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MURDER TUNE

By

ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

Illustrated by
John Skidmore

CHAPTER I

"Bitter Memories"

IT PUZZLED me, seeing George Vardaman in the crowded dance hall. Somehow it seemed incongruous for an elderly dignified professor of classical music to be in a glittering jive palace like the Palanquin Ballroom. He was out of place there; out of character.

Unless, of course, he'd been backstage paying a call on my former wife and his, Flame Shannon.

That was the explanation, I decided.

When a guy's ex-wife is skewered right in his arms, he's got to go into action to clear himself, and when the solution depends upon how a band plays a certain melody it becomes a problem for the experts, both criminal and musical.

"Okay, copper," said Sullivan, "here's another murder suspect."

Then, because I sympathized with him, I tried to catch his eye. I failed. Vardaman, not noticing me, sauntered unhurriedly to the front exit; went out into the night. There was no haste to his movements, but by a like token he didn't linger, either.

Which was natural enough, when you knew his deep distaste for the kind of music they featured at the Palanquin. Its hot braying brassiness even made me wince a little, and my ears aren't artistically sensitive. I'm not artistic at all; I'm just a cop, a hunky cop from the wrong side of the tracks.

For a moment I considered following the gray-haired man, at least to say hello to him. Aside from the disparity in our ages and backgrounds we had a lot in common; we'd shared a mutual and pretty bitter experience. Because of it, we liked each other. Or anyhow we felt sorry for each other.

Presently, though, I shrugged and turned away; dismissed the idea of going after Vardaman and hailing him. Whatever had fetched him to the Palanquin Ballroom was none of my business; if he'd been to see Flame Shannon that was his hard luck. I had troubles of my own. I was going to see Flame, too.

The sooner I got the visit over with the better I'd like it. I started for a door by the orchestra shell, zig-zagging my way through the thronged dancers. And then fingers plucked at my coat sleeve: soft, graceful feminine fingers, ringless, tapered, insistent and insinuating, the nails buffed to a natural polish but not red-lacquered like bloodstained talons.

"Dance, big boy?" the girl said, and smiled up at me.

She was a small girl, small enough to be dainty, though you wouldn't quite call her tiny. Compact is the word, with nice curved lines of hip and breast. Her hair was chestnut brown with soft glints in it, matching the light-flecks in her hazel eyes, and she had a wide generous mouth made for smiling. And for kissing.

She wore an off-the-shoulders evening gown of some filmy blue stuff, daring but not exactly immodest. You merely saw enough of her to want to see more. What jarred was the frankness of her approach. The Palanquin wasn't a taxi dance joint; you were supposed to bring your own partner. Casual pickups were strictly against the rules.

MAYBE my thought was reflected in my expression. The girl's cheeks got pink. "You don't remember me, do you, Bunny?" she said ruefully.

"Well, I—"

"It's all right, I don't blame you. I used to be Flame's roommate. We shared an apartment when you were courting her. Anybody courting Flame couldn't be expected to pay much attention to her country cousin." She made a wry mouth. "Sorry if that sounded catty. I didn't mean it to be."

By now, of course, I'd placed her. "You're Paula Fenton!"

"Then you do remember. I'm flattered."

"Sure I remember you. But I—but you're—"

"Different?"

"Prettier." I realized it was an awkward thing to say, after I said it. Now it was my turn to blush. "I mean—that is—"

She laughed. It was a nice, wholesome laugh. "Don't be embarrassed, Bunny. It's just that I do my hair a different way and use a little makeup and I've learned the kind of clothes to wear. The country cousin grew up."

"And very beautifully," I said. A sudden thought struck me. I added: "Are you here alone, Paula? I've got an errand to do; then I'd like to have that dance you mentioned. Maybe we could go some place later for a drink, or—"

"Would the errand have anything to do with Flame? Don't bother answering that. I was just being spiteful. No, Bunny, I don't think I could make it tonight. Some other time, possibly." Then, skirt swirling, she turned and went toward a man who seemed to be looking for her. Her escort, probably. He took her in his arms and they danced away, and I wondered why it annoyed me to see how tightly he held her. Maybe I envied him.

Frowning, I walked to the door by the bandstand and pushed it open, went through. A moment later I found another door with a star on it, and lettering. I knocked and heard a well-remembered voice say: "Come in," and I entered my ex-wife's dressing room—reluctantly.

"Well, baby," I said. "You sent for me and here I am. What's on your mind?"

Flame Shannon was nothing like her name. There was no heat, no warmth, to this girl who sang with Mickey Dolan's seven-piece dance combo at the Palanquin Ballroom. She was cold, remote, glacially poised, icily sure of herself: sure of what

she wanted, certain of getting it. And callously indifferent to the means she used or the people she hurt in her climb to success.

She actually looked icy as I stood there waiting for her to say what she had to say. She was wearing an ice-blue satin slip with a negligee over it that seemed to have been fashioned of spun snow, it was so shining white. Her hair, too, had the bluish whiteness of powdered ice. A few years back you'd have called it platinum, because platinum blondes were all the style then; but Flame preferred "ice blonde," for its press value. It made a paradox, and the paradox was good publicity for a canary with ambition.

FLAME SHANNON, the frozen-fire girl. The girl you'd love to touch because she was so exquisite, so perfect; only if you touched her you'd find yourself nursing a nasty case of frostbite. The scars of that frostbite would be a long time healing, if they ever healed at all.

Believe me, I knew. It was something I wasn't likely to forget, being her divorced husband. Being one of her three divorced husbands. I was the one in the middle. I had come after George Vardaman, the prim, elderly professor of music —the gray-haired, dignified man I'd noticed a little while ago leaving the dance hall. And in my own turn I, too, had been discarded, just as Vardaman had. No, you don't forget your ice-burn scars.

"Hello, Walter," Flame said without getting up off the white upholstered couch where she was resting. Or rather, where she was posing.

The words theatrical and artificial popped into my mind. They described Flame pretty completely. Everything she did was a pose, deliberately staged for a purpose. That included this calculated casualness of her present reclining position, lazy and indolent and subtly tempting. It included the artful way her negligee was disarranged to show a hint of sleek, symmetrically tapered leg in its sheer lustrous stocking; the glimpse of snowy thigh, and the bold flaunt of her figure beneath the caress of the glossy satin slip.

I wasn't having any. I was not impressed; I wouldn't allow myself to be impressed. Perfection of face and figure are all right for a calendar painting by Petty or Varga, but as far as Flame Shannon was concerned it was just the tinsel wrapping on a package of greed and selfishness.

Glaciers are nice to look at, too, I reflected; but they have an inexorable way of inching toward an ultimate goal, implacably grinding and destroying everything in their path. That was Flame: an avaricious glacier sculptured in the form of a woman.

"You're looking well, Walter," she made her tone intimate and throaty, pronouncing my name.

I said bluntly: "Don't be formal. Just call me copper. Coming from you it would sound a lot more natural."

"Oh, now, really!" she pouted. "Is that a way to talk when I phoned you to come here so I could do you a favor, Walter? I sort of thought you'd be . . . well, friendly, at least. I mean I'd hoped you had got over your vindictiveness toward me."

"Copper is what you called me at the divorce hearing," I said, recalling a scene two years dead. "Copper, and cheap two-bit flatfoot, and numbskull harness bull."

I wondered if she had noticed I wasn't in uniform now. I wondered if she'd read the news about my promotion to plain-clothes detective, first class, with a sergeantcy in sight if everything went well.

"And as for doing me a favor, Tutz," I added, "don't exaggerate. You never did anybody a favor in your life, and you probably never will."

HER Arctic-green eyes flashed, then swiftly lost their momentary anger. Apparently she had learned to suppress her temper, or anyhow to control and conceal it under that veneer of ice.

"Walter Bunczek, cynic," she said lightly, and smiled with her lips. The smile was as phony as she was.

I said: "No. Just Walter Bunczek, hunky policeman. The copper with the college education which never quite blotted out the fact that he came from the wrong side of the tracks."

That wasn't sarcasm, it was a statement of truth. I remembered how she had hated the name Bunczek; it had reminded her of Polaks in the steel mills and coal mines, and right after our honeymoon she'd started nagging me to have it legally changed to something more American.

That was when we'd first begun bickering. Later the arguments had turned to downright quarrels. Bunczek was American enough for me; look at the men who have fought for this country down through the years—Kosciusko and Lafayette and Pulaski, to say nothing of the Mendozas and O'Briens, the Cohens and Svenstroms and Schmidts. It wasn't your name that made you American, it was what you had inside you.

Flame stirred on the white couch, knowing I was baiting her. A purr came into her throaty voice. "Do we have to brawl, darling? Let's keep it pleasant." Then she glanced at her expensive wrist-watch, a bauble that had more dimonds than hours and probably had cost more than I make a year. "Eleven o'clock. The band's going on the air now."

"Is that remark supposed to be significant or just idle conversation?"

"I wish you wouldn't be so sardonic, Walter. On you it isn't becoming." She sighed languidly. "I go on for my last group of numbers in fifteen minutes and won't get through until nearly midnight."

"And so?"

"There isn't much time to tell you why I sent for you."

"I'm listening," I said. "What is it?"

"Information." She let the word dangle.

I waited a while. Then: "Information about what?"

"Drugs, Walter. Narcotics," she answered. She sat up, and the lace-trimmed top of her satin slip was a tight alluring cling to the mounds of her breasts as she drew a deep breath. "Reefers—marijuana cigarettes. And worse. Things that would get me murdered if anybody knew I was telling them to a cop."

I perked up my ears at this. The situation was a lot deeper than I had imagined. I leaned close to her.

CHAPTER II

"The Lady Squeals"

SHE said it in a low voice, like a furtive stage whisper. You heard fear in the whisper's repressed quaver; fear of retribution, of vengeance, of death; but there was also a stagy quality, artificial, a little too glib, like an accomplished actress delivering well-rehearsed dialogue from a script.

I couldn't be quite sure whether she was really afraid, or faking it for effect. The only thing I did know was that she was pulling a stool pigeon routine. It was a squeal job, a tip-off. Flame wanted to finger somebody.

Well, I wasn't surprised. Anything she did that was snide or unwholesome couldn't possibly surprise me. And whatever her reason might be, I knew selfishness lay behind it.

"Dope," I said quietly. "Where?"

"Right here in the Mickey Dolan ork. Mickey himself is one of them. One of the addicts, I mean."

I studied her, tried to read her beautiful blank face, tried to guess how much of her statement was truth and how much of it was cold calculated malice. I had plenty of cause to be suspicious, knowing what I knew.

Mickey Dolan was not only the front man for the band she sang with, but her third discarded husband as well.

It was an implausible situation, the kind you'll find only in the entertainment world. After divorcing me, Flame had subsequently married this Mickey Dolan. I always thought she did it so she could wangle a long-term contract with the highly popular Dolan band; as the leader's wife she would naturally have the inside track. And that kind of maneuvering was typical of her. She knew how to get what she wanted.

The marriage to Dolan hadn't lasted; Flame's marriages never did. But even after giving him the Reno brush-off, she'd kept on singing with his orchestra. A contract was a contract; she was on her way up; and Dolan was a rung in the stepladder.

"What's the matter, have you gone yellow?" she grated through her teeth.

So now she was accusing him of being a hop-head. Why?

I could understand her disloyalty to

the guy. Treachery was a part of her nature. But if Mickey Dolan got convicted of narcotics charges and took a prison rap, his band would be all washed up. Then Flame's contract wouldn't be worth the paper it was written on; what good is a contract with an organization that's gone out of existence?

It wasn't like Flame to indulge in spite-work which would put her out of a job; therefore I realized she had some hidden motive which didn't show on the surface.

I wanted to know that motive. But there was no use asking her the direct question; she would only evade and equivocate and deny. You had to be devious in your dealings with Flame Shannon, as devious as she was herself. It was the way her mind worked. She lived by deception and trickery. She couldn't help it, any more than she could help breathing.

I tried an oblique approach. "Did you send for George Vardaman so you could discuss it with him, too? I noticed him leaving just as I came in. Where does he fit the picture?"

"George?" She lifted a plucked eyebrow. "Oh, he only dropped by for a moment to see how I was getting along. He's such a dear old lamb. So kind, so loyal—"

"Cut it out, sugar. Vardaman is a right guy, sure. I like him. But you divorced him to marry me, and he never completely got over it. He's been licking his wounds ever since. Don't tell me he'd be fool enough to stay interested in your career at this late date. I can't buy that."

"That's your privilege, Walter."

SO I WAS up against a blank wall there. I altered my course as smoothly as I could manage it. "Okay, skip Vardaman and let's talk about me. Why ring me in on this dope caper? That's for the Narcotics Squad. I'm Homicide—or hadn't you heard?"

"A cop is a cop," she lifted an enticing shoulder. "You I can trust not to tell where you got the tip; not to involve me, drag me into a nasty scandal. After all, you're—you were my husband."

"So was Mickey Dolan, for a while."

"A very short while, Walter. He was a mistake I made."

"I doubt that," I said frankly. "You never make mistakes. And anyhow, you've stuck with him professionally."

"That's business. Besides, he's got me on a contract. Not that I minded. Being with Mickey gave me my start; a foot in the door of radio. But now—"

"But now, what?"

"I've got a chance to go with a bigger outfit back east, a top combo, a name band on a coast to coast hookup with a big cigarette sponsor."

"Well, well," I said thoughtfully.

"It's the opportunity I've been waiting for all my life, Walter. And I don't intend to waste my best years here in the sticks with a lousy mob of dope fiends who ought to be in jail."

Now I understood. I said: "So you'd like to jump to the majors. You want to get into the big time, only your contract with the Dolan orchestra won't let you. You're signed up with Mickey; you're important to his band. Consequently he refuses to release you. Am I right?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Everything, I think." I grinned at her. "The only way you can get loose from Dolan's outfit is to sabotage it, wreck it. If he and some of his boys take a narcotics rap, the band will fall apart and you'll be free to sign on with another orchestra." Then I leaned down and patted her shoulder. It was an intentionally ironic caress, without affection, mocking what we'd once been to each other. "No, thanks, baby. Count me out of the deal."

"Now wait a minute!" She flared, and came up off the couch. "I don't give a damn what you think of me or my motives. I don't give a damn what you think, period. The point is, you're a cop and I'm a private citizen giving you information about criminal activities. Drugs are illegal, aren't they?"

"That they are."

"So I'm demanding you to investigate what I've told you. I demand some arrests. Now."

"You demand a lot, hon. You always

did. There was a time when I'd have jumped to your whistle, like a trained dog. Not any more, though."

"Why, you lousy—"

"And I don't make pinches on hearsay evidence. That's a quick way to get shoved back into harness and set to pounding a beat in the wilderness. If you've got charges to make, make them to the proper authorities at headquarters." I turned toward the door of the dressing room. "Sign a complaint. Put your name on it. That's the only way to do it right."

SHE ran after me, grabbed my arm, swung me around. "You know I can't do that, you hunky scum."

"Why can't you?"

"Think of my reputation. The publicity. Me, mixed up in a dope mess. It would probably spoil this big chance I've got to sing on a show that would make me famous."

I didn't say anything. I just grinned.

My silence gave her time to regain control of her temper. She started wheedling. "Darling, all I'm asking is for you to do your duty." She let the negligee drift down her arms, and one shoulder strap of her satin slip also did a little drifting. I couldn't resist a look at the display; couldn't help observing that her skin was as white and creamily smooth as ever. "Your duty as an officer of the law," she pleaded coyly. "You won't regret it, Walter. I'm promising you that."

For an instant, the unspoken implications of this promise stirred a longing inside me—a hunger I'd thought dead. Then I raised my glance, met her eyes and saw that they were as cold as bits of sea-green glass, and as passionless. It was the same old trickery she'd always used, only I was aware of it now. I knew how empty it was; how meaningless.

I laughed.

Her lips got suddenly thin. "What's so funny?"

"You almost had me winging, hon. Almost, but not quite. I must be growing up."

"You mean I'm . . . not attractive to you any more?"

"Of course you're attractive. So's an iceberg, in its way."

"That's unkind of you, Walter. I can be as warm as anybody . . ." Then she gave me a sharp look. "Is it that you're in love with someone else?"

"No. Not that it's any of your business, but no. You cured me of romance, baby, two years ago. I haven't even looked at any other woman since." Then I saw her face glow with satisfaction, with ego and pride and complacent self-approval; and I knew I had said the one thing that would feed her overweening sureness in the power of her charms. Suddenly I wanted to deflate her, puncture her confidence. I added: "Wait, I'll take that back. I *have* looked at another girl. Tonight. Just a few minutes ago. A girl I could go for if I had the chance."

"Really? Who?"

"The one you used to room with before we were married. Remember Paula Fenton?"

"That jealous vixen? I ought to remember her. She hates me—always did. You mean she's here at the Palanquin now?"

I nodded. "And damned attractive she's turned out to be."

"Paula? Dowdy, frumpy Paula? You'd compare her to me, Walter?" Flame came close to me, so close that her delicate expensive perfume cloyed my nostrils. "Don't be absurd, darling. And . . . don't be obtuse." Then she put her arms around my neck and pressed herself against me, her bosom resilient on my chest, her body undulant and sinuous.

I STILL wanted to deflate her, hurt her. And knew how. Pretending comes easy when you're dealing with a woman whose entire life is a pretense, a sham. I crushed her close to me, then backed her against the dressing room wall and pinioned her there. My mouth swooped to her parted, waiting lips. I mauled her. I mussed her. I was rough with her . . .

. . . Presently I let her go.

She drawled: "I knew you couldn't resist me, darling."

"Did you?" I said, and reached into my

pocket; pulled out two one-dollar bills. I wadded them into a crumpled ball and flipped them at her. "Thanks for everything, Tutz. Stuff the money in your stocking—or do you keep it in the toe of your shoe?"

She recoiled, and her cheeks went very white. "You—you dirty rat! You'd dare do that to me—"

"So-long, hon. I've got to be going." Once more I made toward the door. "Don't forget to turn in your dope report to the proper authorities."

She flurried at me, seized me. Frustration and disappointment and wounded vanity twisted her face into a mask of hate. "You're going to do your duty if I have to drag you. Drag you, understand, you rotten hunky flatfoot!" She had hold of my arm and wouldn't let go. "You and your sanctimonious gab about hearsay evidence! Okay, I'll show you evidence that isn't hearsay. I'll lay it in your lap!"

"Oho. So you've made a plant in advance, eh? Figure on tieing us into this mess!"

"Plant?" she shrilled. "This is the real thing. Reefers—and bindles of snow. A needle—and what goes in it." Her mouth was as ugly as sin. "You're so smart, I'll let you look at it and feel it and taste it if you want it that way." She tugged at me. "Come on, you damned pious copper!"

"Now just a minute—"

"I said come on!" She was hauling me out of the dressing room and across the hall to another room just like it, except that this one had only a flimsy drape instead of a closed door. Alongside the drape, tacked to the wall, was a small showcard hand-lettered: *Mickey Dolan.* "Yeah, that's right," Flame said through her teeth. "Mickey's room."

"Wait. I won't go in there without a search warrant. I know my rule book."

She whirled to face me, her back to the drape. "Rule book? Do you need a rule book to be a cop? What's the matter, have you gone yello-o-o-oh-h——"

The word's second syllable seemed to stick wetly in her throat, and in sudden transition became a liquid moan. She stiffened, and her eyes widened until the whites showed.

Then she pitched forward into my startled arms.

CHAPTER III

"Death Takes Over"

I CAUGHT her, and she was a limp weight against me. For one irritated instant I thought she was pulling another act, a new form of tantrum, a staged swoon.

Deliberately I started to drop her. What she needed was a lesson. She needed to learn she couldn't get her own way by pretending to faint, any more than by pretending a little while ago that she still cared for me. I was sick of her wiles, fed up with her constant subterfuges. I thought I'd proved that to her when I had backed her against her dressing room wall . . .

Then, as she sagged and collapsed in my ambrace, she rolled a little; and I saw the handle of a knife in her back, protruding between her shoulder-blades. Somebody standing concealed just inside Mickey Dolan's pitch-dark dressing quarters had stabbed her from behind the doorway drape; had plunged the blade all the way to her heart.

I knew instinctively that she was dead.

Murdered.

Human nature is an odd and unpredictable thing. I would have allowed Flame to fall on the hallway's dirty floor if she'd been alive; but now I gently lowered her when she was dead and incapable of feeling pain.

I had a hot raging impulse to lunge past the drapes and come to grips with the unseen killer; but in spite of it I took time out to perform this quixotic service, this final gesture, the last I would ever do for the lovely, icy, selfish girl who once had been my wife. I suppose it was a subconscious symbolism of a love I would never know again.

And through all the clashing chaos of tenderness and numbed shock and churning fury seething within me, I could hear the Mickey Dolan orchestra out on the ball-

"Paula, run!" I yelled as I went flat on my back. I was being pounded to a pulp.

room bandstand blaring some garish and blatant dance tune: a raucous, brassy rigadoon which a remote part of my mind recognized and remembered. Its beat hammered against my ears, crewded my thoughts, intruded on my senses with a sharp cascade of sound, jarring and savage and insistently penetrating.

Fade My Dice And Throw Me Natural, it was called; a thing as crazy as its title. It was juke box jazz, a meaningless jungle-rhythm jump song—a choppy and syncopated piece of patter jive, illiterate and moronic. It was a pulsating, waiting dirge for Flame Shannon, who had died to its barbaric yawp.

I catapulted into Dolan's dressing room.

MY LEAP carried me over the threshold and into thick darkness, but that darkness blinded me no more than my own crazy rage. I didn't even think to draw the

.32 automatic I carried in an armpit holster; I wanted to smash somebody with my fists, to rend and destroy with my two naked hands.

So I didn't see the foot that was stuck out to trip me as I went plunging beyond the drapes.

I lurched, stumbled and went headlong; and as I fell I caught a vague glimpse of a figure wearing a red-and-white-striped blazer. That was the collegiate costume affected by the Mickey Dolan band—all except Dolan himself, who conducted in a tuxedo.

There it was: a flash of red and white stripes against a solid background of blackness. Then my face ploughed into the floor, and as pain ground into me a new and greater pain followed. The person in the blazer kicked me on the side of the head.

It was a glancing kick, not as accurate as it might have been. Still, it did its work. Unconsciousness closed in on me, folded me in a cloak of nothingness.

When I woke up, the dressing room was lighted and I was supine on the floor, surrounded by seven grim-faced men in striped blazers—and one in a tuxedo. That was Mickey Dolan; the others were his musicians.

Dolan had red hair and redder freckles which stood out against the whiteness of his square Irish face like blotches of rust. He was shaking me and growling: "Come on, mister, snap out of it. Come alive and start talking."

I had an odd feeling of detachment, almost of being two separate individuals. One self seemed to be standing apart, listening, watching, taking stock of the scene. My other self was staggering upright and displaying my badge and pulling my gun, herding the whole Dolan organization against the wall, keeping them covered, hearing first what they said and then asking some questions of my own.

It was like some badly directed movie sequences where only the dialogue made much sense. And even the talk seemed condensed, abbreviated until just the major points stood out with any clarity. The band had been playing, but when it came time for Flames's last appearance of the evening she hadn't shown up . . . Dolan had called a five minute break and they'd all come backstage looking for their absent singer . . .

. . . They had found Flame in the corridor, dead . . . They had discovered me just inside Dolan's dressing room, knocked out . . . They had thought maybe I was the murderer . . . Dolan hadn't known that I was a policeman . . . he hadn't recognized me as one of Flame's former husbands . . . he and I had never met before . . .

Then I myself was speaking.

I was telling of Flame's dope accusations; how she had demanded that I search Mickey Dolan's quarters for evidence to substantiate her charges. My detached self saw the orchestra members bridle resentfully at this.

Hop-heads? Us? It's a lousy lie!

THEY were unanimous in their denials. They invited me to help myself; to frisk the room, to frisk all their rooms. From their very willingness, I knew intuitively that I would find nothing incriminating. But then any one of them, or all of them, could have had time to ditch a cache of marijuana or cocaine or morphine or heroin while I'd been unconscious. Frisking the place would mean nothing, now.

Besides, it would require more than one cop to make a thorough search. Moreover, murder called for a tech squad from Homicide—fast.

I knew I needed help. Gun or no gun, if Dolan and his playmates decided to get tough I would be in for a bad time. Eight to one: the odds were much too long. Dreamlike, I willed myself to a wall phone over at my left. I made my report to headquarters.

Nobody tried to stop me.

I felt dizzy. My head hurt hellishly where I'd been kicked. I had a sickness inside me when I thought of Flame lying in the corridor with that knife in her back. I fought to bring my two detached selves together.

I succeeded.

The ache still throbbed through my skull,

and the nausea kept grinding away at my belly, but the scene was in sharper focus now. So were my thoughts.

"The killer wore an orchestra blazer," I said.

Scowls met this, and more muttered denials. The men were looking at one another, then at Mickey Dolan, then darkly at me. It was Dolan who spoke up for all of them.

"You're haywire," he said. "Nobody left the bandstand during that last group of numbers, and I do mean nobody. If you saw some schmoe wearing a blazer—"

"That's what I saw."

"Then it was one of our spares. That one, I imagine." He indicated a candy-striped coat on the floor under a wall hook.

I didn't buy it. It was too pat, too obvious. I said: "We'll check presently. Seven men were supposed to be playing *Fade My Dice And Throw Me Natural.* Among the dancers there will be somebody who noticed one instrument was missing. There'll be people who saw only six men on the platform instead of the seven you're supposed to have."

"You don't know the boobs like we do," Dolan grinned without mirth. "When we play our kind of jive they don't see us at all. A punk and his frail jitterbopping to that dice tune don't see anything. They're too hip. They're too busy cutting a rug. We send them. And they stay out of this world while they're dancing."

MAYBE so, I reflected. I didn't like it, but there was a good possibility that Dolan was right. Several hundred customers, all potential witnesses—and not one of them to say whether or not the full orchestra had been playing at any specified time. Could be, I decided. It would be lousy luck, but could be.

I got another idea.

"Whoever the murderer was, he's a doper—a narcotic addict," I said. "He knew Flame was squealing about addiction in the orchestra, so he shut her up permanently and then kicked me senseless so he would have time to get rid of the evidence."

Dolan sneered: "Nuts."

"All right, nuts. Just the same, line up. Every damned one of you."

"What the hell for?"

"I'm going to look at your eyes," I said.

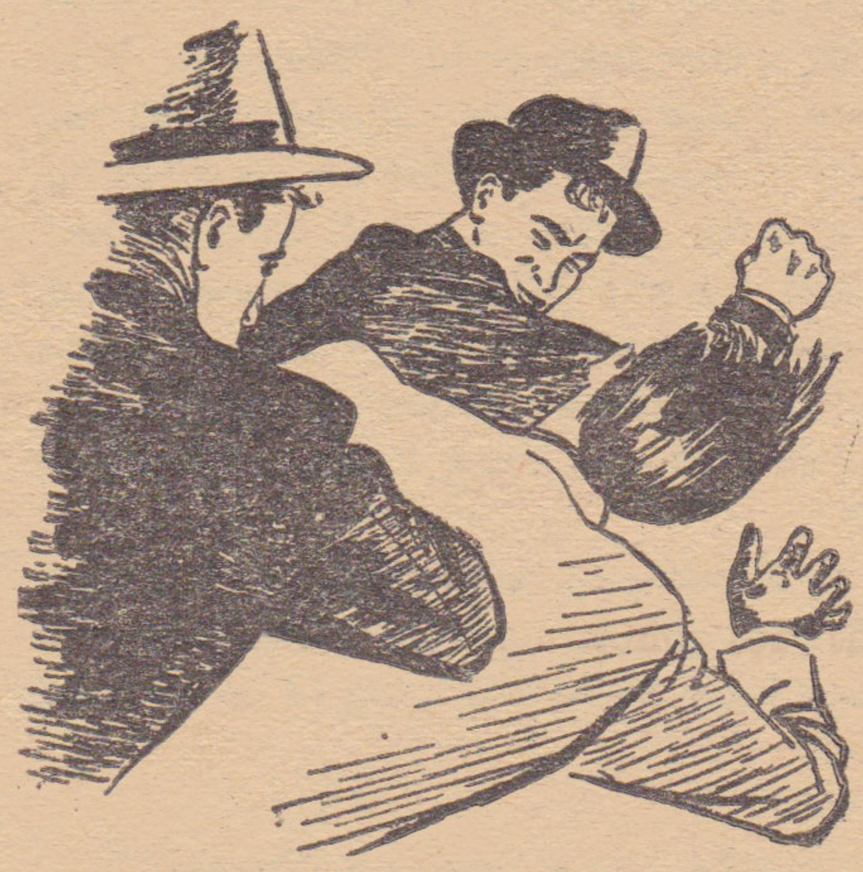
They lined up. They grumbled, but my gun gave me authority and they obeyed. I started examining one man after another.

Dolan first, of course.

Dolan's eyes were a little reddened, but the pupils were neither dilated nor contracted.

I sniffed and moved on along the line.

Bright eyes. Dull eyes. Smoke-inflamed eyes. But no telltale pinpoint pupils. No pupils dilated to full iris-periphery—



Dolan came at me and I smashed him hard in the mouth.

Until I came to the sixth man.

"Your name?" I said. My voice was sharp, harsh.

The musician was small, wiry, swarthy, and he kept his brown eyes narrowed so you couldn't see much of them except a thin slit of muddy glitter.

He growled: "Riggio. Second trumpet. And listen, slewfoot, if you think you can hang a frame on me—"

"Shut up," I drew a deep breath. "And never mind squinting. I don't care about your eyes. It's the way you smell."

"Hunh?"

I sniffed again, sensing the faintly resinous odor that clung to the man's clothes and hair and skin; an odor reminiscent of fresh shoe-polish.

"Reefers," I said. "Tea. You smoke the weed."

Alongside this swarthy, malodorous Riggio, the seventh and last musician in line burst out: "So he drags a little puff now and then. So what?"

"Quiet, you," I said.

He was an elongated man with bright yellow hair and thin sunken cheeks. "I'll talk if I wanna. It's a free country. I'm Joe Sullivan, see? I give you that for nothing; it's on the house. I play piano, and Riggio's chair is right next to me on the platform. I'd know if he was gone from the stand—and he wasn't."

"That's according to your tell."

"I'm telling it level. So don't go trying to stick a bum beef on him, wise guy. Who do you think you are, Sherlock Holmes, maybe? Detecting a murderer by smelling the suspects. That's a bunch of malarky."

"Yeah, lay off," Mickey Dolan chimed in, and stepped forward out of line. "You're not so damn' clean yourself, copper."

I stared at the band leader. "Meaning what?"

"You admit you were alone with Flame when she got it." Anger reddened his freckled face. "And you used to be married to her."

"So?"

"So maybe you slipped her the shiv."

I hit him solidly on the mouth, knocked him down, stood over him and watched his lips puff and bleed. "Nobody calls me a killer and gets away with it," I said. "Nobody."

I was wrong about that, although I didn't find it out until some time later. Meanwhile something happened that drove Dolan's accusation out of my thoughts.

A woman screamed.

CHAPTER IV

"The Woman Angle"

IT WAS a faint scream; really more of a stricken wail horrified and freighted with unutterable shock. It came from the hallway just outside Dolan's dressing room, and Sullivan, the skinny piano player, leaped for the draped doorway like a shot out of a cannon. An instant later he came back, dragging a struggling girl with him—a dainty brown-haired girl in a filmy blue evening gown.

She was Paula Fenton.

If her costume had been fashioned for an off-the shoulders effect to start with it was more so, now. Sullivan's fingers grabbing at her had torn the material until you could see her gossamer brassiere as sheer and revealing as spun sugar-fluff. Her hazel eyes were wide with panic, her face very pale. She kept fighting to free herself from her captor but small good it did her. He yanked her over to me, his expression grim.

"Okay copper," he said. "Now you got another suspect. Let's hear you ask this doll what she was doing backstage where the customers aren't supposed to come. Find out what she was doing leaning over Flame's body and yeeping."

He pushed her toward me then and she she almost stumbled over Mickey Dolan, who was still laid out on the floor where I'd knocked him down. I reached forward, caught her and steadied her. "Easy does it Paula," I said.

"Oh-h-h, Bunny . . . !" she whimpered. And I sensed the uplifted eyebrows, the quick glances that the band members exchanged among themselves. You could guess what they were thinking: *Oh-oh, this cop's name is Bunczek and the girl calls him Bunny; he calls her Paula. They know each other. What gives here?*

I took my supporting hands away from her arms. "I'm afraid I must ask you to explain a few things," I told her gravely.

"Wh-what is there to explain? I—I saw Flame lying there with a knife in her b-back—"

"Yes but why did you come behind the bandstand?"

"Because the m-music had stopped, and there was no more dancing just then and I thought I'd drop in on Flame for a minute —for old t-time's sake. After all, we were third or fourth cousins and we used to room together and—"

I shook my head. "Better stick to the truth, Paula. This is a murder case. And

SUPER DET—1

I don't think there was much fondness lost between you and Flame. In fact, I mentioned your name to her a few minutes before she was killed—and she said something about you hating her. How about that?"

"Well we—we didn't get along too well. She was pretty overbearing at times; you know that. I didn't hate her, though. That's not true."

"And yet even though and she didn't get along, you claim you wanted to drop in and see her for old time's sake."

"All right, Bunny if you insist on embarrassing me," she said and blushed painfully. "I was looking for *you*."

"What?"

"You'd asked me to have a drink and something to eat with you, remember?"

"Yes, and you refused."

"Because I was w-with somebody. I—well, I got rid of him by pretending I had a headache and wanted to go home. Alone. Instead, I came back here to t-tell you I'd reconsidered."

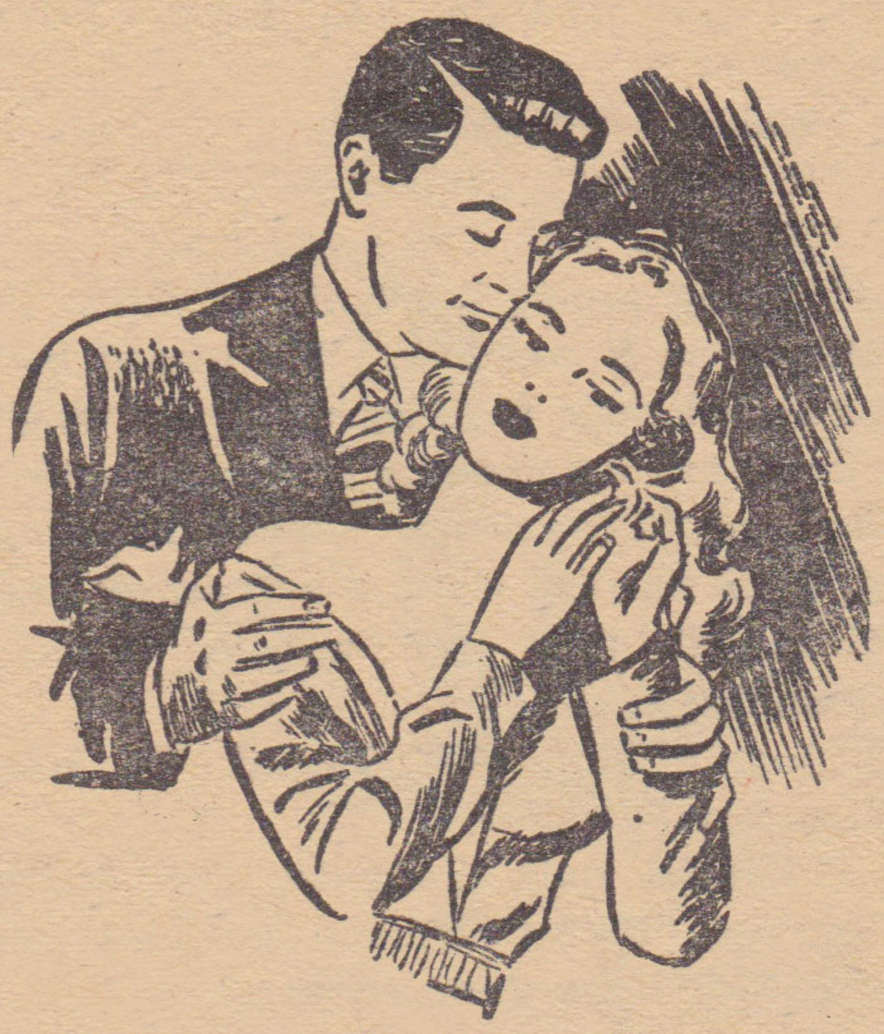
"I'm flattered," I said. "Or was it merely that you wanted the satisfaction of taking me away from Flame?"

She loooked at me, levelly. "That's nasty of you, Bunny. I really th-thought it would be fun to go out with you. I guess I was mistaken."

"Sorry, Paula," I made a quick apology. "A cop has a suspicious nature by training and inclination. I didn't mean to be rude. And there's no use for you to hang around here in all this unpleasantness. You may go—and I'll get in touch with you later."

The members of the Dolan orchestra didn't like that too much; neither did Mickey himself. He lurched to his feet, started protesting. I silenced him harshly; waved Paula Fenton out of the room. Maybe that was the wrong thing to do. But it wasn't the first blunder I'd made in the past hour, and it wouldn't be the last. I found that out the hard way.

Later, when the tech squad had come and gone and the morgue attendants had done what had to be done and the patrons of the Palanquin Ballrooom had all been questioned and released, I found myself



Flame came close to me and her expensive perfume filled my nostrils.

summoned to Dan O'Rourke's office down at central headquarters—Captain Daniel X. O'Rourke, acting head oof Homicide. He had a puckery look on his face, as if he had bitten into something unexpectedly sour.

FOR A moment he didn't glance up at me; he just kept thumbing through a sheaf of reports on his desk, some of them typed, some handwritten. He scanned them and re-scanned them, making occasional pencil notations. Then presently:

"This Flame Shannon kill, Walt."

"Yes, sir?" I said.

"You're sure you've told all you have to tell?"

"Sure I'm sure. That's my report you're looking at now."

"I know it is. I'm asking you if it's complete."

I made a puzzled gesture. "Of course it's complete. Why?"

"I've got a funny preliminary sheet from Fingerprints."

"Funny?"

"The handle of that death knife was pretty clean, as though it had been wiped. Clean, that is, except for one smudged dab."

I waited.

O'Rourke drummed his desk with thick hairy fingers. "They lifted that one dab and blew it up and made comparisons

the regular routine, you know. Photo-microscropy.

"Well?"

"It could be your print, Walt."

"Mine?" I said. "Are you crazy?"

"I'm not saying it actually is yours. I'm telling you it could be." He leaned back, his swivel chair creaking under his weight, a frown making trenches across his leathery forehead. "They weren't able to lift enough of it to warrant making a positive statement; all they got was a trace, a resemblance."

"Just a hint, eh?" I said. "A lying, lousy hint."

O'Rourke quit drumming the scarred desk-top. "Flame Shannon had been your wife, Walt. She divorced you."

"So what?"

"You could have hated her for that. Then she called you, gave you the narcotics story . . . and you suspected she was trying to sabotage Mickey Dolan's band so she could grab a better berth."

"It was fairly obvious," I said.

"To you, yes, because you knew the kind of womas she was. Maybe you felt sorry for Dolan; for all the guys Flame had loused up in the past, and for all the guys she would louse up in the future if you let her go on living. And so—"

"And so you think I stabbed her," I said. I added: "I knocked Dolan cold for hinting the same thing."

"Now wait, Walt. No use getting hostile."

I balled my fists. "Am I supposed to stand still and take it? Like a yellow cur dog?"

"Calm down, Walt."

"Don't worry, sir," I emphasized the sir. "I'm not going to hit you." Then I dug into my coat pocket, brought out the little leather folder which held my identification card and my shield. 'I'm turning in my tin. Maybe you won't feel so bad about throwing me in a cell if I'm no longer a member of the force.' I tossed the folder on his desk and followed it with my gun. "You happy now?"

O'Rourke was red from jowls to bald scalp. "You fool, I told you I wasn't actually accusing you. I simply asked you if you wanted to add anything to your official report."

"I do not. Why should I?"

"Well, for one thing—"

"I say that swarthy little guy, Riggio, is your man," I broke across his words. "Dolan's second trumpet player. He stinks of marijuana. Which makes it look as if Flame told me the truth, after all."

"Everyone in the band swears Riggio wasn't off the stage. How are you going to break down that alibi?"

"Naturally they'd perjure themselves for him when they all realize he killed Flame to keep her from wrecking the outfit."

O'Rourke sucked at a back tooth. "We've questioned every damn' person on the dance floor and none of them noticed anybody missing from the bandstand."

"Dolan boasted it would be like that. Customers don't see anything when they're jitterbugging. As for the fingerprints on the knife, hell! After Riggio kicked me unconscious he could have wiped the handle and then touched it with my hand."

"That I might buy, ordinarily. But—"

"But what?"

"Look, Walt. You claim your report is complete. But Dolan and his musicians have all made formal statements, and every man Jack of them mentioned something that happened—something you haven't put down in your report. There was a girl, Walt. A girl you called Paula. a girl who called you Bunny. She came backstage and screamed when she saw Flame's body, and you said something about her hating Flame. Which she denied. Just the same there's an angle in it; and yet you let her go and didn't include anything about her when you turned in your write-up."

"Because I didn't think it was necessary," I defended myself. "Paula's no killer. She wouldn't—"

"Paula what, Walt? What's her last name?"

"I'd rather not say. You'd only bring her down here and grill her and make it tough for her."

"Stubbornness won't get you anywhere," O'Rourke said patiently. "There was some mention that she was a distant cousin of

the Shannon woman; we can check back and locate her that way if we've got to."

"That's up too you," I said. "But you'll be barking up a wrong tree; wasting your time."

"Why are you trying to front for her, Walt?"

I CONSIDERED before answering. Frankly, I wasn't exactly sure of my motives ; somehow I seemed a little mixed up in my mind. Bye and bye I said: "I'm not fronting for her, I'm only trying to protect her from unnecessary trouble. She's less of a suspect than I am, and I know damn' well I'm innocent."

"I know damn' well you're obstinate," O'Rourke said. "Insubordinate, too. But give me this Paula's name and we'll forget that."

"No."

His voice got brittle. "I'm warning you, Bunczeck—"

"Wait. Let me talk a minute. If I thought Paula had anything to do with Flame's murder I'd give her to you. I'd bring her here personally and help you sweat her. With a rubber hose if we needed to. Don't you think I want to nail the killer? Good God, Flame was my wife . . . once. There was a time when I loved her. And Riggio murdered her. He'll swing for it. I'll see to that."

"You're wrong, there."

"Wrong about what? About Riggio's guilt?"

O'Rourke shook his head. "That remains to be seen. No, what I meant to say is, you're not going to work on the case."

"You can't do this to me, O'Rourke. You can't."

"I can and I will. I could even hold you on suspicion, either of homicide or of accessory to homicide because you insist upon shielding this Paula girl. I won't go that far, Bunczeck. But I'm temporarily relieving you of duty. I've got to, for the sake of appearances. That smudged fingerprint, and your incomplete statement, your insubordination—hell man, you give me no other course. I've got my own job to consider."

"This particular job is already done!" I said. "You're holding Riggio; all you have to do is get a confession out of him. You're holding Dolan and the rest of the band; all you have to do is make them admit Riggio left the stage at the time of the murder. That yellow-haired piano player, Sullivan, the one who stuck his mouth into it when I first accused Riggio—work on him. He's loud; he's the kind that likes to bluster. That type always softens up when the pressure goes on. All right, squeeze him. Squeeze all of them. Let me do it. Give them to me one at a time in the goldfish room; I'll break them down for you."

I shook her savagely. "You little fool, be quiet!"

"No. You're under temporary suspension, I told you." O'Rourke exhaled heavily. "Besides, strongarm stuff is out. That's orders from the high brass. Which means we probably won't be holding the Dolan orchestra very long."

I stared at him. "Why not?"

"Insufficient evidence. They'll have a smart shyster down here tomorrow morning with a writ, and—"

I LEANED over the desk. "Insufficient evidence! And you won't even let me beat the truth out of those heels!" Then, in desperation, I said: "Keep me on the assignment, O'Rourke. Give me twenty-four hours. Or even twelve hours—with a free

hand. I'll get you the evidence you need. I'll crack it wide open for you." It was an empty boast, a stratagem.

And it backfired.

"You've got an angle?" O'Rourke asked me.

"Yes," I lied.

"Tell it to me. I'll have it handled."

I couldn't tell him my angle—because I had none. All I had was an intense, savage desire to get the deadwood on the swarthy trumpet player, Riggio; to see that he paid for killing Flame Shannon.

"Sorry, O'Rourke," I said. "I'm not talking."

He reached across the desk, picked up my badge and gun, opened a drawer and swept them into it. "All right. You're not merely suspended from duty. You're fired. I'll make it legal by bringing charges before the Police Trial Board tomorrow. But pending an official discharge you're through." He stood up, impersonal and correct and expressionless. "You may go."

"Listen—"

"Beat it, Bunczek. You're lucky I'm not placing you under arrest. Go on, get out. Before I change my mind."

CHAPTER V

"On The Scent"

IN THE dark musty corridor outside O'Rourke's office, without my shield and gun, I reflected that now I knew how an unfrocked clergyman must feel. Humiliated; shorn of authority, stripped of everything I'd built my life around.

And suddenly there was a gnawing ache in me, a hollowness, a sense of loss, poignant and ineffably sad. It wasn't the badge I had handed in that caused this dull hurt inside me; it was knowing that Flame was dead.

Sure, I'd already lost her two years ago; but even though she had divorced me at least I'd known she was alive. In those two lonely years I had built up a protective shell, a nacre around my heart; I'd taken pains to drill myself into thinking she didn't matter to me. I realized now, though, that it had been an ineffective auto-hypnosis. Away in the deep dim recesses of my subconscious mind, so long as Flame lived, I'd entertained some remote dream of one day winning her back; I must have, for otherwise why would her death affect me this way?

It made no difference that I'd known her for what she was: a selfish, greedy woman, callous to everything but her own wants and ambitions. In spite of all that, she'd been beautiful. Her body had been soft and enticing and gloriously feminine. And, for a little while, she had been mine. Even tonight she had belonged to me . . . briefly.

But no more.

She would never again belong to any man; her song was stilled and her lips had no more kisses to bestow. They were cold, now; as cold as her heart had always been.

I thought of those last few minutes in her dressing room: the whiteness of her skin, the fullness of her bosom, the tapered symmetry of her legs and the seductive slimness of her pliant waist. I had crushed her in my arms . . . and later I had laughed at her, deliberately hurting her pride. I'd wanted to be cruel; and because of it, she had died.

In a sense, I had killed her.

She'd asked me to find illicit narcotis in Mickey Dolan's room. Had I played along with her I would have gone into Dolan's dressing quarters—and I'd have been the target for the swarthy Riggio's murder knife. Flame would have had a chance to escape—and she would be alive now. Maybe I'd have been killed by the trumpet player's stabbing thrust; but at least I would have died with the calculated passion of Flame's kisses on my remembering lips. And even calculated passion is better than none at all, I told myself. . .

I TURNED, headed back toward O'Rourke's office. I wanted to make my peace with O'Rourke; to admit I'd been bluffing when I'd said I knew a way to crack the case wide open. Maybe if I came clean with him he would rescind my suspension, my discharge. Maybe he would give me back my badge and gun, re-assign

me to the murder investigation, let me put the heat to Riggio. I was sick with desire to convict that swarthy little muggles-smoker, that stinking hop-head. I wanted to send him to the gallows, even if I had to manufacture evidence; even if I had to rig a frame. You can't always go by the rule book when you're trying to destroy a rat.

I reached O'Rourke's door—and stopped there.

It was ajar, and from inside the room his voice rumbled clearly as he spoke into an intercommunicator system. "Yes. Walter Bunczek. He'll be leaving the building about now. Put two men on him. Tail him. Don't lose him. He's deeper in the Flame Shannon murder than he lets on to be. And he's fronting for a dame named Paula something-or-other. Stay on him and maybe he'll lead us straight to her. Get going."

Momentarily stunned, I stood there in shocked silence. Then I felt resentment welling through me, and a bitter sense of injustice. So I was to be shadowed like a common criminal. I was free only because O'Rourke hoped I would bird-dog Paula Fenton for him. He wasn't content with having the real murderer in custody; he wanted Paula too, so he could run her through the wringer. Very likely I would get the same treatment myself, sooner or later.

All because Dolan and his musicians were banded together in a mutual protective alliance, each man furnishing an alibi for the others, all of them putting up a united front to protect the marijuana-soaked Riggio. The trumpet player was guilty as hell, but O'Rourke couldn't prove it. Therefore O'Rourke had to find another fall guy—and Pula was elected.

Or, if not Paula, then me.

"No, by God!" I whispered, and strode down the bleak hallway toward the rear exit. They'd be looking for me at the front; if I hurried I might make it out the back way before they thought to cover it. But I didn't have much time.

I had less when I slipped around a right-angle turn and bumped into George Vardaman.

Vardaman didn't look much like a dignified music professor now. His gray hair was uncombed, his elderly face haggard and sallow, his eyes lusterless, deep-sunken, watery. There was no spring in his walk, no lift to his ordinarily erect shoulders. He had aged ten years since I'd last seen him, a little more than an hour ago. Grief can do that to you.

"Walt Bunczek!" he said. "The very man I was looking for!" He fastened a trembling hand on my arm. "I—I heard a news broadcast—about Flame, and I thought maybe—that is, I wondered if I might—get permission to go into the morgue and —and see her?"

I WAS sorry for him; I knew how he felt, knew the sadness that was in his heart because the girl he loved was dead. But I had no time for sympathy, and I mentally damned the bad luck that brought him across my path now.

"You'll have to ask Captain O'Rourke," I said. I pointed the way. "But Vardaman, I wish you'd do me a favor."

"Anything, Walt."

"Don't mention you met me here."

"I—I don't understand."

"And I haven't got time to explain. Just don't say anything to O'Rourke about seeing me. Promise?"

"Of course, Walt."

I darted off, then; scuttled out of headquarters into the rear alley. It was black, unguarded, and I stole toward the next street over; peered out stealthily and saw that I was in the clear. I had shaken my shadows before they'd even started to tail me.

It was safe for me to call on Paula Fenton.

I found her address in a drugstore's city directory and presently I was tapping on the door of her modest apartment. She looked startled when she let me in. "Bunny—!" she said unsteadily, a hint of dismay in her voice.

All right, so she wasn't glad to see me. After the way I had talked to her at the Palanquin Ballroom, I didn't blame her much. But I'd been a cop, then; a cop with a murder on my hands. Now I was just a private citizen—and under suspicion.

I said: "Don't worry, Paula, I'm not here to arrest you. I've come to warn you." Then I told her everything. All of it. While I talked I kept looking at the highlights in her chestnut hair, the generous fullness of her mouth, the daintiness of her figure. She had exchanged her filmy blue evening gown for a long pink-and-yellow house coat that zippered from hem to throat and snugged temptingly to her slim waist, and I couldn't help comparing her clean wholesome appearance with the theatrical and artificial perfection that had been Flame Shannon. It was a crazy time for such thoughts to be drifting around in the back of my head, but there they were. I couldn't repress them. I didn't try.

When I finished, Paula came close to me; took my hands, pressed them. "Bunny, you mean you actually let yourself get kicked off the police force because you refused to give my name? You did that f-for me to keep me out of trouble?"

"I shielded you, yes," I said. "But that wasn't what got me fired. It was the fingerprint on the murder knife, a print that might have been mine. That's one more debt I owe Riggio, another reason why I've got to get the goods on him. He killed Flame—and I'm going to see that the stinking little hop-head swings for it."

"For revenge, Bunny?"

"And to clear myself," I said. "And you."

"But if you're no longer a policeman—"

"The hell with being a policeman. On the force we have a habit of looking down our noses at private detectives. But a private man has his uses; I can see that, now. I'm just a citizen from here on in; a citizen with no badge, no authority. O'Rourke took those away from me—but he can't take away my training. I'm as good a dick now as I was two hours ago when I had a shield and a gun." I smiled unmirthfully. "Walter Bunczek, private eye. Bunczek the lone wolf investigator. Temporarily, anyhow. Until Riggio's neck gets stretched in a length of hemp."

PAULA GOT a decanter and two glasses, poured drinks, sat down on a divan and gestured me alongside her. She handed me one of the glasses and raised her own, toast-fashion. "To success."

"To death for the rat who killed Flame," I amended, and drank. It probably sounded melodramatic, but I meant every word.

Paula said gently: "You loved Flame very much, didn't you, Bunny? You never quite got over loving her. You never will."

"She was poison. And poison is hard to cure, once it gets in a man's blood."

"I wish I had the antidote for you," her voice was soft. "You're a sweet guy, Bunny. You don't deserve unhappiness. I wish I could do something to help you."

"You can."

She looked at me out of the corners of her eyes. "Yes, Bunny?"

"Blow town for a while. Stay out of sight. Keep away from the cops."

Her lower lip quivered. "Is that . . . all?"

"What do you mean, is that all? Hey, you're crying!" I saw the tears come, saw them spilling down her cheeks, and I put my arms around her; cuddled her and tried to comfort her. Suddenly she was fused against me, flattening on my chest, her sobs gusty and hot to my face. "What is it, Paula?" I said. "What's the matter?" Then I kissed her.

I got more than I bargained for. Her mouth fastened to mine and stayed there, working. Her body trembled, and little whimpers were in her throat. Then abruptly, she pushed me away. "Don't, Bunny. I . . . can't stand it."

"Now wait a minute. "I wasn't trying to—"

She grinned crookedly. "I know you weren't. That's just it. I don't mean anything to you . . . that way. I never did.

"I used to sit in a corner when you came calling on Flame, courting her. I was somebody you just said hello to and didn't even see. I was the country cousin envying Flame because she'd hooked someone clean and fine, a man she didn't deserve. I was jealous. I hated her. You never realized how I felt—but *she* did. I could have killed her."

"Paula!" I said again.

"She used to mock me, taunt me. She

used to laugh at me because I was in love with you—and because I didn't stand a chance. She'd make cutting remarks about my dowdy clothes, my frumpy hair-do. At night, after she had been out with you she'd come home and tell me about the passes you made. The soul-kisses she gave you. The way she would get you all worked up and then leave you suffering. Then she would—"

"Paula, stop it!"

BUT THERE was no stopping her. "—She would tell me I was too stupid to get a man. She'd look at me and say I had a nice enough b-body, but I didn't know how to use it. She said I was like a—a tinkly melody with no orchestration. I had legs and hips and—and—but no savvy. I was a band with some of the instruments not playing. My music was all wrong; I didn't know the score. You think I'm sorry she's dead, Bunny? I'm glad! Glad, you hear me? I want to dance and sing and shout because she's not alive any more. I could have cut her heart out—"

"Damn you, Paula, shut up!" I said, and grabbed her; put a palm over her mouth. I shook her savagely. "You little fool, be quiet. You've said enough."

She grew quiet, and she pulled away from me. "So now you know, Bunny. You know how I feel toward you. And how I felt toward your beautiful Flame."

"I know more than that," I said.

"Meaning you think I k-killed her? Because I've admitted that I hated her? Because I said I wanted to cut her heart out, y-you think I actually did?"

"No. There was something else you said; something that gives me an idea. If it works, I can prove Riggio was off the bandstand at the time of the stabbing."

CHAPTER VI

"One Against The Gang"

IT WAS half past one in the morning when I reached the Palanquin Ballroom. The big building was closed, its main doors locked, the marquee electric sign switched off and the ticket office dark, shuttered.

But the side entrance for staff members and employees stood ajar, and two or three raw incandescents burned inside. Porters were sweeping up the place, cleaning away the nightly clutter of confetti and empty cigarette packs, burned-out- butts, paper cups and charred matches. A phone booth was just inside the doorway. I slipped into it, unnoticed.

First I called Radio Station KKXX and made sure of my premise. Then I riffled the pages of the phone book to the V's and located the listing for Vardaman, George. I dropped another nickel in the slot and dialed the music professor's number.

It took him a long while to answer. Then his tired, quavering voice came over the wire. "Hello?"

"Walter Bunczek," I said.

He sounded startled. "Walter! I heard down at headquarters—"

"I can guess what you heard. I'm under suspicion."

"Yes. When I talked to Captain O'Rourke and asked his permission to see Flame's body, he questioned me pretty sharply about you. I didn't tell him I'd seen you sneaking out the back way, Walter. I respected your confidence."

I said: "Thanks. At least that proves you don't believe I had anything to do with the kill. And you're right I didn't. Riggio murdered her; the guy who plays second trumpet in the Dolan band. Moreover, I intend to prove it—with your help."

"My help? How? And—and—I don't understand, Walter. How can you be working on the case if you're no longer a member of the police department?"

"I'm a private snoop now. Unofficially, of course, but that's what it amounts to. And I'll need your musical ear to help me put Riggio's neck in the noose." Then, crisply and tersely, I detailed the plan I had in mind.

Vardaman took a long minute to digest it. Then, "Y-yes, Walter," he said shakily. "I think I can do it. I'm pretty certain I can."

"Good. I'll call you presently from the radio studio." I rang off, came out of the phone booth and headed for the bandstand.

I knew exactly what to look for, knew how to find what I needed to start me on the final mile.

Then I saw the men on the unlighted stage.

They were men in street clothes now, where earlier they'd worn red-and-white-striped collegiate blazers: the men of the Mickey Dolan orchestra, packing their instruments, buttoning up for the night. Dolan himself was with them. And Riggio.

SO CAPTAIN O'Rourke had called the turn, down at headquarters, when he'd said the Dolan crew would be free on writs of habeas corpus by morning. He just hadn't guessed what time in the morning. It had happened a little earlier than he expected—but it had happened.

The lanky, hollow-cheeked piano player with the yellow hair, Sullivan, spotted me.

"Hey, look who's with us!" he called. "The slewfoot!" He jumped down from the bandstand. "The fly cop himself!"

Dolan and the others jumped down, too. Including Riggio. They closed in on me.

Gunless, I had no way to drive them back; badgeless, no authority to threaten them with arrest. I was only a civilian now, probing where I didn't belong, snooping where I had no right to snoop. Anything that happened to me, I deserved. This was what I got for sticking my neck out.

They seemed to know I was no longer a cop; they'd heard it at headquarters, probably, at the time of their release from custody. News travels fast along the grapevine; and because they knew it, they weren't afraid to tackle me.

I stood my ground. "All right, you lice. Come on, make your play. One at a time or all together, I'm set for you." I crouched, waiting.

"Let me take him," Riggio said. His swarthy face was vengeful, his cheeks twitching, his shoulders jerky. "He tried to fasten a frame on me. I want him. He's mine."

He smelled more strongly than ever of shoe-polish; his jumpiness told me he'd been at the marijuana again—recently. It would be the last he'd ever smoke, I promised myself. I remembered all the judo I'd been taught in police training, and in the Marines before that. I remembered how you snapped an enemy's neck with a certain hold, a certain blow. Okay; if I couldn't send Riggio to the gallows I would execute him personally, and damn the consequences. "Come die, rat," I said.

Mickey Dolan shoved him aside. The band leader's freckles were vivid rust against a complexion unnaturally white with hate. "You get him next—if I leave anything of him," he snarled. "He killed Flame and tried to hide behind his cop tin. I get first crack at him." He spat and bunched his chunky muscles and lowered his head and charged at me, fists flailing. "This is it, shamus. Now I pay you."

I sidestepped and clipped him over the ear.

He swore and staggered. Then he righted himself and launched a roundhouse haymaker that landed on my biceps and numbed the entire arm, almost paralyzed it. I gave way. I had to.

DOLAN came at me when he saw me retreating. I spotted an opening for my left and I struck fast, hard. I smashed his mouth, exactly where I'd hit him earlier tonight in the dressing room when he had first accused me of murder. His lips, already bruised and swollen, ballooned like sponges and sprayed crimson. Something small and white flew across the floor: a front tooth. Dolan sobbed another oath and came in close.

He rammed his knee in my groin.

Sickened, I doubled over. Dolan rabbit-punched me, drove me down on all fours. Then a sort of mob frenzy seized his musicians. I was their common enemy and I was helpless. They were like a pack of animals scenting blood; in a unison of fury they surged at me.

I could expect no help from the two or three porters who had been cleaning up the ballroom; they'd dropped their brooms and mops, scuttled outdoors when the brawl started. I could expect no help from anybody. The toe of a pointed shoe impacted against my spine. Somebody else kicked

me in the ribs, driving the breath out of my lungs in an explosive burst of pain. I grabbed blindly for an ankle, got it, yanked it and brought the lanky blond piano player, Sullivan, crashing thunderously to the floor. He twisted as he fell, and I kept my hold on his ankle. Something snapped. A bone makes a nasty sound when it breaks.

Sullivan screamed.

Someone else screamed, too. A woman.

I caught a glimpse of her when I battled my way clear of the band members who crushed me down. She was Paula Fenton.

Riggio yelled: "It's that dame he turned loose. Get her!"

"Paula, run!" I shouted. I squirmed at the swarthy man, nailed him around the legs. Dolan jumped on my back and I went flat again. I was being trampled, not only by Dolan but by several others. I didn't see Paula race out of the ballroom; I couldn't see anything. I was buried; I was being pounded to a pulp.

A whistle shrilled and a voice roared: "Break it up! Break it up before I start blasting!" Then, suddenly, the orchestra men were backing away, confused, uncertain, cowed by the menace of a .32 Police Positive in the horny fist of a uniformed patrolman—a beat copper that Paula had found and brought back with her. I saw him, recognized him. Hirsch, his name was. Sammy Hirsch, big as a horse and gentle as a collie until the chips were down. Then he was a hellion.

Paula flurried over to me. "Bunny—Bunny——you're hurt—you're bleeding—oh-h-h, Bunny—!"

"You shouldn't have followed me," I said. Then I looked up at Sammy Hirsch. "Nice timing, chum. If you'd come a minute later you'd be scraping me up with a shovel."

"Walt Bunczek!"

THAT was Dolan's cue to speak up. "Yeah, officer, it's Bunczek all right. I understand there's a reader out for him. And for the dame here," he indicated Paula.

"Hunh?" Hirsch looked at me. "Is that right, Walt?"

"Afraid so, Sammy."

He frowned. "These guys that were mauling you—"

"I want them pinched," I said. "I want them taken down, booked on charges of felonious assault. That should hold them until I've finished what I started out to do."

Riggio yelled: "Finish hell, you louse! You'll do your doing in jail! Me and the boys will see to that."

"I don't know about the jail part, Walt," Hirsch said dubiously. "You look more like you needed an ambulance and a bed in the hospital. You—"

"Skip that," I said, and stood up; tried to keep from swaying on my feet. "I'm tough. I'm hard to destroy. Especially when I'm closing in on a killer."

Mickey Dolan said: "Now just a minute, wise guy. I—"

"Shut up," I said. Then I spoke to Hirsch in a low voice, explaining my plan, giv- him the details—and putting myself at his mercy. I finished with: "You can take me in if you want to, Sammy. But you'll be robbing me of my one chance to clear myself, to clear Paula—and to convict the one who's really guilty. It's up to you. I have no authority to give you orders; I'm not a detective sergeant any more, I'm just a private nobody. What do you say?"

He hesitated. "I dunno, Walt. I'd be risking my own badge. And me less than a year away from retirement on pension." Presently he grinned. "Ah, hell, who wants a pension? Here, take my roscoe and cover these guys while I go call the wagon."

"Thanks, Sammy," I said, and accepted the gun.

"Yeah. You won't have much time to question them, though, so make it snappy." Then, as he strode away, he winked outrageously at Paula. "I'm doing this for you, little lady, on account you're so pretty and cute. Buncez is a lucky guy."

I wasn't so sure of that, but I let it ride; inspected Dolan and his men. I said: "Well, this saves me the bother of pawing through your orchestrations and arrangement sheets. You, Riggio, you're second trumpet, right?"

"Go to hell."

(*Continued on page* 114)

The Dead and the Damned

By ROBERT TURNER

A HOUSE party at the Heenan estate out on The Island, was a three ring circus. Without elephants, of course, or clowns. There were some fat and clumsy guests but none of them actually elephantine. There were some funny fellows, too minus the bizarre makeup and gaudy costumes of real clowns.

Sometimes they even had aerial acts. Like the occasion when a Hollywood starlet who had imbibed too many glasses of grade A milk, tried a tight wire walk across

"Stay on the floor and don't move!" Cass shouted to Kitty.

Illustrated by
Newt Alfred

a telephone cable. Fortunately, for the cheesecake lovers of America, she fell into the swimming pool and was unhurt.

Almost anything could happen at one of the notorious Heenan house parties—and often did. Kitty Heenan, blonde and beautiful, ran a party the same way she ran her highly successful nightspot, the Club Screwball. Only the unwise and unwary went to the Club unless they happened to be endowed with a strong stomach and cast iron nerves. Those that could take it had a wonderful time.

This brawl that Kitty was throwing in honor of the eighteenth birthday of her daughter, Julie, was no exception. By midnight, cases of bourbon and Scotch had been consumed. Kitty knew that things were going well when she saw a man in summer evening clothes, fat and bankerish looking,

chasing a redheaded chorus girl around the lily pond pool in the center of the garden.

Suddenly, in desperation, the girl turned and dove into the pool, spangled black evening gown and all. The man lurched for her, missed, and he, too, toppled into the lily-fragrant water. He came up, spouting water like a porpoise. The redhead ducked him and then climbed out of the pool. The wet sheath of gown clung to her as she walked off with all the dignity she could muster.

Kitty Heenan ignored this episode. She was used to that sort of thing. She expected folks to let their hair down and have fun at her parties. In any event, she had something else on her mind. She had to find her daughter, Julie.

Kitty was not a stickler for conventions but she thought it would be nice if Julie at least put in an appearance for the surprise main feature of the party. Julie had disappeared a couple of hours ago and knowing her darling daughter's capacity for getting into trouble, Kitty was worried.

To the left of the lily pond pool, on a broad, green meadow, a platform was set up with benches in rows ten deep all around it. The platform was covered with tarpaulin. One of the plug-ugly gate guards that Kitty Heenan hired to keep newspapermen and other undesirables away from the grounds when she threw these spectacular shindigs, stood watch over it.

The whole field was bathed in the glow of flood lights, expertly wired up into trees. Couples here and there, stood looking the scene over, trying to figure what kind of special entertainment Kitty Heenan had cooked up for them this time.

The last stunt, a cock fight, had been an idea of Kitty's daughter, Julie. It had shocked and entertained the guests, no end. The time before that, Julie had featured a rough and bloody battle-royal in which five broken down prize fighters were dumped into a small ring, ordered to start fighting at a given signal, with a prize of one hundred dollars to go to the last man left standing.

It bothered Kitty Heenan that her daughter showed these slightly depraved tendencies. She had had a lot of trouble with Julie, a spoiled and pampered brat who had been kicked out of the best young ladies' schools in the country.

KITTY made a complete tour of the grounds. Several people had seen her daughter. She had been with a handsome, flashily dressed, dark young stranger. But nobody seemed to know where they had gone.

Finally, Kitty gave up the search and returned to the meadow where the big event of the party was to take place. A voice boomed over the loud speaker system that covered the estate, announcing:

"Your attention, please! Miss Kitty Heenan cordially invites you all to attend the special sporting event to be put on for entertainment, under floodlights in the meadow, within the next fifteen minutes!"

From all over the vast, lantern-festooned acreage of the estate, the house party guests began to drift toward the meadow. They came from the swimming pool, the men still wearing their trunks and the handsome, lithe--figure women with them, in French-type bathing suits. From the outdor dance pavillion and bar they came. From the little guest cottages, in the groves.

Kitty Heenan watched the benches around the platform in the meadow filling up. Workmen stripped the tarpaulin away from the paltform, revealing a regulation size prize fight ring. Kitty wished Julie would show up. If the special match that she had arranged because she knew it would please Julie, was put on without her being there, Kitty new that her daughter would fly into a terrible rage. Kitty had experienced some of Julie's tantrums before. She had no desire to suffer through one tonight, before several hundred guests.

A few moments later Julie came toward her, followed by a white-uniformed servant bearing a tray of Martinis.

Julie Heenan was tall and slender, with long, shiny black hair that caped her shapely shoulders in a careless bob. She had wide-set, heavy lidded black eyes, under long, spiked lashes. She had a short, straight nose. Her spoiled, petulant, full-

lipped mouth was always moist and smoothly painted. High cheek bones with the shadowed hollows beneath them, gave her a look of exotic loveliness.

There was cynicism and a subdued but not suppressed excitement, like smouldering fire, in Julie's expression that made her look older than her eighteen years. Traveling with a reckless, too-rich young crowd, Julie had jammed a lot of vivid living into that time. She seemed endowed with an insatiable hunger for all the pleasures and excitement that life had to offer.

Tonight, she wore a white playsuit, the shorts molded snugly to long, tapering legs. A shimmering silk jersey was specially tailored to highlight her striking curves. The white material made an interesting

The aging night club hostess had a daughter—and what a daughter—crammed with all the lowest instincts of humanity and intent upon satisfying her conceit even to plotting a brutal exhibition that ended in a heartless murder!

contrast against the golden tan of her arms and legs.

As she joined her young mother, Julie replaced the empty Martini glass she had been holding, with a full one from the tray. She bent her head and a lock of black hair tumbled impishly down over her face. She sipped at the brimming glass, darting a pointed tongue along the edge of it. She looked up from under her lids at her mother. When she finished drinking, Julie smiled and her tiny teeth were sharp and glistening white against her moist, scarlet mouth. She cocked her head, coquettishly.

"Hi, Kitty!" Her voice was high pitched and edgy, the only indication that she'd had too much to drink. "You looking for me? Silly girl. I was out skipping rope and playing potsy with the neighborhood children."

KITTY Heenan was not charmed. She eyed her daughter levelly. She said: "First time I've heard it called *that*! Who was the guy you were with? Don't kid around with me, Julie."

Julie Heenan tucked her lower lip between her teeth. She tossed her dark head, defiiantly. "*You* ought to know that," she said. "You brought him here. One of the entertainers you hired for tonight. Al Hano."

"Hano!" Kitty's plucked blonde brows arched. "The prize fighter? You stay away from Hano. You—"

"Oh, stop it, Kitty!" Julie's eyes boldly, insolently, ran over her mother's maturely curved figure, svelte and slender, despite her thirty-six years. She looked at Kitty's deft, theatrical makeup, the shoulder length blonde hair, expertly touched up to give it life and allure. "You're just annoyed because you had ideas about Al Hano yourself. He *is* a handsome beast. But entirely too young for you, mother. He—"

"Don't call me mother, Julie!" Kitty Heenan's face flushed, angrily.

"I won't if you'll stop treating *me* like a child!" Julie couldn't stand to be even slightly rebuked for anything she had done. "You didn't tell me about tonight's special feature, because you were afraid I'd get to one or both of the combatants and steal them from you."

"Well, I—" Kitty looked uncomfortable. "After all I'm still a young woman. I—"

"But Al is ten years younger," Julie cut in. "Kitty, you don't have a chance with Al. He and I went for a swim down at the beach, a little while ago."

Julie Heenan emptied her Martini glass and took another full one from the tray. "Furthermore," she went on, "Earlier in the evening I danced and had a few drinks with the other mug you hired—that wrestler, Bronco Magee. I like them both. I

couldn't decide which one of them I liked best and since they both seemed anxious to see me after the fight, I told them I would go with the man who won! How's that for an incentive for them to put on a good show for us, Kitty?"

"Are you crazy, Julie?" Kitty Heenan knew the high voltage effect her daughter's charms had on a man. "Those two bruisers are liable to kill each other."

Julie sipped her Martini, grinned roguishly. "That's the idea, Kitty. Imagine two superbly built male animals fighting a battle to the death over me, tonight!" Her dark, strange eyes gleamed wickedly.

By now, most of the benches around the prize ring were filled with laughing, excited couples. Cute little brief-skirted maids circulated among them with trays containing a variety of drinks. A murmur of expectancy arose from the spectators as two flannel-robed young men came from the direction of one of the guest cottages. They strode rapidly down an aisle between benches and climbed into the ring. They went to separate corners and exercised against the ropes.

Suddenly Julie Heenan set her glass back on the tray. Her face flushed with anticipation. "I'm sorry, Kit," she said. "You *were* sweet to arrange this entertainment for our guests. I've got to run now. I've got a surprise for you!"

"Julie!" Kitty called but she was too late.

JULIE Heenan ran between the benches, reached the ring and grabbed the arm of a baldheaded man in white flannels and striped shirt. She talked and gesticulated excitedly for a few moments and then Kitty saw the hired referee turn and sit down at one of the ringside benches. Julie climbed lithely between the ropes and into the ring.

She grabbed hold of the microphone and waved a tanned arm in the signal for attention. "Friends," she said, her voice shrill and trembling. "We've got a treat for you tonight. You've all heard the debate about which is the better fighter—a boxer or a wrestler! Tonight we will settle that argument with an exhibition match between Bronco Magee, the well known wrestler and Al Hano, the heavyweight prize fighter Both the same weight. Both top men in their own sport."

Cheers and cries of surprise came from the spectator-filled benches until Julie signaled for silence again.

"It should be a grim and grisly spectacle," Julie went on. "And very entertaining. I am dispensing with the services of a referee. There will be no holds—no punches—barred. Nobody will interfere with the combatants in any way at all. The fight will not be broken up into rounds. You are going to get a real, old-fashioned fight, my friends. A fight to the finish! The man who remains standing when his opponent is no longer able to get up, will be the winner!"

There was a horrified silence and then gradually, the drunken, thrill-seeking crowd began to take to the idea. Men started making bets on the outcome of the battle.

While this was going on, Al Hano and Bronco Magee stripped off their robes and came to the center of the ring. Julie introduced them. Then she teasingly kissed each one on the cheek and climbed through the ropes out of the ring. The fighters moved to their corners, waited for the sound of the bell.

All this time, Kitty Heenan stood back where Julie had left her, rooted to the ground with surprise and horror. She had arranged this purely as a novel exhibition match of five rounds. The referee had been hired to see that the fight was clean. Al Hano, the boxer, was to adhere strictly to the rules of prize fighting. Magee, the wrestler, was to stick to the rules of wrestling. Kitty had expected it to be a hard fought match but apparently that wasn't enough for Julie.

Unknown to her mother, she had egged or bribed the fighters into making it a brutal fight to the finish. Kitty had to stop it. She ran toward the ring, where Julie was about to hit the gong with a metal hammer. She called her daughter's name, but the excited clamor from the spectators, drowned out her voice.

Up in the ring, Al Hano with his curly, short-cropped black hair and flat-planed

Julie tried to break free but Cass held her helpless.

JULIE had promised the one who won this fight that she would spend the rest of the evening with him. Kitty felt terror choking in her throat remembering this. fighter's face, flexed the sleek, rippling muscles of his arms and shoulders. He was not wearing boxing gloves. He was going to fight bare-fisted.

In the other corner, Bronco Magee, shorter than Hano, with the bulging-muscled physique of the wrestler, frowned. He held long, powerful arms loosely at his side, working the thick fingers. Magee, too, with his crew-cut red hair and scowling, brutal face, was still an attractive young savage. These men would be fighting in earnest. Anything could happen.

But Kitty Heenan started toward the ring just as Julie slammed the gong with the hammer. Both men started from their corners. They circled warily in the center of the ring. Al Hano held his guard up in a boxer's stance, his left hand flicking toward his opponent, experimentally, the right cocked. Bronco Magee crouched, ape-like, his sturdy legs braced apart.

Suddenly Hano lashed out two stinging hard jabs that lanced into Magee's ugly face, catching him by surprise. With a roar of rage, Magee lunged in, ignoring a rain of short, stiff punches. He bent and got his left arm and shoulder between his opponent's legs and lifted him clean off the canvas. He dumped Hano down and jumped in to stomp on his face.

At the last second, Al Hano rolled out of the way. He reached out and grabbed one of Magee's legs, pulled it out from under him. Magee fell heavily.

The battle raged in brutal rough and tumble style for the next few minutes. The Heenan houseparty guests worked themselves into a frenzy of excitement over the fight. They yelled and screamed for their favorites. Kitty Heenan knew it would be next to impossible to stop the fight now. The men in the ring had been hurt and were aroused to a primitive fury. They were fighting for their lives. It would be suicidal for anybody to try and climb up into the ring and separate them.

Julie Heenan next to the ring, was pounding the fist of one hand into the open palm of the other. She shouted: "Come on, honey! Kill 'im!" as Al Hano trapped Bronco Magee in a corner, pummeled him with smashing rights and lefts. She seemed to take great delight in the sound of fist crashing against bone, of the grunts and sobs of pain coming from the ring.

Suddenly, Al Hano seemed to have the wrestler completely at his mercy, in a corner. Magee leaned limply against the ropes. His guard dropped and his hands hung at his knees. His ugly features had a laxed and saggy look. Both eyes were puffed shut. Crimson trickled from the corners of his mouth and from his nose.

Al Hano stood close to him, deliberately pumping punch after savage punch to the wrestler's head. With each blow, Bronco Magee's head jounced back. His knees buckled and it looked as though he would fall, but some deep rooted instinct kept him on his feet, sopping up punishment.

Around the benches the eyes of all the Heenan guests were glued to the ring. Some looked shocked and horrified. Others were wide-eyed, almost hysterical with excitement. A little blonde model, clinging to the arm of her escort, was wriggling and twisting and her lips were drawn back from her teeth. The expression on her face was a terrible thing to see.

From somewhere in that crowd suddenly a scream cut out, sharp and ear-splittingly clear. A man's voice, high-pitched, shouted: "Stop him! For God's sake, someone stop him, before he kills the guy!"

KITTY Heenan helplessly kept her gaze on the ring where Bronco Magee, his face a swollen, inhuman mask, finally lurched and forced himself out of the corner and away from Al Hano's pounding fists. Hano turned with him and they both moved into the center of the ring. Magee swayed, perilously, and his knees hit and sagged. Then he swung a slow, clumsy blow that caught Al Hano by surprise and clubbed him along the side of the head.

Al Hano shook himself and bore in angrily, toward the wrestler. Magee didn't have a chance. Hano caught him with a driving hook to the stomach and Magee doubled over in pain. Then Hano brought a looping uppercut from the floor. It caught Magee flush on the chin, lifted him onto his tiptoes. He spun, his face seeming to come apart, his eyes under their puffed lids, crossed, vacant. He took two stumbling steps and pitched headlong to the floor.

Silence draped over the ring in the meadow. Nobody moved. Nobody said anything. They were stunned by the brutal, sudden ending of the fight.

From the front row of benches, pudgy, gray-haired Dr. Disbrough, a retired physician, stood up. The doctor staggered as he moved toward the ring. He said, his rasping voice loud against the silence: "That man's hurt badly! I'd better see to him!"

He climbed the steps into the ring and moved toward the fallen figure of Bronco Magee. He kneeled beside him. Others followed him and the inside of the ring was soon jammed with excited, frightened party guests. Kitty Heenan pushed her way to the front and grabbed Dr. Disbrough's arm as he rose to his feet once more.

"Doc!" she demanded. "Is he all right?"

His round face was pasty and studded with sweat. He shook his head slowly. "Kitty, there's going to be plenty of trouble about this. That man is dead!"

Hearing the pronouncement, the guests closed in around Dr. Disbrough and the dead man on the canvas, in morbid curiosity. Over their heads, Kitty Heenan looked toward Al Hano. Hano's fighting fury had subsided and there was a scared, desperate look on his flat, handsome features. His lips were open and he was breathing hard after the violence of the fight. Perspiration ran from his temples, down his cheeks and neck in small rivers. His brown eyes had the look of a cornered animal.

Then somebody grabbed Kitty's arm, cried:

"Call the police, Kit!" He turned and shouted: "We don't want to get mixed up in this. Let's get out of here!"

Dr. Disbrough cleared his throat. Grimly he said, "Nobody leave! The police won't like it. . . . Kitty, give orders to the gate guards not to let anybody out of the estate."

Kitty pushed her way through the mob in the ring and caught hold of a frightened servant, repeated the doctor's order. Then she looked for Julie. She had to tell her to keep quiet, to let her talk to the police and the newspapermen. She couldn't let Julie get into trouble by telling them that she had goaded the men into fighting to the death by promising the winner a date —or that it was Julie's idea to make the fight so brutal. She had to keep Julie out of this, even if it meant taking the blame herself. She could handle the thing.

A CRY went up from the people in the ring then and Kitty saw several straining to hold Al Hano. The fighter's face was twisted with fear and rage. He lashed out with vicious swings and felled two of the men trying to restrain him. Then he broke free, vaulted from the ring and raced across the smooth, close-cropped grass of the meadow, toward a dark patch of woods. Several men started to chase him, then gave it up, as Hano disappeared into the darkness of close-packed trees and shrubbery.

Kitty turned as a hand touched her arm. It was Julie and her fingers felt feverish against Kitty's flesh. Her dark eyes were unhealthily bright and a corner of her red mouth twitched nervously. Finally she broke into a nervous smile. An hysterical giggling broke from Julie's throat. She began to tremble. She said, flat-voiced: "I didn't mean for Al to kill him, Kitty! Not to *really* kill him. The dam' fool! The handsome dam' fool did kill him for me. You hear that, Kitty? They fought over me and one of them killed the other! I guess I made him a little crazy, eh, Kitty?"

Her voice got louder and higher pitched. The giggling became spasmodic. The skin of Julie's face seemed to tighten across the bone structure and her lips skinned back from her small, glistening teeth. She was pale, except for flag-spots of rouge against her cheekbones. Pinpoints of moisture beaded her high forehead. All the liquor she'd consumed and the dramatic outcome of the vicious ring fight had become too much for her. Her nerves were at the breaking point and Kitty was afraid that any moment the girl would go into violent hysteria.

Kitty Heenan slapped her daughter stinging hard across the face. The giggling cut off. Julie Heenan stiffened and her eyes half closed and then the tightness went out of her features. She put her hands up over her face and bowed her head and began to sob.

After awhile, the sobbing lessened and Julie whispered: "They—they won't blame me for what happened, will they, Kitty?"

Kitty's lovely features hardened. She stared off into the dark. "I don't know," she said, fiercely. "You've got yourself into a hell of a mess. I'll do the best I can to get you out. Now stop your blubbering."

Kitty was thankful that they were out here on the island and not in the city, where experienced big town cops and detectives would shrewdly pry out the truth. The nearest town, Wood Harbor, was only a hick burg of a few thousand people. The local, yokel sheriff would handle the case

and Kitty figured she wouldn't have too much trouble with him.

She and Julie made their way across the meadow and past the swimming pool to the huge Heenan mansion in the center of the estate. Twenty minutes later, the butler ushered two men into the Heenan library where Kitty and Julie had gone. Kitty had hammered it into Julie's head to let her do the talking when the police arrived. Julie now sat demurely in a corner.

One of the men was short and stocky, with a wrinkled, walnut colored face and piercing eyes under shaggy gray brows. He wore a checked hunting shirt and corduroy trousers, tucked into the tops of high leather shoes. His iron gray hair was long and unkempt and he had a ragged looking cigar stub clenched in his clamped jaws.

THE other man was tall and broad-shouldered and deep-chested under his blue polo shirt. His arms were long and well-muscled. He had a square-jawed face, even-featured and deeply tanned. There were wind-crinkles at the corners of his deeply set gray eyes. His hair was close cut and lay close against his finely shaped head in crisp, blond waves.

He said: "I'm Cass Adams, the sheriff." He gestured toward the grizzled looking older man. "This is Jason Frank, my deputy. What's the story?"

Kitty Heenan was dumbfounded. This handsome, blond young man, well spoken and intelligent-looking, didn't fit in with her concept of the local law. Here was no hick from the sticks. Except for his casual sports attire, Cass Adams would have fitted in as one of her own moneyed house guests. Stalling, she said:

"How do you do?" She motioned toward Julie. "This is my daughter, sheriff. I'm afraid Julie won't be much help to you. She's quite upset about—what happened."

Cass Adams' gray eyes moved toward Julie, traveled over her slim, curved loveliness, sprawled in a lounge chair, a cigarette dangling from her long, scarlet-tipped fingers. Julie held his eyes and smiled, slowly, invitingly. She crossed her tanned, gracefully carved legs.

Cass Adams slid his eyes away, disdainfully. He said: "I've seen her in Wood Harbor. She ought to keep more clothes on. The morals of the natives around here bruise easily."

Julie laughed. "Isn't he cute, Kitty?" she said. "We should have trouble around here more often, with such handsome law enforcement officers available.

Old Jason Frank said nothing. He goggled at Julie Heenan and when she glanced at him and winked, his eyes almost pinwheeled. His adam's apple jumped up and down against his collar.

"I know you, too, Cass Adams," Julie said. "You played end for St. Martin's, the year they had a Rose Bowl team. You were All-America three years in a row Then you played ten full years of pro-ball with the South City Rebels. Isn't playing policeman in a hick burg a little tame after all that, Mr. Adams?"

"Yeah," he said. "That's why I moved out here and took the job. I had enough action to last me the rest of my life. Wood Harbor seemed an ideal place to retire and relax and do some fishing and hunting. There hasn't been a major crime committed around here in eight years until now."

"Sorry to bother you, Adams," Kitty said.

He shrugged. "I expected this," he said. "Ever since you bought this estate, I've been hearing about wild parties and I've been waiting for real trouble to break. It always follows. I'm a little surprised, though. You aren't as bad as I pictured you."

Kitty Heenan felt a blush moving up from her throat. It was a strange sensation. From her nightclub experience, Kitty was used to handling men, but there was something about Cass Adams' casual and aloof personality that aggravated as well as attracted her. She felt almost unable to cope with him. She managed, weakly:

"What did you expect? Some broken down, bleached blonde old bag with a whiskey bottle in one hand and a nightclub noise-maker in the other?"

"Something like that." Cass Adams grinned wryly. "Kitty Heenan, Queen of

Cass started across the dune with Kitty stumbling to catch up with him.

the Nightclubs! I was in your place once, fifteen years ago, at the tag end of prohibition. I was just a college kid. You were young and pretty then. Fifteen years is a long time in your business. I'm surprised that you haven't changed much."

"What *is* this?" Julie Heenan demanded, "Old Home Week?"

Cass Adams ignored her. He said to Kitty: "Let's get out to where this thing happened. On the way you can give me your story." He turned to Jason Frank. "Jase, interview some of the guests and get their version of how this guy was croaked."

When Julie Heenan started to follow them out of the library, Kitty told her, "You stay here. I—I don't want you to get upset any more than you are, already."

Julie flicked velvety dark hair away

from her forehead. She glanced at Cass Adams from the corner of her eye. "Don't be silly. I wouldn't dare let you roam around the estate alone with such an attractive man." Pointedly, she added, "A daughter has to look out for her poor old mother, you know."

Cass Adams said to Kitty: "How long has it been since she had a good, old-fashioned spanking?"

Julie snapped, "You think you're capable of administering one, Mr. Adams?"

"I'd like to be your father for about five minutes," Cass Adams said. "You wouldn't sit down for a week."

"Her father is dead," Kitty said flatly. "Has been for fifteen years."

"I'm sorry," Cass Adams said, "I'd forgotten that."

They moved out of the house and along the path toward the meadow. Kitty kept stealing side looks at Cass Adams, wondering vaguely if things might have been different if she'd married a man like him, instead of Tom Heenan.

Tom had owned the night club where Kitty had gone to work as a chorus girl when she hit New York fresh from the Pennsylvania coal mine belt. They were married three weeks later and it was through Tom that Kitty learned the night club business. Even though he was nearly broke when he was killed in a gang war several years later, she managed to salvage what was left of the business, put it on a paying basis for the first time. She had an instinctive knack for pleasing night club patrons. She moved the club several times to larger quarters until it was finally the largest, most successful night spot of its kind in the city.

But even though Kitty Heenan grew rich and famous, she felt alone from the day her husband died. Because of that loneliness she lavished all of her gruff affection on her daughter, Julie. Until it was too late, she hadn't realized that Julie had grown into a selfish, spoiled and often vicious young lady.

Before Julie did that Kitty had been too busy with her business and making money, to bother much with men. In the past few years she had not had much luck with men friends. After they met Julie, if the men were young and attractive, Kitty did not stand a chance.

Kitty's reverie was broken as they reached the meadow and started toward the ring in the center. The place was deserted now but the flood lights were still on. Suddenly Julie said:

"I've got to have a couple of drinks before I can face this business again." She ran off toward the lantern-lit grove of trees where the outdoor bar was.

CASS Adams and Kitty moved toward the ring. Cass looked up at the flood lights and the rows of benches around the ring as Kitty explained about the match that had been arranged for the entertainment of her house guests.

"A pleasant idea," he said. "You'd have been at home with the ancient Romans! Most civilized people like milder forms of entertainment. Whose idea was that?"

Kitty Heenan hesitated. Finally she said, "Mine, of course. We had to have something special to keep the guests from being bored. I—"

"Are you sure it wasn't Julie's inspiration?" he cut in. "I've heard about some of her other ideas along the same line. . . . You don't strike me as being the type to go in for that sort of thing.

When Kitty didn't answer right away, Cass Adams went on: "There's going to be one hell of a stink about all this when the newspapers get hold of it. You're going to be in hot water."

They reached the ring and Cass Adams climbed up through the ropes. He lifted back the robe that had been thrown over Bronco Magee, then replaced it. He straightened up, said:

"This man was brutally beaten. Any professional fighter in his right mind, would have stopped before getting a man in that condition. It looks as though Hano *deliberately* killed Magee—as though he was enraged to a murderous fury. It's not easy to kill a man with fists. Why didn't somebody stop the thing before it got this far?"

Kitty Heenan felt sick. Her brain seemed

numb. Julie had gotten herself into a lot of trouble before but never anything as bad as this. "I—I don't know," she said confused, "It happened so quickly, nobody seemed to know what to do. I—"

"Cut it out! A man gets brutally murdered in front of several hundred witnesses and nobody could do anything to stop it?" Cass Adams interrupted. "You'll have to do better than that, Mrs. Heenan."

"*I* can do better!" a voice behind them said.

They turned around and Julie had come back. She swayed slightly, a full cocktail glass in each hand. It was obvious by her flushed features and the slight thickness of her voice, that she'd had several other quick drinks at the bar. Her eyes were hard and bright. There was a defiant thrust to her mouth.

"Julie!" Kitty cried.

"Keep out of this!" Julie told her mother. "You said to let you do the talking. Well you're not getting anywhere with this bohunk, so I'm taking over. I'm sick of you taking the blame for things I do. I'm goin' to stand on my own two feet for a change. I can handle anything that happens."

She smiled at Cass Adams. "Can't I, Handsome?"

"You were going to say something about the way Bronco Magee was killed," Cass reminded her. "Go ahead. Do all the talking you want."

"It was more than just an exhibition match between a boxer and a wrestler," Julie said, holding her breath. "They were fighting over *me*! That's why they fought so savagely. I told each one of them that unless he could beat the blazes out of his opponent, I wouldn't have anything to do with him any more. Don't blame Kitty, Cass. Blame me. If you dare!"

Cass Adams' lips curled in disgust. "*You* did that?" he said. "You deliberately egged those men on so that—"

"What's the matter?" She stepped in front of him, her face tilted up to his. Her voice was soft and warm and husky, "Don't you think I'm *worth* fighting over? You would do the same thing, Cass Adams, if you had the chance!"

He deliberately turned from her. He said, "I wouldn't fight my own shadow over you."

JULIE Heenan grabbed his arm and swung him around. She slapped him viciously across the face, leaving white finger marks against his tan. He stood stiffly, muscles jumping along the sides of his jaw. Then he reached out and took Julie's arm. He bent it behind her and went down onto the grass with one knee. He forced Julie across that knee and his hand moved up and down half a dozen times in rapid fire blows. Julie shrilled and tried to break free, but Cass Adams held her helpless. When he finally let her up, tears streaked down her cheeks spoiling her makeup. She was white with anger. Cass turned to Kitty Heenan and said, "She had it coming to her. I never let anybody raise a hand to me, not even a woman."

A peculiar thing happened to Kitty Heenan as she watched Cass spank her daughter. She felt a strange sense of relief, as though she knew it was something she should have done herself, long ago and never had the strength nor the courage to do.

Julie stopped sobbing quite suddenly. She dabbed her eyes with a wisp of handkerchief, looked from the corners of her eyes at Cass Adams. In a soft, subdued voice she said:

"You want Al Hano, don't you, Cass? I —I think I know where he is. I can take you there, Cass, and you can get him."

"Where?" he said. "How would you know where he is? This estate is huge, thickly covered with trees and brush in places. He might be anywhere."

"I bet I know where he is," she persisted stubbornly. "You want me to show you, promise me something?"

"What is it?"

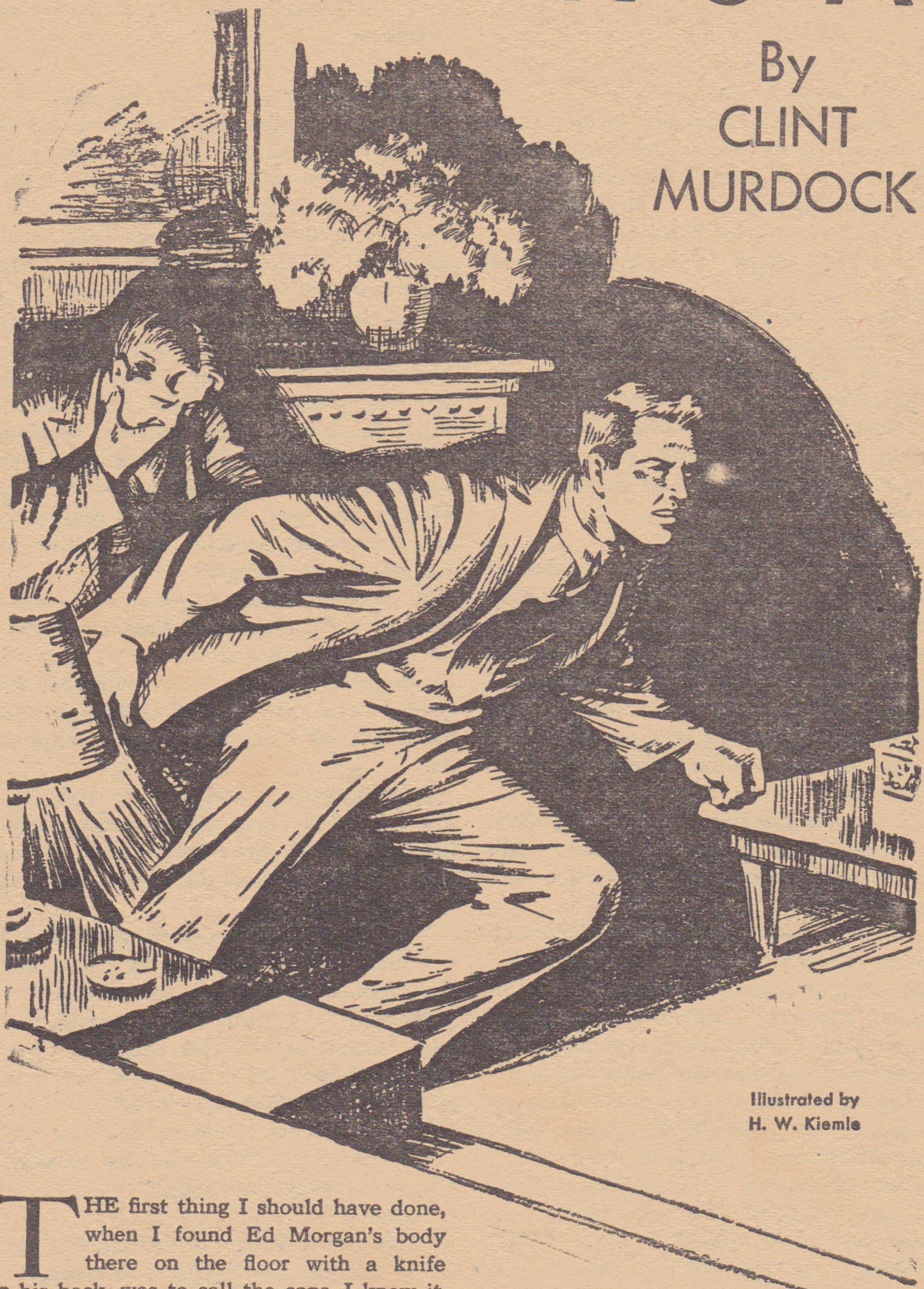
"That you'll keep my mother and me out of this. You won't hold us to blame for what happened. You're the law here, Cass. You can do that. You promise and I'll take you where you'll find Al Hano."

He shook his head. "I'm not making any

(*Continued on page 149*)

MURDER'S A

By CLINT MURDOCK



Illustrated by H. W. Kiemle

THE first thing I should have done, when I found Ed Morgan's body there on the floor with a knife in his back, was to call the cops. I knew it. But I didn't dare. I was just too plain scared. That was *my* knife. I'm no detective, but in this bail bond business, a fellow can't help learning a few things about how the police operate.

CRAZY THING

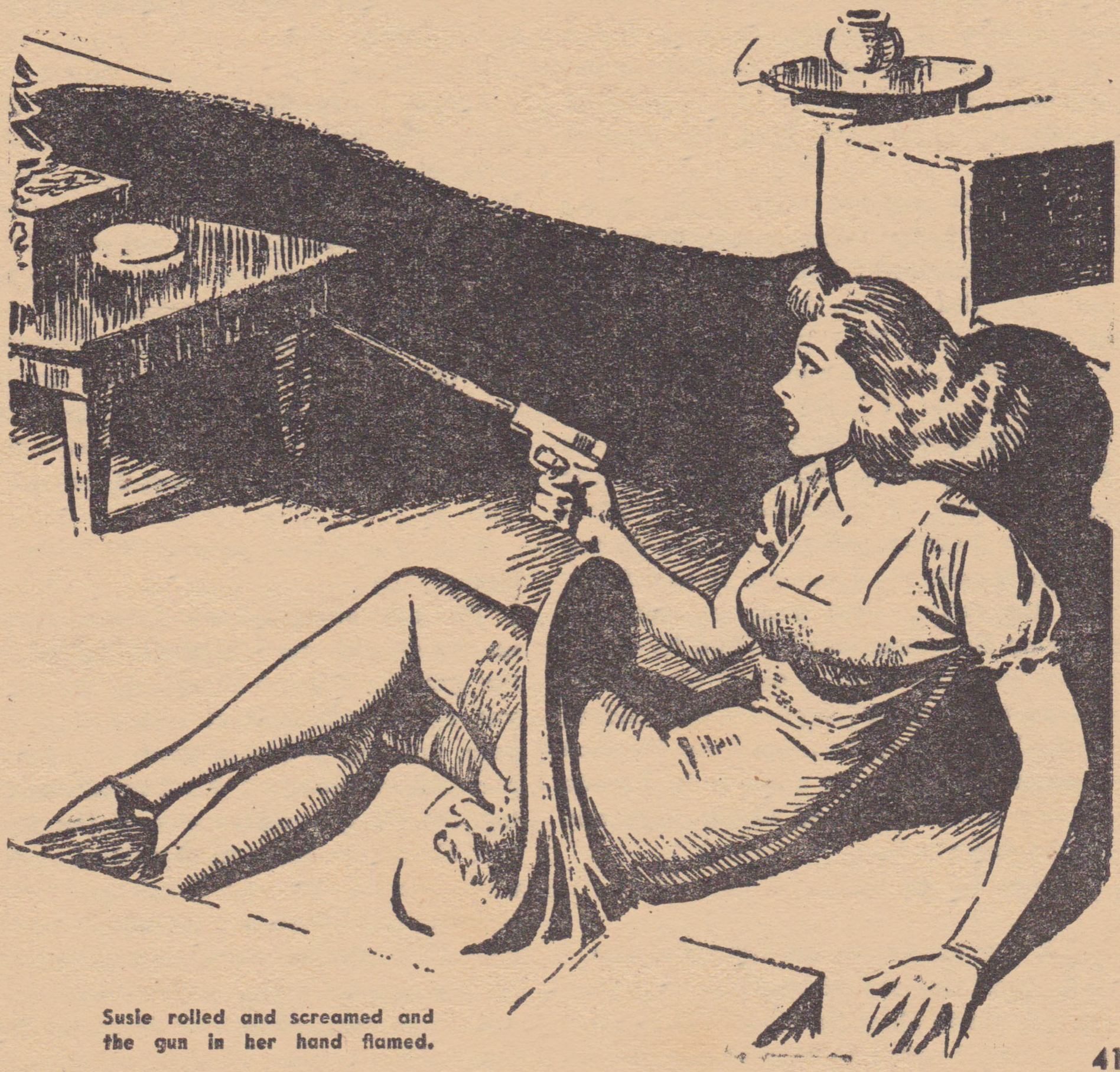
This bail bond business is all right when the other fellow is in a jam, but when murder strikes right in your own office, it's not funny! And particularly when my partner's sweetie didn't seem to mind it at all, after their meaning so much to each other.

I shouldn't have had that argument with Ed, either. Especially over such a trival thing. We were equal partners; we had equal say about how the business should be run. Ed wanted to keep the ten thousand dollars in cash in the safe, so we would have it instantly available in case we had to put up a cash bond in a hurry. I wanted to put it in the safety deposit box in the bank.

And now the safe door stood open, papers scattered over the floor, and only a casual glance showed me the cash was gone. Ed must've opened the safe; only he and I knew the combination.

I stood there with my mouth open, trying to breathe.

My argument with Ed had been just after five o'clock. The courts had closed for the day, and our two runners, Dick Towers



Susie rolled and screamed and the gun in her hand flamed.

and Sig Thorgensen, had come back to the office. Marvin Edwards, our mousey little bookkeeper, was in his cubby-hole of an office in the back room, and Susan Hagan, our stenographer, was at her desk in the front office. They had all heard my spat with Ed. That's all it was, just a spat, a little disagreement on how we'd handle the cash money. They all knew it would be kept in the safe, at least overnight.

After the spat with Ed, I'd put on my hat and left, my temper still ruffled. That was about a quarter to six. I was hungry, so I went down to Olvera Street, to José's little hole-in-the-wall café and had me a big plate of chicken enchiladas with a side of chili colorado, a stack of hot tortillas and a bottle of Tecate. It was nearly seven when I pushed back my plate, feeling replete. I sat there a while and smoked a cigarette, thinking things over. José came by and asked if there was anything else I wanted, and I ordered another bottle of beer. That took another half hour.

Maybe I'd been too rough on Ed, saying the things I had. I felt in a more expansive mood, and decided I'd go back to the office and apologize to him. No use in us being at loggerheads. This was Ed's night to keep open till eleven, and he'd be there.

I'd come out of José's place and walked to the Plaza, where the statue of Philip de Nieve brooded over the loiterers on the park benches. I sauntered on up Main Street to Temple, and turned right up the hill to Broadway. I thought it was funny that the ceiling light was out, only the lamp on Ed's desk burning. And he wasn't in the office; at least, I didn't see him. I opened the door and stepped inside, clicked on the light. It was then that I saw the shoe there on the floor, with a foot in it. I made a jump around the end of the desk and looked down at him.

It was Ed all right.

HE lay partly on his left side, and I could see one of his black eyes staring unseeingly along the floor. His features were rugged rather than handsome, but he wasn't a bad looking guy in a dark swarthy way. Not so tall, about five feet nine, weighed probably around one sixty.

Then my eyes jerked to the open safe.

I'd better get out of there while I could. I knew that, too. If the cops found me like this, they'd pop me into the hoosegow —and there's no bail for murder. I had to be sure, though, that the money was gone. I stepped around the body and squatted on my heels in front of the safe. I didn't touch anything, just looked. The money had been in four packages of fifty fifty-dollar bills each, and the pigeon-hole where they'd been was empty.

Squatted there in front of the safe, I heard the click of the night-lock on the rear door. For a moment I didn't realize what it meant. Then it dawned on me that somebody had been hiding in the rear room and had gone out, closing the door softly behind him.

The killer?

I made a dive for the back room. The light from Ed's desk lamp threw a dim glow into the room, enough for me to see there was nobody there. I strode across to the back door, opened it and looked out.

It was dark here. Most of the cars had been taken away from the parking lot and the attendant was long since gone. I stepped out the door for a better look around; whoever it was might have hidden. Still I couldn't see a thing. My back was partly to the open rear door, and I turned to close it.

Then the whole parking lot blew up in my face.

The next thing I knew I found myself on the ground, my left cheek digging into the gravel. I heard somebody groan. It was me. My head hurt with a throbbing pain, and every time I moved, a sharper pain jagged through it. I put up a hand and felt the sticky wetness around the bump just above my left ear. I rolled over on my stomach, got my hands and knees under me and tried to push myself up. No good. My elbows caved in and my chin hit the gravel again. I lay there for a minute or two, then tried it again. This was a little better. I got up on one knee

and the other foot flat on the ground. From there I pushed on up, stood wobbling and weaving, tried to take a step. Not so good. I put out a hand and steadied myself against the wall of the building. After a minute or two my head began to clear a little, and I tried another tentative step.

There was a hydrant over across the parking lot which the attendants used for washing cars. I dragged my number twelves over there, put my head under it and turned on the water. It was cold, and it did me a world of good. I took a big drink of it, and felt still better. I got out a handkerchief and swabbed at my face and neck.

I WALKED over to my car and got in under the wheel. I sat there a moment, listening and looking. Evidently Ed's body hadn't been discovered yet; there was no crowd, no cops around. No use going back in there. My fingerprints would be plentiful, but they would be old ones. All except those I'd left on the front doorknob when I went in. But it was my office, no reason why my prints shouldn't be found all over the place.

I tromped on the starter and got the car rolling. I headed west out Temple Street. I had to get away from there, find some place where I could think this thing out.

I drove on out to Echo Park, turned into a side street, and parked my car in the deep shadows of the trees. My wrist watch showed a quarter to nine. Let's see, I'd left José's place about half past seven, and it took me probably fifteen minutes to mosey up from there to the office. I'd been knocked out within two or three minutes after I got there. That'd make it about a quarter to eight. I must've been blacked out for three-quarters of an hour, more or less. Strange that Ed's body hadn't been discovered in all that time. That made me feel pretty damn uneasy.

It was quiet here by the park, the low hum of passing autos on Temple and on Glendale Boulevard, the clang of red cars and yellow cars going by now and then. The chorus of frogs along the banks of the little lake, and the sleepy grumble of one of the swans: those were the only things I heard. And the crickets.

The one thing I was sure of was that I hadn't killed Ed Morgan. It had been my knife, though, that I saw sticking out of his back. Anybody could have used it. It was a knife I'd taken off a Jap on Nouméa, and I'd kept it for a souvenir. It had been in the top right hand drawer of my desk, and everybody in the office had seen it, knew where it was. That was one of the things that led me to the idea that the killer was someone connected with the office.

The more I thought about it, the madder I got. My Irish temper began to flare. Try to frame me for a murder, then knock me out with a blackjack. Why, I'd make mince meat of the guy. But who?

Somebody in the office? There was Susie, our stenographer. It wouldn't be her. She and Ed had been going around a bit after office hours, golf over the week-ends. Marvin Edwards, our bookkeeper? He was a small slender guy, timid and shy, self-effacing. He had thin light brown hair, watery blue eyes, and his chin wasn't too prominent. He wouldn't kill anybody; scared of his own shadow.

That left only the two runners, Dick Towers and Sig Thorgensen. They were both large men, about my size. Sig was florid, flaxen hair and blue eyes, a blond Viking. He always had a smile for everybody, a booming laugh that rolled up from his belly, and was a good mixer. He brought a lot of business into the office.

Dick Towers was a big man, too, with black hair and eyes, a little older than Sig, inclined to be a bit pompous; but his wits weren't dull. Neither of these boys, it seemed to me, was a killer. Of course, you can never tell about murder, and the strange vagaries of the human mind that make a killer.

The whole thing had me stumped; I didn't know where to begin. One thing I was sure of, though. I had to find that killer before the cops caught up with me. The circumstantial evidence against me was enough for them to throw me in jail and keep me there.

Maybe it was somebody not connected with the office at all. Somebody who had known about that money, and watched until Ed was alone in the office. Or it could have been just anybody passing by, who didn't know how much money there was in the safe and took a chance for what he might get.

MY work in the bail bond business had taught me many things about crimes. A robbery like that wasn't pulled off just on the spur of the moment. A robbery was usually planned in advance, the place carefully cased, everything possible found out about the way things were run. No, it wouldn't have been some outsider. It had to be somebody connected with the office. At least that was my best bet for a try, and I had to work fast.

Ed and Susan had been friendly, a little more friendly than just a boss and his stenographer. Maybe she could tell me something I didn't know. Maybe she had seen or heard something that would give me a lead. I'd go out and talk to her, see what she could tell me. My wrist watch told me it was five minutes past nine. She lived on Rampart, not far from Sunset Boulevard.

It was a four-apartment building, two up and two down. She lived in the left-hand apartment downstairs. I parked my car around the corner on a side street in the deep shadows, and walked back to the entrance. I pushed the button under her name on the mailbox, and the door buzzed. I went up the three steps to the hall and saw her standing in her door.

"Why, Mr. Sloane!" she said. "What a pleasant surprise. Come on in." She swung the door wider, and I stepped inside and closed it behind me.

Her apartment was small; a front room, a bedroom, combination kitchen and breakfast nook. Very compact and neat, fairly nice furniture and a good rug on the floor. Nothing ostentatious. I walked over and sat on the davenport. The little radio on the center table was giving forth soft music.

"How are you, Susie?" I said, inanely. I'd just seen her a few hours ago, but that was the only thing I could think of to say. She hadn't noticed the bump on my head; it was mostly above the hair-line. My collar was a bit damp and wilted, but not enough to excite suspicion. I could use a stiff drink.

"Why, I'm just fine," she answered, and her big blue eyes asked a question. She was a fluffy little blonde, with platinum hair and heart-shaped face, and the quilted house-coat she wore didn't hide the luscious curves. She was well set up, the athletic type. She dropped into the big overstuffed chair across from me, and looked at me again. "You got something on your mind?"

"Yeah," I said, and looked around the room, wondering how to begin. On a little table over in a corner there was a picture of Ed Morgan in a five by seven plastic frame, and an odd little box made of inlaid wood. Maybe there was more between Ed and Susie than I'd thought. I couldn't just blurt out that I'd found Ed on the office floor with a knife in his back. My knife. She'd evidently liked the guy pretty well, to be going around with him, and having his picture on the table. "It's—it's about —"

"Don't be bashful," she said, and smiled at me. She had pretty teeth, small and even and very white. Funny I'd never noticed them before. "This wouldn't be a business call, would it?"

"Well, yes, in a way," I said, and shifted my hundred and ninety pounds to a more comfortable position. I leaned back and looked her in the eye. "It's about you and Ed."

"Ed and I?" A little puzzled frown grew between her eyes, and she stopped smiling. "Just how do you mean?"

"Well, I just thought —"

The music suddenly stopped on the radio, and the announcer came on. He saved me further explanations.

"We interrupt this broadcast to give you a flash," he intoned. "Edward J. Morgan, of Sloane and Morgan, bail bond brokers, was found on the floor of his office about ten minutes ago, with a knife in his back. The knife belonged to Harry Sloane, the other partner in the business, and it is

understood the two men hd quarreled this afternoon over a point of business policy. The police are hunting for Sloane, for questioning."

Susie sat staring at me, her mouth a perfect oval.

"Oh!" she gasped. "You — you —"

"Nuh-uh, I didn't kill him," I said. "I went back to the office to apoligize to him for the mean things I'd said, and found him there behind the desk. The safe was open and the money was gone."

"And you came right out here to me," Susie said, and the color began to flood back into her cheeks. "You — you think that I —"

"No, Susie. No, I didn't think you killed him. But somebody did, and I thought maybe you could tell me something that would give me a lead. I've got to find that killer before the cops find me. They'll throw me in the can, and take their time to build up an air-tight case against me. You and Ed were on pretty good terms. Is there anything you can tell me that might help? Anybody connected with the office that didn't like Ed, had a grudge against him?"

"No-o," Susie said, and sat back in her chair. "I wouldn't say that. Ed was telling me that he won a hundred and fifty dollars from Sig last week, shooting craps. But Sig wouldn't —"

I SHOOK my head. "Sig wouldn't kill a man over a thing like that. If he thought the dice were crooked, he might beat him up with his fists — he's big enough. But he wouldn't use a knife on him. Not Sig. There must be something else. Were either of those boys making up to you, might be jealous of Ed? Have you been making with the eyes at them?

"Oh, gosh, no." Susie's eyes widened with surprise. "Oh, they kidded me a bit, like all the fellows do. Dick wanted a date once, months ago, but I turned him down. Didn't seem to make any difference with him. Little Marvin was always fluttering around — you know how he is."

"How about outside fellows?" I nodded. "You get to meet a lot of lawyers and their clients, coming in for bail bonds. Any of them ever make a play for you?"

"Lots of them try to get a date," Susie shrugged.

"Young McGurdy, with Oliver, Jackson and McGurdy, he used to pester me quite a bit. And Orville Hiderson, the Clerk in Judge Marsten's court. He's tried several times to get a date. But none of those fellows were serious enough to commit murder, Harry. You think some guy was jealous enough about Ed to kill him?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just don't know. Somebody killed him, and I'm trying anything to get a lead. It might have been just the money in the safe; it could have been jealousy."

"Or both," Susie said. Her voice was soft and there was a faraway look in her eyes.

"Huh?" I jerked up straighter and looked at her.

Then the door buzzer sounded. I put my mind back on the serious situation.

"Oh, oh," I said. "Maybe it's the cops. I don't want 'em to catch me yet." Susie jerked her head toward the kitchen.

"Go in there till I see who it is," she said, and stepped over to the door. She pressed the button that buzzed the vestibule door lock, and opened her door. In a moment two men came in, and I knew by their voices it was Sig Thorgensen and Dick Towers. I opened the kitchen door a slight crack and listened.

"We heard it on the radio about Ed," Dick was saying, "and came right over. The cops are all wet; Harry didn't do it."

"Of course he didn't," Sig's deep voice boomed. "They're crazy. Sure, Harry's a redheaded Irisher, and we all know he's got a temper like a powder-keg. But he wouldn't kill a guy like that. He's big enough to handle Ed, without using a knife."

"Thanks, boys," I said, and stepped out into the room.

"Oh, ho!" Sig boomed. "So here's where you're hiding, huh?"

"Why not?" I asked. "You boys came right over here, too." Then I remembered they shared a bungalow over near Western

Avenue, not more than a ten minute drive away.

I STOOD there a moment, looking them over. Neither of these boys had killed Ed Morgan. They just weren't the type. They might get drunk and go helling around a bit, but they weren't vicious, held no grudges.

"Sure," Dick nodded. "We thought Susie might be kinda cut up about it, seeing that she and Ed —" He stopped and flashed a look at Susie, then at Sig, then at me.

"It's all right," Susie said. "Ed and I were engaged. Harry knows about it."

"Well, look," I said and walked over and sat down on the davenport. "You boys didn't kill him. I didn't kill him. Susie didn't. But somebody did. We're all here, except Marvin."

"Ho, ho, Marvin!" Sig boomed. "That little runt wouldn't kill anybody. He's —"

"Well, he *could*," I said. "That is, he has strength enough to drive a knife into a man's back. But he's —"

"He's too damned timid," Dick offered. "That panty-waist —"

"Still, he might know something that would give me a lead. It must have been somebody outside the office, somebody who possibly knew about that money being in the safe. That's gone, too, you know."

"Oh?" Dick arched his black brows. "But that kinda gives you an out, don't it, Harry? With the cops, I mean. It was *your* money to start with. That is, you drew it out of the bank last month to put up a cash bond in that Darner case. Then when he was acquitted yesterday, you went in this afternoon and got back the money and put it in the safe. That wasn't company money. You wouldn't have to kill a guy to take your own money out of the safe. Or would you?"

"Maybe you got something there," I said. "I hadn't thought of that angle. But it still might be that Marvin can give me a lead, something he's heard or seen. Suppose you call him up, Susie, and ask him to come over here. He'd like that. Don't tell him anybody else is here, or he might not want to come. He's probably heard about Ed on the radio, and he'll think you want him to console you."

There was a peculiar little light in Susie's blue eyes as she went to the phone on the center table and dialed a number.

"Hello, Marvin?" she said. "This is Susie. Yes. Could —"

We could hear the rapid jangle of a voice in the receiver, and Susie looked at me and rolled her eyes.

"Yes, I heard it on the radio, too," she said. "Pretty awful, isn't it? It's got me all torn up. Come on over. Oh? Yes, right away. No. Yes. No, I'm sure the cops are all wrong; Harry didn't do it."

She listened a moment more, said "All right, good-bye," replaced the receiver in its cradle and turned to look at us.

"He'll be right over," she said. "He's all up in the air, very excited. He's —"

"He would be," Sig grunted. "The little flutter-butt."

I LOOKED from one to the other. Dick had a scowl on his face, and Sig's mouth was drawn down at the corners. Evidently these boys didn't care much for little Marvin.

"I need a drink," I said. "That crack on the head wasn't so good. You got any rye or bourbon, Susie?"

"Not a drop in the house," she answered. "Only a couple of bottles of beer in the icebox."

"I need a shot of whiskey," I moaned.

"Why don't you two boys run down to the liquor store on Sunset?" Susie asked. "There's one six or eight blocks down the street. Get a quart — I'll get some money."

"I got money," Dick said, and stood up. "Come on, Sig."

We just sat there after the boys left, Susie in the big overstuffed chair and I on the davenport.

"I'll get on some clothes," Susie said, "make myself a little more presentable." She got up and went into the bedroom, and closed the door behind her.

I continued to sit on the davenport. I took out a cigarette and lighted it, touched fingers lightly to the bump on my head. It was still sore as a boil. After a bit I

got up and walked over to the window and looked out on the street. It was quiet, only the hum of traffic over on the boulevard. I turned away and wandered around the room. I was restless. There was something about this set-up that didn't just jibe. I felt a premonition of danger in the air, the same kind of feeling I'd had when I stalked the little brown men on the islands in the South Pacific.

I wandered on around the room, looked at the pictures on the walls. On the table in the corner where Ed's picture was, I again noticed that ornate little box. It was built something like a Chinese pagoda, and the top of the pagoda was the lid. Only it was more squat. About four by six inches and eight inches high. It seemed to be made of teak wood or some such substance, inlaid in various colors. I thought it was some kind of a fancy humidor, and picked up the cover to look inside.

What I saw rocked me back on my heels.

There was a thick package of currency in there, a fifty-dollar bill on top. I stood there and gawked at it. Then I caught my breath and stuck my finger down and lifted up the package. There was another package of bills under that. Two packages. About fifty bills in each package.

This was half the money taken from our safe.

I REPLACED the lid and walked back to the davenport and sat down. My knees felt weak, and my mind was fuzzy. It couldn't be. Such a thing just couldn't happen. Not Susie. She wouldn't kill anybody. She couldn't know that money was there; somebody must have planted it to throw suspicion on her. But who? Could it have been Dick Towers? He'd been over in that corner. Or Sig? I shook my head, tried to clear my thoughts.

Whoever it was, though, wouldn't have planted half that money just to frame Susie. They might've put in a few bills, but not that amount. That was five thousand dollars.

The bedroom door opened and Susie came out. She had changed into some kind of a flowered dress, cut square in the neck, and tied around with a belt of the same material. It came down to her knees, and revealed a lovely pair of nylons. I opened my mouth to speak—

Then the buzzer from the front door sounded.

I looked at Susie, and she jerked her head toward the kitchen. It was too soon for Sig and Dick to be back with the whiskey. It might be the cops, but most likely it was Marvin. I got up and went into the kitchen and closed the door, leaving only a small crack so I could hear.

I was standing there with my ear to the crack, when another idea hit me. Susie hadn't seemed much shocked when that announcement came over the radio about Ed's body being found. That was the thing that didn't jibe. She had taken it calmly. She hadn't cried any, like a girl would have done who was engaged to a man and had suddenly heard that he'd been killed. That struck me as mighty strange.

"Hello, Susie," I heard Marvin's voice. I heard the door close, and the sound of a whisper. I pushed the door open and stepped out into the front room. Susie and Marvin stood just beyond the center table, their heads close together. They whirled around and looked at me as I walked across toward them.

"Hello, Marvin," I said. "I'm glad you came over. There's something maybe you can tell me. You heard the radio, you know that Ed has been killed."

"Yes," Mrvin nodded, and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "Certainly was a shock, Mr. Sloane. What effect will that have on the business? Will you keep on with it? Or will the loss of the money put it on the rocks?"

I stood there about three feet from him and looked him over. He was a little guy, slender, and always a good dresser. A flashy dresser. Tried to make up in good clothes what he lacked in size.

That crack about the money tore it.

All that Marvin was supposed to know about it was what had come over the radio. There had been nothing in the announcer's statement about the safe being open and the

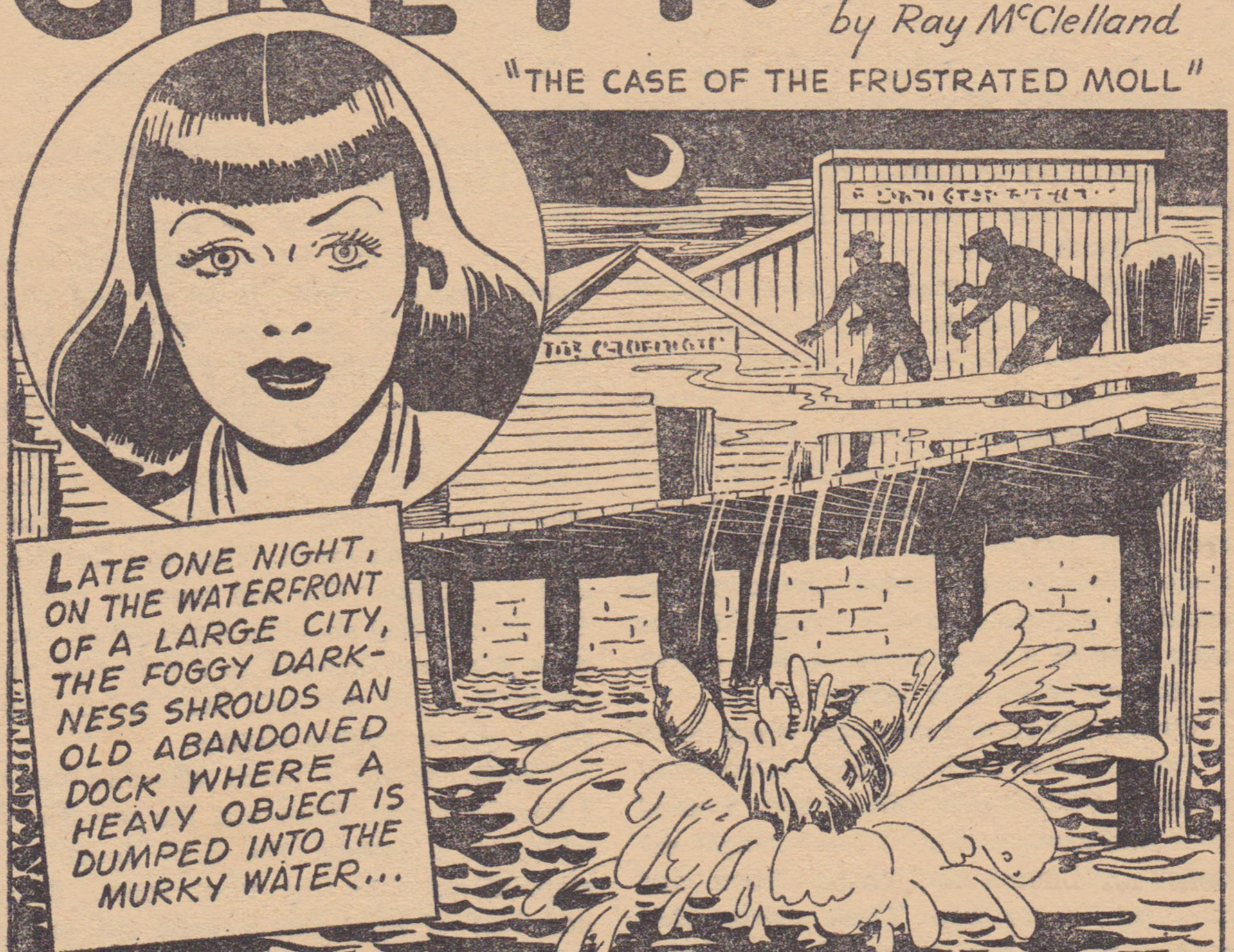
(Continued on page 122)

Introducing GAIL FORD —

GIRL FRIDAY

by Ray McClelland

"THE CASE OF THE FRUSTRATED MOLL"



THAT PUNK USED TO BE A PICK-POCKET BUT RECENTLY HE'S BEEN RUNNING AROUND WITH THE DRY DOCK MOB - BIG JIM CINZANO'S CROWD.

DOT KLINE WAS HIS GIRL, SHE MIGHT KNOW SOMETHING -

YOU WON'T GET ANYWHERE WITH HER. WHY DON'T YOU LET ME WORK THAT ANGLE?

THAT'S A GOOD IDEA, GAIL. TIM WILL STAY CLOSE BY IN CASE YOU NEED HELP FAST.

NEXT DAY, A NEW GIRL MOVES INTO THE HOUSE WHERE DOT LIVES...

THIS ROOM IS TEN DOLLARS A WEEK.

OKAY, I'LL TAKE IT.

BEFORE LONG, GAIL MEETS DOT...

HELLO-

HIYA!

BATH

SOON THEY BECOME FRIENDLY...

THE COPS MADE IT TOO HOT FOR ME IN BOSTON. I JUST GOT IN HERE THIS MORNING.

2.

I USED TO BE IN THE PICKPOCKET RACKET. MY BOY FRIEND TAUGHT ME. BUT I HAVE BIGGER THINGS IN VIEW NOW.

LATER...

THEY'RE WHISTLING AT YOU, KID. YOU'VE MADE A HIT.

LET'S EAT HERE. THE JOINT IS RUN BY BIG JIM CINZANO. HE'S THE BOSS OF THE WATERFRONT, AND A SPECIAL FRIEND OF MINE.

HELLO, HONEY, MEET MY GIRL FRIEND.

HELLO, DOT DARLING. PLEEZ TO MEETCHA, BABE. YOU GOTTA NICE SHAPE.

AS THEY LEAVE, DOT WATCHES BIG JIM IN A MIRROR AS HE EYES GAIL ...

THE BIG BUM! HE'S FALLING FOR THIS NEW DAME!

3.

DOT AND BIG JIM SURE ARE THICK! SHE DOESN'T SEEM TO MISS THE LATE BOY FRIEND ANY-

THAT NIGHT, GAIL MEETS MAC...

BIG JIM CINZANO IS MIXED UP IN IT. I'M GOING TO PLAY UP TO HIM.

OKAY, GAIL, BUT BE CAREFUL.

GAIL GOES TO THE CAFE ALONE...

CINZANO'S CAFÉ

HELLO, BABE. I WANNA TALK TO YUH. COME INTO MY OFFICE.

SURE, BIG BOY.

YOU'RE A NICE LOOKIN' DAME. HOW ABOUT PLAYIN' BALL WIT' DE MOB? WE NEED A FRONT GAL. I'LL SEE YOU'RE CUT IN FOR GOOD DOUGH.

WHAT'S MORE, BIG JIM'S GAL GETS DIAMONDS AND ANYTHING ELSE SHE WANTS - SEE?

WHY-WHY- LET ME THINK IT OVER.

4

OKAY, BABY. DROP OVER AND SEE ME HERE TOMORROW NIGHT.

DOWNSTAIRS, DOT COMES IN..

THAT'S HER HAT. SHE MUST BE IN BIG JIM'S OFFICE.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

JUST VISITING, DEARIE.

DON'T YOU TRY TO DITCH ME, JIM CINZANO! WE'RE IN THIS TO OUR NECKS - TOMMY COULD HAVE BEEN ALIVE TODAY IF--

THINGS ARE GETTING HOT!

NOTHING LIKE A JEALOUS WOMAN TO SPILL THE BEANS! I THINK THE TIME IS JUST ABOUT RIPE--

MAC, TELL THE INSPECTOR TO SURROUND BIG JIM'S PLACE TOMORROW NIGHT ABOUT TEN. LISTEN IN AT HIS OFFICE!

NEXT DAY...

YOU'RE NOT WANTED AROUND HERE. HIT THE ROAD!

I'VE GOT PLANS HERE - AND I INTEND TO STAY -

YOU WITCH! YOU WANT TO TAKE MY PLACE WITH BIG JIM!

OW!

BREAK IT UP, GIRLS!

THAT NIGHT, DOT WATCHES WHEN GAIL ENTERS BIG JIM'S CAFE...

CAFE

HELLO, BIG JIM. HERE I AM!

I KNEW YOU'D BE BACK, BABY.

6

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO MY PROPOSITION?

WELL, YOU KNOW HOW GIRLS LOVE DIAMONDS, JIM-

DOT COMES CRASHING IN...

YOU HUSSY!

YOU DOUBLE-CROSSING BABBOON! YOU CAN'T DITCH ME FOR THIS DAME!

YEAH? I WANTED YOU LAST WEEK AND NOW I DON'T SO WHAT?

I'LL SPILL IT TO THE COPS YOU BUMPED TOMMY!

YOU CAN'T PROVE IT, AND BESIDES, YOU HELPED. YOU WANTED TO GET RID OF HIM SO YOU COULD WORK FOR ME!

YOU HEEL!

OUTSIDE THE WINDOW, MAC BLOWS HIS WHISTLE...

I'VE HEARD ENOUGH!

COPS BEGIN TO BARGE IN DOWNSTAIRS . . .

...AS WELL AS UPSTAIRS...

ALL RIGHT, BOYS, TAKE THESE TWO TO THE GOW

DAMN THAT GIRL!

IT'S ALL HER FAULT!

IT SURE IS, SISTER! SHE MADE YOU TIP YOUR HAND FASTER THAN ANY MAN COULD.

I'M PROUD OF MY "GIRL FRIDAY" AND SO IS THE WHOLE DEPARTMENT!

8

DON'T MISS GIRL FRIDAY IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

Death at Dragon's Head

Illustrated by Joseph Sokoli

AS soon as I came to the place, I could see why it was called Dragon's Head Inn. It was a low-built rambling structure, painted a bright dragon-green, and was sprawled over the hilltop like some great slumbering monster that had just risen from the sea behind it. Over the main entrance was an elaborate sign, displaying a dragon's head with red electric bulbs for eyes and red neon lightning shooting from its mouth.

It had a curious effect on me. I didn't know whether to be impressed or depressed.

By H. C. BUTLER

Eve Dare was running away from threatening doom, but little did she know that it was waiting for her in the little hideaway where she thought she was safe. Only Bill Foy knew about the hand from the past that snuffed out her joyous life.

I braked my jalopy in front of the place, got out, and went into the yawning doorway. I found the inside to be like any other resort hotel lobby, except that the dragon motif was evident on the walls, draperies, and what not. I picked up a Los Angeles newspaper at the newsstand, found myself an easy chair near the receiving desk, and proceeded to unlax.

The newspaper was a blind really, because I didn't read it. Instead, I kept my eyes riveted on the receiving desk and the

In the murdered girl's purse I found something that opened my peepers.

dapper clerk behind it. In a few minutes Eva Dare, the motion picture actress, was due to arrive. I was to meet her here, a date I didn't want to miss.

It had sounded like an interesting case when Eva Dare had called me at my office in L.A. I'm Billy Foy, a private dick, and I'd done some routine work for Eva before. This time, though, it hadn't sounded routine. In fact, it sounded dangerous.

She hadn't told me much about it on the phone, except to say that she'd received several phone calls threatening her life. She rattled on that she was allergic to police, and didn't want the publicity that would accompany a police investigation. So she'd got in touch with me.

It had sounded sort of crazy. But the craziest part was the fact that I had to drive seventy miles up the coast to Dragon's Head Inn to meet her and talk it over.

"I'm going there incognito," her voice purred over the phone. "Sort of hiding out, as it were, until this thing blows over. I suggest you be in the lobby about noon tomorrow when I arrive. Follow me to my room about fifteen minutes later. I'll tell you more about it then."

Well, you don't turn down a client with as much mazuma as Eva Dare, even if you have to go to Timbuktoo for an interview. So here I was at Dragon's Head, waiting for this glamor girl who had half the male hearts in the country missing beats to show up.

I knew her the moment I saw her. She was wearing dark glasses, and the fur collar on her coat was pulled up over the lower part of her face in such a way that the casual observer would have missed her identity by a country mile. But there was no mistaking that form. It had been draped in more abbreviated costumes than Dotty Lamour's, and a mere coat couldn't begin to camouflage it.

I HAVE heard dames referred to as panther-like, but Eva Dare was the only one I ever saw who did the description justice. She was thirty-nine years old — a gossip tidbit that wasn't known to the movie-going public—but even so she was enough to knock the eyes out of a cigar store Indian.

She swayed up to the receiving desk with a cat-like motion, then registered her name while the dapper clerk looked on with appreciation. When she finished, the old boy snapped out of it, reached for the key, and crooked a finger at an ancient bellhop who looked like he'd been too long in the same job.

"Room 221," said the clerk, giving out with his best professional smile. "If you want anything, just ring."

A second later the gray-haired old bellhop and the dazzling Eva Dare disappeared into an elevator. I stuck my head behind the newspaper again, waited exactly fifteen minutes, then ambled toward the elevator myself.

Room 221 was at the end of a long corridor. I knocked on the door softly, then cooled my heels while Eva Dare was making up her mind to answer. Apparently she was having trouble deciding, because she didn't break any sprint records getting to the door. After a polite interval, I knocked again. No go.

Well, there are times when a private dick doesn't stand on protocol. I tried the doorknob, found that it worked, and pushed the door inward. Then I turned to a pillar of ice.

Just inside the door, Eva Dare was sprawled ungracefully on the floor. Her dark glasses had come off and were laying on the carpet nearby, her coat collar was pulled down to reveal a generous view of her face. But it wasn't a very pretty face now—not nearly as pretty as show-goers had become accustomed to on the silver screen.

Eva Dare had been strangled. Her dark eyes bulged from her head, staring grotesquely at the ceiling. Her lips were drawn back tight like rubber-bands, and from between them the tip of a blue tongue lolled. Across her white throat was an ugly red line where some object like a rope had been used to do the job.

Well, I've seen my quota of corpses, so I wasn't very long recovering from this one. I stepped inside quickly, closed the door

behind me, feeling a little twinge of anger at whoever had destroyed a lovely creature like Eva Dare. I had been hired to find out who was threatening her over the phone. Now I felt a moral obligation to find out who had carried out those threats.

Since she'd just arrived, there wasn't much point in going over her room. But her baggage looked promising — a large and small suitcase and a purse.

I tried the suitcases first, but no luck. All she had was a lot of expensive clothing and the usual supplies carried by one who intends to spend time away from home. But in her purse was something that opened my peepers.

Fishing through the assorted junk in her purse, I finally hauled forth a small clipping from a newspaper. It was obviously an old clipping, since it was ragged and yellowish in color. It read:

NICK NOVELLI DRAWS
20 YEAR SENTENCE

Los Angeles:—Nick Novelli, manager of a small night club known as the Savoy, was convicted in the robbery-murder of Anthony Wiznak, wealthy real estate agent, today. He was sentenced to twenty years in prison for his part in the crime. Novelli had a previous police record.

I GAWKED at the clipping for some time, trying to figure it out. But if the Greeks had a word for it, I didn't know what it was. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out why a nice wren like Eva Dare would be interested in a twenty year sentence ladled out to a mug like this Novelli.

I tried to think back, to remember some of the details connected with the Novelli case, but I couldn't. After all, murders are a dime a dozen, and it's a rare case that you can remember more than a year after it's committed. And judging from the aged tint to the newspaper clipping, the Novelli case must have occurred a long time ago. I racked my brains.

I glanced at the article again, trying to tie it up with the threatening phone calls Eva Dare had received. It was distinctly possible that the two were related. It didn't seem logical that the newspaper clipping was a permanent part of Eva Dare's purse. It seemed more likely that she had placed it in her purse for one purpose — to show me. In that case, there must be some connection between the threatening phone calls and the sentencing of Nick Novelli to twenty years in the pen for murder.

I put the clipping back in the purse. Then, deciding there was nothing more of interest in the room, I left, closing the door behind me. Back down in the lobby, I found Dave Hamilton, the rotund little manager of Dragon's Head, standing idly about.

Hamilton was one of these five-by-five individuals with a bald, pinkish head, tiny shell-like ears, and a global face. I introduced myself, ushered him into a chair, and sat down across from him.

"What I've got to say you're not going to like," I told him. "There's been a murder here."

That threw him for a loss. I saw his round eyes pop out like marbles out of a bag. His tiny mouth formed an exasperated O, and he started to wring his hands nervously, like an old woman.

"Murder?" he gasped.

I nodded.

"Eva Dare has been strangled in her room," I said slowly.

It took him a little while to get it. Finally he reached out a chubby hand and grabbed my arm. His eyes were wide with fright.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I'm positive."

Hamilton wagged his round head slowly. He still didn't look like he believed it.

"Eva Dare! Good Heavens, that's terrible!" The look of concern spread over his face, like spilled ink on a tablecloth. "How do you know all this?" he asked suddenly.

I told him the whole story. How I'd arranged to meet Eva Dare in her room at Dragon's Head. And how, when I got there, she was dead. Hamilton suppressed a shudder.

"Eva Dare was one of our most promi-

nent guests," he said in a rueful tone. "Think of the terrible publicity—"

"It can't be helped." I shrugged. "You'll have to notify your house dick and also the cops. Meanwhile, I'd like to talk to the bellhop who took Eva upstairs. He might be able to add something."

THE bellhop, as I'd observed before, was no kid. In fact, he looked as if he'd seen at least fifty summers pass, but he was the kind that never grows out of a bellhop's job. He was small, with a creased face and pouchy pale blue eyes behind thick spectacles. His hair, edging out from beneath a red cap, was steel gray and he had a wispy gray mustache tickling his upper lip. Dave Hamilton nervously made the introduction.

"This is Lester Kratz — Mr. Foy," he mumbled. "Mr. Foy would like to ask a few questions, Kratz."

Kratz nodded, but his brow wrinkled in a puzzled frown.

"You recently took a lady up to Room 221," I said. "Did you know who she was?"

Kratz's lined face broke into a grin and he pushed his red cap back on his head.

"Yes, sir—I sure did," he said elatedly. "That was Eva Dare, the movie star. She's a repeater here."

I looked at him.

"A repeater?"

"I mean she comes back here often," Kratz explained. "She has Room 221 reserved all the time and makes trips up here whenever she can. Everybody in the hotel knows her, sir."

"In other words," I said, "most of the hotel personnel knows Room 221 is hers exclusively?"

Lester Kratz nodded, his pale blue eyes blinking behind the thick spectacles.

"Sure. News like that gets around, you know."

I thought it over. It seemed highly possible that whoever had killed Eva Dare had been waiting in her room for her. I had been seeking to narrow down the list of suspects by finding out who knew Eva's room number in advance, but if all the hotel employees—plus maybe a few outsiders I didn't know about—had the room number, it wouldn't help much. I decided to come clean with Kratz.

"Look, Kratz," I said. "You're probably wondering why I'm asking questions. The fact is, Eva Dare has just been murdered."

Kratz's wrinkled face went as blank as a prize fighter's after a haymaker. It took a long time to sink in.

"That can't be," he said incredulously. "I just took her up—"

"I know. That's what makes you a key man in this, Kratz—if you can remember certain things. First, did you notice anything unusual about Eva Dare today? Did she seem worried?"

Kratz shook his head slowly.

"I'm sorry. I—I didn't notice anything."

"What about her room?" I asked. "Could there have been anyone hiding in it? In a closet maybe?"

Kratz frowned and fingered his stringy mustache.

"I—I suppose there might have been. You see, I can't help you much because I didn't go into her room. I just took her to the door, set her bags inside, and left. That's the way I dress in all repeaters."

I COULD see Kratz wasn't going to be much help. I started to say something to Hamilton, who was standing nearby still wringing his hands, when loud voices at the registration desk caught by attention. A tall, clean-shaven man with sharp gray eyes was in the act of giving the desk clerk a rough going over.

"Look, buddy!" he was saying. "Don't give me that stuff! I happen to know Eva Dare is here, and I want to see her!"

It sounded interesting, so I sauntered over. When I came up the tall man gave me a frigid glance that would have thawed out a hula dancer.

"I heard you asking for Eva Dare," I said. "Who are you?"

The tall man spun around sharply to face what he apparently construed to be a new menace. He gave me a quick once-over.

"Who wants to know?" he snapped abruptly.

I told him who I was, and I saw his tensely angry face soften a little.

"I'm Miles Clark, Eva's press agent," he said, lowering his voice this time. "I followed her up here. I was with her last night and she acted worried about something. When her maid told me this morning she'd left for Dragon's Head, I decided to follow her here and find out what was cooking."

"You sure came at the right time," I said. Then I told him about Eva's death. He was more surprised than Kratz or Hamilton had been. He simply stared at me, speechless, his handsome face going a little pale. Finally, after a long tense interval, he managed three staggering words.

"It—can't—be—"

"It is, though." I motioned him to a soft couch and we sat down. Hamilton and Kratz stood nearby, Hamilton nervously working his hands, Kratz tugging thoughtfully at his thin mustache. I gave Clark time to get over the shock, then started to pump him.

"Eva told me she had been receiving threatening phone calls," I said. "Did you know about that?"

Clark shook his head, still a bit dazed. I went on.

"You're her press agent, Clark. You should know something about Eva's past that might help us. Have any idea who might have threatened her—or killed her?"

Clark looked me squarely in the eye then. His face was set in grim lines.

"I haven't the slightest idea, Foy. I know very little about Eva's past, as a matter of fact. She was always very secretive about it—tight as a clam. All I know is that her real name was Eva Darwin, which was changed to Eva Dare by the movies. She started her singing career in a small Los Angeles night club. In fact, that's where a talent scout found her."

Well, I have always been good at adding two and two and coming up with something close to the right answer. As soon as Clark said "small Los Angeles night club" I thought of the yellow newspaper clipping I had found in Eva Dare's purse.

Nick Novelli, the killer who had been sent up for twenty years, had been manager of a small night club in L.A. called the Savoy! And the fact that Eva Dare had the clipping in her purse indicated some connection between herself and the club! Things were beginning to perk up, so I pressed my luck.

"What night club was it? The Savoy?" I asked.

But I was expecting too much. Clark just shrugged.

"Don't even know. Some cheap joint. But why—"

I turned to Hamilton. He started nervously when I spoke to him, like he was waking up from a nightmare.

"Call the cops in, Hamilton," I said. "I'm taking a quick run into Los Angeles. Tell the bulls I'm mixed up in the case, and that I'll be back later. I think they'll trust me—I hope."

IT WAS a seventy mile jog into L.A., but I made it in short order. A quick look in a phone book gave me the address of the Savoy, which turned out to be just what I expected.

From outside it looked small and cheap. Inside, it was smaller and cheaper. The place was low-ceilinged, smoke-filled, with the stale odor of liquor in the air. There was a two-by-four dance floor, a three-piece band, and general bedlam.

A stone-faced mug that passed for a head-waiter strolled up and gave me an obsequious smile. When I asked for the manager's office he froze up like an old maid on a blind date.

"Who are you?" he asked bluntly.

I told him, in a way that made an impression.

"I'm Bill Foy, a shamus. If he doesn't see me now, he'll have to see the cops later."

This caused the head-waiter to start moving like a spurred horse, and I followed him to a door at the back of the joint with the name, "Lou Vance, Manager" in gilt-edged letters.

The best way to get into such places is to barge in like an Army tank out of control, so I pushed my way into the room as soon as the waiter opened the door. This

procedure got me a dirty look from the waiter, but it got me in too.

"This man is Bill Foy, a private dick," said the waiter quickly. "He wants to see you."

Lou Vance sat behind a highly polished desk which was only one feature of an attractive office entirely out of keeping with what I'd seen outside. He was a dark-skinned man with sleek black hair combed stiffly back, black eyebrows and eyes, and a thin, neatly-trimmed mustache. His face broke into a beaming smile that seemed a little too eager as he waved the waiter from the room.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Foy," he asked pleasantly.

"That's right—Vance at your service!" chuckled a feminine voice from the side of the room, and for the first time I saw a buxom blonde woman lolling in a chair on my right. She was maybe forty-five, but resented it. She was painted heavily and dressed in a low-cut gown that clung to a form which had long since given up any protense of being willowy. She gave me a knowing wink from a mascaraed eye.

"Vance will do anything if it doesn't cost him dough," she harped maliciously. "I've been trying to get a raise in salary for a year now."

"Shut up, Mattie!" Vance shot the woman a mean look, then turned back to me. "What do you want, Foy?" he asked, more sharply this time.

I decided to give it to him straight, with no sugar.

"I'm investigating a murder," I said. "The trail has turned up a character named Nick Novelli. Know him?"

THE pleasant expression on Vance's finely-chiseled face slid into a frown. I had the feeling he was weighing his answer before he spoke.

"Yeah—I know who he is," he said cautiously. "He used to run this place before he was sent to jail. That was twenty years ago—twenty-one, to be exact."

Twenty-one years ago? That sounded interesting.

"He was sent up for a twenty-year stretch," I said. "If that was twenty-one years ago, then he's probably out by now—right?"

Lou Vance shrugged. His dark eyes made me nervous. They were on me every instant.

"I wouldn't know if he's out or not," Vance said easily. "This place is under my management now and has no connection with Nick Novelli. Moreover, I'm very busy, so if that's all you want to know—"

"It isn't. I want to know if Novelli ever had a girl named Eva Darwin singing for him. Remember her?"

Vance's face suddenly clouded and he made an impatient move of his hand.

"I'm sure I don't know who Novelli had singing for him twenty-one years ago—" he began, but the stout blonde cut him down.

"I knew Eva Darwin," she said quickly, and I noticed a mean, malicious note in her voice. "She and I came here about the same time, twenty-one years back. She eventually went into the movies and I'm still singing corny numbers at the Savoy." She shrugged beefy shoulders. "I never did get the breaks."

I gave Mattie the eye. So did Vance, but there was a strained look on his face. I gathered that Vance would have felt more comfortable if the blonde babe had kept her mouth shut.

"What connection was there between Eva Darwin and Novelli?" I rapped at her.

A twisted smile curved Mattie's painted lips.

"There was plenty of connection," she chuckled. "She was married to the guy."

"Married?" That was a shocker.

"Sure." Mattie shifted heavily in her chair. "Eva was only eighteen when she came here and innocent as a lamb. Novelli was thirty and slick. Anyway, Novelli started making passes at Eva, gave her a sucker line, and she fell for it. They were married, and about three months later Eva found out what kind of a guy he really was when they nailed him on a murder rap and sent him up."

"So?"

"So the kid was shocked. Especially when

she found out later that the way she'd answered some of the questions the cops had asked her helped to put the finger on him. Novelli was sore too. He figured she deliberately crossed him and threatened to get her if he ever got out again."

"So that's it," I said, as the whole thing began dawning.

"That's it," said Mattie, nodding her blonde tresses. "Novelli could hold a grudge too. I wouldn't be surprised if — " She stopped short, her mouth falling open and her eyes widening. "Say! Don't tell me that Eva's been—"

I saw a frown criss-cross Vance's dark face.

"She's been murdered," I told them. They looked at me aghast.

The news dropped a hush over the room like a stifling blanket. I took advantage of the moment to do some quick thinking.

Things were beginning to make sense. Nick Novelli and Eva Darwin had been man and wife. Novelli had been sent up for twenty years on a murder rap and had accused Eva for his plight, threatening to get her when he was free again.

THAT had been twenty-one years ago. No doubt Novelli had been released from prison by now and had called Eva on the phone, making threats against her life. She had become frightened. She didn't want to call the police, because she was afraid that if the papers got the story of her marriage to Novelli, the killer, the bad publicity might ruin her career. So she'd called me to meet her at Dragon's Head, probably intending to give me the job of locating Novelli and negotiating some kind of settlement with him so he'd forget his threats.

But somehow Novelli had learned of her plans to hide out at Dragon's Head, and had managed to finish her off in her room. As far as I could see, Novelli was my man. All I had to do was find him.

The ring of the telephone on the desk stirred me from my thoughts. Vance picked up the instrument, barked a curt hello, then listened. When he hung up his black eyes had slitted.

And then, very suddenly, he had a gun in his hand!

"That was Novelli, himself," he said grinning. "He suspected you were here — and he doesn't want you to leave."

I looked at the gun in Vance's steady hand.

"So you and Novelli *are* in cahoots, eh?"

Vance smiled superciliously.

"We belong to the same — er — social gathering," he said.

"Gang, you mean," I correcteed. I didn't try to pull my punches.

While I talked I tried to estimate my chances of jumping Vance's gun, but the odds weren't good. I didn't hear the door open behind me, nor realize the presence of the mug at my back.

Then, when the blow fell, my head exploded in a million fragments and I dropped quickly into black oblivion.

I was dreaming about dragons. In fact, one of them was licking its chops with a full red tongue, anticipating a good noonday snack with me as the meat dish. Every time he licked his ugly lips he made a noise that sounded like slup, slup.

I came out of its slowly. When consciousness ebbed back, I found that my head ached throbbingly, that my mouth was dry—and that the slup, slup sound continued. Then I realized what it was. I was near the sea and could hear the waves slopping against the pilings of a dock.

I opened my eyes, found myself in a small, square basement room lit by a feeble light overhead. I swung my legs down and sat on the edge of the old cot I'd been lying on. Then the man's voice, thick and heavy, came.

"Just stay where you are, bud. Don't get funny."

I looked around. A fat, uncouth character with beady brown eyes and full red lips sat at a table nearby. On the table was a gun and a flask. I didn't know whether he'd been using the gun lately, but I could see he'd been using the flask. He had a half-numb look on his face, and his eyes were bleary.

"Where am I?" I asked him, rubbing my head.

An evil grin spread over his thick features.

"You're in a little seaside shack that Novelli and his gang use as a hideout. It ain't far from Dragon's Head, case you're interested." He shrugged his shoulders and grinned more. "Anyway, why do you care? You won't be here long. When Novelli gets here we're taking you for a ride—see?"

I saw. I saw something else too. I saw that this ginzo had been hitting that flask heavy, and that he was far from steady. He apparently was the only one who guarded me.

"Where's your gang?" I asked cautiously.

He was just drunk enough to reply.

"They're getting a boat ready for you. A nice cabin cruiser. They're gonna take you out, tie some weights to you, and dump you. Fish food—that's you."

It sounded very nice. Typical gangster style. Novelli, after twenty years, apparently still employed the old methods.

I KEPT looking at the fat character. There were a few feet between me and the table. With an ordinary guy I wouldn't have tried it, but this man was drunk. Liquor would have slowed up his reflexes. If I could leap up suddenly, dump the table . . .

I decided to try it. I sat waiting until the right instant, when his watery eyes wavered to one side—then I sprang forward. I went in low, caught my shoulder under the table and reared upward. I saw his hand go for the gun on the table, but he never made it. The gun rattled to the floor, and the mug went over backward with the table on top of him.

One hard sock on the whiskers put the damper on him. Then I scrambled up, grabbed him by his fat arms and tugged his big body across the room into an obscure corner. I went back, got the gun—just as a noise, like scraping feet outside, snapped me to attention.

Somebody was coming. I flattened myself against the wall near the only door to the room, so that the opening door would conceal me from the view of anyone entering. An old gag, but an effective one.

THE man who came into the room was small but powerfully built, dressed in a dark suit with a neat pinstripe. He stood in the doorway uncertainly a moment, his back to me. Then he spotted the mug's body in the corner and took a few steps into the room. That's when I nailed him.

"Turn around, Novelli," I said. "And reach high, because I've got a gun and a trigger finger that itches plenty."

He stood stock-still a moment, frozen. Then, slowly, his hands crawled over his head. Then he turned around, facing me.

It was Lester Kratz, the Dragon's Head bellhop!

I grinned at him.

"I didn't tumble to you at first," I said. "But after I found out that Novelli was really the man I was looking for and that he'd served twenty years in jail, I began to tie things up. I began to suspect, then, that you and Novelli were one and the same."

Kratz's pale blue eyes, behind the thick spectacles, glistened in the feeble light. But he said nothing.

"You're Nick Novelli all right, Kratz," I went on. "You just finished serving two decades in the jug for murder. You nursed a grudge against Eva Dare all the while you rotted in prison, and you determined to get even with her when you got out. You got out a year ago—maybe longer than that for good behavior — and laid low for a long time. You even went out and got a job, to give the appearance of being back on the straight and narrow. But the job you got figured into your plans."

I pushed the gun a little closer and he backed up. I was tempted to try out my marksmanship.

"You knew that Eva Dare had a habit of going to Dragon's Head Inn. That news has been spilled in movie magazines and newspapers, so that it wasn't hard for you to find out. So when you got out of jail you made a beeline for Dragon's Head and landed a job as a bellhop. How'd you work that, by the way?"

Lester Kratz grinned. He was just conceited enough to tell me.

"It was easy," he boasted. "I used to be a bellhop when I was a kid. I told Hamil-

ton, the manager, that I'd been away for my health, but that I had experience as a bellhop and would like a job. I put the sob-story and the old fuddydud hired me."

"Okay — from there it's easy," I said. "Knowing Eva Dare came to Dragon's Head habitually, you waited your chance. When she didn't show up quick enough, you became impatient and decided to lure her out there. Every night, when you were through work, you drove into L.A. and phoned her, threatening her life. Finally, because she knew you were in the city and a danger to her, she decided to get out. She went to Dragon's Head to hide out, like you figured she would. The rest was simple. You took her to her room and killed her before you came back down, using a piece of rope you had ready for the job. Naturally, Eva didn't recognize you as a bellhop, because your appearance had changed. You were only thirty when you married her, and twenty years changes a man—especially twenty years of prison life. Besides, you probably didn't have that sleezy mustache you got now."

Kratz smiled, almost proudly. But he was a curious devil, who had to know all the answers.

"You said you suspected me. How?"

I chuckled at that one.

"You gave yourself away, Kratz. When I questioned you at the hotel you denied having gone into Eva Dare's room when you took her upstairs. That was a bad break to make, Kratz. You know darned well that a bellhop *always* enters a guest's room and pretends to look around while waiting for his tip. It sounded to me that, for some reason, you were lying—and that made me suspicious. I became more suspicious when you made your second break."

Kratz—Novelli—looked at me with weak eyes. His mouth had gone suddenly tight.

"What break?" he snapped.

He was asking for it, so I let him have it.

"It was when you called Eva Dare a 'repeater', meaning that she came repeatedly to Dragon's Head. Also when you made the remark about 'dressing her in', meaning that you showed her to her room. Those two expressions branded you. They aren't hotel jargon, Kratz. You picked up those two expressions in prison and used them unconsciously when you got out.

"Dressing in a prisoner refers to the routine he goes through when he enters prison. And a repeater is a convict who is repeatedly coming back to prison for one misdemeanor after another. The use of those two prison terms—which you'd been employing for twenty years and couldn't break yourself from—stamped you in my mind as an ex-con. When I learned it was Novelli, an ex-con, I was looking for, it wasn't difficult to tie the two angles together."

KRATZ stood staring dully at me a moment, his watery eyes pale and expressionless. Then, all at once, a light seemed to jump into those eyes and he looked beyond me at something behind. I wasn't sure if it was a neat bit of acting or not, but I took a chance.

I spun around just in time to see the man in the doorway bring his hand down in a savage blow at my head. I stepped aside and the blow missed. Then I blasted a bullet into him and he crumpled over with a little groan.

It was Lou Vance.

Kratz was moving at the same time—moving in with a gun already yammering in his hand. I felt a bullet nick my ear, another spat viciously into the wall behind me. Then Kratz let out a scream and spun to the floor. I had been firing without even knowing it.

I looked at the mess around me. Kratz muttering curses as he sat on the floor, Vance groaning dismally, and the mug in the corner sleeping peacefully through the whole thing. I looked back at the bellhop. Lester Kratz alias Nick Novelli, or the other way around.

"Funny about ex-cons," I said. "They never seem to get enough of prison life. They always want to go back to their alma mater."

RAY HALE NEWS ACE

"SIDE SHOW MURDER"
by Douglas March

RAY HALE, STAR REPORTER FOR THE MIDVALE "CLARION" WANDERS TO THE OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN, WHERE A TRAVELLING CARNIVAL IS OPERATING..

THIS WAY, FOLKS! HURRY! HURRY! HURRY!

THE LOCAL CITIZENRY IS GETTING A BIG KICK OUT OF THE DANCERS...

OH BOY!

LOOK AT THAT BROAD SHAKE IT!

BUT HALE FINDS ONLY BOREDOM...

NOTHING OF INTEREST HERE, THESE CARNIVALS ARE ALL BORES-AND GYPS...

AFTER DOING THEIR "COME-ON" ACT, THE GIRLS TURN TO RE-ENTER THE TENT — WHEN ONE OF THEM SUDDENLY PITCHES TO THE FLOOR !!!

HALE, ALERT FOR NEWS, DASHES THROUGH THE MILLING CROWD...

WHAT'S UP? MAYBE THERE'S SOME NEWS HERE AFTER ALL --

THIS DOLL IS DEAD!

OOH-H!

POOR JANE!

SHORTLY, THE CITY PHYSICIAN CONFIRMS THAT THE CARNIVAL DANCER IS DEFUNCT...

SHE'S DEAD, ALL RIGHT, BUT NO SIGN OF WHAT KILLED HER.

HALE RETURS TO THE "CLARION" OFFICE . . .

WHAT DOES THE CITY EXAMINER SAY? SHE DIED OF POISON, EH? I SEE - I SEE --

BUT, BOSS, SHE COULD NOT HAVE TAKEN ANY POISON. I WAS LOOKING RIGHT AT HER.

HALE'S CURIOSITY IS AROUSED . . .

THAT POISON ANGLE DOESN'T SOUND RIGHT TO ME --

CITY MORTUARY

LOOK AT THAT LITTLE RED MARK ON HER SHOULDER, DOC. BETCHA SOMETHING STUCK HER THERE! WHAT SAY?

MAYBE. I'LL EXAMINE THE SPOT. WAIT HERE A WHILE --

A LITTLE WHILE LATER . . .

YOU'RE RIGHT, HALE. I FOUND THIS STEEL DART EMBEDDED IN HER SHOULDER - AND LOADED WITH POISON!

NOW WE'RE GETTING SOMEWHERE.

MEANWHILE, THE CARNIVAL OWNER IS DOWN AT POLICE HEADQUARTERS...

BUT, CHIEF, YOU CAN'T CLOSE US UP! I'LL BE RUINED!

LISTEN, THIS IS MURDER!

STILL, RATHER THAN THROW ALL YOUR CROWD OUT OF WORK, I'LL LET YOU CONTINUE TO OPERATE. BUT DON'T DARE LEAVE TOWN.

THANKS, CHIEF.

3

THE CARNIVAL SHOW STAYS OPEN, AND CROWDS ARE DRAWN OUT OF MORBID CURIOSITY TO THE SCENE OF THE RECENT TRAGEDY ...

HALE GOES INTO A SALOON FREQUENTED BY THE CARNIVAL WORKERS ...

HE STRIKES UP AN ACQUAINTANCE WITH A COUPLE OF THEM ...

-AND THE ODDS WERE 20 TO 1-

WHAT A HORSE-!

ANOTHER MAN ENTERS THE GROG SHOP...

THERE'S YOUR BARKER.

YES, IT'S SAM STONE. SO WHAT?

THE HEEL!

I TAKE IT YOU DON'T LIKE HIM SO MUCH,

NO. HE PICKS ON POOR SLIM - THAT GUY OVER THERE.

HALE RECOGNIZES THE MAN WHO PLAYED MUSIC FOR THE DANCING GIRLS...

THERE GOES SAM HE HASN'T A FRIEND IN THE SHOW. JANE USED TO BE HIS GIRL, BUT SHE LEFT HIM FOR SLIM. DUNNO WHAT SHE SAW IN THIS SCARECROW, BUT IT SURE MADE SAM MAD AND HE KICKS SLIM AROUND.

LATER, PASSING THE CARNIVAL TENTS HALE OVERHEARS AN ARGUMENT...

YOU KILLED JANE, YOU LOUSE! YOU WANTED HER BACK AND SHE HAD NO USE FOR YOU!

NO, CHUCK! I WAS SORE AT SLIM, BUT WHEN I SAW HER MAKING EYES AT YOU TOO I SAW SHE WASN'T WORTH THE TROUBLE

HALE SPIES ON THE BARKER AND THE CARNIVAL STRONG MAN, CHUCK WILLIS...

I REALIZED SHE'D NEVER BE TRUE TO ANY MAN, SO I DECIDED TO FORGET THE WHOLE THING AND LET YOU HAVE HER.

YOU LIE!

PLARK!

C'MON — PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER. CHUCK WILLIS IS GONE.

BUT I LOVED JANE — I WOULDN'T KILL HER!

HEY, FELLA YOU NEED A LITTLE HELP

NEXT DAY, AT THE NEWSPAPER OFFICE . . .

THE WHOLE CARNIVAL TROUPE IS DOWN AT HEADQUARTERS FOR MORE QUESTIONING.

THAT GIVES ME AN IDEA!

HALE SLIPS UNSEEN INTO THE ALMOST DESERTED CARNIVAL LOT-

1

THE REPORTER SEEKS OUT SLIM'S ROOM...

HE SEES AN INTERESTING PHOTOGRAPH...

A MALAY DANCING TROUPE - AND THE MUSICIAN IS NONE OTHER THAN OUR OLD FRIEND SLIM!

HERE'S HIS CLARINET. MAYBE HE'S A FRUSTRATED SYMPHONY PLAYER -

-AND ANOTHER. GOSH, THIS ONE IS LIGHT -- HARDLY WEIGHS AN OUNCE.

A PACKAGE OF PHONOGRAPH NEEDLES -- THAT'S FUNNY - HE DOESN'T HAVE ANY PHONOGRAPH IN HERE --

A FEW MINUTES LATER..

HEY, BOSS, HOLD THE PRESSES! I'VE GOT A STORY -- A BIG ONE! ABOUT THE CARNIVAL GIRL'S MURDER!

IN POLICE HEADQUARTERS...

HEY— WHAT DO YOU WANT? CAN'T YOU SEE I'M BUSY?

HOLD EVERYTHING, CHIEF! THE MURDER IS SOLVED!

THAT GUY SLIM, THE HORN-TOOTER, IS GUILTY. I'VE GOT PROOF!

HE HAD TWO INSTRUMENTS BUT THIS LIGHT ONE IS REALLY A BLOW-GUN. HE BUMPED THE DAME WITH A POISONED PHONO GRAPH NEEDLE. HE USED TO BE WITH A MALAY DANCING TROUPE. THAT'S WHERE HE LEARNED THIS METHOD OF KILLING.

HIS GIRL HAD A YEN FOR THE CARNIVAL STRONG MAN, AND HE WAS SO JEALOUS, HE CROAKED HER RATHER THAN LOSE HER.

YOU'VE GOT ME. I HAVE THE VIAL OF POISON RIGHT HERE, BUT YOU'LL NEVER HANG ME.

GURGLE! GURGLE! AW-W-K-K!!

HO-HUM! ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER STORY!

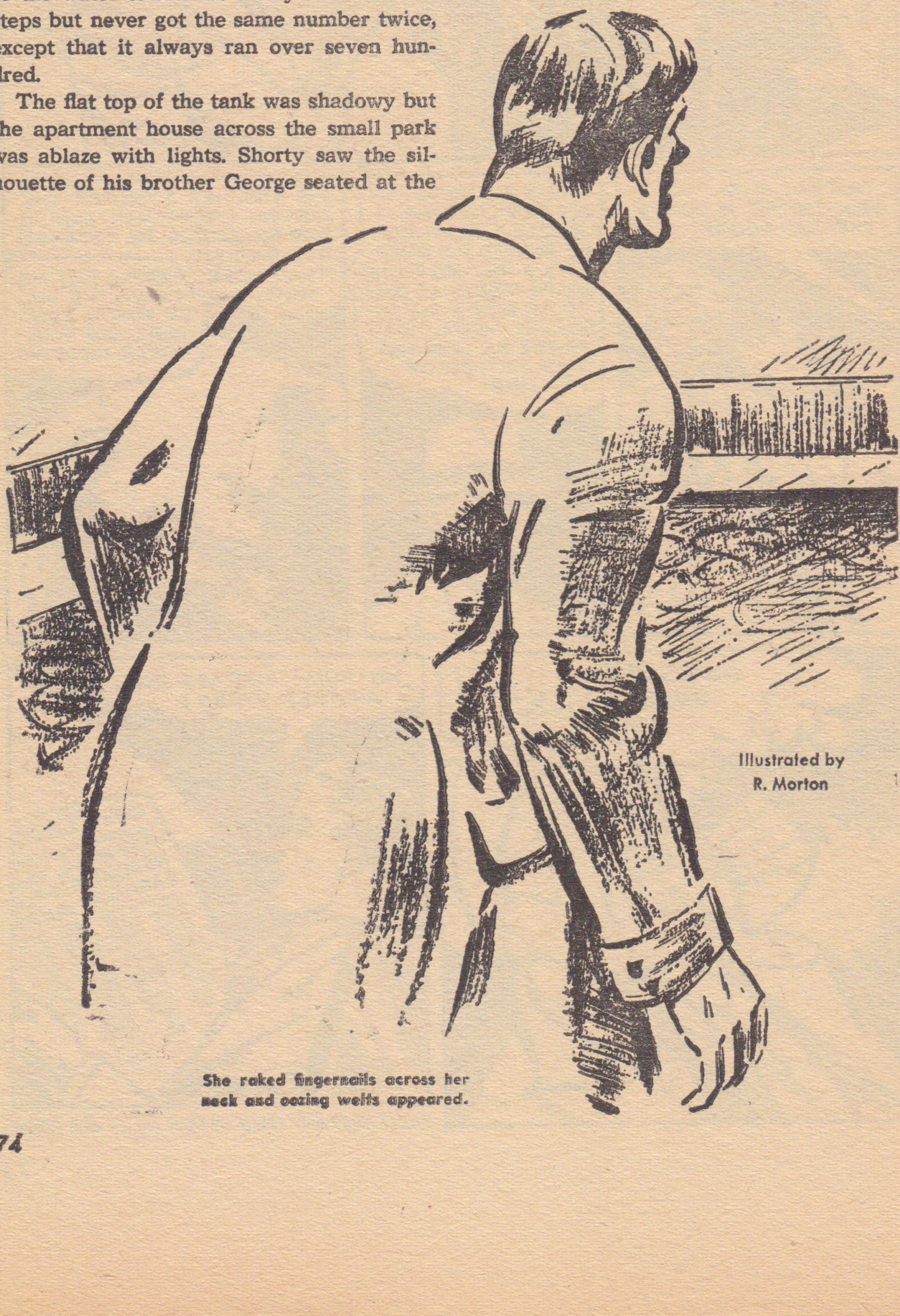
DON'T MISS RAY HALE IN OUR NEXT BIG ISSUE

LADY IN THE

By ALAN R. ANDERSON

IT WAS an hour after nightfall when Shorty Neff climbed the seven hundred and some odd steps to the top of the water tower. He always counted the steps but never got the same number twice, except that it always ran over seven hundred.

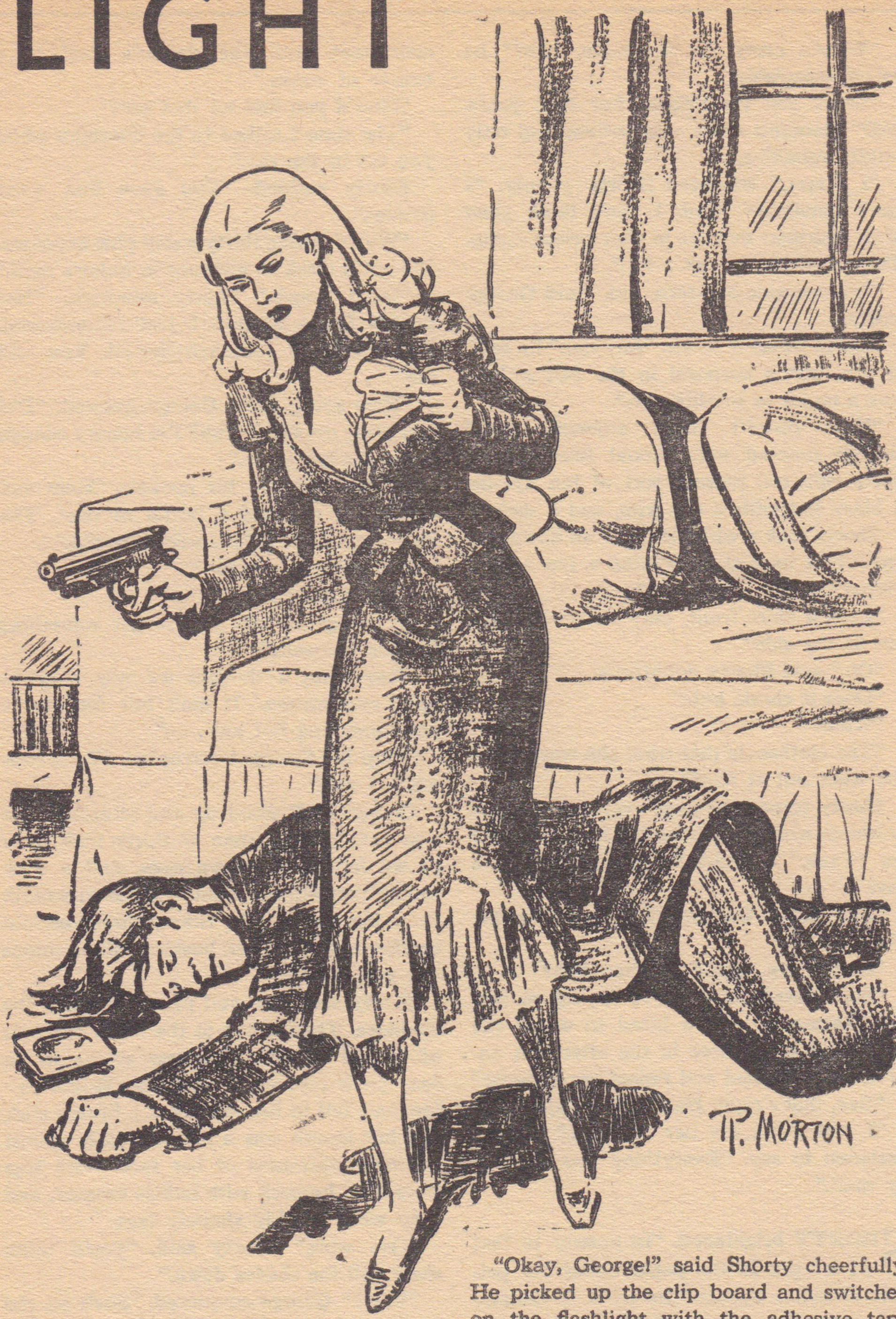
The flat top of the tank was shadowy but the apartment house across the small park was ablaze with lights. Shorty saw the silhouette of his brother George seated at the front of the tower squinting through the twenty-power spotting telescope on the tripod there.



Illustrated by R. Morton

She raked fingernails across her neck and oozing welts appeared.

LIGHT



"She came in at seven-ten," said George without turning around. "Write it down!" His brother was alert at once.

"Okay, George!" said Shorty cheerfully He picked up the clip board and switched on the flashlight with the adhesive tape over the lens. Pale light fell across the white paper. He wrote laboriously: *Subject arrived at*—

"What's army for seven-ten, huh?" he asked sheepishly.

"Don't you remember after four years, kid?" George's voice was patient and only mildly rebuking.

"I forget," admitted Shorty glumly. "I can't remember good. I can't think good after fourteen months in that prison camp. They sure beat us up a lot."

"It's one-nine-one-zero, kid," said George softly.

Shorty wrote it down. "Anyway," he said, "I was just a corporal in the M.P.s. You was a major in intelligence."

"That doesn't count anymore, kid," George pointed out. "Look! She wore a black suit, red pumps, sort of tan nylons, a black hat with a red trim, and a dicky."

Shorty took a while to get it all down and knew that he had misspelled a few words. "What's a dicky, George?"

"Like a shirt front, only fancy. It stuck out at the side."

"Oh," said Shorty doubtfully.

"Does it check, kid?"

"What?"

"The clothes. Is that what she wore when she went out at five?"

Shorty turned the page over and read his brother's writing, moving his lips as he did so. "Yeah," he said. "Only she carried a coat."

"Ah!" cried George. "She left it someplace."

"Maybe we should tell her, huh?"

"She doesn't know we're spying on her, kid. Remember, we're hired to watch the apartment from three in the afternoon until she goes to bed and report her actions?"

"Gee, that's right. Her husband hired us."

"I just think it's her husband," George hastened to say. "Everything was handled by mail."

SHORTY brightened. "In answer to that ad we put in the paper about our private detective agency," he cried. "I remember now. She and her husband live over there, only in different apartments. Gee whiz, that's silly."

"They're getting a divorce," explained George patiently. "He moved into a vacant apartment until the decree's final in a couple of weeks."

"How'd you find all that out?"

"The time I talked to the doorman while you sat in the car."

Shorty nodded. "You gave him some money."

"We're getting thirty a day plus expenses. We got a week in advance in today's mail."

"Good dough," Shorty admitted. "Her name's Sabra Sewell. I just remembered. Her husband's Jonathan Sewell. You told me."

"Nice going, kid!" George avowed. "Did you bring me some grub? I'm hungry enough to eat the telescope."

Shorty dug into his pockets. "Ham and cheese on rye and a bottle of beer. The beer's good and cold. I asked special."

"What'd you eat, kid?"

"The same thing."

"I thought I told you to get something hot for yourself!"

"Gee whiz, I thought we was goin' to split even-steven. It ain't fair for me to eat something hot an' . . ."

"Skip it!" George interrupted. "Take over while I eat!"

George Neff stood up and stretched. He was a tall, lanky man of thirty with crisp brown hair, soft brown eyes, and a wide mouth that always seemed about to wreath in a big smile. His twenty-three-year-old brother was a smaller, huskier edition minus the graying hair.

Shorty sat down and peered through the eyepiece. The woman in the black suit sort of leaped at him. She was sitting in an easy chair reading a magazine. Bright yellow hair fell to her shoulders a brassy slick and her mouth was a maroon dash against the oval whiteness of her face. Both legs were on a hassock with ankles crossed, and they were notably shapely legs.

"Gee whiz," Shorty said, "you'd think she'd pull the shades down."

"Why?" George countered. "She's on the fifth floor and the apartment fronts the park. Who'd expect two guys with a spotting scope and a pair of binoculars to be on the top of the water tower?"

"I never thought of that," said the

abashed Shorty. "Why do we always check what she wears in and out, huh?"

"To see if . . . oh, hell, kid, it doesn't matter. We just want to give our client good service."

"It's silly," Shorty protested. "What's he want her watched for if they're going to be divorced?"

"I figure like this, kid. If she's cheating, it'll change the alimony setup. Jonathan Sewell is well heeled."

"She sure has pretty legs," Shorty said admiringly. "She looks expensive."

"You hit the nail on the head, kid," George cried. "I've been trying to pin a tag on her all along. Expensive, that's it. The big spending kind. Nice work, kid!"

time, he thought, four numerals covering every hour of day and night without the bother of a.m. and p.m. He liked the system.

Suddenly Shorty sucked in his breath and gave out with a soft wolf whistle. "Gee whiz!" he cried in an awed voice. "Get a load of her, George! Boy, oh, boy!"

George jotted down the time, *2037*, left the comments for later, and hurried to his brother's side and picked up the twelve-power German binoculars he'd brought back from Europe.

The picture window ran almost the length of the living room and was about eight feet high. Sabra Sewell was in the far corner to their left preening herself in front of the full lengthed mirror on a standard. She wore

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Snooping through a telescope was fun as well as profitable, but these peeping toms couldn't prevent the old geezer who had hired them from being murdered, when all he wanted was a divorce from the gorgeous creature that they spied upon nightly.

SHORTY'S chubby cheeks warmed with pride. Praise from George was a lot better than a handshake from a four starred general. It was good to be back together again after the war years and the months in the hospital. It'd been the two of them against the world ever since their parents had been killed in an automobile accident when Shorty was eleven, George eighteen. Now they were business partners. It was swell.

Blonde Sabra Sewell stood suddenly and turned her back to the big picture window. Shorty watched her riffle slim fingers through the brassy slick of her hair, then stretch elaborately with upraised arms forming a shallow V. She headed toward the three doors grouped close together opposite the window. She went into the room to the right and closed the door.

"She went in the bedroom, George!"

"Check!" George wrote: *Subject entered bedroom at*—He glanced at his wrist-watch. It was 8:34. He added twelve and wrote: *2034*. A tidy, scientific method of telling a sketchy two-piece bathing suit. The diaper shorts bared her hip bones and was secured there by little bows. The same glossy material circled her torso like a sash, narrowing across her back and tied in a neat bow knot between her shoulder-blades. It was a spectacular eyeful.

"Gee whiz!" Shorty cried. "This is better than the Bijou."

"So that's where you go Friday nights!" said George in disgust. "I thought you went to the gun club."

"The new show opens Fridays," said Shorty defensively, "so I see it the same time the censors do."

George frowned thoughtfully. "It's October," he mused. "Looks as if she's planning on Florida or California after the divorce."

Sabra Sewell put on quite a show. She backed from the mirror, practiced a gliding walk up to it, performed a few pirouettes, then uncorked some head-high kicks; first right, then left. Breathing heavily, she stood examing her reflection.

"Like the Bijou," Shorty chortled. "She good enough to be in the line there."

"She used to be a dancer," George explained. "Was teamed up with a guy named Rolf Roz on the roadhouse circuit. He's dancing alone at a spot a hundred miles away. It may add, may not."

THEY watched Sabra Sewell go back into the bedroom and close the door. Her long legs in motion was a fine sight. George went back to what he militarily referred to as their, "Record of Events." He recorded the return to the bedroom in the bathing suit at *2046*.

"Hey, she's back out in a green hostess gown, you said it was," cried Shorty. Then added, "Hurry! She's back at the mirror taking the gown off."

George recorded the reentry at *2048*. He hurried to his kid brother's side and scooped up the binoculars and found his target just as she dropped the hostess gown.

"Robbed!" Shorty groaned.

Sabra Sewell wore another bathing suit. But it was a comparatively demure number that would have passed any beach censor. She appraised herself leisurely, then went back into the bedroom.

Shorty chuckled. "Am I glad I don't have to write all that junk down."

George grunted and went back to the clip board.

"She's back!" cried Shorty. "Got on those blue lounging pajamas. She's sitting in the chair reading again."

"Good!" George said, sighed. "Guess she wanted to see how the bathing suit looked under the hostess gown."

Shorty Neff had been thinking things over. "Look!" he said. "What if she goes out and doesn't come back for a long time?" We don't shadow her any."

"Now you're cooking!" George applauded. "I knew that once you got out of that hospital and started working, you'd get the cobwebs out of your brain."

Shorty warmed with pleasure. "I'm doin okay?" he asked shyly.

"Like a million, kid. I figure Sewell, if he's our client, has another agency shadowing her. It'd give him a double check. On her, and on the two agencies."

"That'd cost."

"He's got plenty. His mother has ten times as much."

Both stiffened as sirens shattered the silence of the night. The wailing shriek grew nearer, then ceased. In a minute a police cruiser stopped in front of the apartment house. Two more cars drove up and parked. A lot of men, uniformed and in civilian clothes, hurried into the lobby.

"What she doing, kid?"

"Reading. Guess she didn't hear."

"That's right. The place is soundproofed and air-conditioned."

"You sound worried, George. Have we got trouble?"

"I think so. I hope not."

Shorty's voice went up high. "George!"

"What, kid, what?"

"She's at the door. There's cops there. They're coming into the room."

George said, "They're really rolling. Something's happened to Sewell. They got the score quick. Probably from the clerk. Stand fast, kid! I'm going over. Stand fast until I come back."

"You bet, George, you bet!" Shorty agreed. He glued his eye to the telescope and heard the patter of his brother's footsteps fade away down the iron steps.

SABRA Sewell sat in the easy chair with her face buried in her hands. He saw her shoulders work. An elderly man with snow white hair and wearing a blue serge suit stood in front of her. The man was talking. The blonde kept shaking her head in violent negation without lifting her face from her hands. In the background men were moving through the apartment.

Finally a cop went to the door. Shorty gasped in surprise as his big brother was ushered in by a burly cop. The white-haired man said a few words to George, then the two of them went down by the mirror. The elderly man began to slap the nape of his neck with his right hand in a gesture of outraged anger and frustration. Then George Neff, the elderly man, and a police sergeant left the apartment.

Shorty heard them climbing the iron steps that spiraled up to the top of the water tower. Then a flashlight beam caught him in a blue-white brilliance. He turned his head around blinking against the glare.

"This is the setup we used," George said. "Shorty, Lieutenant Brice and Sergeant Taylor of the police are with me. It's okay."

"What's happened, George? What's happened, huh?"

"Jonathan Sewell's been murdered, kid. Shot through the forehead with a thirty-eight."

A nasal voice that seemed to fit Lieutenant Brice's spare figure said, "Pretty thin. Hired by letters with no signature. Paid by letters. An unknown client. I don't buy that guff, Neff."

George Neff's voice was edged. "The first letter said that our client would appear in person for the reports the day before the final hearing."

"I still don't buy."

"It was our first case," said George. "We needed the dough. What the hell laws did we break? We've got a license."

"Well, you trespassed up here, for one thing."

"We got permission from the water company," George said. "I'm fussy about such things. We signed a release in case we got hurt."

Brice's voice was incredulous. "To spy on an apartment? Bosh!"

"To take pictures," George explained.

"And we took pictures," Shorty cried, getting to his feet and dusting off the seat of his pants. "We took some dandy pictures of the waterfront with Mary Parker's camera."

"Who's she?" Brice asked.

"The woman I'm engaged to," said George, voice thin.

A guttural voice said, "It's too pat. Too obvious."

"What is, sergeant?" asked Brice testily.

"Like the book asks, 'Who profits by the crime?' And she has an alibi, thanks to these two gents."

George's voice went wild. "By God, if you're insinuating . . ."

"Pipe down!" Brice's voice cut like a razor blade. "He's trying to say that it was Sabra Sewell who hired you."

They saw Sabra Sewell preening herself before the full-length mirror.

"Plain as the nose on my face!" boomed the sergeant smugly. "She knew a murder was coming up. Therefore she knows who the killer is."

"Who found the body, sergeant?" asked Brice in a fretful tone of voice.

"Jim Abernathy. Sewell's business partner. How can he gain? The wife inherits the dough."

BRICE'S voice went savage. "Look, sergeant! Get all the facts before you pop off. Sewel was insured for two hundred thousand for the benefit of the partnership. So Jim Abernathy gets two hundred grand."

"Oh!" said the deflated sergeant, then rallied and said, "That big amount of insurance in itself . . ."

"Is customary in a partnership where success depends on the skill, personality, or connections of the partners. Sewell and Abernathy are stock brokers. Sewell's upper crust and his family and friends have plenty to invest. Abernathy's the office brains, the investment specialist. He couldn't sell an apple to a horse with his face."

Shorty Neff said, "Did you tell about the bathing suit?"

"Yeah, kid! She was going to Miami. Had new clothes, new luggage, and a plane reservation for a week after the final hearing."

Brice spat savagely at the top of the water tower. "It shouldn't happen to a dog," he said. "Retirement coming up the first of the year. A chicken farm all bought and paid for."

"I guess you can pack up the spotting scope, kid!"

"Where'd you get it?" Brice asked. "Those things cost."

"I borrowed it from the gun club," Shorty cried. "I'm secretary. Because I was expert on nine weapons in the army."

"Pack it up!" Brice said. "Sergeant, go back and tell Fisher I'll be along as soon as I run down to these boys' place and pick up those letters for the lab."

Shorty packed the telescope and tripod, slung them over his shoulder, and hung the binoculars from his neck. Sergeant Taylor breathed gustily as he went down the steps.

"You boys got a car?" Brice asked.

"A model A sedan, if you call that a car," George replied.

"It's a good car," cried Shorty with fierce pride. "It takes you where you're goin'. A Caddy can't do no better."

"You go a point there, son," said Brice, actually chuckled.

They trooped down the stairs and Shorty was too upset and troubled to count the steps, the first time he had failed to do so. The brothers oiled into the front of the car with George behind the wheel. Brice climbed in back, was quite surprised at the new seat covers and immaculate upholstery.

"Good engine," Brice conceded as they drove away.

"I give it an overhaul," avowed Shorty pridefully. "The car's part of my job."

BRICE didn't reply. They stopped in front of the shabby but highly respectable apartment house and went into the first floor apartment. The living room faced the street and had been made into an impressive office with a new desk, filing cabinets, a typewriter on a castered standard, a red leather arm chair, and new wallpaper imitating wood paneling.

George said, "Get the lieutenant a drink, Shorty."

"Cops don't drink on duty," Brice growled.

"Water," George said, gave Brice a wink.

Shorty nodded and went into the dining room, opening and closing the door quickly so Brice wouldn't see that the room was unfurnished and that the wallpaper had peeled away to bare the cracked plaster. They got the apartment cheap because there wasn't any kitchen, so Shorty went into the bathroom and let the water run until it was fairly cold. He filled a tumbler and took it out to the lieutenant who sipped it cautiously.

'Hear the doc said you were supposed to go to bed early," Brice remarked.

"He didn't say that!" Shorty cried. "He said twelve hours sleep a night."

"Look, kid!" said George. "We got big things ahead. I want you alert in the morning, see!"

Brice nodded. "We might want you at headquarters."

"But, gee whiz, George! You do all the work."

"Hop into your pajamas, kid! I'll bring in the pills and a slug of whiskey to wash them down with. A double. That good whiskey we got in case we got a high-class client."

Shorty brightened. "Okay, George, okay!" He went back to the tiny bedroom. He

undressed quickly and hung his clothes on hangers, even his shorts, jersey and socks, and hung them in the narrow closet. He donned his pajamas and crawled into the lower of the bunk beds just as his brother came in with the pills and a jelly glass almost half full of whiskey.

"I don't feel right in this bunk," Shorty confessed. "You rate it. You got me outranked and you're the oldest. I ought to be up top."

"Sometimes you fall out of bed when you get those bad dreams, kid."

Shorty threw the pills into his mouth, followed up with a sip of whiskey and shivered pleasantly. "Good stuff," he said. "We can keep the dough, can't we? We sure need it."

"We keep it. You get a good rest. In the morning I'll give you a report and maybe you can take over while I catch some shut eye."

"Gee whiz, that'd be swell. You're a great guy, George. It wasn't your fault they transferred you to intelligence after we enlisted in the M.P.s together. You're smart. Gee, a major."

"I feel dumb right now. The war's been over for three years."

Shorty studied the rim of his jelly glass. "Gee whiz, I always feel bad because you couldn't take that college scholarship because I was such a little jerk and couldn't make enough dough selling papers to live on."

"I went to night school, didn't I?"

"It ain't the same."

"Isn't the same."

"Isn't the same," Shorty echoed, sniffled. "And like that girl. Why didn't you marry her and let them put me in the orphanage?"

"I'm glad I didn't, kid. I wouldn't have met Mary. I never knew women like Mary came along anymore."

Shorty nodded with vigor. "I like the way her eyes get shiny when she looks at you. It makes me feel swell."

"Cut it, kid! You'll have me bawling."

"George?"

"Yeah?"

"Why does a girl like Mary who went clear through college wait on tables at The Grille?"

"For ninety a week, kid. She got twenty-six, teaching."

"Oh! Gee whiz, I hope I don't louse-up things with you an' Mary like everything else I do. Like the war. The first day I seen any action, I got captured."

"Did you get those medals for getting captured?"

"I can't figure those medals."

"Look, kid! You and two other guys held a road block in a defile and stopped a motorized German regiment for nine hours, didn't you? That's why you got the medals. It was big stuff."

Shorty shook his head wonderingly. "That's silly, George," he protested. "That's what we was there for, wasn't it?"

"I need a drink," George said.

THE door opened. Lieutenant Brice said, "You gave me more than enough time to frisk the place. Nice war records, both of you. I'll have to check with Washington. Let's go, Neff! And you, son, get plenty of sleep!"

The two men went out, closing the door and leaving the room in darkness. Shorty snuggled down, the whiskey diffusing a relaxing warmth throughout his body. The pills began to take effect. He fought them because he was afraid he'd wake up thinking he was in the prison camp again. It was pure horror, and the next day he had the shakes and couldn't think.

Hot, bright sunlight awakened him. Shorty sat up rubbing the back of his neck and yawning. "Gee whiz!" he cried. "I didn't dream nothin'." He hopped out of bed and looked at the upper bunk. It hadn't been slept in. He dressed in frantic haste and hurried into the office. It was a few minutes past eleven.

George came in shortly before noon. He put a paper bag on the table. He was dog tired; his shoulders drooped, and his eyes were red rimmed. He threw himself into the red leather arm chair with an animal-like grunt of pleasure.

George waved at the bag. "Your breakfast, kid!"

Shorty fished out a pint milk bottle filled with hot coffee and a small carton holding six doughnuts. He began to eat.

"What happened, George? Boy, do you look bushed!"

"We're whitewashed," George said. "The town's in an uproar. Sewell's mother has offered twenty-five thousand for the apprehension of her son's murderer."

"What's that mean, huh?"

"Twenty-five grand to finger the killer, kid. The police can't take reward dough. We got Brice on our team solid. Sewell was killed with his own gun. It had been dropped into a chute for trash and was in the rubbish pile in the basement. Nary a fingerprint."

"Where'd he keep it at?"

"Everyplace. At the office. At the apartment. Sometimes in his car. He had a permit for it. He carried it when he was walking around with stocks and bonds. No one knows where it was last. Sabra Sewell says the office, naturally. Abernathy says at the apartment, naturally. A lot of people could have taken it at either place. Anybody could have taken it from the car."

"Gee whiz, it's a tough one, ain't it?"

GEORGE was too tired to correct his brother. "Sabra Sewell just plain forgot her coat. It was at The Grille. Mary remembered her having dinner there. Abernathy claims Sewell sent him a note to call at the apartment. But he can't find it. Threw it in the waste basket, he said, and the office building burns trash every night after cleaning."

"We're okay with the cops, huh?"

"Yes. The letters we got were written on Sewell's portable. But like the gun, it was apt to be at home, at the office, or in the car. He was a fair typist and liked to do confidential letters himself. He didn't write those letters to us, kid."

"Gee whiz," Shorty cried. "How do you figure that?"

"The police lab did. They had other letters he wrote. He had a heavy touch on the keys in the center of the keyboard. They say our letters were written by someone using two fingers—like a beginner. They'd backspaced and gone over a lot of letters the second time."

"That's slick. The police lab, I mean."

"Brice and I have beat our brains out. We had a slick theory. A slim blonde like Sabra Sewell went into the bedroom before three, put on the bathing suit, and waited. Sabra went in when we saw her. The phony blonde comes out and gives us a treat. We checked the time. In the time it took to put on that act in front of the mirror, Sabra Sewell could have gone up a flight, killed her husband and returned. Then the fake blonde goes into the bedroom and Sabra comes in wearing the hostess gown and the other suit."

"That's it!" Shorty cried. "I didn't look at the dame's face when she was flashing all that flesh."

"What man with blood in his veins would," George admitted. "Only it's no dice. The only way out of the bedroom is through the living room. There isn't any sort of a ledge outside the windows. She'd have had to fly up."

"How about the dancer guy—the one who used to be her partner?"

"Rolf Roz was a hundred miles away at the time. The state police up there checked."

"I mean maybe he got a ringer to hoof for him."

"We thought of that too, kid. Roz is a sissy boy, tall and lanky with a bushy mustache and a high voice. He's double-jointed and does a screwball routine. He'd never find a guy who resembled him who was double-jointed in the same places."

Shorty finished the last doughnut and drained the milk bottle. "What do we do now, George?" he asked. "I feel swell, honest! I didn't dream nothin' last night."

"Swell, kid. I've got a few leads. I want you to sit on the phone. Put on your thirty-two in the shoulder-holster. It's chilly out. When you leave, put on your hat and topcoat, understand?"

Shorty nodded vigorously. "When do I leave, huh?"

George Neff laid a ten spot on the desk. "When I call. Take down the address I give you, then grab a cab and come out fast."

SHORTY watched his brother go out. Then he folded the ten spot carefully and tucked it into the watch pocket of his trousers. He got a scratch pad from a drawer and sharpened a pencil, placed them beside the handset. In the bedroom, he put on his .32 in the shoulder-holster, struggled into his too small topcoat and donned his hat. He went back to the desk and sat down carefully arraying the phone, paper and pencil right in front of his chest.

Time dragged. Shorty amused himself by seeing how fast he could draw and aim the automatic. Then he sat looking at the telephone accusingly. Nothing happened. He drew a lot of dizzy didoes on the scratch pad and sketched the kind of an automobile he'd like to build. It was spectacular. The silent phone annoyed him. He felt foolish and warm in the topcoat and hat, but George had said to come fast when he phoned.

"Guessed I'll call The Grille," he mumbled at two o'clock, mostly because talking to Mary would relieve the monotony of sweating it out.

He lifted the handset.

The phone was dead!

Shorty jumped to his feet. He shook the handset with savage fury, banged the base of it on the desk top, then jabbed the switch with his right index finger. The phone was dead, no doubt about it. "Goofed-off again," he groaned, tears in his eyes and his throat working. "Gee whiz, everytime George asks me to do something important, something happens to make me goof-off. I ain't good for nothin'."

He roused from his dejection and decided to run down to the drug store and call the complaint department. Halfway there he came upon a phone company truck and a man working atop a pole in a little canvas enclosure. Shorty, who'd once been attached to a signal corps outfit, got the score. "Gee whiz," he moaned, "there's a million wires in one of them cables. It's a hell of a job splicin' cables. He has to call the wire chief on each one of them little wires. It'll take him a month."

Shorty went into Nick's bar and had a shot to quiet his suddenly jerky nerves His mind was chaos. He didn't know where to go or what to do. He fought down the temptation to drop in The Grille. Mary Parker would see how mightily upset he was and worry herself to distraction. He left the bar and wandered around aimlessly.

HE was quite surprised to find himself in the park by the water tower. The apartment house seemed to possess a magnetic attraction. He entered the swanky lobby and stood there awaiting developments. The few people there didn't even look at him. Deciding that they weren't going to heave him out, Shorty went into the glittering cocktail lounge. He was the only customer. All he saw were rows of high priced whiskies. He ordered a bottle of beer. The bartender was having a lot of trouble making out a liquor order.

Shorty finished his beer and went back into the lobby. The straps of the shoulder-holster made his back itch. He twisted his arms crazily to scratch. The desk clerk gave him a disapproving glare. Shorty rammed his hands in his pants pockets and tried to pretend that he was waiting for someone.

Finally he crossed the lobby to the stair well. By the time he reached the fifth floor, he was huffing and puffing. He did a quiet sneak down to Sabra Sewell's apartment. There was nothing but a solid expanse of wall where the bedroom would be. He'd hoped there'd be a package door at floor level. Shorty sighed.

The apartment door, like the building, began to exert a wierd sort of magnetism. Shorty stared at it a long, long time. Then, magically it seemed, he was standing there knocking timidly.

Expensive was the right tag. She was lovely except for tiny wrinkles of strain etching out from the corners of her mouth and eyes. The dark red of her mouth seemed out of place against the pallor of her oval face. Her blue eyes didn't say a thing and her cool voice was a challenge. "Yes?"

Shorty took off his hat and twisted it around in his hands. "Ah," he said, "I'm Shorty Neff."

She wrinkled her forehead on that. Then suddenly her red mouth wreathed in a smile that flashed blue-white teeth and brought a dimple to each cheek. Her throatly laugh made pleasant music in his ears. "I never thought I'd greet a peeping Tom with open arms," she confessed. "Come in, Mister Neff! A private detective, eh?"

"Shorty," he corrected her. "My real name's Oscar, but, gee whiz, don't tell anybody."

Rolf Roz sat at an end of the davenport. Shorty identified him at once. The dancer got to his feet fluttering his hands and his knees were a-tremble.

"Mister Roz," said Sabra Sewell, made introductions. The dancer's hand was hot and moist and very flabby soft. He gulped, said, "Howdy!" then his teeth chattered twice before he tightened his jaw. He sort of collasped back on the davenport with little beads of sweat springing out on his receding forehead.

"Sit down, Shorty! I'll buy a drink. What'll it be?"

Shorty sat down on the edge of a straight backed chair. "Whiskey," he said. "Straight. No chaser."

"Oh, the rugged type," she said with a bright smile. He watched her go to a blonde mahagony cellarette and lift the lid. The black suit fit in the right places. Every motion she made was quick, but not jerky —catlike.

She came back and handed Shorty a notable slug in a frosted glass. He blinked. She handed Rolf Rox a scotch and soda. The dancer's hand shook so bad that a full third of the drink sloshed over into his lap. He parked the drink on the end table and ignored the mess in his lap. Sabra Sewell ran the tip of her tongue around her red lips. Then she took the handkerchief from Rolf Roz' breast pocket and handed it to him. He blotted his trousers front as if it didn't really matter.

Sabra Sewell remained standing and faced Shorty. "Anything I can do for you?" she asked.

Shorty took a big sip of whiskey and it gave him a jolt of courage. "Who was in the bedroom when you went in to put on that bathing suit?" he asked. "The little black suit."

Rolf Roz leaned back and closed his eyes. Sabra Sewell laughed. "No one, silly boy," she said. "What a silly question."

"There had to be," Shorty avowed. "You couldn't do it alone."

"Do what?" she asked, eyes wide.

"Well, that thing that went around your chest."

"Bra?"

"Well, whatever it was, it was tied in a bow knot in the middle of your back," Shorty said. "Nobody can tie a bow knot in the middle of their back. Gee whiz, downstairs I couldn't even scratch my back good."

Sabra Sewell's laugh was too genuine to question and some of the strain left her face.

Then suddenly Rolf Roz lurched to his feet, his face ashen and his pale eyes wild. "I knew you'd overlook something!" he screeched hysterically. "I just knew it." He buried his face in his hands and began to cry like a child.

Shorty had never seen a woman move so fast. She scooped up a thick crystal ash tray from the top of the radio, reached the hysterical Rolf Roz in three long legged strides, and smashed the tray against the side of his head. Shorty winced at the sound of it. The lanky dancer pitched forward on his face and became very still; the left side of his face and neck wet redness.

"You dirty, stinking louse!" Sabra Sewell raged. "I might have known your nerve would crack somewhere along the line. I would get soused and spill the whole thing to you." She began to kick his left side.

Shorty put his drink on the floor and stood up in a numb sort of a trance. "Hey!" he said weakly. Sabra Sewell spun on him. There was a .25 automatic in her right hand, and the muzzle of it looked big and blue. She raked fingernails across her neck and down to where her suit coat was buttoned. Blood oozing welts appeared.

"Your brains are scrambled," she said, speaking fast and panting. Her face wasn't pretty anymore and dark shadows rippled across the blue of her eyes. "I know. I

looked you up long ago. Watching me through that telescope was too much. War nerves. You came in, knocked Rolf out, then attacked me. I had to kill you. Had to, understand?"

SHORTY blinked. The knuckles of the fingers encircling the butt of the automatic were whitening. He swayed drunkenly, cried, "I'm goin' to faint!" He dropped his head and slacked his mouth. The muzzle of the automatic shook, then lowered a foot as she awaited developments. Shorty let his knees buckle and bent forward from the waist as if going into a faint. Then he charged forward with churning feet. Something tugged at his right heel just as the explosion of the report slapped his eardrums. Then his right shoulder smashed into her stomach. The two of them hurled back against the davenport and skidded it across the carpet and against the wall. Shorty staggered to his feet. Sabra Sewell didn't move a muscle.

The hall door burst open. George came in fast followed by Lieutenant Brice and Sergeant Taylor.

"You all right, kid? We were waiting to grab Roz outside."

Shorty nodded, rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. "Gee whiz, George," he said, "you were right all along. There *was* a ringer. That wasn't Sabra Sewell strutting in front of the mirror in the black suit. She was on her way up to kill her husband?"

"How?" asked George, voice edged. "There's no door out of . . ."

Shorty pointed to the bedroom door. "She come out there an' went out there!" He pointed to the door to the corridor.

"Nuts!" George said. "We'd have seen her."

"Gee whiz, no!" Shorty cried. "We was lookin' down at the end of the room, George. Even with them German glasses all you could see was that end of the room. None of them doors was in our field of vision. It was the real Sabra Sewell in the hostess gown an' other suit. She just had to catch our attention long enough for the ringer to get out."

Brice nodded. "I'll buy that, son," he said. "I sure will. Jonathan Sewell was killed while a blonde woman in a two-piece black bathing suit put on a show in front of the mirror."

"I know who the woman was!" Shorty cried. "Didn't I say it was as good as the Bijou? It *was* what I seen at the Bijou. It was Hilda Fox. She don't come on the stage till after nine. And it was their last show in town. They always take the midnight train to Buffalo, an' that's five hundred miles away."

"You've got it, kid!" cried George. "The murder probably wouldn't be in the Buffalo papers."

"Gee whiz, George, I ought to know Hilda Fox's legs. I was in the front row at the opening last Friday night."

Brice said, "Son, you make me feel like an old fool."

Shorty broke out in a cold sweat. "I feel sick, George," he said. "I forgot an' mixed whiskey an' beer."

George Neff grabbed his kid brother by the arm and hustled him out in the corridor.

Shorty said, "I ain't very sick, George. I just don't want to be in there when she comes to. I don't like to see people in trouble."

"I know how you feel, kid. Run down to the bar and get yourself a couple of creme de menthes. They're swell for an upset stomach."

"Is that the green stuff you drink with a straw?"

"Yes. I'll come down and pick you up."

AN HOUR later the brothers walked down the sidewalk on their way home. The creme de menthe had done Shorty noble, but his slight stagger was due mostly to his heelless right shoe.

"She hasn't cracked yet," George said. "But she will. It was a slick plan. She knew the tower would be the logical place to watch the apartment and that we'd need glasses to do it. She had a pair of binoculars. Brice figures she went up on the roof and watched us, saw we had a telescope and binoculars as well. There was a page

(Continued on page 123)

Corpse in a Frame

THE pilot said, "Jeeze, when it snows in the Panhandle it snows! I hope we don't crack up!"

The white flakes were swirling so thick about the windows I couldn't even see the ground. Way below I could just make out the smudge of one beacon. It seemed to be rushing at us a hundred miles a minute and the guy hoped we wouldn't crack up! What a life!

Anyway we didn't crack up.

I waded through a gang of snow-drifts to a cab and settled back with a grunt of thankfulness. The driver started down the macadam like a bat out of hades and, just before making the turn, opened the window and said, "Haw! Haw! Hold your hat and watch this one!"

I held my hat and my breath as the crazy fool swerved west, braked, skidded almost completely around and gave her the gas to roar eastward on the highway to town.

He said: "Haw! Haw! Ain't that some-. thing. We ain't had a snow like this for eight years. When we get to the next corner, I'll show you something."

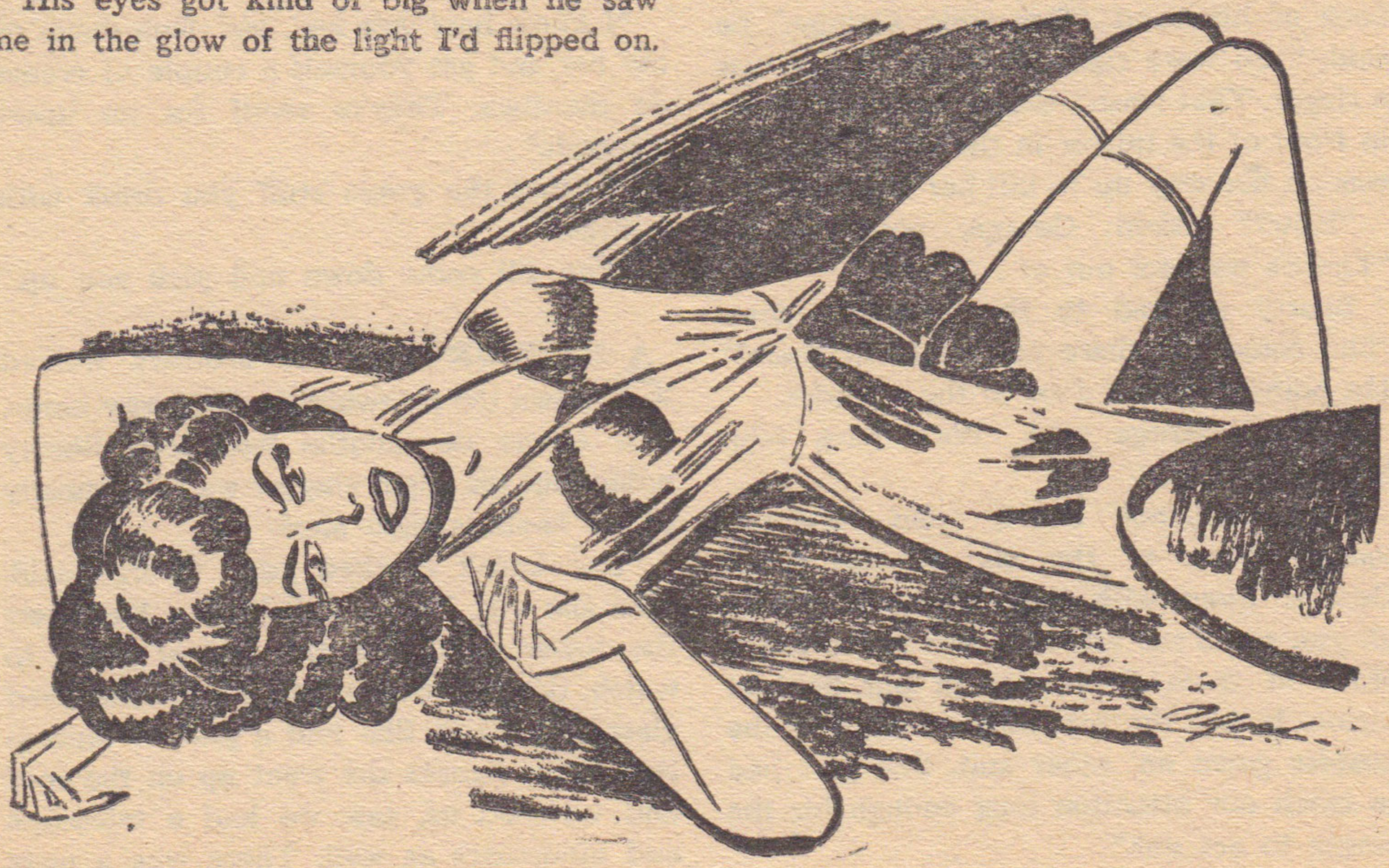
His eyes got kind of big when he saw me in the glow of the light I'd flipped on. I was a little sore. My nose had smashed against the steel partition rod and felt like hell. I picked my hat off the floor—a new twenty-buck derby—and noticed I'd put my heel through the crown. I put it on anyway.

Barney Oldfield said, "'Smatter, Pop, can't you take it? Wait till we hit the next one. I'll show you a real—hey, you can't do that!"

By that time I was crawling through the front window and squatting on the seat beside him. "Buddy," I told him, "it makes me mad as hell for a squirt to call me Pop. I got a .38 under my left arm, a .45 in my grip and a coat pocket full of .32. You get out. I'm gonna drive this hack."

He got out. I shouldn't have done it, but I get mad sort of easy.

I MADE good time all the way to Olive in spite of the snow. At Lemon I stopped for a red light. A dame leaped away from the curb and rammed herself in the back seat before I could close my mouth.



By RALPH SEDGWICK DOUGLAS

She said, "The City Hall, driver, and hurry!"

"Hanh?" I said and turned around for a look.

She was peering out the back window with her nose against the glass. Her big fur coat had fallen open. I like to fell out of the seat. She had on a pair of silk panties and a bra and a pair of slippers! And two feet of snow on the ground!

"Lady," I told her, "you need a dressing room, not a City Hall. This cab is engaged."

She pulled the coat together, her eyes sparkling and mad. "Hurry, you fool," she said and damned if she wasn't pointing a little nickel-plated gun right between my eyes!

Illustrated by Newt Alfred

I barged in and found her lying on the floor where the door had knocked her.

Driving a stolen cab was bad enough, but when the girl jumped in and said "Get going!" he knew he was in trouble up to his neck. The gun in her hand told him that she meant business on that snowy night when the craziest things happened thick and fast.

I threw it in gear. Anybody crazy enough to own one of those little guns is crazy enough to shoot it. I didn't know for sure where the City Hall was but I wasn't willing to take a chance. I headed toward town.

She said, "Hurry, damn it, hurry!"

In a minute I knew why. We whirled onto Greenville Road and before we made another block I see a big black sedan nose up beside us. I took a peek in the back and damned if the dame hadn't hunkered down on the floor out of sight. The sedan drew up even and cut over toward us. I damned near hit the curb and was pretty sore.

"What the hell?" I yelled out the window and saw the guy driving. I've seen plenty of those kind of black sedans. He had his collar up and a white felt hat pulled down low, but his nose was flat and his lips thick and his eyes like a rat's. And the back window was rolled down and the guy's twin rat was looking out the hole with a young cannon in his yellow gloved hand. I braked right fast and pulled to the curb, keeping my hands on the wheel.

Before I came to a full stop, the back door flew open and the dame heeled it across a vacant lot. Something was hanging in her hand. Just before the snow swallowed her up I saw it was a brief case.

The rat in the back seat of the sedan jumps out and takes across the lot after her. The Front Seat rat sticks his head in my cab.

"Drive on, punk," he sneers. "You ain't seen nothin', you don't know nothin', and you don't even suspect nothin'. Get me?"

Crazy people. What a town, what a town! I'm forty-four years old and a guy can get a hell of a lump of curiosity in that time. I whined, "What about my fare, mister?" Stalling for time.

Something lit on the seat beside me. The rat says, "Get going now. I got your number. You don't know a thing."

I straightened out the folded bill, saw a couple of ciphers and a figure one and slammed the cab in gear. The bill was brand new and crinkled mighty pleasant! After all, it was none of my business and I had plenty of worry of my own ahead of me in this man's town without butting into someone else's trouble. I drove a couple of blocks wondering what it was all about and began to worry plenty. That hot temper of mine had me in another jam! The cabbie had probably got to a phone by now and had the cops on my trail! On top of what just happened!

No one was coming either way.

To my right was a big vacant lot with a low tool shanty squatting near the rear. I wheeled up over the curb and made for it. I left the cab behind the shack, waded back to the street, suitcase in hand and had to grin. The snow had already covered the tracks!

I called another cab at a little restaurant.

"Buddy," I told the driver, "make the Longview Hotel and one skid out of you will be your last."

HE'S still got a skid coming. We made the hotel. I went in through the revolving doors in a flurry of slushy snow and stamped my feet to get the hooey off them. Over behind the desk was a sleek-headed pretty boy paying lots of attention to his nails. He glanced at me and raised his eyebrows, like I was something that had just crawled out of the wall. I went over.

"I want a room and bath on the corner where I can see both streets and plenty high up."

He went on looking at his nails, murmured, "Sorry, we're full up!" I got what he meant. There was a mirror on the post beside me. My nose had been bleeding, my derby was bent and had a hole in it, and my tie was under my right ear.

I said, "Get your hands off your hips, Clarence, before I pinch your brains out. I'm Mike Cockrell. I've got a reservation."

The air thawed. "Oh, yes; pardon me Mr. Cockrell! Yes, to be sure!"

He shoved the register card around, smiled pretty, and turned to the key rack. I signed, turned around to look the joint over. The lobby was almost deserted. A fat guy with his belly in his lap was snoring by the radiator. Two old maids were looking out the front window at the

storm while they knitted. Over in a sort of side lobby a guy was reading a newspaper with his legs crossed, the paper before his face.

The clerk said, "I believe you'll like 1654, Mr. Cockrell." A bellboy picked up my grip and grinned. Then it happened.

I DON'T know where she came from. She was on my neck like a halfback dying for dear old Rutgers. A couple of arms around my neck, a warm body pressing against mine, and before I could dodge she was kissing me! I didn't mind it much but she finally got tired. I grinned at her and said, "Your mistake, sister, but thanks a lot."

Damned if she wasn't crying. She kept hold of my lapels and said, "Oh, Daddy, Daddy, I thought you ne er would come! I've been so scared. I thought you didn't love me any more!"

She swarmed all over me again.

The old maids in the window let their knitting go hang. The fat guy woke up and put on his glasses. Only the guy with the newspaper kept on reading. I broke the clinch when my hat fell off.

"Listen, lady," I told her, trying to wipe the lipstick off my cheek and mouth, "You've made a mistake. I'm not Daddy. I ain't anything. And I never saw you before in my life. You're a nice—"

Tears poured out of her eyes like water out of a faucet! "Darling," she moaned, "I thought we had the misunderstanding all cleared up! I don't care what you do. Run around with all the blondes in the world, but love me a little! I'll never nag you again, I promise, if you'll only take me back!"

Arms around me again. There went my hat. Boy, did I feel helpless. The bellboy stood there grinning like a cat on a garbage pail. Behind the desk the clerk smiled archly and shook his finger with a naughty-naughty expression. I got sore.

"Listen, Clarence," I roared, "if you don't get this dame's keeper to come get her off my neck, I'll sue this joint for a million bucks! A man ain't safe in this town! Can't a guy—?"

She broke away, and dried her tears. Her voice was low. "All right, Daddy, all right! So you're going to throw me over after all I've been to you."

"Lady, lady," I goaned. "I never saw you before. You've made a mistake! I—"

She screamed, "I hate you! I hate you!" and slapped me hard. There went the hat again! Boy, was I sore! I kicked the derby clear across the lobby, grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

"Lady, I'm gonna spank you humpbacked if you don't lay off me! I'm gonna —" I was mad as hell at her and I could have slapped her but I controlled myself.

Her voice was quiet again. She said, "I'll make you regret this to the last day of your life." She whirled around and ran out the front door. The clerk said, "Tch, Tch!" The bellhop grinned. The two old maids glared at me. The fat guy wiped off his glasses in a hurry and turned owl eyes my way. The guy reading the paper folded it up, went out the side door whistling, without ever looking at me. The elevator man said, "Going up."

AT THE elevator I stopped. "Put my stuff in the room kid, and go out and get me a quart of Scotch. Have it ready to go to bat. Can a man buy a hat this time of night in this crazy town?"

I went to the phone in the corner drugstore and got Belton. He answered himself.

"This is Cockrell," I said. "I just got in and I already wish I hadn't."

"Good! Good! Excellent! Does anyone know you're in town?"

"Everybody but Sam Houston and he's dead! Has an asylum been burned and all the nuts let out? By gee, I never saw so many screwy people in all my life." I told him everything that happened in the hotel lobby. He was silent a long time.

"Damn it all," he said, "who else saw it, sure enough?"

I told him. He grunted. "Well, it may be on the up and up. Maybe she thought you was someone else, but we can't take any chances. You go back and check out of there. Move over to the Cliff and register under another name. Use Roy Adams. Then

I'll get in touch with you the first thing in the morning."

He got in touch with me before that. Belton is the district attorney that brought me all the way from Dallas to do a little special investigating.

I hung up and bought a hat at a cheap store that stayed open late. I managed to get it down to four eighty-five then went to get some ham and eggs. I think better when I eat. There was a swell-looking redhead waiting on the counter. I said, "Good evening, Red!"

She grinned and her eyes got wide. "How'd you know my name?"

So I groaned and went to work thinking. The thing in the cab puzzled me. Who was the dame that ran around with fur coats and lingerie? Who were the rats that chased her and passed out C-notes so free? How come the dame wore a fur coat and few clothes? Now to go on to the hotel. Who and what was the dame that got the strangle-hold on me? Crazy people. Crazy people.

The babe set my ham and eggs down with a bang.

I said, "What would you do if you were a hack driver and a dame jumped in your cab with a fur coat and hardly anything under it and—"

The babe said, "What kind of fur was it?"

I gave it up and tackled the food.

Back at the hotel, Clarence, the clerk, said, "Naughty, naughty, Mr. Cockrell! Pushing the babes around!"

I said, "Check me out of this madhouse, and go pick yourself a daisy. This joint stinks. I'm coming right back down. Going up, boy!"

I opened my door and flipped on the lights. There in my bed lay a dame!

She smiled and said, "Don't be sore, Daddy. I just can't stay away from you!"

I stood like a statue while she got out of bed and walked toward me. She closed the door and put her arms around my neck. She said, "You're not sore, are you honey?"

She wore a pair of thin pajamas, and she was warm and soft against me and I got to feeling right sorry for her. Maybe I told myself, she's mistaking me for someone else. I sort of patted her a little and she moved closer and breathed deep. Me, too.

I said, "You haven't got me mixed up with somebody else, have you, babe?"

"You're Mike Cockrell, aren't you? Nunh unh, I'm making no mistake!"

What could a man do? Crazy people, crazy people!

She felt sort of good; I couldn't help finding that out. After a while she reached over and opened the door. Before I could stop her she put her mouth to the crack and started to scream! Not just a little scream, but a plenty good one, big and hearty for such a little dame.

A couple of wild notes got out before I clamped a fist over her mouth. She bit me. I got mad and socked her. Not hard. But she was kind of little. She folded up like a Russian accordion and I tossed her on the bed and beat it, talking to myself.

I had to wait five minutes for an elevator and that didn't help my temper any. When it hit the main floor, I walked nearly to the desk then went back and cussed while the elevator made a round trip before picking me up again. I'd forgotten my bag.

I opened the door easy. She was still lying on the bed.

One minute later I rang the desk from my room and asked for Clarence. I said, "What the hell kind of joint is this? There's a dame in my room!"

He sort of snickered. "Well, after all, Mr. Cockrell, what did you expect? A flock of dames!"

I got mad. "Listen, you, get the house dick if there's such a thing around here and send him up. This dame is dead. Dead as hell."

It took Belton himself to keep those hick coppers from dragging me down to jail just for the practice. Clarence and the bellboy identified her as the same dame that tackled me in the lobby. It looked bad for me.

SHE lay there on the bed straight and still, her breast as motionless as if she was holding her breath. She was—would

"Maybe you're putting me on the spot," she said. "How do I know you're shooting square?"

be for a long time. . . . She wore the same filmy pajamas, rumpled up around her legs, and a little .22 automatic lay on the carpet beside the bed. A bullet had splattered blood all over the pillow as it tore through her pretty little head. If the gun hadn't have had her prints all over it, even Belton couldn't have saved me a trip to the clink!

Believe me, by the time Belton got there I was plenty sore. A big homicide dick named Swenson had been pushing me around considerable trying to make me admit I knew the dame at least. The only thing in her purse was a brand new hundred dollar bill. No identification, no lipstick, no compact, no nothing, only this bill. When Belton came in, he quieted the squarehead and listened to the whole story.

He said, "I'll be responsible for Mr. Cockrell, Swenson. You haven't got a thing on him anyway that I can see. Come on, Mike."

The fingerprint boys were dusting everything in the room and the camera boys were setting up the tripods. The hallway was swarming with reporters. I began looking around. After a while Belton says "Come on, come on. Let's get going."

"Okay. This gets screwier and screwier. Now who in hell could have walked out with my bag?" Sure enough the bag was gone. And although we turned the joint

upside down we couldn't find hide nor hair of it.

A little guy with a yellow face and a cigarette hanging out of purple lips said to everyone in general, "I think it's a stall. Probably, this guy knocked off the dame himself, put her prints on the gun and was getting ready to take a powder out of town. He's probably got his turkey checked somewhere."

"That's about the kind of ideas I'd expect from hick dicks," I sneered. I didn't like this guy telling me his ideas.

He lit another cigarette. "I'm no dick, mister. I'm Peters, of the *Record*. It ain't a bad idea, though. I don't like your looks."

I started for him. Belton caught me. Swenson says, "It ain't such a bad idea at that. I think I'll go through you."

"You damned squarehead!" I was plenty tough. "You lay a finger on me and I'll knock the corners off that thick skull of yours. Why I'll. . . ."

Belton was pulling me toward the door. "I'll be responsible for him, Swenson. Lay off. You can have him whenever you want him."

Peters piped up. "You're making a mistake, Swenson. He's your man; not Belton's!" Swenson stood there undecided and we pushed on.

Waiting for the elevator Peters bustled out and tapped me on the arm. For a little guy he had guts. He said, "Want to make a statement, Cockrell?"

The elevator stopped, Belton stepped in, his hand on my arm. I jerked loose. "Yeah, punk, I'll make a statement." I grabbed his dinky little hat by both sides and pulled it clear down to the bridge of his nose. "Here's my statement. If I ever run into you again around this whistle crossing I'm gonna move your right ear to where your left ear ought to be and push your whole face to the back of your head."

HE DIDN'T move, just grinned nasty. "Okay, Mr. Cockrell, I'll put that in, too!" He was still standing there grinning, sticking a new cigarette between his blue lips when the elevator door closed. He never even tried to lift his hat.

We went to Belton's office and he called the dogs. In other words he fired me. I could see he was on a spot.

"You see, Mike," he said sort of miserable, "I hired you with the idea of keeping you in the background, sort of an undercover man. I know and you know that this whole thing at the hotel is a frameup. Wait until you see tomorrow's *Record*. Even the rest of the papers will have to print it. And it'll be another indirect blow at me. So I'll just pay off now and let it go."

I said, "You're quitting, hanh? Calling me off?" He nodded. "Okay. Do you mind if I stick around town on my own for a while?"

"You mean you'll go ahead and try to clear this thing up at the hotel? You'll try to clear the suicide?"

"Suicide, hell. That kid was killed. Someone paid her that C-note to make the play in the lobby and come to my room later to scream her head off. But you don't think for a minute she'd kill herself for a hundred bucks? She couldn't spend it dead!"

He looked dumb.

"Goshamighty, man, wake up! There *had* to be someone else. Maybe in the closet, maybe in the bathroom. After I left she must have caught him. The guy gets excited, knocks her off, and then fixes it so it would look like suicide."

"What would anyone else be doing in your room?"

"I don't know but I am going to find out. Don't forget my bag's gone. It didn't have much in it but a gun I think a lot of. I want that gun back. Now as long as I'm gonna stay on my own why not give me the whole layout? It can't do any harm."

He did. And it took the rest of the night. Leaving out all the details here's what Belton was up against.

A lug named Whalen owned the *Daily Record* and went in for Reform with capital letters, just like this, *REFORM*. A fat moxie named Johnny Spratt practically ran the town, along with a bunch of crooked officials, coppers, and the usual layout. They went in for everything from the numbers to bank robbery and just the week before had knocked over a suburban bank

for seventy grand, just one man being captured.

Whalen of the *Record* was yelling for Belton's scalp because Belton didn't give this gang the works, and Belton was handcuffed on account of a dame. Get that, a dame! There's always one.

Belton had a nice wife and a couple of kids, but like most mugs he played around a bit. He played once too often. He even wrote letters and signed checks for the girl friend. And now the girl friend was gone along with the letters. Vanished. Belton had received a phone call to the effect that if he didn't lay off prosecuting Maroni, the captured bankrobber, the whole kit of letters would be turned over to the *Record*, and Whalen would be tickled to death to boil Belton in oil.

Kind of complicated, but there it was. Belton looked like he was in for it. He'd sent for me to try and get those letters for him and to locate the girl. And now lookie what happened! Screwy people, crazy people!

I yawned and said, "Okay, Belton. I'm gonna stick around and try to get that gun. Maybe I can turn up something for you."

His grin was pretty sour. "Grab a look at the *Morning Record* as you go out. The best thing you can do for me is to get out of town and forget it all."

The *Morning Record* had scareheads:

BELTON'S IMPORTED GUNMAN RUNS AMUCK. HOLDS PRIVATE ORGY IN HOTEL ROOM RESULTING IN SUICIDE OF WOMAN. DEFIES POLICE, ASSAULTS REPORTER WITH DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S AID.

There was a long editorial in blackface right down the center of the first page. Something about, "How long will the outraged citizens allow these evils to go uncorrected?" The usual blah-blah-blah.

I waded through two feet of snow to the Cliff Hotel and registered. It made me pretty sore because I had to pay in advance. I didn't have any luggage.

The bellhop that took me up was a smart lad with a lot of suggestions, but we compromised on Scotch. I had a couple of quick ones and went to bed. It must have been about eight a. m.

AT TEN-THIRTY the phone rang. Before it tore itself off the wall I wobbled to it and jerked down the receiver. Then I went back to bed, still shivering and cussing. In a few minutes someone hammered on the door. I yelled, "Stand to one side, I'm going to shoot through the door."

They went away. I went back to sleep, just got there, when another heavy-handed fool beat on the door. He yelled, "Open up in there. It's the law. Open up!"

I sighed and opened the door. It was the house dick.

"What's going on in here?" he growled. "Why in hell don't you hang up your phone?" Then he saw the bottle. "Just another drunk, hanh?" He hung up the phone himself, glared around the room again.

I looked out the window. You couldn't see three feet for the swirling snow, and there I was shivering in my underwear.

"If you don't get the hell out of here and let me sleep, I'm gonna toss you out. And tell the engineer to get some heat in this morgue while you're at it."

He looked at my shoulder holster where it hung on the head of the bed. "Buddy, you don't need heat. You look hot enough to me!" He shut the door very carefully behind him.

I was almost asleep when the phone rang again. I picked it up and said, "All right. You win. I couldn't be any colder anyway."

A babe on the other end said, "Is this Mr. Cockrell?"

I told her, "Yeah."

"You came here to recover some very valuable papers for Mr. Belton, the district attorney, didn't you? How would you like to know where they are at?"

"I'm not working on the case. He paid me off. Who is this speaking?"

"Never mind that, I thought Belton was a friend of yours. If you take them back to him he'll certainly pay you, won't he?

I'll pay you myself. Now I can tell you exactly where to get them if you'll—" The receiver clicked. I jiggled the hook.

The operator said, "Your party hung up, sir."

I said, "Baby, I got a brand new fifty dollar bill that I'll hand you in just three minutes if you'll trace that number for me. I *got* to know! Fifty smackers and I'll be down there in three minutes."

I would have made it. I was dressed in one, on my way out in one and a half. But when I opened the door I ran over little Peters of the *Record*. I grabbed him and shook him till his cigarette bobbed like a twig in the brook.

"How long you been listening, rat?" His head made a noise against the wall but he kept on grinning.

When I stopped he said, "Quit playing. I come up to give you a couple of tips."

I should have smacked him, wanted to smack him, but I was afraid he'd fall to pieces. I just slapped him down a little and beat it for the elevator.

HE MADE it with me, still smiling. I started to pop him again but he said, "Wait, Rollo, wait! I'm shooting square. There's a couple of gorillas in the lobby waiting to play with you. And they play rough."

We were the only passengers. We got off on the mezzanine and Peters pointed the two guys out. One of them was the rat-faced lug that had given me the C-note the night before. The other guy looked just like him.

"I never saw either one in my life," I growled. What could this wise little mug know about my business?

He said, "Okay. Go ahead then. I was trying to do you a favor. One of them was driving the car that knocked you off last night in a stolen taxi. There's a fire escape here we can take."

It was still snowing sixty a minute but we took the fire escape, me still wondering.

I stopped at the Western Union on the corner and sent a kid back to the hotel with a fifty dollar bill. The phone operator was a wise buddie. She had the number that called me and also the listing. What a break! I stuck it in my pocket and turned to Peters.

"Okay. What's the payoff? Why do me favors?"

He shrugged. "My boss wants to see you. Mr. Whalen."

I flagged a taxi. "Tell your boss to come up and see *me* sometime. I'm busy."

He followed me into the cab before I could kick in his face and told the driver, "Record Building."

I guess my mouth was open. The cab skidded through a couple of drifts, ran a red light, made a U-turn and swirled away into the storm.

"What the hell does Whalen want to see me about?"

"About five grand. Maybe ten if you're smart."

That's money. We went to the *Record* office.

Whalen was a big man with a black mustache and a Van Dyke beard. He sat behind his desk flanked by a pair of bright-looking young men I didn't like. Peters leaned against the wall, thumbed a match and said, "This is the guy."

"Ah, Mr. Cockrell! How do you do, sir? How are you?" Whalen's eyes were boring into me.

I grunted, "Okay. I'm the guy. What do you want?"

"Ah, a man of action! I can see that. Good! I, too, believe in action!" He opened a drawer, began laying crisp, green bills on the desk before him, spread out like a fan. When he got to ten, he stopped and smiled. "There's a thousand dollars, Mr. Cockrell. Shall we call it a retainer? Four more when the job is done."

I said, "I worked a crossword puzzle at breakfast. What's the answer?"

"Deliver me the letters Belton wrote Lucille DeVere and you get the other four!"

I sighed. "That's a lot of jack. I'll bet I could find those letters."

"Then you'll do it?"

"Frankly, I wouldn't know where to start looking! What would you do with them if you had them?"

"Just as frankly, force Belton's resignation, of course. He's a crook. As for your ability to find them I—ah—I have the greatest faith in you. Yes, I might say all the faith in the world!"

I reached over and picked up the ten C-notes. They fitted in my bill-fold like peas in a pod, making a grand total of eleven crisp, new crinkly hundred dollar bills! Then I glanced up—and damned if Whalen wasn't pointing a revolver at me over his desk. He said, "I have faith in your talent, Mr. Cockrell. Be sure you don't let me down." Then he opened a drawer and put the gun away. "That's all, Mr. Cockrell."

I said, "I'll be seeing you," and opened the door. Whalen sat there smiling thinly.

Something was plenty screwy! Crazy people! I stepped around the ell instead of making for the elevator. Peters came busting out of the boss' office looking more like a dead man than ever. He didn't care for elevators either. He took the steps.

I waited five minutes right in front of the building for a cab. Sure enough when we pulled away a yellow delivery truck with a closed body tore into the traffic right behind us. The sign on its side said, *"Read the Morning Record!"*

I HAD my driver cruise around until I was sure they were tailing us. Then I stopped at a drugstore, sauntered in and made a call to Belton. I told him what I wanted and came out like I didn't have a care in the world. For a lousy five bucks my driver ditched the delivery truck with no trouble at all. The snow was so thick it wasn't such a hard job at that.

"Does it snow out here like this all the time?" I grinned when I got out.

"Buddy, this is the snowin'ist snow they've had in these parts for nigh forty years. My grandpa told me."

I walked the rest of the way. It was only three blocks to Lemon Avenue and I wanted to go in through the alley anyway. I went up the fire escape to the roof, in through the trap and on down to the second floor. I was afraid someone was watching the front of the joint.

I must have looked like Santa Claus when I knocked on the door of 245. Snow from head to foot. Only Santa Claus doesn't carry a gun in his hand. No one answered. I tapped again.

"Who is it, please?" Low, contralto.

"Telegram!"

The door clicked and I hit it hard with my shoulder.

She was brunette and looked plenty good lying on the floor where the door had knocked her, but I was too busy watching the other doors to notice her much. Afterwards I found she'd been taking a bath. She wore a sheer negligee. And it was the dame of the fur coat and she didn't recognize me!

I kicked the hall door shut and trotted through the place. There was no one else around. When I came back, she was standing in the middle of the room all swelled up with outraged pride and other things, too damned mad to keep the negligee very close. It was cold outside but she certainly warmed up a room.

I grinned and said, "Well, what happened, babe?"

She said, "That's exactly what I'd like to know!"

"You was talking to me on the phone about some stuff of Charlie Belton's, and then you—"

"Are you Mike Cockrell?" Her oval face glowed as she ran toward me to put both hands on my coat lapels. She clean forgot about the negligee. I didn't.

"Yep, in person. Now let's have it. Where's the stuff he's after?"

Her eyes were shrewd. "If I tell you where to get the stuff what will you do with it? You said you weren't working with Belton any more!"

"Give it to Charlie, of course. But why don't you take it to him yourself, or get it at least?"

"I couldn't do that. It's impossible. You see, it's like this."

Her voice was low. She set me down on the divan after taking my coat. She even mixed us a drink and set the bottle handy

"I'm—I'm—well, never mind who I am.

(*Continued on page* 124)

Dames Spell Death

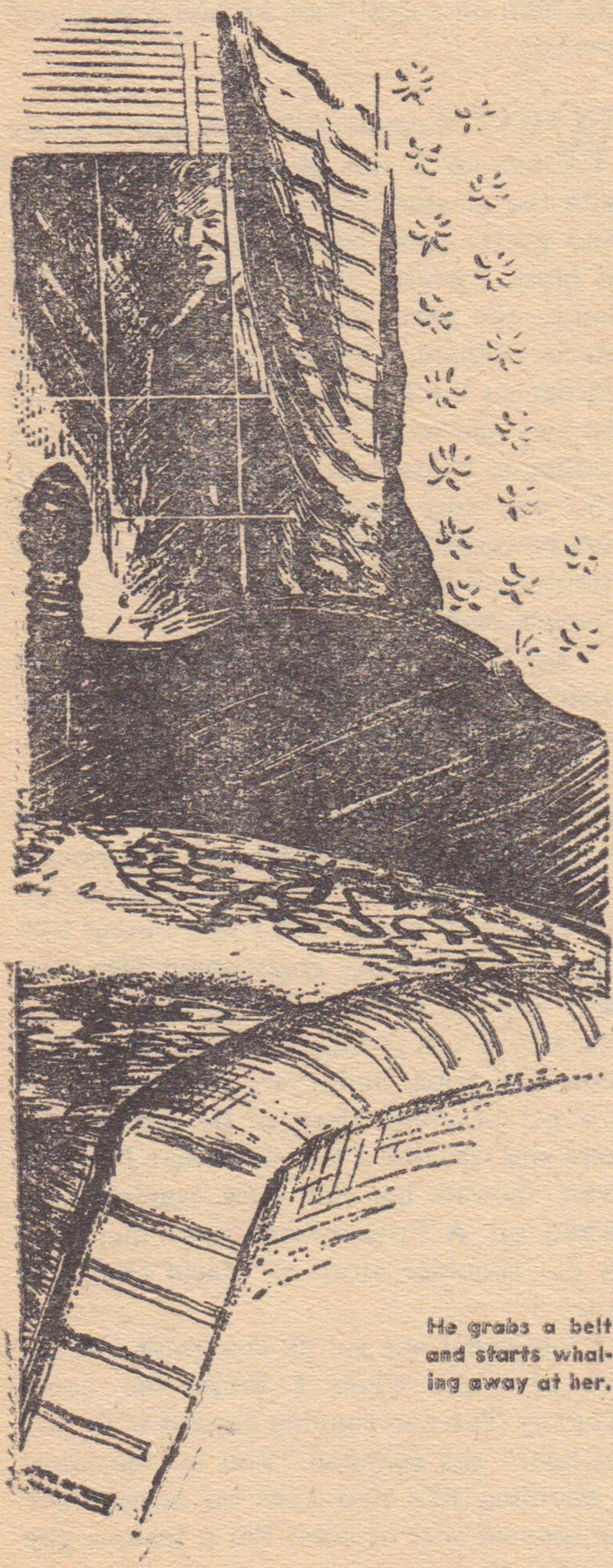
HELLO, Pete; hello, Marge; hello gang! Imagine seeing all of you clear down here in Florida! Gee, Marge, you're looking swell, same old million dollar form. Pull your skirt down, babe, if you want to interview Eddie Zinn, the man who sees all and tells all.

But imagine me giving interviews in-

By PAUL HANNA

Here was a guy the gals just couldn't resist, and he blazed a trail through blondes, brunettes and redheads, piling up bitter enemies all along the way until he reached the inevitable end of the road—and there Death was waiting!

Illustrated by Al Savitt



He grabs a belt and starts whaling away at her.

stead of writing them! Fourteen years I been working for papers, getting plenty of bylines and never a headline until now. Well, you never can tell. Where do you want me to begin? Righto, right at the beginning. And the title of the feature is going to be "Who Killed Tommy Toscano!"

You know, seriously, I never liked that guy right from the start. Ever since the Falcons have been doing their Spring training down here, I been covering them for the *Express*. I was here the first year Tommy Toscano came up from Frisco, in the Coast League, and even then I didn't like him. Nobody liked him. He was too cocky for a rookie, too damn' sure of himself.

Let's see, that was year before last, wasn't it? You know how he made good with a bang, hit way up in the 350s for the season, led the league in fielding his position, and just generally wowed them. But if he hit 350 with a bat, he must have hit 500 with the dames.

That's what got me to disliking him so. I sort of like dames myself, and to see the way that big lug could strut through a hotel lobby and panic every feminine heart was sickening. Honest, it made a man sick to his stomach just to watch him strut. Anyway—okay, okay, I'll get on with the story, but you got to have a little history of this guy to understand him.

The first year he had the accident with Pop Asher's daughter. You know Pop? That's been writing sports for the *Telegraph* the last forty years.

Tommy knew she had a crush on him and the way he treated her was pretty bad. But when they had the car accident and her

face got all cut up so she wasn't pretty anymore—he dropped her like a hot potato. That's why Pop always hated his guts so bad.

The second year he got in headlines when that chorus gal from Palm Beach had him arrested for assault. They'd have jailed him that time if Mack and the front office of the Falcons hadn't spent beacoup jack. Anyway, what I'm pointing out is that he was always in trouble with somebody over a dame. But did it take any of the cockiness out of him? Hell, no!

This year, he showed up with his wife. Have you seen her? Got pictures yet? Well, dig her up and get at it, gang, and get her in a bathing suit if you can. Take my word for it, Lili Toscano is a treat for any man's eyes, even an old newshound's. She's got that sort of olive skin and her hair is black and her lips are red and oh, hell! Firm, high bosom, a willowy waist and slender hips. You know, you get the idea. Hang a million dollars worth of legs to those hips, imagine the dame full of pep and fire, and you get an idea of Lili Toscano.

You know how I am about souvenirs? The first day she was here I picked the lock to Toscano's room and stole a pair of silk orchid panties. Wore the damned things in my breast pocket for a handkerchief. Matter of fact, here they are now. Cute, hanh?

Anyway, Tommy showed up with his wife but he'd been married to her two months and was already a little tired of her I guess. He was that way with dames. Now we're down to this year, and I can start the real story.

THE first morning I noticed anything was one of those mornings after the night before. The sun was just coming up when I sat on the edge of the bed and had my first drink of the morning. I ran for the window pretty fast, and leaning out, the first thing I saw knocked me for a loop.

Down behind the boathouse, in plain view, was Tommy Toscano. He was wearing a pair of white trunks and there was no mistaking that build of his. He had his arms full of woman and was doing his stuff. But her back was turned my way and I couldn't see who it was. He was kissing her and she was liking it plenty. I beat it for my bureau, picked up the binoculars I use at the track, and couldn't get 'em focused soon enough.

I managed to get Tommy just as they disappeared around the corner of the boathouse. Damned if he didn't have that dame draped around his neck as if he was the last man on earth! Yep, he had a way with women.

WHAT happened the next morning? By sun-up I was there at the window with the glasses ready. Nose for news, eh? And pretty soon here they came, as bold as brass. I nearly dropped the glasses. The dame—the same dame as yesterday—was Marie Oldham, wife of the best southpaw-pitcher on the Falcons. Big Al himself. And the way she went for Tommy Toscano left nothing to be desired. Even me, Eddie Zinn, who was only looking on with a pair of high-powered binoculars, broke out in goose pimples all over and began feeling like a younger man.

They were so much wrapped up in each other that they didn't seem to care whether anybody saw them or not.

I TOLD my girl Betty about it that night when she was up to see me and wangle a couple of cocktails. Betty was switchboard girl here, you know, and I don't mind telling you I was pretty crazy about her, have been for the last two years. She had no business in my room, but what the hell? I know the hops, and even the house dick is a pal of mine. Used to be anyway. So there she was and I told her what I'd seen. Even showed her the new souvenir I'd picked up. A little silken tassel that held up the shoulder strap of Marie Oldham's suit.

I remember she sat up straighter and got sort of white when I broke the news. "Tommy Toscano running around with that old hen?" she snapped "You let me know if anything like that goes on again," and she seemed sort of sore. I'm a jealous guy and I'm curious.

"Why?" I asked her.

"Well," she sort of hesitated, "because Al Oldham is too nice a guy for that. His wife shouldn't play around with Tommy—and she won't if I can help it."

THE next morning, bright and early, came the payoff. If anything, the scene was more torrid than ever, although it did seem that Tommy's actions showed a little boredom. That guy simply couldn't stick to one woman long. Just when things were at their brightest, I see another dame going down the beach toward the boathouse She's wearing a bright red swimming suit and, even from the back, I knew her. I'd admired those full, swinging hips too often as they went through the dining room or lobby.

It was Lili Toscano, and she was headed right for her husband, who was necking Marie Oldham on the other side of the boathouse. Business was picking up.

Almost there she stopped, turned around quickly, and I could see her face. It was what you good writers call "contorted with rage." There may have been tears, but I couldn't see them. Just anger. And the thing she held in her right hand was a gun. Get that, now, a gun. For a minute she stood staring at it like she didn't know what it was. And suddenly she began to shake.

Gentlemen, she was a picture, shuddering in a bathing suit with that swell shape of hers. Shaking here, trembling there, quivering here, if you see what I mean. And suddenly she threw the gun in the sand and began running toward the hotel, her face still damned near ugly with anger.

I spot the gun, and get it a little later for my collection of souvenirs.

In a couple of minutes my phone rings. I take it, and it's Betty Swenson, on the switchboard. She says, "For the love of God, Eddie, go out your window and tell that cheating couple to get scarce. Mrs. Toscano just phoned Al Oldham's room and told him they were out there. Do something quick."

My room was on the first floor—so I went out the window. I was on them before they knew it. Tommy started to bluster. I said, "Hold it, Toscano, the lady's husband is on his way down here. If there's three of us, he won't suspect anything."

Tommy's bluster died away. Marie got plenty white and frantic. But when Al Oldham came barging around the corner in a robe we were all three feet apart, wrapped up in a discussion of the Falcons' chance to win the pennant. He growled something about breakfast, glared at me and Toscano.

AFTER the Oldhams left, Tommy growled, "I suppose I ought to thank you, but how in the hell did you know we were here? You been spying again?"

"Tommy," I warned him, "someday you're going to bite off more women than you can handle."

He just sneered and swaggered away. At the hotel I asked Betty again why all the sudden interest in something that was going on every day all around her. And again she stalled me. I was a damned chump about that kid. Anyway, back to the room I go for clothes.

Now it happened that Tommy Toscano's room was right next to mine. The Crystal is an old hotel and the walls aren't soundproof. I'm no more than in when I hear the sounds of a terrific argument. A woman sort of screams and there's a thud, followed by Tommy's roaring voice. I goes out the French door onto the balcony, ease along, and have a look for myself.

They're fighting all right, and fighting like hell. I can't understand the lingo, but I can understand the actions, plenty. She gets up off the floor where he's knocked her and leaps at him like a tiger. Before he can dodge, she's scratched his face and he catches her. It's right interesting to watch.

He shoves her down on the bed, grabs a belt from somewhere and begins whaling away at her. She cowers there, shielding her face with her arms, never muttering a sound. The old strap goes *whack-whack-whack*. And suddenly the big lug stops, stares at her sort of funny and begins to bawl.

Then he was beside her, petting her,

caressing her, crying over her. She just lay there, never moving, like she was dead or something, then suddenly she came to life, and her arms were about his neck, she was pulling him to her and crying with him.

I watched for quite a while. You know how a newshawk is. And after a while when they were both calm again, she took his face in both her hands and looked straight and hard into his eyes. She said solemnly, "To share you with another woman would kill me, Tommy. If I ever find you cheating on me, I'll kill you myself and commit suicide." And you could see she meant it.

THAT was a busy day, gentlemen, a busy day for Eddie Zinn. I went to breakfast with some of the other gang, old Pop Asher, sour and gloomy as ever, along at my right. Al Oldham came in by himself and ate alone. The Toscanos came in, grinning like a couple of newlyweds should, and ate together. The rest of the gang drifted off, all but Pop Asher, who sat still picking his teeth and glaring at Tommy Toscano.

"The swell headed pup," he muttered. "What right has he got for happiness when he ruined my kid's life. I'd like to fix his face like he fixed hers!"

He got up and stalked out. I waited. I was playing a hunch. And I was right, for in a few minutes a waiter came in and told Tommy there was a phone call for him. I was just a little behind him when he left. And sure enough she was waiting for him in that little alcove off the side lobby. Marie was wearing colored glasses. And she raised them piteously and showed Tommy the black eye her husband Al had given her. It was a dandy.

Tommy shrugged politely, said something and started away. Her face grew sort of pale and she grabbed his arm. He voice was raised a little and I could hear how bitter it was. "You can't mean that, Tommy! You wouldn't throw me over? You wouldn't—?"

He just took her hand off his arm, grinned at her and walked away. And there was another dame around with hatred lining her face.

Yeah, I know, you're interviewing me on how I solved the case. How Eddie Zinn turned boy detective. It takes all this to line it up, for I'll admit I got a lucky break, having all this previous information dropped in my lap. I don't want to get ahead of my story, but I just want to point out that four people either hated his guts or expressed a desire to kill him. His own wife, who warned him she'd knock him off if she caught him cheating; Al Oldham, who knew damned well Tommy had been messing with his wife; Marie Oldham who'd just been thrown to the wolves by the elegant Tommy; and old Pop Asher, who hated him because he'd wrecked his daughter's face and life. Now you got the layout, boys.

THAT afternoon the Yannigans played the Falcons a five inning game. Al Oldham was on the hill for the rookies and of course Tommy Toscano was covering third for the regulars. Tommy bats third. He dusted his hands, pulled down his cap, and stepped in the batter's box. Al winds up, draws back that left arm, and lets loose with his fast one. Tommy hits the dirt on his face for the ball was coming a mile a minute at his head. He grins a little and the catcher tosses the ball back to Al.

Again the windup, the pitch. And again Tommy in the dust, the ball having shaved him by a fraction of an inch. He bellowed something at Al this time, something about bush league control. The third pitch was just like the other two, right at Tommy's head. Tommy scrambled up and started for the box. Al met him halfway and they were at it hammer and tongs. Of course Mack and the rest of the boys stopped them, pulled them apart. Mack sent Tommy to the showers and put Al Oldham on the bench. Business was picking up.

Pop Asher, sitting beside me, grunted, "I wish he'd have stove in that guy's face. I'd like to do it myself!"

Another voice, behind us, said, "And that goes for me, too, the damned swell head." It was a dame's voice.

I turned around. It was Marie Oldham, still wearing horn rims to cover her black eye.

ABOUT the third inning I see someone get off the bench and head for the showers. And right away I followed. It was Al Oldham. I didn't follow him in but I was getting a bird's-eye view through an open window. Always the newshawk.

Oldham opened his locker, took out a bottle of Scotch and like to foundered himself on a half pint drink. He sat down on a bench, the bottle in his hand, and stared at the locker. Then he hit the bottle again, plenty hard.

Tommy Toscano comes in, wearing his pants and shirt but no coat. His hair is still wet and glistening. He pays no attention to Oldham, but puts on his shoes, stands up to tie them, putting first the left one and then the right one on the bench. His back is to Oldham and it's more than Al can stand. He gulps at the bottle again, then gets up. Very slowly he walks toward Tommy, draws back his right foot and boots Tommy—where guys are supposed to be booted. Tommy takes a header over the bench and comes up fighting mad.

It was a pretty scrap while it lasted. Like him or not, Tommy Toscano was good. Three minutes more and Al Oldham was out like a light, face flooded with blood, nose already starting to puff. Toscano left him where he was, put on his hat and coat, and walked out.

I got Al on his feet after while. "Come on, boy," I told him, as he gulped at the Scotch, killing it, "we've got to get out of here before Mack finds you drunk. You did the best you could, what the hell!"

"I'll kill the damn' ladies' man," he mumbled and tossed the bottle in a corner. I grabbed him by the arm, jerked his street shoes out of the locker, and made him put them on. I knew he wouldn't have time to dress before the gang came in. "Come on, I'll take you to the hotel, Al," I offered, and was halfway to the back entrance of the park before I noticed he was still carrying his spiked shoes. But how the hell can a man know what a drunk'll think of?

I almost had him in the car when we heard running footsteps. It was his wife, Marie.

I was kidding Al along. I said, "Al tomorrow I'll buy you a new pair of ball shoes, the best there are. I want them old ones for a souvenir. I've always wanted a shoe that had booted Tommy Toscano where he should be booted!"

Marie listened for a minute with her mouth open. I winked at her, and she plucked at Al's suit.

"What happened?" she asked. "Who beat you up? Did that rat—?"

"Get the hell away from me," mumbled her husband, "you're worse than him." He tossed the shoes to the floor of the roadster and we drove off. I got him in the hotel that evening all right. Last I saw of him he was crawling beneath a shower. I went on down to my room thinking how many guys would like to take a death poke at pretty Tommy Toscano. I decided I wouldn't like to be that guy.

I TOOK a nap, a shower, and six fast drinks. Then I called Betty at her house She went off duty at three in the afternoon. "Evening, toots," I caroled, "how about a big night together, you and I? We'll make the Casino, then find a moonlit stretch of beach."

"Honestly, Eddie, I can't," she pleaded, "I've got such an awful headache."

And nothing I could do would move her. It worried me a little. In fact I got sore as hell about it and bawled her out plenty. After all we'd been to each other for the past two seasons! So I slammed the phone and went down to the bar and got very thoroughly polluted. And at the robber's prices they charge, too.

IT MUST have been ten o'clock when I went back to my room. As I came through the lobby, Marie Oldham stopped me. "Have you seen Al?"

She looked pretty swell, all dolled up in decolleté, low cut evening gown swimming tightly down across her hips. I don't know what got into me but I began to burn a little, remembering what I'd seen down on the beach, between her and pretty Tommy. She went on, "I'm afraid he's out on a binge, and it's all my fault."

I nodded. "Yep, baby, it's all your fault.

Eddie Zinn is the guy that knows, don't forget that."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on in my room, Marie, and I'll show you what I mean." She must have been scared, must have realized I knew something. A minute later she was standing by my side at the open window and I could tell by the rise and fall of her breasts she was excited. I handed her the glasses, showed her where to point them.

I was pouring a drink when she turned from the window, white-faced. "What are you going to do about it?" she asked, sort of low. I handed her a drink.

"I've been wondering what Al would do if he knew the truth. He only suspected something when he beat you up."

She walked over to me and put her hands on my shoulders, just like I meant for her to do. She got the old pleading look on her face, and she wasn't so bad wearing it. She whispered, "You wouldn't tell him, would you, Eddie?" She was pretty close, close enough for me to smell the fragrance of her hair. But this is an old racket to me. I shrugged, said, "It's funny you can be nice to lugs like Toscano when wise guys like me are around."

It's a racket, see?

A HALF hour later we were standing near my door ready to leave. We were both a little tight as we'd finished the bottle. And all at once she began to cry, began to cry like hell. I put an arm around her shoulders but she pulled away, sobbing, "Damn all men for beasts! They're all alike."

I shrugged and opened the door. I'd heard that line before. She said, "Wait, my mascara's running." She reached for the edge of orchid chiffon sticking from my breast pocket, dabbed at her eyes as I stepped into the hall.

Just then the door of Tommy Toscano's room came open and a girl stepped out, a girl in a hurry. I said, "Damn it, Betty Swenson, what were you doing in that punk's room?"

She was so scared she just stood there. I heard Marie gasp behind me, then I had Betty by the arm hauling her toward the back entrance.

I got her in the car, walked around and crawled in myself. I kicked something. It was Al Oldham's shoes. I only stopped once on the highway, to get another bottle. About two miles out I turned off on a side-road, and a mile farther on stopped the car. The moon was big and bright. And I never hated anyone so much in my life as I hated Betty when she whimpered there in the corner of the seat.

I REMEMBER shaking her while I questioned her, shaking her hard till she was half out of her dress. I said, "Get out!" And she got out.

"Now, two timer," I grated, "get back tto town the best you can."

She said defiantly, "To hell with you! A man like Tommy's worth a dozen snooping reporters."

I saw red, gentlemen. The only thing I could find to throw was one of Al Oldham's big shoes. Betty was just staggering to her feet. I heard the shoe plop against her, saw her fall over backward. Then I drove like hell back to town.

Coincidence is a funny thing, isn't it? I was opening my door when Tommy's door flew open and another woman backed into the hall. She was Lili, his wife, and her hand was at her mouth, her eyes strained. She kept looking into the room, not at me. Then she screamed, and fainted. I looked into the room too, stepping over her. Then I went back to my room and phoned the desk.

TOMMY TOSCANO was lying over against the bureau, his head a mass of clotted blood and brains. A baseball bat with a taped handle was on the floor near his feet. And Tommy Toscano would fool around with no more dames. He was veddy, veddy dead, gentlemen, like he deserved to be. I stared around the room, picked a wisp of cloth from the floor and wiped my forehead. I was still looking at the dead guy when O'Connor and Rourke arrived from headquarters.

Ten minutes later they were still work-

ing Lili Toscano over. All she could say was that she'd been walking alone in the moonlight, had come in to find him that way. Not much alibi.

I said, "Rourke, I think I can help you." This is where the boy detective part comes in gentlemen. And I told them everything I knew. How I knew what kind of guy Tommy was, how I'd spied out the window on him and Marie Oldham, about the fight between him and Al Oldham, even about old Pop Asher hating the guy so much. I felt very good about the whole thing. A man likes to help the law. It can be very useful sometimes.

Another ten minutes and they were all there. Al Oldham had been found drunk in the hotel bar, blind drunk. But he'd just come in, had no recollection of where he'd been or what he'd been doing. Consequently no alibi.

Pop Asher was looking at the dead man and laughing like hell. But he denied killing him, claimed he'd been in his room playing solitaire. And no alibi there, either.

Marie Oldham had been found in bed asleep. But no positive alibi there, either.

Rourke said, "Hell, let's haul Oldham. He had plenty of reason to kill him, and the guy was croaked with a ballbat. Who else but a ball player would use a bat to beat out another guy's brains."

I had a great moment then. I handed Al the bat, told him to play like he was taking a cut at a fast ball. He did, owl eyed. I said, "Gentlemen, that wrecks that theory. You can see for yourself that Al is a natural southpaw. He even bats left-handed. He wouldn't change his stance just to beat out a guy's brains, and Tommy was hit by a normal guy. Look for yourself."

Rourke said, "To hell with that. We ought to ride the whole gang."

Marie Oldham looked at me maliciously. "The whole gang isn't here. The last person I know of being in this room is Eddie Zinn's girl friend, Betty Swenson."

I growled, "Ex-girl friend, sweetheart." Then I rememberd. Grumpily I said, "Get her down here. She should have made it home by now." And I gave him her number. Rourke made the call. He yeahed and ohed and izzatsoed a lot, then turned around and walked to Al Oldham. He stuck his finger into Oldham's face.

"So you been so drunk you can't remember where you've been, eh? Listen, guy, murder is murder, whether it's a guy or a dame. They just found Betty Swenson laying on a side road three miles out, dead. Someone had knocked her down and her head hit a stone. And beside her, was a baseball shoe with a heavy toe plate, a pair of spikes, and your name stitched into the heel. Come on, fellow."

Marie Oldham began to laugh. She said, "It's a damned funny thing that Eddie Zinn had those shoes in his car this afternoon. I can even tell you a remark he made about them. And Eddie Zinn left the hotel tonight with Betty."

I HARDLY heard her. I was hunkered down in my chair crying to beat hell. I had to hold my hand over my eyes and even then I couldn't blot out the picture of Betty going over when that heavy shoe hit her, of Betty's voice swearing a rat like Tommy Toscano was worth a dozen prying newshawks. I could see her slim legs, her soft flesh, her slender white body.

Well, gentlemen, there you got it. That's why I'm here behind the bars waiting for the day. Glad you all came down to interview me. Like I say, I'm used to bylines, but not to headlines. This ought to be interesting reading. Headline it, "Who Killed Tommy Toscano?" and put a deck on it, "Mystery solved by former newspaper man."

Certainly, certainly I solved it. O'Connor and Rourke would have been lost without me. You see the wisp of chiffon I picked off the floor to wipe my brow with, was a pair of Lili Toscano's panties. The same one's I'd snitched from her room and had been wearing in my breast pocket. Remember how I'd lost them? Yeah, just before I met poor Betty coming from Toscano's room.

You'll find Marie Oldham in the next wing, gents, the ladies' quarters. Give her my love and tell her I'll see her on the gallows. So long.

HOMETOWN HOMICIDE

By GERALD JAMES

Illustrated by
William Meilink

THE woman was blonde and above average size. She had on too much makeup, but her lips were full and inviting despite that. She opened the door of her stalled coupe as Dan Galen brought his coughing roadster to a stop beside her.

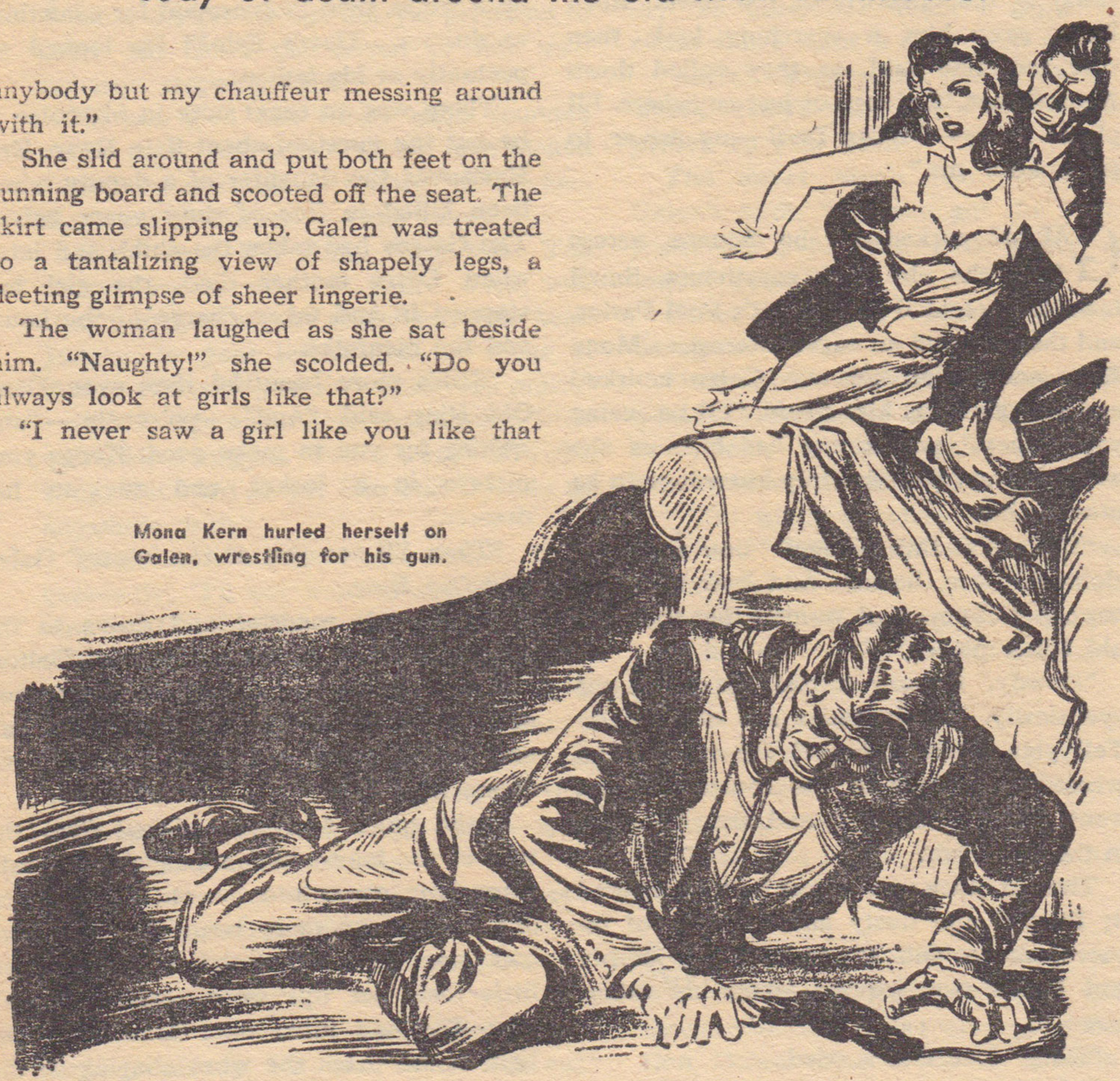
"Hi, pal," she greeted, turning on a smile. "Mind giving a poor girl a lift as far as Delton? This crate's cut out on me."

Dan Galen's lips twitched, a blank expression dulled his eyes and set his lean, square face. He opened the door.

"Maybe it's something I can fix," he offered.

"No!" she blurted. "Besides, I don't want

The sheriff's son returned to the small town and everybody said that he was taking up with the wrong woman. Even the girl who loved him couldn't understand it until bullets began to sing a rhapsody of death around the old Mink farmhouse.



Mona Kern hurled herself on Galen, wrestling for his gun.

anybody but my chauffeur messing around with it."

She slid around and put both feet on the running board and scooted off the seat. The skirt came slipping up. Galen was treated to a tantalizing view of shapely legs, a fleeting glimpse of sheer lingerie.

The woman laughed as she sat beside him. "Naughty!" she scolded. "Do you always look at girls like that?"

"I never saw a girl like you like that before," Galen gulped. The woman eyed him narrowly as he got under way. She checked the walk-a-flight suit and hat he wore, and the too-muchly-stitched brogues on his feet. Despite the cheap loudness of his apparel, there was an air to this guy, the dame decided.

She squirmed on the seat. "You don't live around here," she said.

"Me? Well, I used to. But the place was too small for me. I had to leave. I'm going back to Delton on a visit to my dad."

She thought. . . . Small town boy goes to city, but the country remained in him. And then her face showed a singular hardness when Galen added proudly, "My dad is Old Ring Galen. Delt County Sheriff."

"Yeah?" she snapped. "And I suppose you're a deputy."

"Like hell! I don't have much use for the law myself. I was known as a pretty smart guy up in the Big Town." He gave her a look intended to be worldly and knowing.

"Well, we big timers got to stick together," she said reflectively. "I'm Mona Kern. Mrs. Mona Kern, but not working at the Mrs. part. I took the old Mink farm,

beyond Delton. To get away for my health."

"Sometimes," Galen said, "that's a good idea."

He kept his eyes straight ahead as they came to the outskirts of the town. Mona Kern gave him a searching look, then shrugged. She said, as they rolled down Main Street, "Let me out just anywhere. I'll phone Batty—I mean Dool—my driver, to come after me."

GALEN parked in the Square, across from the old brick courthouse. Small town idlers loafed before Pat's Pool Parlor, and they showed an eager interest as Mona Kern and Galen got out. Galen smirked and swaggered as Mona said, "I'll be seeing you, honey," and swung her hips as she walked away. She certainly knew how to be provocative.

"Hell, it's Dan Galen!" one man exclaimed. "Dan, howdy. And how is it you happen to know that woman that took the old Mink place?"

"Howdy," Galen returned. He closed one eye slowly. "Mona and I are old friends. Tell you about it later." He turned and crossed the street to the courthouse and went down to the jail and sheriff's office in the basement.

The old office was just as he remembered it; littered and dusty and smelling of tobacco smoke. Old Ring's desk was empty and Galen was leaving when his father came in.

"Ring!" Dan Galen cried.

"It's fine to see you, son." Old Ring Galen gripped his son's hand in a grip that was iron and steel despite Ring's age. Shrewd old eyes were studying Dan Galen, though, and it didn't seem that Ring was too well pleased at the way Dan had turned out. Old Ring began packing his pipe

"I heard you'd come back, and hurried over," he explained. "News travels fast here, you know. You know Mrs. Kern?"

"Picked her up when her car stalled."

"She called you sweet names on short notice," Ring muttered. He expelled pungent smoke, as though that dismissed Mona Kern.

"You never wrote much, Dan," he said. "Never was very clear about what you been doing all this time."

"Oh, this job and that," young Galen evaded. "I thought I'd come home and rest up a while, then look around for something to do. . . . How's Erin?" He looked expectantly at his father.

There was an eager note in his voice as he put the question about Erin Ryan. Erin Ryan was the daughter of a deputy who'd been killed in line of duty years before. The Galens had taken the child, and later, when Dan's mother died, the girl had stepped in and taken charge of the house and the menfolks.

"Erin's more beautiful than ever, Dan," Old Ring said. "And"—pointedly—"still waiting for you to make good. Keeps your picture in a locket, and one on her dresser."

"Then I'll see you at the house," Galen told Old Ring.

He got his roadster and drove to the old white house in the old part of Delton. His steps were eager as he opened the door, and his voice rang in the wide front hall and up the stairs as he called, "Erin, Erin. Guess who it is?"

Light, quick footsteps clicked from the rear of the house. Galen caught his breath when Erin came into the old living room. She had grown more beautiful! Her dark hair was clouded around a heart-shaped little face; her lips were a small Cupid's bow. She had filled out, Galen saw the light house dress she wore clinging to the sweet curves of budded womanhood. Her breathing made her bosom rise and fall heavily.

She didn't seem to notice his clothes, nor remark a change in him. She called his name in a glad, ringing voice, and then stopped shyly. Her long lashes lowered and lay against her cheeks and high color rose in her throat.

"Erin!" Dan Galen choked. He took one step, reached out and pulled her into his arms. Her own arms were warm, soft as they locked convulsively around his neck and she pressed her vibrant young body against him, turning her lips up to him as she closed her eyes. There was longing and

a sense of belonging in the hard, breathless kiss they gave each other.

IT WAS Galen who sensed the danger here; danger he was not yet prepared to court. He broke the thread of this mad moment, stepping back.

He was glad Old Ring's steps sounded on the porch just then. The old man looked at Erin as she hurried toward the kitchen, then at Dan Galen—a little uneasily.

"Son," said Old Ring, "let's talk. You always had a way for police work, and aimed to get into it when you left here. Judging by your letters and the looks of the car you own, you ain't done very much."

Galen's lips again gave that strange little quirk. He shrugged. "Police work's all right, Ring. But hard to get into and slow to go anywhere with."

Ring shook his head and sighed. Then, guardedly, "I'd not want to see Erin hurt, son. . . . Uh, this Kern woman. Dan, there's something funny there. She come here three weeks back, and rented the Mink place. The fellow that drives her car is a thug if there ever was one. She's got another man she calls her butler and houseman; thin, dead-eyed devil I learn is Jig Jurvis—with a police record a yard long."

Galen frowned uneasily. "That means nothing," he said. "You're too suspicious, Ring. You'd do better to let people alone; not bother them."

"I don't understand you," Ring said a little helplessly. He rose. "Well, let's eat."

There was something strained hovering over the three as they went through the meal; Ring tried to drive the talk toward the things Dan Galen had been doing these years since he'd left Delton, and young Galen evaded his questions. Worried, Erin remained silent, regarding Galen uneasily.

Galen got up when Ring did. I'll drive you downtown," he offered. He parked back in front of Pat's Pool Parlor and when Ring walked across the square, went in.

Men greeted him. In an affected, offhand manner, Galen answered them. He moved toward a table where a squat, hard man with cauliflower ears was practicing shots alone. The man looked up, scowling. Then he eased it off.

"You must be the guy that picked up Mona—I mean Mrs. Kern—up this mornin'," he observed. "Want a game? These rubes won't shoot a stick with me."

"Rack," Galen called, pulling off his coat. Then, "How'd you figure I was the one picked up your boss?"

The squat man's lips curled behind Galen's back. "Oh, you got the look of a smart city guy. Batty Dool knows a wise one, I guess."

Galen swaggered openly. "That's me," he agreed.

Batty Dool chalked his cue and purposefully bungled a shot. "Guess your old man being a sheriff gives you an edge around here?" he remarked.

"Who wants an edge with these apple-knockers?" Galen grunted. "Of course," he looked sly, "if I was to see something easy and wanted at it, I guess my old man wouldn't go too far toward tossing me in the can."

Dool racked his cue.

"Guess he wouldn't," he agreed. "I got to meet the boss now. She said for me to tell you she wanted to see you."

"That goes double," Galen said with emphasis.

MEN'S eyes followed them as they walked out. And there were whispers, speculations after they were gone. How did Dan Galen come to be so friendly with Mona Kern and a man like Dool? Had he known them before? . . . What did Galen do for a living? . . .

A sedan was nosed in at the curb down the street. Mona Kern was just getting in. For a country boy who thought he was big town, Galen's observation of the sedan was mighty close. The heavy way the door slammed, the thickness of the glass in the doors and windshield, caused Galen's eyes to narrow.

Mona Kern showed white teeth in a broad smile as Galen put a foot on the running board and leaned on the door. "I wanted to see you again," she crooned. "Busy? How about going for a ride?"

Galen's body tensed for a second and he stared at Mona Kern as though trying to read her mind and find out what she meant about taking him for a ride. Then Galen smirked.

"You said something," he answered, getting in. Batty Dool took the wheel. As they pulled away from the curb, Erin Ryan walked up the street. She stopped, hands going to her breast, a hurt expression on her face. Mona Kern noticed that.

"Girl friend?" she asked.

"Naw," Galen grunted.

Mona Kern's lips set, like she knew he lied and intended doing something about it.

The big car eased out of town. A town that was buzzing. Dan Galen hadn't been home but a few hours, but already he was getting himself a bad name.

In the car, Mona sat pressed against him. There was an animal attraction about the woman that made itself felt. Galen reached awkwardly and got an arm about her.

"This's no place for us," she said throatily. She leaned. "Dool, take us home."

The road now became bumpy and rutted as it wound into a section of abandoned farmlands now brush and briar and tree grown. Dool ran the car over a hill, through a sagging gateway and up to the old Mink farm.

The old house sagged and was rank with decay. Mona and Galen left the car, crossed the protesting porch and went in. The barest furnishings had been moved in. Mona tossed off her jacket and sat on a cot in the musty living room.

"I haven't moved in any furniture," she explained, "because there's no telling when I'll leave here."

She turned as a gaunt, putty-faced man with dull, set eyes came to the door. "This's Jig Jurvis, the best butler in the country," Mona exlaimed. She watched Jurvis' face closely, while Jurvis' cold eyes seemed to bore through Galen.

"Guess you're right," Jurvis said at last, giving the impression he was agreeing with something having nothing to do with Mona's statement about his butling qualities. He seemed just to disappear, then.

MONA sat on the sofa and patted the spot beside her. Galen sat down. She snuggled against him, one arm around his neck, her head back, lips turned up to him.

She made a humming sound in her throat as he kissed her. And then that sound stopped. Her arms tightened, she moved uneasily and her breath caught in her throat. She clung to him with sudden savagery, breasts moving agitatedly as she kissed him almost brutally.

"Galen!" she gasped, pulling back. She bore a far-off expression, that slowly changed to one of guarded interest, as though she'd started something as a game and found the game going too far.

Galen wiped moist palms on his pants. Caught a full breath.

"You—you love me?" crooned Mona Kern.

"I could," he answered.

"You'd do something for me?"

"Anything!"

"Your father, the sheriff, seems to suspect us of being criminals—or something," she pouted. "He's been watching this house, and eyeing me in town. It makes me nervous. Can't a woman come here without being spied on?"

"I'll tell him," Galen promised, "to let you alone."

"That's a dear," she said, rising, kissing him quickly. "Perhaps we'd better go, now."

Back in Delton, Mona Kern squeezed Galen's hand, told him she'd see him the next day and Batty Dool drove away. Hands in his pockets, Galen watched them turn toward the railroad station. He waited, saw them come back and take the road out of town, then walked to the station himself.

The agent looked up when Galen leaned an elbow on the ledge of the ticket window. "If you ain't in no hurry, I'd like to to get this message off," the agent said.

"No hurry," Galen assured him. He pretended to study a posted time table. The *click-clack* of the agent's sender cut the station's between-train silence. Galen's face seemed to flatten, his lips thinned. He followed the clicking of the instrument. His senses were all at attention.

Gus reeled against the coupe and the little bag fell from his hands.

"Gus," he decoded. "Bring dishes safely enough. Mona."

Galen was whistling through his teeth when he picked up a blank and wrote a message of his own. "Three down, one coming with required," he penciled.

The station agent blinked, looked at Galen and complained, "It don't make sense."

"To you, it doesn't have to," Galen growled. He tossed down money and moved away.

HE drove home. The house was quiet, almost brooding. Galen stopped on the top stairway landing. A low, jerky sound as of a woman crying, reached his ears. He moved to the door of Erin's room and knocked. Heard her move about inside, and then she opened the door for him. Her eyes were red with weeping, her lips quivered.

"Erin," he protested. "What's wrong?"

"Everything," she mumbled, eyes downcast. "They're saying, people around town, that you're playing some sort of racket; that you knew that Kern woman before you came here. I saw you in her car, Galen."

"It didn't mean a thing," he lied.

"No?" She showed a flash of angry spirit. "Then you'd better wipe the lipstick off your face!" She stepped back and slammed

the door. Galen grimaced, pulled his handkerchief and wiped his mouth as he went downstairs. He answered the telephone, and the station agent's voice crackled in his ear.

"'Nother message ain't making sense," the man snapped. "'Send encyclopedia', it says. Now what sort of—"

Galen's voice was crisp, authoritative as he interrupted. "Send a wire to the same place as the other," he rapped. "Say: 'Raising minks. Inquire and watch.'"

"But you ain't raising minks," the agent protested.

"I'll be raising hell with you if you don't get that message off," Galen snarled. He hung up and turned. Old Ring Galen stood just inside the room, shaking his head side-to-side.

"You've raised hell, I think," he told Galen. "Dan, it's time you told me what brought you here." He raised his right hand and shook the yellow flimsies it contained.

"You sent an odd message, after the Kern woman sent one. I have her answer from some man named Gus Shruff, in Ray City. This Shurff says he'll see her tomorrow and bring some dishes. There's something going on, Galen; something wrong. You're in on it."

"There's nothing wrong," Galen insisted. "Ring, let that woman alone!"

"I'll have that say," Ring said sharply. "Dan, my being sheriff ain't going to make anything easier on you. I'd appreciate it if you'd leave. Not tonight. But tomorrow. Maybe you'll save yourself trouble; me and Erin a lot of heart-ache, too."

"I still tell you you'd better let Mrs. Kern and her help alone!" Galen said flatly. He hesitated, shoved his hands into his pockets and left the room. It was tough having words with his father, but it had to be.

IT was dark when he climbed into his roadster and drove away. On the smooth highway beyond Delton, he slowed and reached under the dash and made a twisting motion with one hand. The battered car stopped stuttering and wheezing. A power-motor, one never associated with the body make of the car, began to purr a song of speed and power. Galen tramped the accelerator. Seventy, eighty, ninety the speedometer indicator rose.

He slowed when the surfaced road ran onto the rough going toward the old Mink place. He turned the knob under the dash as he neared the house. His motor began to miss and labor again. He pulled up before the porch, got out, stomped across the boards, laid his fist against the door.

It was jerked open. Batty Dool, feet planted firmly, a gun in hand, snarled, "What the hell you want?"

"It's me, Dool." Galen sounded scared and shaky. "I came to tell Mona something. What's wrong with you, anyhow?"

"We're afraid of burglars," Dool growled. "Go on in." He motioned with the gun.

Galen walked into the old parlor. Mona sat on the cot, a thick robe around her. Her eyes were narrow-lidded and speculative. Then she jerked her head at Dool and the man's footsteps echoed toward the rear of the place.

An oil lamp cast dull, yellow light and softened the woman's features. It wasn't too hard for Galen to speak softly as he sat beside her and took one of her hands.

"I talked to Ring, Mona. He won't bother you," he lied. "He never really meant to be snooping, anyhow. I wanted to see you, so I brought you the word tonight."

There was a loud bump, as of a piece of heavy machinery, in the rear of the house. Jig Jurvis' voice rose irately as he berated Dool. "Dammit, you bust that press—"

"It was nice of you to come out." Mona raised her voice so he couldn't catch the rest of Jurvis' words. She swayed toward Galen, her expression that of a woman who deliberately temps herself for the fun of seeing how far she can go.

THE countryside was quiet when he ran his roadster back to town. One little lunchroom was open. The night constable and watchman over the business district was, beside the counterman, the joint's only occupant. Galen took a stool.

The constable looked at his watch.

"Folks in Delton don't traipse around this time of morning," he said sharply.

"Nor mind their own business very well!"

Galen snapped, immediately sorry he'd let go his temper. After all, a man could hardly blame the constable.

The officer smacked his cup on the counter, wiped his mustache and went out.

"They seem to've sort of got it in for you around here because they can't figure you out," the counterman said slyly.

"More coffee," was all Galen said.

He drank coffee, watched gray light push back the dark, heard sparrows commence a pleasant chirping around the courthouse and the trees lining the square. Delton was a pleasant old place, he reflected, and it would be nice to settle down in it and make a home. After—

He stopped thinking, then. In Galen's business it never paid to think of any "after".

Seven o'clock and merchants were opening up. Delton was a farm center, and an early rising town. Galen slipped an expensive timepiece fromhis pocket and consulted it. The watch was a tasteful, beautiful piece, not in keeping with Galen's clothes.

He tossed money on the counter and sauntered out, moving to the depot, where a few early loiterers waited for "Ol' 386 from the City" to arrive.

Galen leaned against the depot and watched the train come in. Doors slammed, papers and mail were tossed off, two strangers, big, stern, silent men, alighted. They walked toward the waiting room. One of them paused to light his cigar. He asked behind hands cupped around a match, "Anybody raise minks around here?"

"Nope," Galen replied. "But there's the old Mink place, seven miles East and off to the left on a side road. Nobody there now, though, you'd want to see."

"Thanks. Guess we can wait."

The two men moved on. They crossed courthouse square toward the lunchroom, just as Erin Ryan, driving Old Ring Galen to the courthouse, parked the car. Ring's eyes narrowed and he watched the strangers, then he turned his head and watched Dan Galen get into his roadster and head out East.

"Dan's heading for trouble," Ring muttered. "Those two men, there, Erin, look like—well, like trouble. I'm going to wait a little while, and then I'm going out and go through the Mink place. I'm going to head Dan off if I have to put him in jail in the next county."

"He—he'll never stand for it from you," the girl muttered.

"Don't you worry yourself, Old Ring advised, getting out.

Erin looked back across the square. The two big strangers had paused and were talking to Lew Teal, owner of Delton's two taxicabs. Sudden decision set Erin's face. She put her old car in gear . . .

DAN GALEN pulled up in the Mink farmyard just as Batty Dool backed Mona's coupe out of the barn. Dool left the car near the rear of the house and jumped out.

"Well, well," Dool said mockingly. "Glad to see you this bright and sunny morning, big boy. Saved me a trip. I was coming to town after you. Mona—and a friend of hers that just drove in—want to see you."

Galen sucked in a long breath. He hadn't expected this Gus Shurff person to arrive so soon. Galen's right hand touched the gun in a belly holster lying flat against him and went into the house.

A tall, dark man with a set mouth and with the cruel features set stiffly from a recent plastic operation, stool in the center of the parlor. Galen glanced at him and, with an effort, turned his head and smiled at Mona.

"This your sweetie?" the stark-faced man snarled.

"Aw, Gus," the woman protested. To Galen, "Don't mind Gus — Mister Shurff. He's an old friend—a family friend—of mine."

"T'meetcha," Galen greeted.

"What you doing out here this time of day?" Shurff demanded.

"Just paying a call, is all. Thought perhaps there was something I might do for Mrs. Kern."

Shurff looked at Mona Kern. She looked meaningly back at him. Shurff's mouth moved with a choppy motion. "You the

guy that can keep the sheriff from bothering Mona, are you?"

"He won't bother her as long as I'm around." Galen swelled importantly.

"I suppose he wouldn't bother you if I got you to go get an important package for me?" Shurff said sharply. "They're legal papers. I wouldn't want them touched."

"Nobody will bother me!" Galen insisted.

Shurff looked again at Mona. Her expression was pleased and sort of I-told-you-so. Gus Shurff fished in a pocket and handed Galen a baggage check.

"Take this and get a little bag from the depot in Ramburg," he ordered. "Don't stop. Come right straight back here."

"Sure," Galen agreed. "But Ramburg's six miles on East. You should've had the bag sent to Delton."

"Never mind that," Shurff snapped. "Get going, now."

AS Galen nursed his roadster toward Ramburg, he told himself, "Smart enough not to bring the things in on him until he saw — or thought he saw — how things stacked up. He wouldn't even trust himself. And I want them *with* him when we move in."

He grinned, then, as he handed the Ramburg station agent the ticket and was given a small handbag. In his car again, Galen opened the bag. Inside was another, made of thick sole leather and heavily locked. Galen snapped the outer bag and drove back. As he climbed out, he took a quick look around. Old blackberry vines and brush had crept up around the farmlot. There was no sign of life in the tangle. Yet he sensed it there. Galen raised his right hand and scratched his head with an exaggerated motion, thumb and four fingers sticking up in a "five" signal. Five minutes more . . .

He stopped short when he entered the musty parlor. Jig Jurvis stepped from behind the door, closed it and leaned against it, a gun in his hand. Gus Shurff leaned against the room's other door that led toward the back of the house.

Galen had no eyes for them, or for Mona Kern, who lounged across the room. Galen stared at the cot, at Batty Dool, who stood beside it—and at Erin! Erin was huddled on the cot, cringing back against the wall. One shoulder was bruised; her skirt was torn.

Galen dropped the handbag as she sobbed, "Dan, oh Dan!"

"Just stay put," Jig Jurvis snarled from behind Galen.

"What the hell—" Galen began hoarsely.

"That's what we intend to find out," Shurff said mockingly. "We found this girl snooping around outside. She claims she came to warn you your old man, the sheriff, is coming here. You expect us to swallow that? Nuts! You've learned something and you're working a racket. We want to know what you know, and how you found it out before we leave . . . you and the girl behind."

"I told you the truth," Erin sobbed. "Dan, if you're in with them, they ought to be glad I brought a warning. Ring is coming—"

"Batty, take a look around outside," Shurff snapped. He took a step, picked up the handbag, took the smaller one out and hefted it and inspected the lock. "I still don't get this," he muttered. "I—"

"Gus!" Batty Dool yapped, springing back from a window. "There's a guy with a Tommy gun comin' outta the brush!"

Galen let his knees give and hit the floor. Jig Jurvis' shot went over him and smashed through a window. Galen rolled, got his gun cleared and slammed a shot at Jurvis as the man ran into the hall, pounding toward the rear.

Batty Dool leaped back screaming as Galen fired pointblank, and from the back of the house came the angry chatter of the Tommy gun and the full-throated roar of Old Ring Galen's .45 pistol.

Mona Kern was cowering in a corner. She screamed, "They got Jig, damn them. Gus—"

Gus Shurff hadn't drawn a gun. He was clinging to the small bag with his right hand; he had his left arm crooked around Erin Ryan's throat and, while holding her as a shield, was choking the resistance out of her. Galen lurched to his feet as Shurff

started backing through the doorway. Mona Kern hurled herself on Galen, wrestled with him, and they went to the floor.

She clawed, kicked and bit. Galen got his fingers in her hair, twisted her head around and held her while he gained his feet. Crushed against the floor, head twisted, limbs waving, she yelled profanity at him.

Out back, Shurff opened the door of Mona's coupe and hurled Erin within. She sat there on the seat, in a complete daze, her face expressionless. As Shurff started to enter, three men with guns rushed at him. As the leader came close Shurff slammed open the door against him, knocking him cold.

Inside, Galen heard Shurff yell out in the back, "Hold those guns, damn you, or you'll get this girl!"

"Don't shoot. It's my girl, Erin!" he heard Old Ring plead.

Galen gave Mona's head an extra twist, let go of her and sprinted for the front door, just as a powerful motor roared and Mona's coupe rocked out of the farmlot with Shurff and Erin in it. Galen leaped off the porch. He passed one of the two big men he'd met at the Delton depot.

"Get the Kern dame!" Galen shouted as he leaped into his roadster and kicked the motor to thundering, power-full life.

The coupe rolled in front of a thick cloud of dust that hung over the road toward Ramburg. Galen sent the little, gowed-up roadster moaning after it. The coupe was fast. He'd known it would be when Mona refused to let him tinker with it on the road. But the roadster was faster. Grit stinging him, dust blinding and choking him and making his drive suicidal at this speed, Galen began to gain. His gun was on the seat beside him, and he was thankful Gus Shurff wasn't driving the armored sedan with its bullet-proof glass and windshield.

The coupe made a curve on two wheels. Galen's heart went into his throat. He cursed Shurff in one breath and prayed for Erin in another, and nosed his front wheels halfway along Shurff's left running board.

Shurff gripped the wheel with his left hand and his right hand raised, gripping a gun. Teeth set, Erin, now revived, gripped his arm with one little hand. The shot Shurff sped at Galen went wild and the coupe swayed crazily. Shurff jabbed back with his right elbow, driving Erin back. The coupe cut across the road . . .

Shurff's face was twisted wildly as he dropped his gun, gripped the wheel with both hands and began to bake wildly. The roadster shot past, brakes screamed and Galen sent the car into a racing spin. Dust billowed up in a mighty, choking cloud, and Galen, afoot, came running out of it.

The coupe was stopped halfway through a barbed wire fence. Shurff grabbed at Erin as she leaped out the opposite door. Part of her dress came away in his hand. He cursed crazily, grabbed the sole leather bag and spun.

His gun breathed the wisps from smokeless powder, once, twice.

Galen was a weaving, grim-jawed figure as he came on. His gun was held almost shoulder level, and when he squeezed the trigger he was squarely on his target. Gus Shurff reeled against the coupe; he slid to the running board as more lead and copper found his body. His gun, the little bag fell from his hands as he hit the ground and rolled half beneath the car.

GALEN stopped, shaking off a sudden, nervous reaction. And then went to Erin, a little figure in torn clothing, who leaned against a fencepost and sobbed violently. She turned when Galen put his arms around her, clutched him around the neck, kissed his dust-coated face and cried wildly: "You've killed him. They'll be after you. Galen, run for it. I don't care what you've done, go one. And remember, I'll always love you."

Dan Galen smiled gently, held her vibrant little body in a delicious, long embrace. They were this way when a car pulled up and the two strangers of the depot and Old Ring got out. Mona Kern handcuffed to the robe rail in the car, saw Gus Shurff under the coupe's running board. She closed her eyes.

"That accounts for all of them," one of the big men said.

Galen nodded, picked up the leather bag, took a knife and split it open. He unwrapped four copper plates and inspected them. "Twenties and hunderds. Counterfeit — as good as evermade — that's been bothering us from Coast to Coast for three years." Galen was talking toward Old Ring.

"And behind that made-over face, you'll find Gus Shurff to be Tee Dannifer.

"The one wanted for the Tyler kidnapping!" Ring exclaimed. "Galen, I was coming to try to get you away from that house—against my oath of office. I ran into these men here. G-Men! But there wasn't time for them to explain until we started after you. I—I was glad when you left. Thought you might save Erin and make a getaway."

"Erin wanted me to run, too." Galen smiled. He put an arm about her. "You see, honey, I couldn't explain a thing. I've been an F. B. I. man quite a while. When we traced Shurff—or Dannifer—this far, I cooked up the plan so we wouldn't scare them off. We wanted to get Shurff *with* those counterfeit plates."

"We found the press and other stuff in the house. Jig Jurvis, one of the best ink and pressmen in the world, is *out* behind the house," one big man said.

Galen nodded. Continued: "Running onto Mona, stalled, was a bit of luck. But the plan was we thought they'd trie to use a wise-guy, rube-minded, sheriff's son to cover them. They're full of such stunts. Cute, they were. That's why it took so long to catch up with them."

"We're sorry this is your last job," one of the big men said. Galen shrugged. He looked at Ring, then at Erin.

"The State is going to put in State Police. I've been offered the job of running the force. But I should be a married man."

"Then don't worry!" Erin said, coming into his arms again. "We'll attend to that right away!"

MURDER TUNE

(*Continued from page 27*)

"And Sullivan, you're piano?"

The yellow-haired man sneered. "You know that. Why ask?"

"Okay. Not counting Dolan, who just waves a stick, that leaves five more instruments. Each guy will name what he plays. Talk up. Paula, remember what they say."

She nodded, while the musicians sullenly sounded off. There was a first trumpet. Then trap drums. A fiddle. Tenor sax, doubling on clarinet. And a string bass who sometimes played guitar instead; it depended upon what particular score was being performed.

Sammy Hirsch came back from the phone booth. "Wagon's on its way, Walt. You got what you needed?"

"I've got everything, now."

"Sure you hadn't better let a doctor look you over?"

I could have used a doctor, yes; my ribs ached fiendishly and the bottom of my spine tortured me with every move I made, where I'd been kicked. I could have used X-rays and splints and bandages and sedatives for the pain that throbbed through me. But I had a job to do first.

I gave Hirsch his gun. "I'm all right," I said. "I'll be seeing you, Sammy. And when I do, I'll know who murdered Flame Shannon."

Paula slipped her arm through mine, and together we went out toward the payoff.

CHAPTER VII

"The Band Plays Murder"

THE dog-watch engineer at Station KKXX was twentyish, pimply and impressionable. He made wolf eyes at Paula and was frankly awed when I told him I was a headquarters detective from the homicide squad. He didn't suspect I was

private; he didn't even ask to see my shield.

"Knew you was a copper soon as you came in," he said. "There's something about the way a dick carries himself." He squinted at me. "You look like you tooken one hell of a trouncing somewheres, though."

"I did." Then I explained what I wanted. "That is, if you can spare the time to get it for me. It's mighty important."

"Time? From now until six o'clock I got all the time there is. Only program we got on is an all-night platter jock, and he flips his own pancakes. Watches his own modulation, too. Jeeze, copper, this breaks the monotony. Glad to help you. And you, too, Beautiful," he added to Paula.

She gave him the kind of smile he probably didn't see very often on his lonely job. KKXX was a small, twenty-four-hour local affair of five hundred watt power, unaffiliated with any of the networks. Its equipment, though not extensive, was adequate; it maintained cables to a couple of the local hotels to pick up tea-time concerts and dinner music; it had two studios, one small, one moderately large, to handle live talent broadcasts supplementing its inevitable hours of recordings; it had turntables and cutting heads for the making of transcriptions, and playback pickups to reproduce them. It also had a direct line to the Pelanquin Ballroom for a featured forty-five nightly minutes of Mickey Dolan jive session for the hepcat trade.

The pimply kid ducked into his studio's library and returned with a sixteen inch disc of black, glossy acetate. "Got it," he announced proudly. "Wanna give a listen right now."

"I'd like to use your phone first," I told him. Then, presently, I was making my promised call to George Vardsman.

"I'm at KKXX," I said. "And I need your ears. You'll hurry?"

His tired voice sounded dull and lusterless. "Right away," he promised. "And . . . I hope it works out."

Hanging up, I could understand how he felt. No matter how he had suffered at Flame Shannon's hands, no matter what she's done to him, he still cared enough for her memory to want her murderer convicted and punished.

IT was odd, the ability Flame had always had to leave permanent scars on the hearts of the men who loved her. She'd married Vardman only because he was a professor of music, knew how to teach it, how to train young voices up to professional caliber. His fees were enormously high; much higher than Flame could ever have afforded. But she had another way of paying for what she wanted. Wantonly she'd used her body as coin to spend. Marriage, to Flame, was merely a means to an end . . .

. . . And when Vardaman had made her into the singer she aspired to be, she ditched him; he was no longer of any use to her, and he was far too old. She was on her way; she had started her climb.

First she appeared in cabarets and cheap night clubs: cellar dives and tawdry gin mills. It was then that she'd begun looking around for somebody like me. In the kind of places she worked, too many men made too many passes; too many guys got wrong ideas. So the thing to do was marry a cop. That made it safe. A cop's wife automatically had protection; you didn't get out of line with a Mrs. Policeman, or Mr. Policeman would land on your neck.

It was perfect—for Flame. But it wasn't so perfect for me, later. As long as she had to do her warbling in low grade joints, I meshed with her plans; but when she got an audition with the Mickey Dolan band, and a temporary engagement, she didn't need me any more. In those days she hadn't yet become sure of herself; she'd lacked confidence in her ability to stick in the big time. A girl like Flame needed something solid, needed to know that she wouldn't slip back into obscurity; she needed something like a contract with the Dolan orchestra.

She got it the same way she always got what she went after. She divorced me and married Mickey. He was one more stepping stone, another rung in the ladder to the top—a ladder she was ruthlessly determined to climb.

But tonight death had yanked the ladder from under her; she had finished with a knife in her back, died to the jungle rhythm of a crazy tune called *Fade My Dice And Throw Me Natural.* Suddenly I was hearing it again, hearing it just as it had been played at the moment of her murder. The wild brassy dirge came from a loudspeaker in the room next to where I'd been phoning Vardaman. I followed the sound to its source, like a man drawn by some overpowering magnet.

The pimply youth, trying to make a hit with Paula Fenton, had set his acetate disc on a turntable; had lowered a pickup head onto the outer groove. Dissonant chords brayed out; drumbeats pounded at my ears as they had pounded when I'd lowered Flame's body to the floor of that corridor behind the Palanquin bandstand, just a few short hours ago.

Again I lived through that numbed, raging moment; again felt a berserk impulse to lash out with my fists, to rend and destroy. It was a wild, intolerable anger, riding each strident pulsation; a frenzy of hate and despair.

THE kid was listening with another kind of frenzy, rapturous, entranced. He rolled ecstatic eyes at Paula. "Listen at 'em jam! Them horns and fiddle and sax —that four way counterpoint! Ain't they out of this world, Beautiful?"

No, I reflected; it was Flame Shannon who was out of this world. I lifted the tone arm from the spinning transcription and forced a smile when the kid and Paula looked questiongly at me as the music chopped off.

"Let's wait until my expert comes before we hear it through," I said. "He'll be here soon."

The kid had to leave, then, to make sure his disc jockey program was running smoothly. And presently George Vardaman came into the studio.

He knew and remembered Paula. "Yes, of course. You roomed with Flame, after she . . . left me," he said to her in a gentle voice. "I used to see you with her occasionally." His eyes moistened. "It's difficult to realize she's . . . gone. She was so alive, so vital, so brimming with new plans when I saw her tonight . . ."

"Had she asked you to call on her?" I said.

"Yes. She wanted my advice on the type of numbers she should specialize in when she went with that name band back east." A wry smile quirked his lips. And she wanted to borrow money from me, a few thousand dollars to tide her over. She said she didn't want to pawn her jewelry; she wanted to wear it to make an impression, to make a headline splash in the New York papers." He looked embrassed. "Walter, you won't think badly of me if I tell you something?"

"Of course not."

"I made her a counter-proposal. Instead of loaning her money, I offered to go east with her and finance an exploitation campaign if she . . . if she would re-marry me. I loved her very much, Walter. I wanted her back again. On any terms."

"I suppose I did, too," I admitted. "So did Mickey Dolan, very likely. She refused you?"

He nodded ruefully. "It was a forlorn hope at best. An old man like me . . . What about this recording, Walter?"

"It's an idea that Paula gave me, though she didn't know it," I said. "She happened to speak of orchestrations and missing instruments, and — well, here's the general thought. The Dolan band was on the air at the time of the murder. KKXX was broadcasting from the Palanquin Ballroom by remote control. Now, a lot of radio stations made what they call air-checks of their live shows: that is, they transcribe their programs on temporary acetate discs."

"Yes?"

"These discs record at thirty-three revolutions a minute. The stuff can then be played back later, to check the quality; sound levels, balance, microphone placement and so on. Or even to let a prospective sponsor listen at a more convenient time. All right, such a recording was made tonight of the Dolan orchestra. Here it is on this turntable."

Vardaman glanced at the slowly spinning black platter. "Then you believe—"

"I think a man like yourself, someone with a keen musical ear, could tell me exactly what instruments were playing at the moment Flame was stabbed. There were supposed to be seven: piano, fiddle, trap drums, two trumpets, tenor sax or clarinet, and string bass or guitar. Got that list?"

He parroted it, letter perfect.

I said: "I contend that one instrument was missing, one musician away from the bandstand. The killer. I want you to hear this playback and then tell me which man was out of the ensemble. Listen." I lowered the needle to the moving groove.

From the loudspeaker came the blaring, harshly discordant jamming of *Fade My Dice And Throw Me Natural*, wild, untrammeled by musical convention, savage as a tribal chant. For me, the tune would always be stigmatized by the memory of murder, the thrust of a death knife. Vardaman listened with the intent concentration of a man determined to separate and identify each yowling instrument.

At last he looked up, spoke over the unmelodic chaos of noise. "No second trumpet."

"You're sure?" I said, and lifted the pickup. "You can swear it in court?"

"I'm positive, Walter. The piano and fiddle are all there, and a saxophone that switches to E-flat clarinet. The bass violin plays throughout, except for one brief passage where it's dropped and replaced by guitar chords. There's a lead cornet, or trumpet. But no second trumpet. That would be your man Riggio, the little dark fellow you accused of smoking marijuana. He's not playing in the number. He must have been off the bandstand."

CHAPTER VIII

"Murder's Playback"

FOR A long moment I stared at the elderly music professor who was a qualified expert in the science of sounds. Of all the fantastic, improbable clues to a killing, I had come upon the most inconceivable; the most incredible. I knew now. I had called in the one person in the world capable of giving me that answer.

"There's no mistake, Vardaman? No chance of error?"

"None. The tune has a short transposition to the key of G. It would be where the second trumpet should normally take over for a few bars. But there's no second trumpet anywhere."

The key of G, I thought. G for guilty.

"Let's go to headquarters," I said. "They're holding Riggio on assault charges—I hope. Along with the other members of the band. You have your car?"

"Right outside. I'm ready when you are."

I took Paula's arm. "This is it, hon," I said.

It wasn't much of a drive; not more than six or eight minutes. But they were the longest minutes I ever lived through. A phrase kept running around inside my head . . . the key of G, the key to murder. G for guilty. But no matter how completely that key unlocked the answers, it couldn't bring Flame Shannon back to life. Music can be transposed, but nothing can transmute shadow into substance. Death was death, leaving behind it only a poignant sense of loss—and a dark hunger for revenge. That kind of hunger was a morbid appetite, I told myself. You could feast on it forever, and you'd still have an empty belly. And an empty heart.

Captain O'Rourke looked up from the papers on his desk when I walked into his office with Paula and Vardaman. He lunged to his feet. "Well, by God, Bunczek, you've got the crust to come back here—"

"Yes, because I've got the goods on the killer," I said quietly. "I want to take Sammy Hirsch off the hook. He helped me, and I know he put himself in a jackpot."

"Damn right Patrolman Hirsch put himself in a jackpot, letting you and this girl walk out of that ballroom when he should have hauled both of you here to headquarters! And bringing in the Dolan band guys again, after they'd been released on

writs. If you think you can make assault and battery charges stick on those men just because you snooped around where you had no right to snoop, and they jumped you—"

"I don't intend to bring charges against them, now," I said. "As far as I'm concerned, they're in the clear. Including Riggio. He didn't kill Flame. Here's the man who stabbed her. Vardaman." I pushed the elderly man forward.

Vardaman's face went gray, like spoiled and pasty dough. He wheezed: "Wh-wha-what?"

"You gave yourself away," I looked into his sunken, frightened eyes. "You claimed the second trumpet was missing on that aircheck of the orchestra playing *Fade My Dice*. But by happenstance I'd already had another expert hear the recording: a jive hound, a pimply kid who's the studio engineer."

"You—I—"

"He went nuts over what he mentioned as horns and sax and fiddle in four way counterpoint. In jive lingo, horns mean brass instruments of any kind; cornets, trumpets, trombones. There are no trombones in the Dolan combo. Trumpets are the only brass he uses. So if you take a sax and a fiddle, and add horns for a four way harmony, there must be two horns. That's simple arithmetic. Two horns; two trumpets. Which has to include Riggio. Therefore Riggio was playing all through the number, when Flame was being killed."

"I—I could have made a mistake."

"No. You told a deliberate lie, trying to frame Riggio. You actually named him, identified him as the little dark fellow I'd accused of smoking marijuana. I hadn't told you of that accusation; so how could you know about it? Unless you were hanging around behind the bandstand after you murdered Flame and kicked me unconscious. You were lurking there, hiding, watching and listening as I lined up the band members to examine their eyes and smell them for reefer smoke."

"No—n-no, Walter—"

"I suppose you wanted to make sure somebody took the rap. You didn't care whether I was the fall guy, or some player in the band. Just so long as suspicion didn't turn your way."

"This is—is preposterous! You know I left the Palanquin right after I visited Flame. You saw me go."

I said: "Oh, so you noticed me. You pretended not to. I think you went around to the side entrance and walked in again. You must have eavesdropped on her conversation with me. Did it drive you crazy with jealously when I grabbed her and shoved her against the wall and—"

"That was despicable of you, Walter. It was bad enough to do what you did; but then when you humiliated her afteryard, tossed money at her—oh, my God!" he gasped as he realized what he'd admitted.

"Thanks for the confession," I said. "So you did eavesdrop. I knew it had to be something like that. And when she took me across the hall to Dolan's dressing room to look for narcotics which she herself had probably planted in advance, you sneaked into the room ahead of us. When your chance came, you knifed her—and later you smudged my fingers on the handle. Maybe we can eventually trace the knife to you, if we have to. As for the striped blazer I saw, I guess you accidentally knocked it off its wall hook when you tripped me. I thought somebody was wearing it, but I was wrong. I was wrong about a lot of things," I added grimly.

Vardaman was shaking. "I wouldn't kill Flame. I loved her."

"Sure you did. You asked her to remarry you, offered to pay for exploiting her in a publicity campaign; anything to win her back. I can picture what happened. You begged, pleaded. And Flame laughed at you. She was that kind. She flaunted her beautiful body at you, and laughed, and brushed you out. You'd taken a lot from her, but that was something you couldn't take."

Suddenly the elderly man changed. His face was red now, rather than pasty gray, and he'd stopped trembling. My guesswork had struck through his armor, found his

pride. He squared his shoulders, and the look he gave me was steady, dignified.

"She wanted money from me," he said. "She wanted to use me, as she'd always used me. But when I suggested marriage . . . you're right, Walter, she laughed. She told me what a failure I'd been as a husband. She brought up things that happened when she was my wife . . . embarrassing things . . . humiliating . . So I killed her. And I'm glad I killed her."

Then he sank into a chair, buried his face in his hands. "No, I'm not glad. That's a lie. I'm sorry. God help me, nobody can ever know how sorry."

"He's yours, O'Rourke," I said. "Treat him gently. I was once married to Flame, too. I know how he feels."

I went out of headquarters, then, and I took Paula with me. I was through with being a cop; and I was finished being a fool. If I did any detective work from now on, it would be the private kind. Somehow I felt released from long bondage—the bondage of wearing a badge, and the bondage of remembering Flame Shannon.

Paula said softly: "Bunny, when you were with her in her dressing room, did you really . . I mean did you . . . kiss her?"

"Yes, but it wasn't love," I said. "It was hate." Then I hailed a passing night-owl cab. "Come on, Paula."

"Wh-where?"

"To your apartment. There's a scene you started that never got finished, remember?"

"Bunny!"

"I'm going to finish it," I told her. "Only it won't be an ending. It's the beginning."

THE DEAD AND THE DAMNED

(*Continued from page* 39)

promises. You and your mother are partly responsible for what happened. You'll answer for your part the same as Hano has to answer for his . . . Don't worry about us finding him. If the gate guards let him off the grounds there'll be hell to pay. And while we know he's still somewhere on the estate, we'll route him out if we have to rip the whole place apart."

Julie Heenan pouted, looking at Cass Adams with her head cocked to one side. "You're a hard guy, aren't you, Cass? I've got respect for a man who's really tough. So many men are namby pamby. All right. You win." She tossed her head proudly. "No jury could convict Kitty and me. I'll take you to Hano, anyhow."

SHE swung away from them and they followed her to a path that led through a patch of woods. On the way, they picked up lanterns. Julie led the way and in the dark woods, the soft yellow lantern glow played over Julie's tall, gracefully curved figure.

After a ten minute walk, they came out onto a long, narrow strip of beach. There was a bright yellow moon glittering on the water and the rumble of surf as it came booming up onto the sand. Along the beach, every few hundred feet, were high dunes. Julie pointed to the roof of a small building showing behind one of the dunes.

"There!" she said. "You'll find him in the boathouse, Cass. We were down here, earlier tonight for a swim. We went in there after to have a smoke and to get out of the wind. I have a hunch it would be the first place he'd think of to hide."

Cass Adams started toward the dune, but Kitty Heenan grabbed at his arm. "Wait, Cass!" she said. "We keep target pistols and rifles in there."

When Cass hesitated, Julie said: "I'll get him for you, Cass. Nobody will get hurt. There won't be any shooting."

"How?" he said.

"You two stay here," Julie answered. "I'll go down there. He'll let me in. Don't worry about that. When I get inside, I'll

take one of the guns and hold it on him until you come. Give me about ten minutes."

Before they could stop her, Julie ran toward the dune that partially hid the boathouse. Kitty and Cass Adams stood there alone and for a moment, neither of them spoke. Finally Kitty became aware that Cass was staring at her. She couldn't stand it and she turned toward him. In the light from the moon, with wind riffling his wavy blond hair, he was incredibly handsome.

She said, "What's the matter, Cass? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I was just thinking," he said. "You and I might hit it off pretty well."

She turned away. "What about Julie?" she said.

"The hell with Julie," he told her. "Why don't you stop thinking about Julie and give yourself a break?"

She moved close to him. She looked up at him and the wind had whipped high color into her cheeks. The moon glow softened her features. Cass Adams' lips parted and he started to say something but no words came out. Instead, he reached and pulled her close against him. She didn't fight him. She stood there, feeling his arm, strong against the hollow of her back, and her head was thrown back. She felt his mouth brush against hers, then crush her lips. Her eyes closed and the whole world went swimming around her head.

They broke apart, both breathless and almost harshly, Cass Adams pushed her away. He said: "It's time to go to the boathouse."

He started toward the dune and Kitty had to run, stumblingly, through deep sand, to catch up with him. They went over the top of the dune and the small crude frame building of the boathouse was only a few yards away. Through a window, they saw a light flash. Cass put out his arm in front of Kitty, barring the way as he stopped. He said:

"Something may have gone wrong. You'd better wait here."

She shook her head. "No, Cass. My daughter's in there. I'm going with you."

He hesitated for a moment, then dropped his arm and they went on toward the boathouse, together. At the door, Cass stopped again. He called, hoarsely: "Julie!"

There was no answer. More sharply, then, he called: "Julie! Is everything all right?"

This time she answered. "Yes!" she said. "He—he's here, Cass. Everything's okay. Come on in."

He stepped into the black interior of the small building, with its close, musty, shut-up smell, mixed with the odor of tar and caulking compounds. The bright, dazzling beam of a flash suddenly hit his face, blinding him for a moment. He flung up his arm before his eyes, shielding them.

A man's voice, which Kitty recognized as that of Al Hano, said: "Okay, copper. Don't make any smart moves. I've got Julie in front of me and a gun in her back. I made her bring you in here so we could make a deal."

Julie's husky voice, with an edge of fear in it, said: "I—I'm sorry, Cass. It didn't work. I tried hard. Honest I did."

"You soft-talked me into enough trouble already, tonight, baby," Hano answered. "This time it didn't go over. I suspected right away that you were trying to work me into some kind of a trap."

"Don't be a damned fool, Hano," Cass Adams said. "You can't get away with this. You'll be picked up somewhere along the line. You—"

"Stop it," Hano broke in. "I said I was going to make a deal. You're going to let me get out of the estate and you're going to give me a couple of hours start. I'm takin' Julie along with me to make sure you don't renege. Is that a deal, copper?"

"Please!" Kitty Heenan suddenly begged. "Cass, do as he says. He's desperate. What difference does it make? We can't let anything happen to Julie!"

"What guarantee have we got that Julie will be safe if he takes her with him?" Cass said.

Before anyone could answer, Julie Heenan screamed: "Dam' you, Al, you're hurting my arm! Take it easy!"

He growled something in answer and the next instant the flashlight went spinning from his hand and there was the sound of feet scuffing in a struggle. Al Hano swore violently. A gun went off, the sound deafening loud in the close confines of the boathouse. Another scream was cut off sharply in the middle.

Kitty Heenan heard Cass Adams yell: "Get that flashlight, Kitty!"

She dove for the light rolling on the floor, snatched it up. She sent the beam spilling around the room, and finally focused it in the direction of the sound of heavy breathing and the pounding of fists against flesh. In the bright glare of the flash, she saw Al Hano, still in his fighting trunks, his face puffy and bruised from the fight with Bronco Magee—and Cass Adams, standing slugging, toe to toe.

"Keep that light on us!" Cass yelled to her. "I can't fight this guy in the dark."

KITTY stood there, frozen with fright, the flashlight wavering and trembling in her hands. At the edge of the glow of light, then, she saw the small target pistol that had been knocked from Al Hano's hand. Al and Cass Adams saw it, too, at the same time. They both dove for it but Cass gave Al Hano the shoulder at the last moment and it was he who grabbed up the pistol, but he spun around, half off balance and fell to the floor.

When Hano saw that he'd missed out on getting the gun back, he twisted and lunged toward Kitty Heenan. He bowled into her with his shoulder and sent her crashing back onto a pile of rope. She dropped the flash and this time it smashed against the hard floor and went out.

"Stay down on the floor and don't move, Kitty!" Cass Adams shouted.

Then the gun he held flashed orange fire, vividly against the dark interior of the boathouse as he fired toward the spot where he had last seen Al Hano. Meanwhile, Kitty Heenan sprawled, unmoving, where she had fallen. She wondered where Julie was, if she'd been hurt badly in her struggle to break away from Hano. But there was nothing she could do to find out. She had to lie there, in the blackness and the quiet, listening to the two men moving around.

Cass fired again as Al Hano betrayed his location at the far end of the room. This time there was an answering shot and Kitty knew that fumbling around in the dark, Hano had found the gun rack, had gotten hold of another weapon for himself. Now the two men stalked each other in the darkness and several more shots were fired.

After the last one there was a long silence and Kitty Heenan finally couldn't stand it. She called out: "Cass!"

There was no answer for a moment and then she heard his voice: "Yeah? I'm all right, Kitty." He paused, then went on: "Hano!" When the fighter didn't answer, Cass Adams continued: "Kitty, see if you can find a lantern and light it. Watch your step."

She got up off of the pile of ropes where she had been thrown and felt her way through the darkness along a wall, to a cupboard. Inside this, her trembling fingers found a lantern and a box of wooden matches. Quickly, she struck a match and set it to the wick of the lantern. The small weak glow fanned out and Kitty let her eyes rove around the room. The first person she saw was Cass Adams, standing against a wall, the pistol still held ready in his hands. He was looking toward a figure huddled in a heap on the floor against the far wall, another target pistol lying near crooked, reaching fingers. The figure didn't move. Sweat still glistened on Al Hano's naked, muscular back and shoulders.

Through his teeth, Cass Adams said: "I guess it's all over, Kitty. That last shot got Al. I—"

He broke off, his eyes moving around the now dimly lighted room, stopping where another limp figure lay twisted and grotesque looking in the center of the floor. Kitty felt a scream climbing in her throat. She opened her mouth but the scream stuck there and no sound came out. She felt her hands go moist and she almost dropped the lantern. Her hands and her legs felt numbed and as though they wouldn't hold

her up. There was a dull, twisting pain in her chest.

SLOWLY, woodenly, Kitty Heenan moved toward the crumpled body of her daughter, Julie. She slumped down onto her knees beside the girl and set the lantern on the floor. Julie was sprawled on her face, her lovely black hair spread out, fan-like on the rough flooring. Kitty started to turn her over and then stopped as she saw the blotch of crimson staining the front of Julie's white blouse, just above the belt of the shorts. She saw Julie's dark eyes wide and staring. The girl's ruby-red lips were parted, showing the pale shine of her teeth between them.

"She's gone, Kitty," Cass Adams said, gently, standing above her. "When she struggled and broke free from Hano, the gun went off. It must have been pointing right toward her."

Kitty Heenan didn't answer. She kneeled there, looking down at the long, slender figure of her daughter, still graceful and beautiful, even in death. She said, once, softly, almost a whisper: "Julie! My baby, Julie!"

She blinked back the swimming moisture in her eyes and slowly rose to her feet. She swayed and would have fallen except for Cass Adams' arm, suddenly around her waist. She turned and clung to him, her face buried against his shoulder and for a few moments her whole body shook with sobbing. And then it was over and she moved away from him, brushing at her eyes with the backs of her hands. She took a sheet of sail canvas from the boathouse shelf and gently spread it over the still, twisted figure of her daughter.

She reached out and took Cass' hand, then. "Let's get out of here, Cass," she said. "Let's get out of this place."

They left the lantern there and together they moved out of the boathouse and across the sand of the beach toward the path that led back to the estate. After they'd gone a little way, Kitty said:

"I guess—maybe it worked out best for Julie, this way. She would have been in a lot of trouble over this thing tonight, anyhow. And I'm afraid she would have gotten herself into worse trouble some time in the future. She was beautiful, Cass but I'm afraid she wasn't much good. It—it wasn't her fault, either. It—it was mine. She never had a chance."

MURDER'S A CRAZY THING

(*Continued from page 47*)

money gone. How did Marvin know about it? And half the money was over there in that little Chinese pagoda.

Did Marvin have the other half?

Then the whole set-up blazed in my mind. I could see it now. How dumb I'd been. Susan and Marvin in cahoots all the time, she making a play for Ed.

"It won't wash, Marvin," I said. "That quarrel between Ed and I, and the cash in the safe. It was too good an opportunity to miss, wasn't it, Marvin? Frame it on me, then get me over here and bump me off. That would leave the bail bond business without an owner. Susie could claim that she and Ed were married. She could fake a marriage certificate—and she'd step right into the business. Pretty, eh, what?"

I GUESS I was just a plain damn fool, talking like that. I wasn't armed, I didn't have a gun or knife. Nothing but my bare hands. But not Marvin. The little runt had a full grown gun. His hand darted up to his lapel, came out holding a snub-nosed .38 automatic, and it pointed squarely at my belt buckle.

All that shyness and timidity, I realized too late, was just an act. This guy was hard boiled. And his size didn't count. Not now. That gun in his fist made him as big as any man.

I just grinned at him.

This was right down my alley. I'd learned a lot of things in the South Pacific. Marvin hadn't. He'd been a 4-F.

I was standing with my left side turned partly to him, with my head swiveled around a little to look at him. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Susie pick up a book-end from the bookshelf at the side of the room. Her hand drew back and it came hurtling right at me. Like swinging a golf club. I ducked, and at the same instant brought down the edge of my left hand on Marvin's wrist. The hurtling book-end made him jerk back and for an instant confused him. At my blow he yelped out in pain, and the automatic dropped from his grasp to slide a few feet across the rug. Susie made a dive for it. My right fist followed through to the point of Marvin's jaw.

I didn't pause to see what happened to him. Susie was stooped over, reaching for the gun. I planted my foot in her back, and she dived on her face. But she had the gun. I heard Marvin stumble, but I didn't have time to look.

Susie screamed and rolled, and the gun in her hand flamed. I was moving fast and she'd shot without aiming. The bullet zipped by my ear like an angry wasp, and the next instant I had kicked the gun from her hand. She screamed again.

It was then I turned to look at Marvin.

He was still on his feet, a blackjack in his hand. That was what he'd hit me with, outside the back door of the office, there on the parking lot. But his legs weren't steady now, he was weaving from side to side. I hit him again before he could lift the blackjack, and this time I really put some force into it. He hit the wall, and turned again to Susie. She was scrabbling across the floor to where the gun lay against the wall. I made one jump, swung my foot and kicked her wrist. She kept right on screaming. I picked up the gun and backed off.

There was yelling outside, and somebody pounding on the vestibule door. I stepped over and pushed the button, and opened the front room door. A big burly cop came swinging down the hall, tugging at his gun. I slid Marvin's gun in my pocket and grinned at him. Sig and Dick came along behind him.

"Here they are, officer," I said. Marvin was up against the wall, still out. Susie lay huddled on the rug. The cop came in and looked around. Dick and Sig crowded in behind him.

"What the hell happened?" Sig boomed.

I told them. I told them the whole works, and the cop stood there taking it all in.

"I'll phone for the wagon," he offered when I finished. "And Captain Conlon of Homicide. He'll want to know about all this."

I didn't say anything about the fifty-dollar bills over on the table in the little Chinese pagoda. I'd save that for Captain Conlon. I looked at Marvin and Susie as the cop snapped handcuffs on their wrists.

"Pretty slick." I grinned at Susie. "But, you know, there's no bail for murder."

LADY IN THE LIGHT

(*Continued from page 85*)

torn from an optical catalogue in her desk. It was a chart showing the field of vision for different powered lenses at various ranges. We estimated that even a six-power glass wouldn't have taken in the doors when focused on the mirror."

"Gee whiz, if she ain't talked, we don't get the reward."

"You're wrong," cried George, hugged his brother's beefy shoulders. "Brice called Mrs. Sewell. She feels grand. She's fond of Abernathy. We get the reward at ten tomorrow morning."

Shorty shook his head wonderingly. "I'll believe it when we get a new car," he said. "And maybe a couple of suits."

"Brice got Hilda Fox long distance. She admitted her part without hesitation. The gag Sabra Sewell used to hire the Fox girl was pretty thin, but as Hilda said, it was an easy two hundred bucks. Incidentally, the Fox girl told Brice that she doesn't read newspapers but gets a weekly news magazine."

"I should have known they were her legs right off," Shorty said.

"Tell me what happened from the time you went in?"

Shorty told him, ended dramatically, "Gee whiz, nobody can tie a bow knot in the middle of their back. It ain't possible."

George jerked his brother to a stop. "I need a drink!" he croaked. "Something beautiful's happened to us, kid! If I were a philosopher, I could make a fable or parable or something out of it. Like stopping thinking at the right time hits the jackpot."

"You nuts, George? You don't make sense."

"Brice and I wondered how a woman could get into one of those suits all by herself."

"They can't," Shorty cried.

"Think, kid, think! They tie the bow in front, then slide it around between their shoulder-blades!"

Shorty's face went red with mortification and chagrin. "No wonder she give me the horse laugh! Ain't I dumb!"

"Rolf Roz was all set to crack. His snap judgment was that you had her cold on that bow knot deal. So he blabbed."

"Gee whiz, was I lucky!" Shorty cried.

"Being at the right place at the right time with the right question is more than luck, kid! Although I don't know what it is. I'll have to hunt up a gray beard and ask him."

They walked on. Suddenly Shorty jerked to a stop and pointed dramatically. "Hey, look!"

A half a block ahead a man was putting a sign on the marquee of the Bijou. Big black letters proclaimed: Opening Tonight. VICKI VALONE.

"Friday night," Shorty cried. "Boy, oh, boy! She's a redhead. They hold me a front row seat next to the trumpet player till six o'clock. His name's Joe Hart an' I bet he's the loudest trumpet player in the world. I better get my ticket now."

"Look, kid! Don't you think . . ." George Neff broke off suddenly and his lean face went thoughtful. "Better get two," he suggested.

Shorty was outraged. "It ain't right!" he yowled. "Guys about to get married shouldn't be seen in a burlesque joint. It ain't right!"

"Isn't right," George corrected.

Shorty laughed raucously. "Pretty soon you'll be asking it instead of dishing it out."

"What do you mean?"

"You're marrying a school teacher," Shorty leered. "I may murder the king's English, but you cuff it around a little yourself."

CORPSE IN A FRAME

(*Continued from page 95*)

A long while ago Charlie Belton did me a lot of personal favors. I—well—in return I cut his throat. Now I'd like to make up for it. There's a gang of rummies after his scalp because he's honest and I'd hate to see them hook him! Maybe it's my conscience, I don't know, but I don't want to see his wife and kids suffer for something he didn't mean to do."

I said, "Maybe you're kidding. Maybe you're just putting me on the spot. How do I know you're shooting square now?"

"If you'll take those letters to Belton, I'll do—anything—to thank you. . . ."

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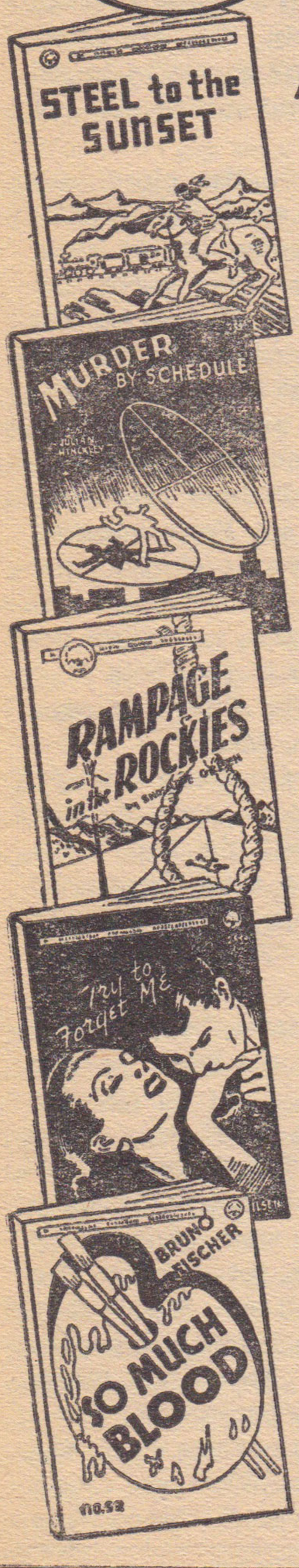

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—everything but me—and I always was easy. There's no fool like an old fool.

I took another drink, right from the bottle and reached for her.

I said, "Okay, baby. Where do I get those letters?"

Her eyes were heavy like. I had an arm around her shoulder and she took my hand and pressed it warmly. She whispered, "There's no hurry! Don't go yet!" I kissed her, of course. It was cold outside—but not here!

Pretty soon somebody else piped in—"Hold the picture and watch the birdie!"

He stood in the doorway, my old friend Rat-face that drove the black sedan, and his gun was as big as ever. He had his twin rat with him. And the twin rat had a twin gun, just as big and just as ugly.

I looked at the babe and sneered, "Once a rat always a rat. I had you figured from the start, kid. You're Belton's ex-sweetie, the one that sold him out. For a minute I thought you'd had a change of heart and were really going to tell me where the stuff was. But go on, now, you've put me on the spot, crawl back in your hole."

Her eyes blazed. The little guy says. "Quit stalling. Fan him, Maxie."

Maxie fanned me. I felt pretty bad.

The little guy sat down easy like and said, "All right, Cockrell, the boss wants those letterrs. You got three minutes to start talking. These walls are soundproof."

I sighed and said, "Fire when ready, Gridley."

Maxie slapped me across the ear with a blackjack. The last thing I heard was the babe cursing. When I came to, she was bathing my face with a towel.

The little guy said, "That's enough, Lucille. Now, Cockrell, quit stalling. Someway or for some reason you were driving a taxi last night. Lucille here got a funny idea she could cross us all up. She took a powder on us with the letters and papers, and made the street. About two blocks from here you picked her up and about three blocks further we ran you down. She scrammed. So did you. When we caught her, she didn't have the stuff. The portfolio

was empty. She swears she gave the hot stuff to you. Where is it?"

I sneered at the girl. "She's a liar by the clock. She held a gun on me and made me drive her!" I dodged the blackjack and caught it on the shoulder.

The girl said, "Don't be a chump. Why take a beating? Tell them the truth. Where's the stuff at?"

She walked behind the little guy to get a cigarette at the table.

The little guy said, "You've only got two minutes now, fellow. I'm going to start by shooting your right kneecap off."

I saw Lucille pick up a book-end. Then—

Thud! He looked surprised, slid out of the chair and fell to his knees, trying to raise the gun. No spinach. He sighed and put his cheek down on the floor. The brass book-end tumbled off his shouder where it had lodged and lay beside him just as I reached for friend Maxie.

He was a little guy, too, no good without a gun. I took his blackjack away from him, twisted his arm behind him and dropped his shoulder gun on the davenport. Then I tapped him gently behind the ear with the blackjack. It made me feel good all over.

I TORE up a good sheet and tied the twin rats, even gagged them. Then I put on my coat and kissed the girl.

"You were right and I was wrong, baby," I said. "Now tell me where!"

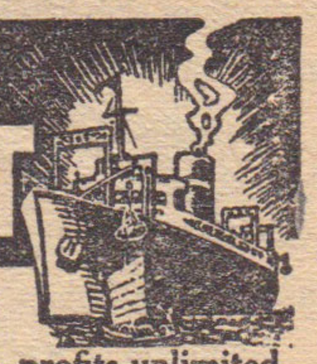
She told me.

From the drugstore I called Belton. I told him where to pick me up, then wrote down the serial number of the hundred dollar bill he got for me. I checked the numbers with the eleven bills I had. *None of them missed being consecutive by over two or three figures!*

So there we were.

Me and Belton made a fast run in a cab. Coppers were called. Police wagons ran hither and thither and likewise yon and pretty soon we were all gathered in the office of none other than Whalen, the publisher of the *Record!*

There were the twin rats, Swenson the copper and a few of his men, Peters the



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reporter, Whalen himself, Belton and good old Mike Cockrell feeling mighty fine.

Whalen blustered. "You're ridiculous! Absurd, Cockrell! And I'm going to have you arrested for obtaining money under false pretenses!"

I had to laugh. I said to Belton, "Here's ten C-notes this lug gave me for a retainer. That's what he's squawking about. Now here is another the rat-faced punk gave me last night in the taxi. Check the numbers with those on the bill found in the purse of the girl killed in my room last night. Notice anything? How do they run? Now just for a hunch check them with the numbers of some of the bills reported stolen from the Highland Heights National last week. Don't guess, I'll tell you. Whalen here—reform or no reform—is right in the middle of the mess. Spratt and his gang have probably been kicking through to Whalen to help drive you out of office so they can put in some heel that will play ball with them!"

Whalen laughed. "You shouldn't smoke that stuff, Cockrell. Would I be fool enough to pay you with money I knew was hot? I have a little sense!"

"Me, too, Whalen! You figured I had the letters hid out so you sent Peters to bring me to see you. The money, the retainer, was just a stall to get me interested. Five grand is a lot of jack to a private dick. You sent some of your gang to follow me, figuring that even if I outsmarted them I'd cut Belton's throat and bring the stuff to you—for five grand. But you weren't fooling anyone. I can smell rat a mile away. You'd have knocked me off in your office just as quick as your gang would in a back alley. I'd have never spent any of your hot jack!"

I was getting plenty sore again.

"It won't be a conspiraacy charge you'll face, Whalen. It's going to be murder!"

He began to bluster but his face looked like raw liver. I chopped him short.

"You found out I was coming to town to help Belton. I don't know how you found out but that doesn't matter. You decided to frame me, to laugh me out of town and get the public even farther down on Belton. You picked up some poor little dame and paid her a hundred to go into a song and dance in the hotel. You knew damned well that sometimes laughter is a more powerful weapon than guns!"

"Murder is no laughing matter, Cockrell. Watch your tongue. You say I had her killed. The police called it suicide."

"Boloney! It started out to get a laugh, but it ended up as murder. Quit stalling. I beat it out of my room for five minutes and she's dead, shot to death, when I get back. You thought I had those letters and someone was hiding in my room to make their getaway with the bag. The poor little dame raised a howl or something and he shot her dead."

There was a silence. Whalen mopped the sweat from his brow. He knew he was cornered. "All right, Belton. You win. I was playing around with the Spratt bunch. We both wanted your scalp. I persuaded Lucille DeVere to sell you out. Later on—just last night—she had a change of heart and tried

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to bring your stuff to you. Her running into Cockrell was just blind luck. Just as he says, we had Cockrell framed, meant to laugh him out of the picture, a gunman-detective on a spree with a blonde. But if the girl was really murdered I don't know a thing about it. Maybe one of Spratt's men did it."

I said softly, "Yeah. You know who did it, Whalen. Spratt's men are rats, killers. They use guns, not cap pistols! The poor little dame in my room was rubbed out with a popgun, a little, cheap .22. Not a .45 or even a .38 like one of Spratt's killers would use! Now who'd you send to do the dirty work?"

THE sound of coughing filled the room. Peters, the little reporter, leaned over the desk and gagged. When he finished his paroxysm he grinned weakly and lit a cigarette.

"It's okay, boss," he whispered, "you did your best." He turned to me. "I did it with my little bow and arrow. I was doing his cat's-pawing and went a little too far. Guess I lost my head. She hollered when I came out of the closet and I shot her before I knew it. I was so damned scared I put her prints on the gun and left her lying there. I went down the fire escape. You'll find your bag in the checkroom at the Longview. Here's the ticket."

His grin was weak as he flipped the pasteboard check across the desk.

Swenson said, "What beats me is how them letters got beneath the back seat of a stolen cab!"

I said, "Me, too, thickhead."

He went on, "And I'd like to catch the guy that put that cab behind that shed on the vacant lot! No wonder we couldn't find it! Looked like the whole thing was one big snowdrift! How'd you know it was there?"

I said, "A little bird told me." I was trying to think of something but I wasn't sure what. I reached for the door.

Belton said, "Wait, Cockrell, I want to talk to you."

Then it hit me all of a sudden. Brunette. I opened the door. "Sorry, I got a little unfinished business out on Lemon Avenue."

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C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

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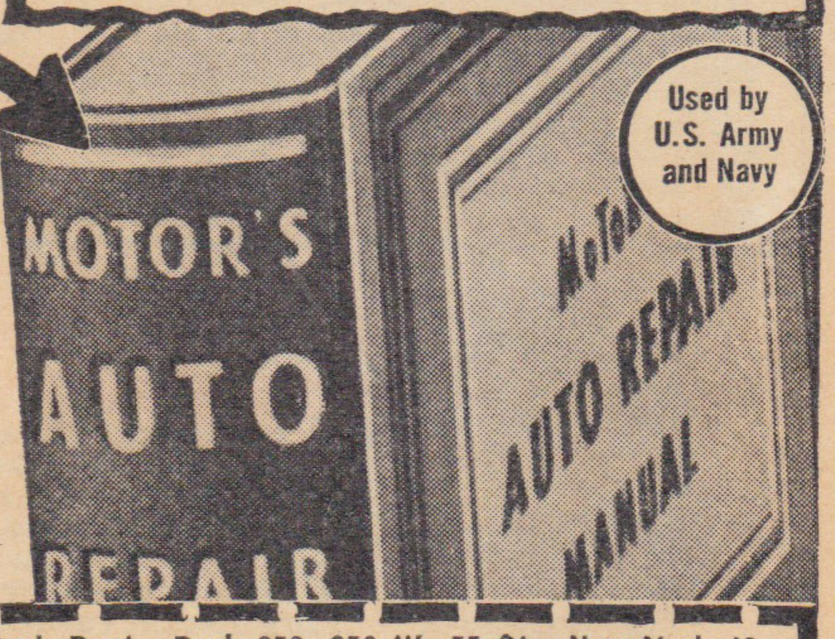

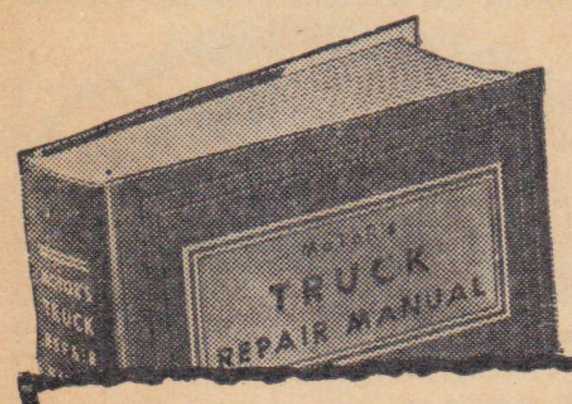

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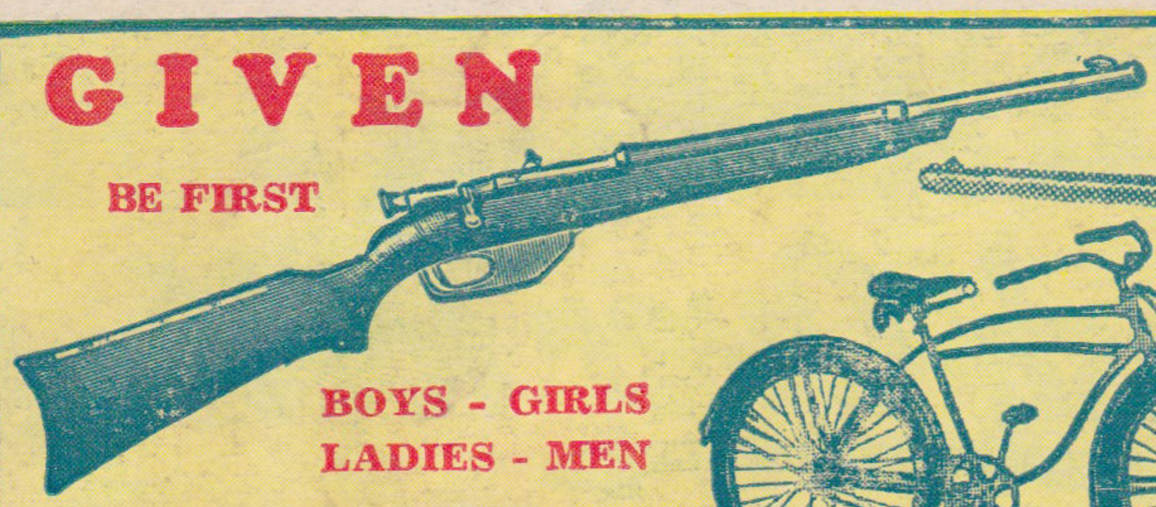

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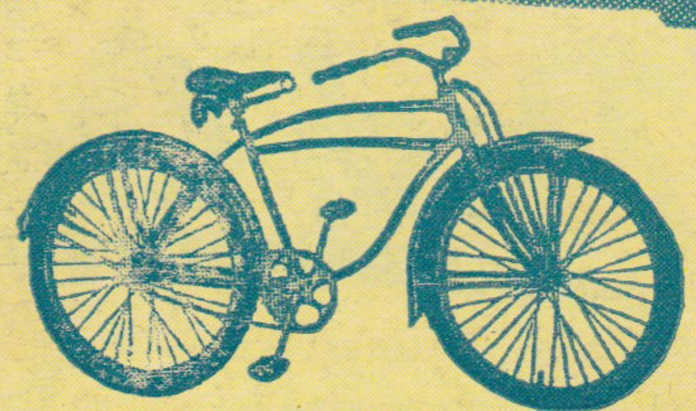

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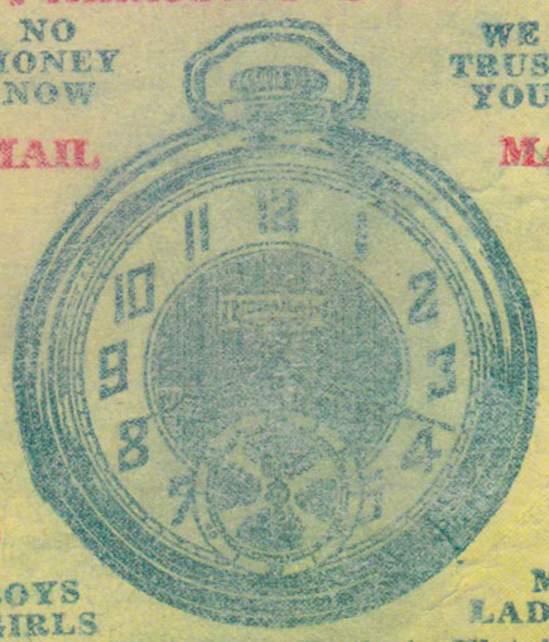

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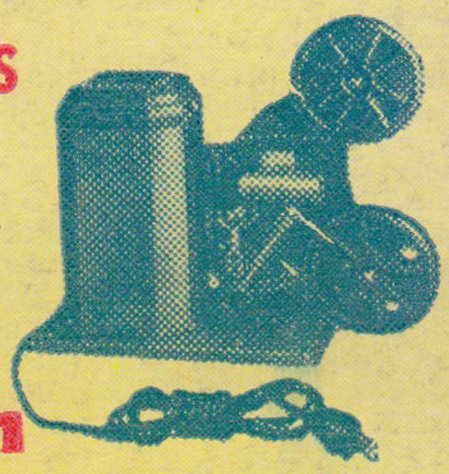

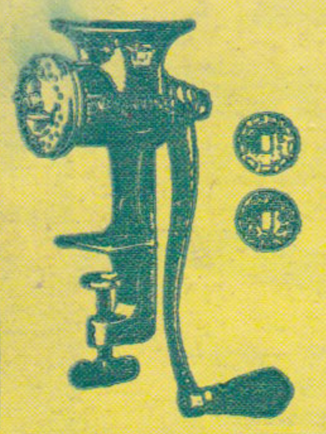

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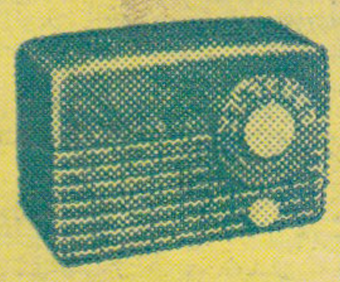

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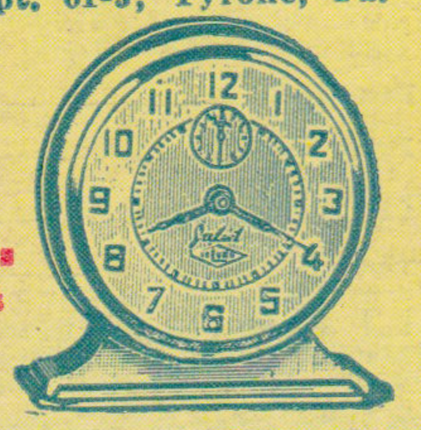
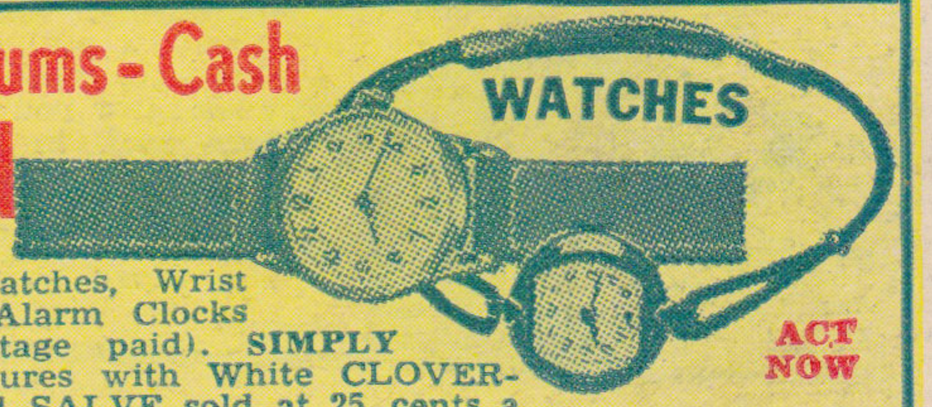


Ladies
Girls

Premiums - Cash GIVEN



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