of the hall. He motioned Timothy McElvoy to his side.

"See here!" Timothy McElvoy protested, sitting down.

"I was saying, there's nothing I admire more in a newspaperman than accuracy," Finch Comer resumed. "You recall a little story about a man named Jacob Seymour and a holdup this morning?"

"I remember," Timothy McElvoy said drily.

"Good." Finch Comer plucked a cigarette from a fresh pack, lit up and followed a current of smoke with his eyes. "How did you know seventeen thousand was the sum stolen?" His voice was so conversational, so off-handedly inquiring that at first Timothy McElvoy missed its fatal implication.

"You told me over the telephone," he stammered.

"I didn't. I didn't know. Nobody knew until an hour ago when the books were checked. Seymour was the kind of guy who trusted no one. The best his assistants could estimate was several thousand dollars. Ten, maybe fifteen, was in the safe. That's what they told police. That's what I told you."

"I'll print a retraction," Timothy McElvoy ridiculed, running his fingers through the air to indicate a banner headline.

"I don't want a retraction," Finch Comer said softly. "I rather like things as they are."

They studied each other a minute.

"How much do you want?" Timothy McElvoy said, hardly knowing he was speaking.

"All of it. Seventeen thousand."

Timothy McElvoy stared, stunned. "You can't prove it was anything but a mistake. I misunderstood you over the telephone."

"Perhaps," Finch Comer allowed. As he spoke, some of the bravado seemed to slip from his manner. "But suppose I brought Jacob Seymour up here to identify you? You see, I give you a choice. Part with the money or a good-sized lump of your life."

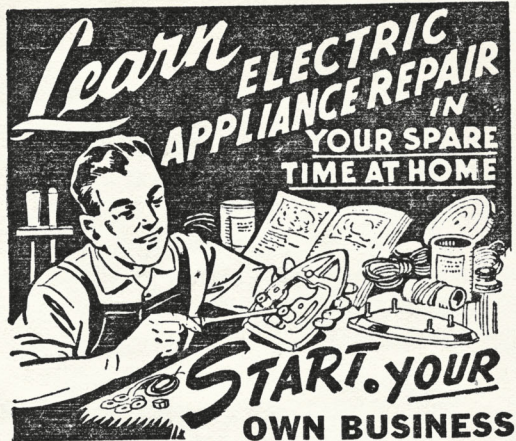
The other's sudden strange nervousness steadied Timothy McElvoy. He let the white-faced Comer wait for the answer. The kid had stuck himself into something big—blackmail. He'd gone this far and there was no getting out. He was over his head and scared. The grin had caked on his face.

"You win." Timothy McElvoy registered a sigh, signifying the futility of his position. "You'll get the money. All of it."

"You're making sense. The money—it's safe?" Finch Comer pressed.

"In a locker in Grand Central Station," Timothy McElvoy reassured him as he

[Turn page]



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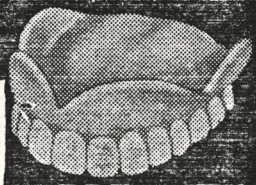
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might an anxious child. He jotted his home address on a scrap of paper. "Come tonight at nine. I'll be expecting you."

Finch Comer took the paper, folded it twice and tucked it into his wallet. His hands were shaky.

Timothy McElvoy put his palm on his forehead. "I've a rotten headache. Better beg the afternoon off."

He preceded Finch Comer to the city-room, thinking, "Right now I can buy him off for ten thousand, or five."

But already racing into conception was a better way out. He still had the Luger.

SIX short months ago he would have recoiled in horror at such thoughts. This morning had changed all that. He'd gained a fortune and brutally slugged an old man to the floor for it. The road back was past. He would not have taken it if he could.

Leaving the staff coatroom, he spied Finch Comer idling by the water cooler. At nine, if you have the nerve, the message flew across the room. Shoulders squared, Timothy McElvoy sauntered out the door.

Finch Comer proved he had the nerve. He came at nine o'clock. One detail differed from Timothy McElvoy's blueprint.

The meeting took place in the office of the district attorney.

"Seymour died?" Timothy McElvoy gasped.

"Dead from your two blows to the head," the district attorney said.

Slowly, the meaning penetrated Timothy McElvoy's bewilderment. He spun on his chair toward Finch Comer. His face, livid, contorted with rage.

"You knew he was dead! You lied. It was a trick! Seymour could never have identified me!"

A burly sergeant intercepted his wild lunge. Two more bluecoats were summoned to restrain his writhing.

"I lied." Finch Comer fingered his shirt where Timothy McElvoy had clawed it. "You see, the seventeen thousand dollars you mentioned was the tipoff. Your story, so peculiarly lacking in fundamentals, like Seymour's age and address, which I gave you, added up. But it wasn't proof. As you

said, it might have been just a misunderstanding over the telephone. So we had to know more. Where you hid the money, for instance." Finch Comer bowed his head. "I'm sorry, Mac," he said very gently.

"You'll make it easier on everybody, McElvoy, if you tell us which locker," the district attorney said.

"You'll have to open every one," Timothy McElvoy muttered fiercely. "Everyone . . . everyone . . ." He chanted the word with a weird mixture of terror and defiance. Then, abruptly, he quieted and began to sob, wide-eyed and tearless.

The cops looked quickly at the district attorney.

"Take him outside," the district attorney ordered; and added in a lower, but pointed tone, "no rough stuff on him."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said knowingly.

"Something I still don't get," the district attorney said to Finch Comer. "What made you suspect the little guy? The mention of the stolen sum you conceded might have been an error, a fluke coincidence."

Finch Comer walked to the window and stood looking down at the street. Slowly he said, "I watched the whole thing happening."

"You what?" the district attorney roared.

"Well, not exactly." The young police reporter picked up the clipping from the district attorney's desk—the story Timothy McElvoy had written on his own holdup. "Mac forgot the reflection worked both ways. Jacob Seymour got worried about another man on the street. This one, like the others, seemed more interested in his office than in the lingerie shop. He called headquarters about a month ago. I went with Sergeant Thompson on the investigation." Finch Comer faltered.

The district attorney barged out in front of his desk. "Go on."

"'A false alarm,' I told Sergeant Thompson across the street from the lingerie shop. 'That's our own Timorous Timothy. Poor guy can't work up enough courage to go in and buy his lady-fair a pair of pink panties. Give him time.' Thompson howled. It got to be a standing joke around the precinct."

[Turn page]

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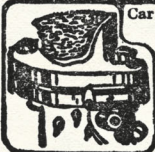
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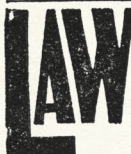
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The district attorney's jaw tightened. "The joke cost Seymour his life. Maybe your friend McElvoy's, if he can be tried. You," he sucked in his breath, "you bungling cub!"

"Blame it on me!" Finch Comer flung back, hating himself and impotently furious at the district attorney's righteous, paper logic. "I do."

The district attorney flushed. "All right, all right. You can leave."

Finch Comer nodded. He made a ball of the clipping, bunched it in his hand. "Seventeen thousand—accurate to the finish."

"Huh?" the district attorney grunted.

"Nothing." Finch Comer shut the door.

In the marble corridor Matthew St. John paced heavily up and down. "Well?"

"It's over," Finch Comer said wearily.

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"He did it."

The massive editor threw a fatherly arm around Finch Comer's shoulders. "Good boy. Fine work. It wasn't easy to bluff Mac, not being sure he was guilty."

"Hoping I was wrong every second," Finch Comer said. "Why did he?"

St. John shrugged sadly. "Maybe there was a dame."

Going down in the elevator neither spoke. On the street St. John said, "There'll be an opening in the city room now. You want the job?"

Finch Comer hesitated.

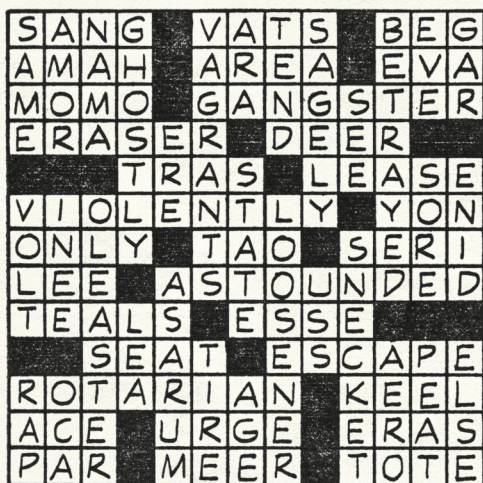
St. John said quietly, "Not at his desk, of course. We'll move Murphy over. You can take Murphy's desk. How about it?"

"Okay," Finch Comer grinned. And it seemed that he could not remember when he had grinned last.

PUZZLE PAGE

(Answers to Puzzles on page 79)

DETECTAGRAM



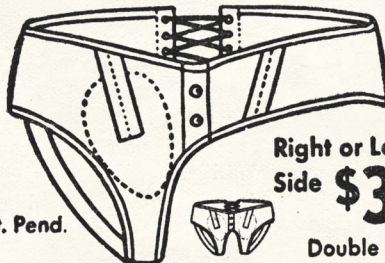
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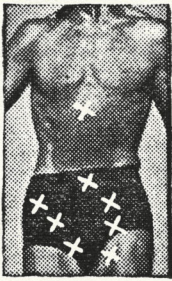
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INSIDE STUFF

(Continued from page 6)

He rides up behind her, holding a small pocket mirror beneath her skirts, presumably getting even less of an eyeful than he could get, wholesale, on any bathing beach during the summer and with no risk of spending six months in the jug. But the beach or burlesque house view won't do for this perverted strip-tease enthusiast. Also, in order to complete his satisfaction, he needs his victim's attention, so invariably he mutters some obscenity in her ear.

Sometimes, if she is a healthy-minded girl, she may merely turn around and kick him in the shins or in a more tender spot. Perhaps she'll simply burst out laughing, which will be his worst punishment, since it robs him of his off-beat enjoyment. Occasionally the lady will scream and faint, in which case only an alert protection officer will prevent the mirror boy from escaping at the top of his ride.

How to Catch Him

The point is, few women have ever heard of such mirror workers, and so they are not prepared for them. Certainly their activities may be a shock to the sensitive nervous system of a woman unprepared for such an invasion of privacy, though she might feel no indignity whatever at being examined in more detail and at closer range by a nurse or doctor.

In any case, if women were aware that males of such arrested instincts were likely to be encountered in big stores, if they knew that the right thing to do would be to wait until they reached the top of the escalator and immediately call for one of the store employees to take this new-style Peeping Tom into custody, there'd be very few such attempts made.

The only reason the mirror workers ever get any satisfaction out of their attempts at a hillside strip-tease, is because so few women know about them and are prepared to act against them.

The same is true of the homosexual approaches made in public lavatories and other likely places. These are often much more

dangerous because so frequently they are made with the idea of extorting blackmail later.

But most men and women are reluctant to be involved in any accusation against a degenerate in a case involving morals. They are afraid that their own reputations will be smirched—on the where-there's-smoke-there's-fire basis—and so such predatory blackmailers continue to frighten others until some plainclothesman or woman member of the protection staff traps them and sends them away.

This is our reason for publishing this series—to expose the thus far well hidden methods by which perfectly innocent people may, all-unwittingly, be caught in a moral quicksand from which no escape seems possible without disgusting or ruinous publicity simply because they don't know how sex criminals operate.

We don't intend to panic parents by warnings against permitting their eight-year-olds to accept candy from evil old men. That is a matter involving revision of court procedures, changes in parole methods, and modern psychiatric approaches to known sex criminals or those with observed tendencies toward molestation. What we will do, in each issue of POPULAR DETECTIVE will be to outline in plain English the methods used by these individuals whose peculiarities might shock, embarrass or endanger Joe or Jane Doakes.

This month we've told you about the mirror-working Peeping Toms. Next issue we'll tell you about one of the most horrifying, and least known, types of sex criminals—the Blackmailing Juveniles.

—Frank Talker

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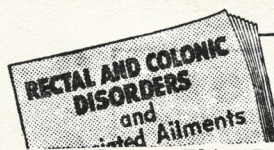
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This is What \$100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

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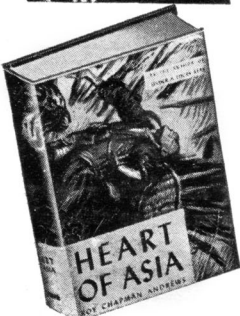
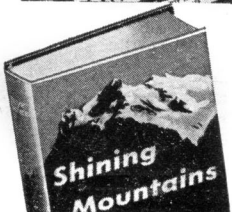
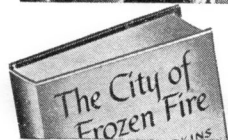
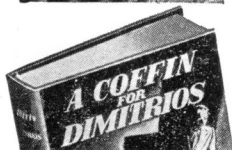
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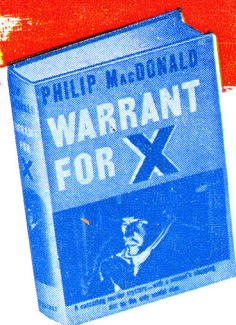
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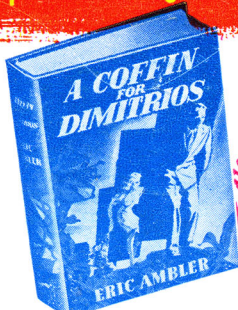
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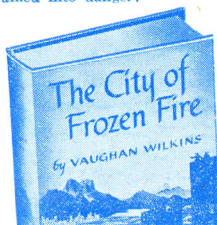
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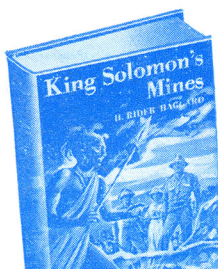
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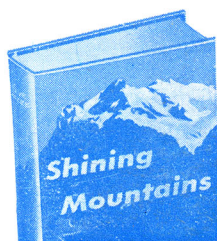
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