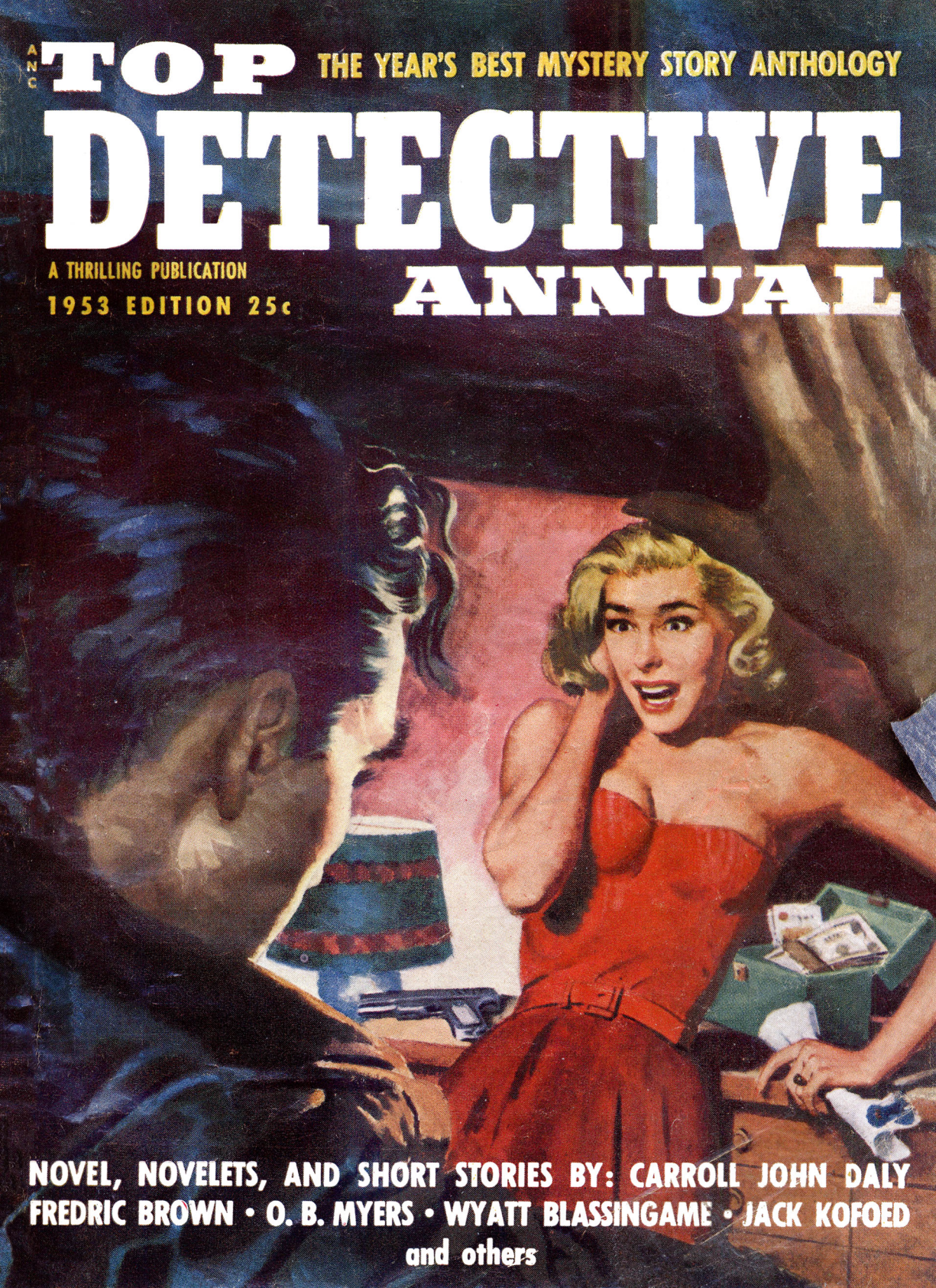
ANC

TOP DETECTIVE ANNUAL

THE YEAR'S BEST MYSTERY STORY ANTHOLOGY

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

1953 EDITION 25c



NOVEL, NOVELETS, AND SHORT STORIES BY: CARROLL JOHN DALY
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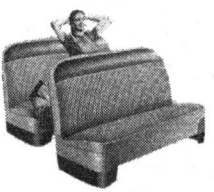

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BLACK EBONY

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Want extra money—plenty of it day after day? Then rush your name and address at once for Free Sample Outfit that will start you taking orders from car owners everywhere for Key expertly tailored Auto Seat Covers. EXCLUSIVE NEW PATTERNS to fit every make and model car. No one can compete with you in wide choice, in quality—and in expert tailoring that makes covers fit like a pair of gloves. And when you quote prices that are only a fraction of what the customer expects to pay, brother! You make money hand over fist writing up the fast orders! Line includes nationally advertised sensations like BLACK EBONY Saran, in the new Black and Silver Watermelon Stripe, beautiful beyond description BAMBOO, luxurious, brilliant FIESTA, colorful BULL FIGHTER PLAIDS, plus many other exclusive patterns to choose from, all at unbelievably low prices. It's no trick at all to make *big* money whether you sell full time or just in spare time. OPPORTUNITY TO SELL AT WHOLESALE TO GARAGES, SERVICE STATIONS, ETC.

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City_____ State_____

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YES NO

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One out of three who read this page and check their shortcomings will *do* something about it. Two will stay in the rut. One will plan for self-improvement and stay with it till he gets there. Are you the one?

I. C. S. has helped train nearly 6 million men and women for better jobs. Among its 391 courses there's one that can help *you* succeed. I. C. S. lessons are clear, direct, authoritative. They give you bedrock facts and theory with practical application. Studying at home you can progress at your own speed, have the advantage of individual instruction. Choose the course you need from the list below, and *mail the coupon today!* We'll send you full information plus free book, "How to Succeed."

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Everett H. Ortner
Editor

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TOP DETECTIVE ANNUAL

The Year's Best Crime and Mystery Stories

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EXCLUSIVE FEATURES SELL MASON SHOES QUICKLY FOR YOU!

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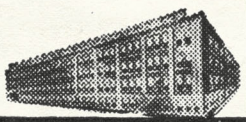

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Do YOU want to make steady EXTRA money? Do you want *real security?* Do you want to be able to afford the things you've always dreamed about? — then send this coupon TODAY! We will rush your powerful Free Selling Outfit that features over 150 fast-selling Mason Shoe styles for men and women — Air-Cushion Demonstrator, How-To-Make-Money Booklet, *everything* you need to make money from the first hour!

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For the Warden, with Love

Even a hardened con can have a soft spot in his heart

A True Story by JACK BENTON

YOU will not find the name of Ben F. Van Dyke among the great prison wardens. Fact is, he only served in that capacity for ninety days. Just the same, his name deserves to be recorded somewhere in the annals of penal warfare.

When Governor William H. (Alfalfa Bill) Murray appointed him warden of the penitentiary at McAlester, there was a mighty roar of protest. Van Dyke had had no direct penal experience. He was, by profession, a lawyer.

As a matter of fact, Murray hadn't exactly offered him the job outright. The governor thought a lot of Van Dyke and wanted to reward him with some kind of state job. He gave Van Dyke a list of eight that were available. Van Dyke chose that of warden.

The protests against him were not all due to his inexperience. Van Dyke reputedly had no church affiliation. In fact, some regarded him as an atheist.

But Van Dyke had not chosen the job of warden out of caprice. His lawyer's job had taken him in and out of prison. He didn't like what he saw. He felt very deeply that something should be done about prison conditions. Atheist or not, his favorite quotation was, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

As soon as he took over the reins of the penitentiary he went to work to correct what he considered to be the sadistic overtones of the place. He found 40 persons in solitary confinement when he took over the prison. He cut this number down considerably.

He'd talk to a so-called troublemaker like this: "You're supposed to be a pretty bad guy. But I'll let you out of solitary if you'll promise me that you'll behave properly." It was as simple as that.

It nearly always worked.

He told the prisoners that if they had any complaints to make they could make them to him directly. He ordered corporal punishment stopped. He fired 50 guards because he considered them too brutal and harsh.

He began building a new cooling system and a new hospital ward for the prisoners.

He did all this without technically being the warden. The state legislature refused to confirm Van Dyke's appointment. Alfalfa Bill kept him on anyway, for ninety days. Then he had to let him go.

Nevertheless Van Dyke was responsible for instituting some vital and important Oklahoma prison reforms.

But the strangest thing about it all was this: Van Dyke received no salary while all the controversy raged around him. So the prisoners pitched in and turned over to him $1,200, the amount he would have received if he'd been paid, to let him and everyone else know how they felt about the situation.

And, so far as is known, this is the first and only time that prisoners ever paid the salary of their warden. ● ● ●

WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?

Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

WHY was this man great? How does anyone—man or woman—achieve greatness? Is it not by mastery of the powers within ourselves?

Know the mysterious world within you! Attune yourself to the wisdom of the ages! Grasp the inner power of your mind! Learn the secrets of a full and peaceful life! Benjamin Franklin—like many other learned and great men and women—was a Rosicrucian. The Rosicrucians (NOT a religious organization) first came to America in 1694. Today, headquarters of the Rosicrucians send over seven million pieces of mail annually to all parts of the world.

The Rosicrucians
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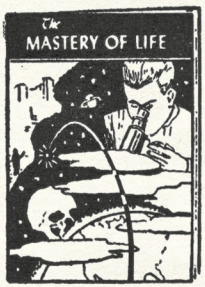

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DOWNFALL DATA

A **NASHVILLE, TENN., chicken thief had a tough—in fact, an impossible—time trying to prove his innocence. Police proved that his peg-leg fitted perfectly the little round holes in the dirt around the hen house in question!**

JUST PLAIN HARD LUCK was responsible for a bogus check writer ending up in the Idaho Falls, Ida., clink. Going eeney-meeney-miney-mo, he selected a name from the phone book to sign to a phony check—and was promptly arrested upon trying to cash it. He'd picked the name of one of the town's best-known citizens—the prosecuting attorney.

PHOENIX, ARIZ., OFFICERS had no trouble in getting their hands on a man who walked out of a pawnshop with a pilfered diamond ring. While examining a typewriter in the place, he had absent-mindedly pecked out his name.

POOR JUDGMENT IN HANDING out a counterfeit $10 bill resulted in a New York sharpie winding up in the toils of the Federal law. He gave the spurious bill to a judge in paying a gambling fine.

THE PRETTY GIRL FROM INDIA was just a little too shapely, customs officials in London thought. Blushingly, she said it was her brassiere. Blushingly, they said she'd better take off her waist. Underneath was a man's waistcoat with nine gold bars worth nearly $6000.

A NEW YORK DEPARTMENT STORE Santa proudly had his picture taken for the papers. The cops recognized it and promptly pounced on him. They'd been looking for him for a long time for non-support of his wife and child.

IF A CERTAIN INCARCERATED citizen of Ketenis, Belgium, had his life to live over again there's little doubt that he'd drive more carefully next time. But as it was, he was in a corner collision. There was a thud, then a mixture of hissing air and coffee beans commenced pouring out of his tires. Police arrested him on charges of smuggling coffee across the German border.

CARELESS DIALING spun a Cleveland, Ohio, gambler into the arms of the law. He called to place a bet and, while the voice on the other end asked him to hold on a minute, the call was checked. The gambler had accidentally called the city's anti-gambling director.

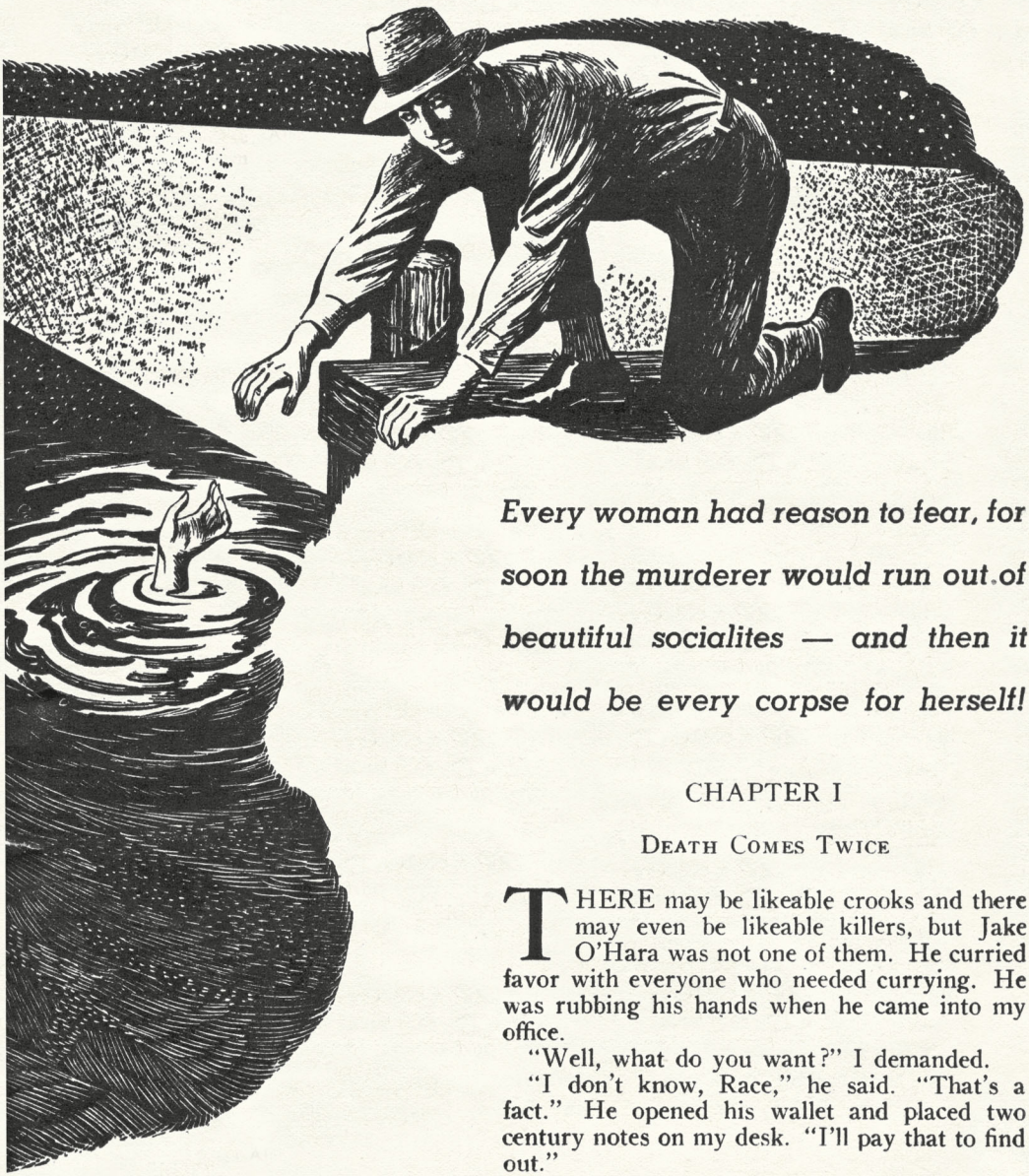
A POOR SELECTION of hiding places led to the recapture of an escaped Oakland, Calif., prisoner. Officers visited his home to see if he'd turned up there. Coming into the bedroom, they spied a baby's crib. In it was a large, blanket-covered form. "Some baby," said Officer Lawrence Holmes, jabbing it with his finger. "Ouch!" exclaimed a deep bass voice.

—Harold Helfer

Not My

A Novel by CARROLL JOHN DALY

Corpse



Every woman had reason to fear, for soon the murderer would run out of beautiful socialites — and then it would be every corpse for herself!

CHAPTER I

Death Comes Twice

THERE may be likeable crooks and there may even be likeable killers, but Jake O'Hara was not one of them. He curried favor with everyone who needed currying. He was rubbing his hands when he came into my office.

"Well, what do you want?" I demanded.

"I don't know, Race," he said. "That's a fact." He opened his wallet and placed two century notes on my desk. "I'll pay that to find out."

"I don't like anything about you, Jake," I told him. "Beat it."

"But," he insisted, "you're a private eye, aren't you? I got trouble. We've never crossed."

I shrugged. "You don't cross anyone in the open. You do your shooting from behind garbage cans and the corners of buildings." And when his eyes widened, "I understand you even peddle the stuff."

Jake didn't get mad. "I never sold a dime's worth of the stuff."

"Okay, Jake. I hear you can't make a dame unless you feed her the stuff. It all adds up to the same. I don't like you."

"We can't like everyone." Jake stood there and agreed with me. "Remember the dirty little man in the dirty little room?"

"Harvey Rath?" I was startled. "I never believed that myth, Jake—and he's been dead, anyhow out of circulation, for a long time."

"He ain't out now." O'Hara laid a card on the desk before me. On it was printed:

THERE'S A DIRTY LITTLE MAN IN A DIRTY LITTLE ROOM

"Would you like to get a card like that?" Jake asked me.

"I wouldn't mind," I told him.

But I was curious. I noticed that there was a nervous twitching to his fingers and that his usually ruddy face was pale.

"Go back a couple of years, Race." He wet his lips. "Guys were being shook down, bumped for no reason at all. Tough Tony walked into Eddie Smart's place. Eddie was behind the bar. Him and Tony were friends, see. Tony pulled out a gun and shot him through the head. 'That,' said Tony, 'is straight from a dirty little guy in a dirty little room.' Tony was hopped up, all right. What more he might have said we don't know. Milligan was in the bar and he pulled out a rod and blew Tony apart."

"Jake," I said, shoving the two Cs back into his hand, "I'll give you some free advice. I think someone is trying to scare you to death." I opened the door. "On your way, Jake."

"It isn't me so much as my girl," Jake whimpered as I let him out of the office.

Five minutes later Jerry, my boy, came in.

"Boss," he said, "wasn't that Jake O'Hara who just left you a little while ago?"

"Yes," I said. "So what?"

"So I know something about him you don't know. He's lying dead in the gutter. Two doors down the street. Someone stopped a car, called him over and shot him."

"Where do you get your information?"

"Clarice—on the newsstand downstairs. She buzzed me. I know it was O'Hara. I put the glasses on him out the window."

They were moving the body and the crowd, too, when I put my six-power glasses on the street below. I guessed Jake O'Hara wasn't worrying so much now. I shrugged—and gulped. What of the girl?

"Has Jake got a girl?" I hollered to Jerry. "And do you know where she lives?"

"A dame called Sissy Pierson," he said. "She slipped down from the upper crust. Does a number in one of the night spots. I'll get her address for you."

JERRY was efficient that way. In five minutes he had her address, on Ninety-second Street.

"If she's got a phone," he said, "it's a secret."

I went out and took a taxi to Ninety-second Street to a small walk-up apartment.

Sissy Pierson's card in the mail box read "4D." I pressed the bell and held my hand on the door, waiting for the latch to click. There was no click. Perhaps she wasn't in. Perhaps she *was* in danger and Jake had told her not to answer the bell.

I pressed the buzzer of a ground-floor

apartment and got service. I was in the door fast and on the stairs before 2A could get a look at me. Though you can always apologize. On the fourth floor I found 4D, and it didn't take too much of a keen eye to see that the door latch wasn't caught. Someone could do that going out quietly: someone could do it door open and walk into a lot of trouble. A burst of gunfire or a tap on the head from someone behind a door. I gave the bell a ring, heard it plainly back in the apartment. No response.

I thought I'd go in and wait for Sissy Pierson. I was there to do her a favor. Most normal people don't like getting themselves killed, that's quite certain.

The hall was fairly dark, so I swung my gun into my right hand, crouched low, hoping that if it was gunfire, they'd shoot high, or that I'd shoot first, and started to push the door, to put the squeeze on anyone hiding behind it.

Nothing stirred. I got the door back as far as it would go. I looked down a long straight hall and intc a living room with curtains drawn back from the windows. I had plenty of light now.

I stepped in, closed the door and with my gun still in my hand, walked slowly down the hall. A kitchen loomed up to my right, and I took a look-see—empty —so I went to the living room. The furniture was comfortable, expensive and in good taste.

Living room empty. No dining room. The door to the room down the side hall was closed. I raised my gun slightly and pushed this door open.

I didn't even have to enter the room. I was looking straight at the bed and the girl that was huddled on it—a dead girl. Despite the rope that bound her feet to the foot of the bed and her hands to the head of it, she was curled up, half turned on her side.

Her lips were torn, and the skin on either side of her mouth was raw with little bits of whitish linen still clinging to it. Strips of adhesive tape lay on the floor, evidently tossed there as they had been stripped from the lips they sealed.

She was fully dressed, but her feet were bare—and blistered and burned, and many burned matches and cigarette butts were in the deep ashtray.

Someone had tied that girl on the bed and before killing her had tortured her for information. Whether he'd got it or not, I didn't know.

THE CORPSES HANG HIGH

ONCE a year, the editors of Thrilling Publications put on their shrouds and revisit some of the old scenes of crime. Some of the people there are old friends, and if they don't say "howdy do" to us, maybe it's just because they can't—being strapped pretty tight in electric chairs, with gags over their mouths. Or maybe afraid to take their attention away from the killers they face.

They are the people who throng the back of our detective magazines, the people whose stories are just too good to disappear. That's why we make them available to you here, the stories and the people—the killers, the deadly blondes, the staring-eyed corpses, the hard-fisted private eyes—all coming back to life to re-enact their crimes.

For the first time they have all been brought together, the whole murderous array, in an unsurpassable group of stories . . . selected for your reading pleasure. ***—The Editor***

There are times for lads in my business to get from under. This was not one of the times. I lifted the phone by the bed, dialed headquarters and got Sergeant O'Rourke.

"I've walked in on a body, O'Rourke," I said. "It's murder." I gave him the address and the apartment number. "I'll give you the setup, and don't bring Inspector Nelson with you."

"He's Homicide, Race," O'Rourke said easily. "He's got to come along."

Which was true enough.

I took a quick look-see in the bathroom, then sat down in the living room and took a smoke. I guessed the dame was Sissy Pierson, all right. Her picture was around the place enough, in all sorts of poses—mostly costume stuff or lack of costume stuff.

HOW had she died? I thought offhand, from the marks of her throat, that she'd been choked to death. How long had she been dead? Not long—her body was still warm. I didn't question further. She was not my corpse. She belonged to the police department.

I went into the kitchen and looked for a bottle of whisky. I've seen a lot of mean killings. I can take them, but that doesn't mean you ever get exactly used to them. She hadn't been a bad-looking kid. I took a stiff drink.

She couldn't have been a day over twenty-three. I took another hooker, went back in the living room and sat down to wait. I was thinking she would not mind about the whisky.

Pretty soon they came—O'Rourke, the same friendly cop as ever, and Inspector Nelson. O'Rourke was only a sergeant in rank, but he was close to Commissioner Porter. He could have been an inspector a long time ago, but as he said, and meant it, a copper learns more when he keeps close to his men.

Inspector Nelson acted with his usual belligerency, as if he had just found me after I'd murdered the woman. He disliked all private dicks and me in particular. But I wouldn't be shoved around like other private eyes, and he knew it.

CHAPTER II

Daughter of Wealth

OUR assistant medical examiner, Dr. Spear, came on the heels of the boys who were setting up cameras and going over the place. Dr. Spear was not the public's idea of a big city medical examiner. He never complained that he was pulled away from his dinner, never made flippant remarks about the corpse, never kidded with the police or permitted levity from them. It was a hard, cold and serious business with the assistant medical examiner.

I was wrong about the choking to death. She had been stabbed. Right through the heart. No knife was found. The time of death he set within the hour. That made Nelson look at me sharply.

"I suppose, Williams," he said, loud enough for the cops in the living room to hear, "you can account for your time?"

He gave me a look that showed how he felt about private eyes.

"Sure," I said just as loud. "I was out looking for the Malone brothers."

Which held Nelson. The Malone brothers had disappeared a couple of years ago, not five minutes before Nelson had dropped down on them. Nelson had had an anonymous tip and the evidence that would convict them of murder for more than four hours. But he had checked up before even trying to make an arrest. The story still went over big—if you wanted to get under Nelson's skin—which you often did.

The girl might have been killed in anger at not getting the information the murderer wanted. But it was Dr. Spear's opinion that the torture had gone on for some time.

One thing more. A card had been thrust down the girl's blouse. I didn't need to see it to know what was printed on it.

"Come around to my office and I'll match that card for you," I said to O'Rourke.

He showed the card to me then. Of course it read:

A DIRTY LITTLE MAN IN A DIRTY LITTLE ROOM

O'Rourke came around, and I told him all about O'Hara's visit.

"A dirty little man in a dirty little room," he thought aloud. "Remember Harvey Rath? He was a fence for over forty years. He lived back of his pawnshop—yes, in a dirty little room, and he was a little man, not overly clean. There were hints that he started to cash in on some of his knowledge. Tough Tony blurted it out before he died. But we never found out anything. Rath disappeared—we never found his body. . . .O'Hara say anything else to you?"

"Not a word."

"And you never saw the girl before?"

"Not until I saw her on the bed dead. No skin off your nose, O'Rourke—another cheap gangster and his dame."

O'Rourke looked at me steadily. "She had a scrapbook in her apartment, Race. She was Daniel Pierson's daughter. The stockbroker. Plenty of money and society, though he was rather pushed out of it a few years back when he was divorced. A mess. His daughter blew up and got a job singing in a Chicago night club. Made pretty good money at first. Then she met O'Hara. Doc Spear said she needled herself."

I nodded. "O'Hara would get his girls that way. I told him so. I guess he deserved the dose."

ONLY Foster of the *Journal* put me into the morning papers—a line about O'Hara taking the dose "almost immediately after leaving the office of a private detective." Evidently the advertising department wouldn't let him put my name in.

The wages of sin and hints at the sins of the parents and so on were played up good. O'Hara and the dope were pushed down as if the divorce had everything to do with it.

There were pictures of the girl when a child, and at an exclusive girls' school, and the information that last summer she had done a song-and-dance act at the invitation of the Junior League up in Maine for a new hospital opening on Moosehead Lake.

O'Rourke trotted into my office several times to see if I had heard anything, and it was surprising the things he knew about that girl—alive—and how little he knew about her dead.

"A couple of guys were making a play for her," he told me about a week after the murder, "and in spite of the dope, O'Hara was having a tough time keeping her in line. If O'Hara hadn't come to you, Race, I'd think he threatened the wrong man in a jealous rage and got himself knocked over."

"And the card—the dirty little man?"

"Just a red herring of O'Hara's."

"So the guy gets rid of O'Hara because he wants the girl, then tortures and kills her because she won't tell him what she saw in O'Hara. How does Nelson cater to that idea?"

"Nelson," said O'Rourke, "has it all sewed up. He liked the idea of the lover killing O'Hara and explains it that the girl has a new boy friend. O'Hara tortures the girl to find out his name. She won't talk, so O'Hara kills her. The boy friend walks in on the body, goes after O'Hara and pops him off. The time element makes it possible."

"And I suppose I was to help alibi O'Hara."

"Could be." O'Rourke shrugged. "Anyway, a lot of guys liked her, and O'Hara wasn't one to scare a man much."

"No." I shook my head. "O'Hara was scared himself."

Jerry came in then.

"I've plugged it in here." He nodded toward the phone then at O'Rourke, who took it and listened.

"Sure," he said. "I know where it is.

Loft building. Body, huh? She was—" O'Rourke straightened. This was not simply another body to him. He said, "Like that, eh?" and dropped the phone back in the cradle and walked toward the door.

"It's a dead girl," he said slowly. "Tortured, too—burnt matches and butts."

"And a card?" I asked.

"Yes—and a card." His lips set tightly. "And if you ask me what was on it, I'll bash your teeth down your throat. Want to come along? We're traveling fast."

I went. And I didn't need to ask him what was on the card.

I knew.

The Loft building was in the Bronx. We made time in a police car.

Nelson was already there. The homicide boys had set up their cameras, the place was being dusted for fingerprints, and Dr. Spear was finishing up his job. I got a look at the girl lying on a dilapidated couch, an old chair beside her, a tin box full of butts and matches, and the torn lips and scarred face where the adhesive tape had been torn off repeatedly as the girl evidently had been given a chance to talk.

That was all I did see. Nelson wanted no part of me, and O'Rourke didn't try to buck him.

Nelson was within his rights, so I went out into the hall and talked to the reporters.

The girl was identified two hours later at the city morgue, and the papers had a field day. She was not simply a child of wealth and respectability and society. There was no personal blot on her character and certainly no family scandal back of her.

She was Elsa Ames, daughter of Otis Ames, the real estate man, and Mrs. Ames, the former Constance Barrow of the Barrow Chemical Works and the Barrow fortune. Those two names, Ames and Barrow, meant plenty of dough, and the Barrow name took care of the society, back a few generations.

The card made the papers this time. The speculations were most anything you wished to name

WHAT'S more, the Ames girl had disappeared in broad daylight. She had been shopping in a well-known Fifth Avenue shop and had walked out onto the avenue—or at least walked toward the door. The store wanted her all the way out, but O'Rourke told me the girl had last been seen walking toward the Fifth Avenue entrance by a saleslady who knew her.

That was at half-past eleven in the morning. She was not seen again until four in the afternoon. Then she was dead. Some kids playing in a condemned building had found her.

The underworld of New York—the dives and the gambling houses came in for a bad time. Even night clubs were investigated.

I went around personally and couldn't find anything. In one of the big uptown clubs Bill Cruthers, who owned the place, came over and sat down.

"It's a rotten racket, Race," he said. "Look at this club. Of course, we have shady customers." He waved a hand. "They're all missing tonight. It's the same in the big hotels. Lads who can't stand being questioned. They've run. Not a bit of harm in—well, ninety per cent of them."

"What do you think, Bill?" I said. "You've been around a long time."

"Off the record?" He grinned at me and I nodded. "Understand, Race, it's only my opinion—not anything I've heard. But the bad boys of the city are scared. There is a sort of code in the underworld of self-preservation. They keep their quarrels and their wars among themselves. They don't murder respected citizens any more than they kill cops if they can avoid it. It's bad for business—from the pickpocket in the subway to the lad at the roulette wheel. Look what it does to the night life—a respectable place like this, too, almost deserted."

"Why don't you chuck it up? There's nothing to hold you—nothing shady."

He put that nice smile on me. "Per-

The car door opened below, and something was pushed into the street

haps the dough I brought along in the beginning and put into different spots wasn't made by the sweat of my brow. But how many big business men would not say the same thing if they told the truth? I don't let myself get pushed around and I don't push too much myself. But I'm not a sucker."

"And your idea?"

"Well—" He rubbed his clean-shaven chin. "I don't take too much stock in that card business. I never knew Harvey Rath, but I think he did use the threat of disclosing things to get a few enemies bumped off. Then someone got to him. I think, Race, the cops have a tough job. I think someone is trying to cover something."

"How?"

"Well," he said, "it's hard to connect up the two murders. I don't think O'Hara counts too much. He was only in the way. The girls had met, I suppose, and that would make it appear like a link to the police. But I think a certain guy wants to do in a certain girl and that these are preliminaries."

"So it will look like the work of a maniac?"

"Sure." He grinned. "Maybe I read

too many detective stories—but maybe the killer did, too."

"But the torture business," I said.

"Why not?" He shrugged. "It's got to look macabre."

"But a man couldn't work it alone," I said. "Remember the death car and O'Hara."

"Don't spoil a good story, Race." He got up from the table. "Here's news for you. I've sold out my interest in the night spots to some A Number One lads—Harry Long, Spencer Clarke, Malcolm Drew. They're forming a syndicate and pulling in bank money from outside. But I'll stick around a bit and see this through. The cops are running roughshod through the night. It would be something, Race, if you broke this case. If I hear anything—it's yours for a little bit of quiet when I blossom out as a gentleman, maybe a financier."

He gripped my hand again and was gone.

I liked Bill Cruthers. Never saw anything bad about him, though I heard plenty—but then, I heard the same things about myself. Still, I knew he'd be a mean man to cross. He was like me.

He wouldn't be shoved around.

CHAPTER III

The Next Victim

THE next day Mr. Otis Ames made several statements. One of them was that his daughter had never been in a night club in her life. The best one was that it was quite possible that his daughter had met Sissy Pierson, since they were both up at Moosehead Lake in Maine on the occasion of the opening of the hospital.

The police were raising the roof through the underworld, and men were talking who had never talked before. The general feeling was that Harvey Rath was alive and had returned, that he had passed the word along that certain people must be killed, and that these killings included not only the two girls but Jake O'Hara as well, and anyone else whose death could not be satisfactorily explained.

When two gunmen were fished out from under a wrecked car alongside the reservoir by Kensico Dam above White Plains, the word traveled fast that these were the birds who had picked up the Ames girl and spirited her to Harvey Rath up in the warehouse in the Bronx.

O'Rouke was too busy to have any talks with me.

Then things broke wide open. A girl named Dorothy Sears Briggs, of the Johnson Briggs clan, not yet twenty-one, received a message during a late dinner at a smart night spot. There were eight in her party. Every one of the eight, including her escort, the idiotic but extremely wealthy Mortimer Chase, saw her read the note carefully before excusing herself. Two of the party were sure she carried the note from the room with her.

That was the end of Dorothy Sears Briggs. At 1:20 the following morning they found her body behind some bushes in Central Park. There were no burnt matches, but her bare feet showed signs of the use of fire. Her face and lips were torn like those of the other two girls, though the tape was missing. Fingers that had gripped her smooth white throat had finished the job.

O'Rourke came to see me again. Even his voice was tired.

"I want to check my thinking with yours, Race," he said. "You can lie in bed and do your thinking."

"Well," I told him, "I think each of these girls knew something. Maybe the first victim told them."

"Yes, yes. We figured on that, but it doesn't jell. The Pierson girl, yes. She might have been afraid to talk, for in a way she was one of the mob. But the others—why should they keep a secret, one so terrible to the murderer that he would kill to prevent its being

known? And O'Hara—and the two thugs who were picked up, and—"

"Wait a minute, O'Rourke," I said. "Did these last two girls know each other—and did they know Sissy Pierson?"

"They knew each other socially. Dorothy Sears Briggs was a nice kid, and so was Elsa Ames, but she wasn't as far up the ladder. They met at social affairs but weren't chummy if that's what you mean."

"Well," I said, "someone knows something and won't or can't talk."

I asked him what the department was doing.

"Plenty," O'Rourke told me. "Since the Briggs girl was found dead Nelson has got the names of nearly every young girl who is in the social set or trying to get in. He's got the name of everyone who knew Dorothy Briggs personally, and a few who knew Sissy Pierson. He's interviewed most of them."

"And the results?" I wanted to know.

"Irate papas, and friends of irate papas, and lawyers of irate papas have been calling the commissioner. But Nelson's not backing down."

"What did he find out?"

"That the daughters of the rich have their secrets as well as the daughters of the poor—and that some of their so-called friends are about as willing to talk about it. But the killer's hot. Some day he'll make someone talk—say exactly what he wants to hear."

"I'm lucky to be out of it," I told him.

"But you're not out of it." He looked straight at me. "No citizen is out of it—no decent citizen. The alert is on for eight million people in New York. Someone is sure to talk Something is sure to break any minute. No, Race, you're not out of it."

THE shock came exactly one week after the death of Dorothy Sears Briggs. And it jarred me like an explosion.

I got a phone call to meet a man named Riley. He was a familiar figure to be seen strolling along Broadway. A dapper old guy, though not as old as he'd like you to think. He had come up from the gutter but wasn't going back into it—not alive. He had been a pickpocket, a common stick-up and a con man, but all that was years ago. Riley had slipped from one thing to another so fast that the cops had never been able to put the finger on him. Then suddenly he went in for high-class literature and poetry, and could misquote most any authority you named.

But he did get around and he did know what was going on. Now he was the go-between for so many things, and stepped on so few toes doing it, that he was taken for granted around the underworld when anything diplomatic had to be pulled off. So he had his nose in everything.

I got his secret call—everything about Riley was secret. He wanted me to have dinner with him in a delicatessen-restaurant in Brooklyn. I wondered who thought I was after his hide and wanted Riley to sound me out on what Riley always called "a meeting of the minds."

This cheap but large restaurant was doing a big business. But they had booths for two and poor lighting in the back. It was in one of the booths that I found Riley.

"I know how fastidious you are, Race," he said as I sat down, "so I ate my dinner before you came. We haven't got more than a moment to give to each other, but it's a moment of some importance."

There was a note of excitement in his voice—strange to Riley—and a trembling to his hand and a furtiveness in the way he looked around. It was all the more strange because Riley had always had a direct look, an honest, steady handclasp and a voice of assurance.

"Important to me or you?" I grinned at him.

"To me," he said. "There is ten thousand cash in it." Riley never said "grand" any more. "For you, as much as you can make the traffic bear above that. Maybe a small fortune." He leaned across the table. "And maybe death."

Riley could always be melodramtic. Then he went into swearing me to secrecy, insisting on my solemn oath that I would not divulge the source of my information.

I gave him all the assurance he needed. "Since the thing is big and it will take time," I said, "get talking. What have you got that's worth ten thousand dollars?"

He coughed and prepared to give me his usual spiel about how he served mankind. Then he suddenly thought better of it and said in a hoarse, unnatural voice, "I've got the name of the next victim of the dirty little man in the dirty little room."

"What!"

The dishes rattled on the table. If Riley had wanted to throw me, he certainly had. He hushed me to silence.

"That's it," he said, his voice hardly a whisper. "The name of the next—shall I say intended victim?"

"What do you mean, intended?" I said.

"You might gather a large fortune preventing it."

"And who will pay you this ten thousand? You don't think I have it."

"I think you could get it," he told me. "Her father should pay. He's worth enough."

I WANTED to tell him he was crazy. But Riley was not crazy. When Riley gave, or rather sold, information, it was good information. You got all you paid for.

"Look," he was saying. "I only want your word that the ten thousand is mine. Then I'll give you the name of the girl. Then you'll send me the ten thousand. I'll be out of the city until the vicious fiend is dead, the girl is dead, or you are dead. Don't you see, Race, the chance I'm taking—for a measly ten thousand?"

"I'm to go to the girl's father and ask him for ten thousand dollars to tell him his daughter is the next victim. Why he'll know it as soon as I peep the request for money." I thought a moment. "I see. You give me the name. I'm to collect the money. He'd run to the phone and the police would be in. Give me the name, Riley. Maybe I can work something. Certainly you'll be entitled to a reward after—"

"No. Listen, Race. If I was as young as you, as quick with a gun as you, as willing to die as you are—and as much of a fool as you are—I'd work it myself. This guy's millions. I'm risking my life."

I shook my head and felt my jaw harden.

"Riley," I said slowly, "you're risking your life more right now by not telling me. When I think of the way those girls died—and that another is to die horribly if you don't speak—why I'd choke the truth out of you for a lead nickel." I looked around the crowded restaurant. "If the place wasn't so crowded, I'd start now."

"It does you credit." Riley was more himself now. "I thought of that when I picked this crowded haven of hungry mortals. No, Race. I must have the money—and I have a plan."

"In the meantime, a girl dies."

"I think not."

"Riley—" I was recovering now—"you can't know. If the money was obtained and then—the girl—well, we'd want her to live, of course."

"Of course. And for once I'll break my rule and tell you how I know. Tiny Prague—you know him?" I nodded. "He used to be a bad boy. He did his stretch, and I guess he was lucky he didn't sit down on a chair for murder. He's been straight since. Has charge of the bar at the Golden Eagle. I think Cruthers gave him his chance. Big, handsome fellow, Tiny Prague.

"Well, I was at the Golden Eagle and Tiny took a phone call in the booth. I happened to be in the next one and heard him curse and then swear that if he fried, he wouldn't do it. Then he mentioned a girl's name, and there was horror in his voice. 'I'll go to the police,' he said. 'I'll go to Bill Cruthers!' Then I heard the girl's name again, and when

he came out of the booth, he was white. Perspiration was running down his face. He doesn't drink, but he did then, and put on his hat and coat and went out."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. He muttered over the phone like he was repeating what he heard—'A dirty little man in a dirty little room.'"

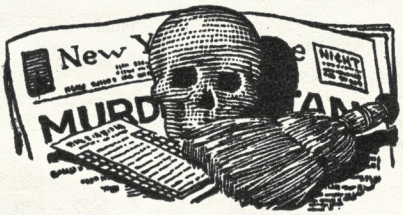
I looked carefully at Riley. "Well, Bill—"

"He won't go to Cruthers," Riley was saying. "Tiny's dead, Race. Stabbed in his own apartment—through the back. And no card, Race." He paused. "That's significant, isn't it?"

"Could be." But I couldn't think of anything significant about it.

"So," said Riley, "ten thousand is dirt cheap. Listen how you can work it. Of course, you don't go to the girl's father. You go see—" And Riley talked. . . .

I had done some work for the Second National Bank. In a way I knew the president. He had bowed stiffly when the others had shaken my hand at that



board meeting. But he hadn't liked my methods and my ethics, though he congratulated me grudgingly on behalf of the stockholders and the depositors.

"I'll be satisfied with what he says, Race," Riley went on. "If you don't get the money—" he shrugged— "I've done my duty. But I expect you to get the money."

"I don't like it, Riley," I told him, "but I'll play it your way. If it doesn't pan out and you don't give me the girl's name, or go to the police with it, I'll get the information out of you."

Riley smiled as we both stood up.

"You'll mail me the money, Race—in cash—or you won't find me."

CHAPTER IV

Body Blow

TO WALK in at night and call on J. Fletcher Logan, president of the Second National Bank, for a private conference—as Riley wanted me to do—was something. I had to pull a few fast ones to do it.

I decided to work through Frank Rainer, playboy with plenty to play with. Not that he'd have any influence with J. Fletcher Logan, but his eccentric aunt would. She was both society and money, and even J. Fletcher Logan would respect her wishes.

It took me a couple of precious hours to work it. Enough to say that "a gentleman would call on J. Fletcher Logan on a matter of the gravest importance." The gentleman was me. Rainer insisted on it that way, since anything less wouldn't impress his aunt.

At that, I guess it wasn't the first secret visit J. Fletcher had ever had. His secretary met me in the alley of his Fifth Avenue home, at the door. He was a bald-headed, horse-faced individual with eyes like a ferret and he knew me at once.

"Mr. Logan will see you briefly in his upstairs study," he said. "The hour is late. You will understand that."

I said I would and followed him along a dim narrow hall to a small elevator. It shot up like a snail.

J. Fletcher Logan was as formidable looking as his name and position in the financial and social world indicated he would be. He was in a dark purple dressing gown. His white hair was neatly combed and parted in the middle with mathematical precision.

He was standing behind a desk, tall and rather on the thin side, and with a slight stoop. There were two pairs of glasses on his desk, the nose type and spectacles. His eyes were blue, not bright and pleasant, but steady.

"Mr. Williams—with a message of the gravest importance," he said simply.

I looked at the secretary who closed the door and stood by it, and he got the point and said, "My secretary, Mr. Norman Hilton, has been with me twenty years. You may proceed."

I proceeded. His dark eyebrows went up when I broke into the society murder cases, but although I didn't like the man, I'll admit he heard me through, even to details. His face expressed nothing when I came to the ten-thousand-dollar part. I finished with the final crack that I believed in my informant, that he had never misled me, and that he wanted to know if Mr. J. Fletcher Logan would advise the father of the girl to pay the money—even before he knew the father's name.

"A close personal friend of yours, who accepts your advice always," I finished, just as Riley had put it.

J. Fletcher Logan spoke then. "Mr. Williams, this girl's father, whom your informant has in mind, is quite evidently a personal friend of mine or one who is in a position or in the habit of seeking my advice and reasonably certain of acting on that advice. Would I advise him to then place in the hands of this doubtful character the sum of ten thousand dollars for information of a most tragic and horrifying nature, affecting the welfare of his home, actually, as you believe, the life or death of his daughter? Now suppose that this informant, being as you frankly state of an unsavory character, made the same offer to a dozen different men at the same time through different intermediaries."

"Mr. Logan," I interrupted, "I have stated the case to the best of my ability. I want a yes or a no."

"Really. Then—"

"If I may suggest," the secretary cut in, "we have had dealings with Mr. Williams before, Mr. Logan. Perhaps we might—compromise on a small amount in advance and later—"

"With a girl's life in the balance and every moment precious? I said. "If the price was low enough, I'd pay it myself. I wouldn't be here."

"How low?" Mr. Logan's voice was soft now.

"I can raise five thousand," I told him. "I found that out tonight. And it's from people you wouldn't even meet."

"Very well, Mr. Williams," Mr. Logan said. "The bank will lend you the other five. I'll go on your note myself."

HE BOWED stiffly and was about to dismiss me when I saw a phone across the room and asked to use it. When he nodded, I lifted the phone and dialed my number. I heard Riley answer as Logan was rebuking his secretary in a soft voice for bringing me so neatly into making my offer.

"All right," I said to Riley. "The money goes to you at the opening of the bank tomorrow. Never mind congratulating me. I don't want congratulations. The girl's name! . . . What?" I guess my voice went up. "And her father is—her—"

I dropped the phone in her cradle, turned and faced J. Fletcher Logan.

"You look a little stunned." For the first time he actually smiled. "I hope you found your investment—satisfactory."

I couldn't speak. I simply looked at him. When I did speak, my voice sounded far off. "Not satisfactory at all, Mr. Logan—not at all."

"Well, I won't question you. You have your ethics, or so you told me once. Our little talk will be confidential, and the bank will take care of you in the morning. I am not to know the girl's name, of course."

"But you are to know it." A hundred ways to break it to him were dashing through my muddled brain. Then I tossed it out. "The girl's your daughter." And when his face remained the same, "Your daughter Martha. Martha Logan."

People have taken blows before too heavy for the mind to accept at once,

and I thought that was what had happened to Logan. I guess the secretary did, too, for he came over and took his arms.

"It's true, Mr. Logan," he said. "Somehow I knew the moment Mr. Williams spoke, yet he couldn't have guessed it."

No, I hadn't guessed it. Maybe I should have. Later I knew I shouldn't have. Not J. Fletcher Logan's daughter. Not Riley actually sending me to the father.

I'll say this for J. Fletcher Logan. He could take it—plenty. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. But he didn't let his mouth hang open. He closed it firmly and leaned on the desk, not gripping it for support exactly, or at least, not giving me that impression. Logan had faced crises before, though not like this, and he was gathering his mental strength to face this one.

His secretary suggested a brandy and that he sit down. Logan waved him aside.

"No, Norman," he said. "I like to take things standing—a little brandy perhaps in a moment." Then looking at me: "I recall your doing some work for us at the bank. I did not approve your methods, yet I did not question your integrity. Now—is it possible that your information is erroneous?"

"Anything is possible," I told him, "but I'd say that the odds were twenty to one that my information is correct."

"There is nothing from my point of view to substantiate this—this horror. I am thinking."

Logan waited a full minute, took the brandy Norman offered him.

"Nothing strange about Martha's actions lately," he murmured. "Not even little things. She is an especially level-headed girl, Williams. The police must be notified at once."

"I wonder, sir." Norman was in it now. "The police are capable, honest, and without doubt anxious to protect you and yours. But you know yourself, Mr. Logan, that things leak out."

"Leak out!" Logan's voice raised. This strong man of finance was using all that strength now to fight hysteria. "What does it matter? A cordon of police day and night! I'll call the commissioner."

I broke in hurriedly. "Where is Miss Logan now?"

"Ah!" He swung then. "Norman, she's in bed, isn't she? Mr. Williams, you think—"

"I don't know," I told him. "Who knows where she is? The thing to do is to find her at once." As he moved toward the phone, I said, "I don't know if your phone is tapped or not, but a call to the police might bring immediate and disastrous action. I want to find her. "

"Her maid—Walters, Norman said, and pressed a button. "But I think Miss Martha is out of town.-

Walters came. She was not a frivolous young French maid but rather stout, motherly and dependable looking.

Martha Logan had gone up to Westchester to a party, she said. But she was not staying the night. "Her work at the hospital, you know." Her train would arrive at 11:27. Thomas, the chauffeur, was to meet her at the Roosevelt Hotel. Yes, the maid thought she was returning alone.

I got a good description of how Martha Logan was dressed before the maid left us.

CHAPTER V

A Gun Roars

I GUESS the same thought entered the minds of all three of us at the same time. The thought was that there was a long underground tunnel, the passage from Grand Central station to the Roosevelt Hotel.

I walked over to the desk and lifted a small picture from it.

"Miss Logan?" I asked and when both men nodded, I shoved it into my

pocket, grabbed up my hat and went to the door.

"Better let me out as quietly and quickly as possible," I said to Norman. "The house might be watched."

"Yes—yes." Logan was still beside the telephone. "Norman will see you down. Williams, don't hesitate to protect Martha in any way necessary."

"In the way perhaps that you objected to when I worked for the bank last year?"

He faced me squarely.

"I was a narrow-minded man then. Perhaps I am a narrow-minded man now." His lips set grimly. "Strike without mercy. Kill, if it is necessary. My name, my money and my lawyers will stand behind you."

"I don't think it will come to that yet, Mr. Logan," I said. "I've got plenty of time to reach the station. Wait until I contact your daughter before using that phone."

As I left the room, J. Fletcher Logan called after me, "Are you armed?"

I grinned and swung a gun into my hand from a shoulder holster so fast that Norman jumped. I stepped into the elevator with him and crawled down three floors. If I had had an acetylene torch, I'd have burned the cable and dropped the car.

Norman said as he let me out the back. "Think nothing of that ten thousand, Mr. Williams. I'll have the check ready for you as soon as you return."

The long tunnel that runs from Grand Central Station to the Roosevelt Hotel is hardly ever full of people at eleven-thirty at night. As a matter of fact, I've seen it deserted sometimes at seven P.M.

A good place for a murder, but not too hot for a kidnaping. The girl would scream if conscious, and if unconscious, would have to be carried out. That would be my meat. At least, this three-time murderer of young girls had to get his prey alone where he could torture information out of them.

I was thinking it over as I got out of the taxi and walked into Grand Central Station, coming down the ramp from Forty-second Street. I still had seven minutes before the train came in. I'd had a good look at the girl's picture and I had liked what I had seen. A little on the ritzy side maybe, but good.

She held her head as if she were somebody, and I guess she was, at that. Her features were sharply defined, but not too sharply cut. There was a delicate fineness to her face, like that in old-time paintings, with a little firmness tossed in. A hands-off sort of look.

She was a blonde and her eyes were blue. Best of all, I had a full description of what she was wearing.

I got up to the gate where the train came in but not too close. I couldn't spot

anyone in the theater crowd returning to Westchester who looked too out of place.

Thomas had already left with her car, but my idea was to introduce myself to Martha Logan, preferably after she left the tunnel and came up in the Roosevelt Hotel. I'd take her home in a taxi in case this was the pay-off and an accident had been arranged for the Logan car.

THE station was pretty crowded. There was quite a mob around the gate where she would arrive.

The train came in. The gates opened, and people poured through. The train must have come from well upstate becaust it was pretty crowded and a lot of people were coming through and a lot more were meeting them—and I saw the girl.

If you didn't know there was great wealth and family behind her, you'd fall for her right away. She walked like a thoroughbred. It was only knowing about the dough that gave you the idea she might be snooty.

Blonde hair peeped out from a little hat. The weather was still cold, but she carried her coat over her arm. A plain coat, a plain tailor-made suit—but I expect it cost heavy dough. It fitted her perfectly, or she fitted it perfectly. Fine straight body, quick walk, nice blue eyes.

I turned in after her when she was in the thickest part of the crowd.

I was closing in to get on her heels when I saw the man. Short, stocky, well-dressed, nothing loud. I didn't know him, but he didn't give me a pleasant impression. He walked through the crowd, got close to the girl, and I saw his hand come out of his overcoat pocket. There was a gun in it.

A place like that seemed no place to intimidate a girl and make her walk quietly to the nearest exit and disappear into the night. Certainly the gun was jammed close to her. One woman saw it, for she cried out—and my right hand swung up under my left armpit. A man alongside me was jarred back by my sudden movement. Maybe I could have shot the gun out of that fellow's hand under ordinary circumstances. But heads were bobbing in and out between me and the girl.

There was the man's body. There's was the man's face. There was the man's gun—and I read death in that face. Death for the girl. In that hard, cold evil face of a killer. For an instant his face was clear, his eyes were clear, his gun was clear and raised close to the girl's head. All clear—and I squeezed lead once.

The roar of the gun. A woman alongside me, looking at me and folding up

[*Turn page*]

and fainting. The screams of another. The—yes, the gunman going down amid the small jammed-up crowd.

I moved fast then. I knew the man was dead. You don't lay a .45 into a man's head at twenty-five or thirty feet and not get results. Hysteria took the crowd as I reached Martha Logan. Women were screaming. Men were shoving and yelling, and that inevitable man in every crowd who can handle things was shouting orders to stand back and give the man air, and "Where the devil did that shot come from anyway?" As many people were trying to break into that circle that held death as were trying to get out.

"This way, Miss Logan." I had her by the arm and steered her along quickly. "I'm from your father," I told her, weaving in and out. "Keep your head now. Remember the notoriety if you get into the papers. Take it easy—this way."

I steered her toward the restaurant, twisted right, joined those who were going up the ramp and avoided those who were coming down asking what had happened.

It wasn't hard to get away. The gunman had figured that. People who were close to that shooting were fighting to get away from it. Those who weren't close were running toward the excitement.

The ride to the Logan house in the taxi was something. A lot of class was sitting beside me needing protection—a few million dollars' worth of class. Also she was asking questions, and I was avoiding them and telling her to ask her father. I handed her one of my cards which she made out in flashing lights.

"Race Williams, isn't it?" she said. "Yes, Race Williams, the detective."

I liked the way she put "the detective."

But I wasn't talking.

WHEN we reached the house, I hustled her in. The place was already overrun by the law. O'Rourke was there, and Commissioner Porter himself. Logan, telling Norman to give me a check, was tossing his arms around his daughter. She wanted an explanation. Logan told her that there had been trouble at the bank and hustled her off to her rooms. But before she went she tossed a parting shot that hit the bull's-eye.

"The bank?" she said. "But, Father, if it has anything to do with—with these awful murders, I want that man there." She pointed at me, smiled. "Yes. I mean Race Williams. I like him."

She was gone up the stairs then, and they were all questioning me. Had I told her? What had I told her? To my surprise, I got the drift of what Logan was saying—that he was dismissing me, handing me a check.

"Norman considers it my duty," he said. "Ten thousand dollars for the man who furnished you with such information." He bowed slightly toward the commissioner. "Of course, Williams, I realized after you had left the impossibility of my daughter actually being involved in such a sordid—" He choked that off. "I am inclined to agree with the commissioner that you yourself were taken in and had nothing to do with the—extortion."

I looked at the check. It was for ten thousand, all right. I looked at the commissioner and at O'Rourke. They knew nothing about the shooting at the station. Then I turned to Logan, but I didn't throw in his face the suggestion that I kill if necessary, that his lawyer would stand back of me.

"The ten thousand, Mr. Logan, is simply expense money," I said. "There is a small fee for escorting your daughter home from the station. I get twenty-five dollars an hour or for any part of an hour."

"Very well," Logan said, but the commissioner's eyebrows went up, and O'Rourke grinned. "Norman, make Mr.—this man—out another check for twenty-five dollars."

"One moment." I was calm but I was good and mad. "There is a small extra charge for additional service. I don't

know what the other agencies charge, but I always demand three dollars and seventy-five cents extra when I kill a man in protecting the life of my clients' daughters. If you think it too high, why mail me what you think it's worth." I turned then and started toward the door—just in time to bump into Inspector Nelson.

"So," said Nelson, grabbing me by the shoulder, "you shot somebody—just like that."

"Just like that," I repeated. "So what?"

Ten minutes later we were all in the upstairs study. All but the girl. Intended victim Number Four—Miss Martha Logan.

CHAPTER VI

Race Has a Theory

COMMISSIONER PORTER was quiet and composed. Nelson was pacing the room and talking. O'Rourke was standing beside the door, and J. Fletcher Logan was sitting uncomfortably in the big chair by the flat desk, Norman beside him as if ready to take notes but without his usual secretary's pencil and notebook.

"If this is a pinch, say so," I said, "and I'll get my lawyer. Not yours." I looked at J. Fletcher Logan who had made no remark.

"Come, come." Commissioner Porter was poring the oil around. He was a good commissioner and he was a good politician, too. "Let's have it all, Williams. Tell us what happened at the station."

So I told it. The killer's face, the gun in his hand, death in his eyes.

"It was a split second or death for Miss Logan," I said. "A wound would only have jarred him, and he'd have fired. So I shot to kill—and he died."

"Like that." Nelson stopped walking and glared at me. "You know these girls have never been killed on sight. They've been kidnaped or lured away and tortured before they died. Don't say you didn't think of that. You claim to think of everything."

"Sure," I said. "I thought of it. I thought, too, that maybe the murderer could have changed the pattern. All right, Nelson." I glared back at him now. "If you were there, you'd wait and see what his plans were—is that it?"

"I'm asking the questions." Nelson pulled the iron jaw on me.

"You're not asking this one, Nelson. I'm asking it." I turned to J. Fletcher Logan. "What would you expect from the police? A wait-and-see game? I had an instant decision to make."

"Why—er—" J. Fletcher sort of stiffened. "Under the circumstances—"

"You'd prefer the newspaper to carry a story about how quick-acting Inspector Nelson wounds murderer five seconds *after* brutal slaying? How would it read to you—the girl's father?"

"Come—come," said the commissioner. "The inspector is merely questioning whether your action was necessary. Let us presume it was necessary. I think perhaps the least publicity given to the whole affair in the station, the better for all concerned. We must assume that this was a hired assassin who misunderstood his orders. It's about your information, Williams—we'd like to know about that."

I told them all except Riley's name.

"Well, well," said the commissioner, "I think Williams has perhaps performed a commendable action. What do you say, O'Rourke?"

"I know Williams," said O'Rourke. "He calls them as he sees them. No man can do better than that, Commissioner."

I'll give all of them credit for respecting my position and not trying to get Riley's name out of me. Nelson, no doubt, because the commissioner hamstrung him a bit.

"You feel certain you got all the information available from your—informer, Williams?" the commissioner asked.

"I'd have wrung his neck for what

I got if he hadn't made that impossible. And I'd have paid him myself. Ask Mr. Logan about that."

"Yes, yes," said the commissioner. "I am quite aware of the dramatic denouement in naming his daughter. Now, Wililams, you are to understand that in a case of this importance your protection alone would hardly be satisfactory. Miss Logan must have complete protection. I would request your silence. Leave this entirely in our hands. And be so kind as to give us your opinion on the matter."

"For free?" I asked.

"For the benefit of the citizens of New York," he said slowly. "I know you too well to offer you money from the public funds."

"Nicely put."

The commissioner was a smooth lad. He didn't like my methods. But he was honest in that dislike. He had never hounded me. Cautioned me at times, yes. Maybe threatened me once or twice. But he was no hard-driving, bull-headed Nelson.

HE KNEW there would be nothing in it for him if he started driving me for killing a man in saving the life of Martha Logan. Logan—like it or not—would have to stand behind me, or the newspapers would make him. I had a story and it was a beaut.

"Well," I said, and this was my big moment, for I'd had this in my mind ever since the last girl was killed, "all of these victims held a secret—a secret of a crime—and each one who knew that secret must die."

"And the torture?" The commissioner was interested.

"The murderer knew the name of one girl who held the secret in the beginning, but he knew that there were others. He tortured Sissy Pierson to get the names of the others and got only one name. Let's say Sissy Pierson knew only one name—Elsa Ames. So he tortured Elsa Ames to get the other names, and she knew but one name. He got that name and tortured the third victim, Dorothy Sears Briggs, to get the other names—and got only one name—Martha Logan."

"Would girls like that keep a secret that was so important?" said Nelson. "You're out of your mind. We had that idea, but it wouldn't fit after the second death and certainly not after the third girl died. Now there's Martha Logan. None of these girls showed any fright, or the least apprehension even, at any time before they were killed."

"These girls didn't know what the secret they held was," I said. "Martha Logan doesn't know it now. Can't you see? All of them were at the scene of some crime. All of them saw the murderer's face. Not one of them even knew a crime was committed."

"Then why trouble to kill them?"

"Because," I said, "all of them saw the murderer. That must be the only solution. They saw the murderer, no doubt fresh from his crime, but they didn't know he was a murderer because they didn't know a crime had been committed."

"Then why would the murderer kill them?"

"Because the murderer knows that sooner or later they *will* know a crime was committed and will remember him. Now, my suggestion for solving the case, if you're interested—"

"Yes," said the commissioner. "we would be interested in that."

"Well," I said, "make a list of every unsolved murder committed in New York within the last year, or out of New York at any time Martha Logan was out of the city. Try to place her at the scene of any of those crimes. Martha Logan has seen this murderer smack at the scene of his crime, but she doesn't know it, because she never heard of the crime. Good night, gentlemen."

I turned and walked out of the room. And out of the house. Cops were all over the place. . . .

The next night I went down to the Bright Spot, a small new night club that was coming along. The talent was not expensive, but it was good. Boys

and girls got a chance to show their stuff there and make names. They had a fine talent scout combing the city. It was like a proving ground for some of the big clubs.

I wasn't there to be entertained. I wanted to see what I could pick up. Big shots dropped in there, and not-so-big shots, too—lads who would be barred when café society discovered it.

I guess I wasn't the only one who hoped to get some information. Lieutenant Hogan from the Broadway squad was sitting at a table, looking for all the world like an old-time matinee idol. A plainclothesman named Cohen was with him, dolled up for the sporting mob.

JOEY PALENO, the manager, came over and flopped into a chair beside me.

"Business not so good," I said.

"Bad," he said. "I've been asked a dozen times already if the regulars were all here last night, and when they left or if they acted nervous—and I don't know who are regulars and who aren't any more. They all got up and left last night at about the same time, except a few."

"A telephone call tipped them off that something was wrong?"

"Just nothing, Race." Paleno spread his hands. "You know how those things are. Everyone knew something at once. I was out at the bar, and Fingers Levine is drinking alone. Suddenly he puts his half-drunk glass down and walks straight out of the place. It was a double whisky sour, at that. Talk about mental telepathy. Duke University should do its experimenting here. It's uncanny. I've seen it hundreds of times. They were all out by midnight when the cops were on the prowl."

He got up as Lieutenant Hogan went by and beckoned to him.

"See?" Paleno tossed out those expressive hands again. "Now it'll be what time some of the drunks got to playing musical chairs."

I watched the show. The girl who was on had talent. "Feather" Falon they billed her as. And I appreciated the club a little more. Her old man had been shot to death in a gang war when she was a kid. Feather was tough. Feather was afraid of nothing.

Feather looked like a million dollars. Maybe two million, for that was the first time it struck me that Feather looked like Martha Logan. Or was it simply that the Logan girl was on my brain? No. She looked like her, all right. Not that they were twins. Just a likeness in height, color of hair, fair skin.

I saw Bill Cruthers. I gave him the hand as he passed and he came over and sat down at the table beside me.

"They'll have me down at headquarters, Race, for associating with you," he said. "It'll be my first trip, too."

"What are you doing down here?" I asked him.

"Getting around. The Bright Spot is part of the syndicate, but it won't be known until we branch out and welcome the big money. I'm trying to smooth the rough spots. The cops are at it again."

"So Joe told me. Another big—crime?"

Bill Cruthers had a nice smile. "Don't be coy, Race," he said. "A shot was fired, and everyone who should know knows. The cops go into a panic and start raiding again." He leaned forward. "How deep are you in it?"

I ignored that.

"What are you doing down here?" I asked him again. "You've got bigger business."

"Well," he said and he was serious, "it isn't known and I wouldn't like a guy who started guessing. When this panic clears up, I'm going to marry Feather Falon and take her out of this business."

"Feather Falon?" I was surprised.

"She's the cutest, straightest little shooter that ever trod the avenue. Anyway, I'm for her whether she likes it or not. She'll take a chance on anything for money and she's ambitious, so I guess I'm set. I'll take her to South

America—abroad if things are right—to the West Coast, and I won't be back until they've forgotten—if then. Then maybe I'll star her on Broadway. The truth is—"

"Yes?" I waited.

"I'm in love with her, Race."

Then he went on to talk about his age. Thirty-eight not being so old. That he'd make it up to her in many ways. He'd run straight for years. Her old man had been no good, but the kid was straight. Loyal.

"Bill," I told him, "you don't have to cry all over your face to me. It will be a real break for her. She's getting a swell guy." I shook his hand. "I wish you luck and I'll send you a present."

HE HESITATED a moment before he spoke. "You might do something for me now," he said. "I don't want to mix my name up with hers or I'd do it myself. Inspector Nelson is buzzing her backstage. Every once in a while they drag her in because of her old man. But the girl's straight as a die—I know that. I thought maybe you'd slip back and break it up. I've got to toddle. Nelson would forget anything to jump on you. Give him the Malone brothers gag."

I didn't like it, but I did wander backstage. I'd had no idea that Bill Cruthers was gone on Feather Falon, but it explained how she had got her chance at the club.

I didn't cross Nelson and I didn't see Feather Falon. I found out enough to know that she had gone off with Nelson, but if he had dragged her down for questioning, I couldn't tell. The watchman backstage said he didn't know.

"Cops are like that," he said, adding that Feather had a temper but she hadn't been using it. "Believe me, son," he said, "she ain't tongue-tied, either. He must have offered a few bucks. That kid will do anything for money."

So I left without any information, except the item of Bill Cruthers' heart throb that any gossip columnist would give his right eye to have.

CHAPTER VII

A Different Pattern

A LATE edition of the paper had not a word about Martha Logan, nor had I been mentioned yet in the Grand Central Station shooting. The commissioner was soft-pedaling things until he got the breaks.

I wondered. Three girls had never got the breaks. Martha Logan—I rather liked the kid. At least, she'd had a break the other girls hadn't had. The police knew for certain that her number was up.

Did that give her safety? It should, for a while. Surely they'd toss enough police around her. She would have an escort every place she went, if they let her go any place. No. It looked as if she would have to stay in her own house until she—or the killer—died.

The next day I liked her better. I went down to the *Times* and went through some old papers with the help of a doll who knew the society angle. Martha Logan had done her stuff. She held a record for war bond sales and not to the millionaire set, either. She had gone out and done her part at public gatherings. Sold them on her personality, too, without benefit of identification.

She had been a nurse's aid. None of this stuff of running around in a pretty uniform and meeting important visitors to the hospital. She had done more than straighten flowers and hand over vases to be filled with water by someone else. She had worked. Seven o'clock in the morning stuff—six days a week, and sometimes seven.

What's more, she hadn't simply waved the flag and folded it up when the war folded. She had kept right on at the hospital. More work and less pictures in the papers than any girl in the city, was the way the superintendent of the hos-

pital put it.

I felt a little proud. I had given her a chance to carry on, and now the police were watching her, so she couldn't carry on until the thing was settled. . . .

O'Rourke came in to see me the next day before I had breakfast. He still looked worried, but he looked as though he'd had more sleep. He had some typewritten data in his hand.

"Here," he said, "is a list of every murder for the past two years in the city of New York, and out of it, on the dates we can fix the Logan girl as out of town. She has never been near most of the places at any time. The Central Park killing—well, she rides in the park once in a while but never at the right time to have been near when a killing was pulled off. Besides, she's never had the other three girls riding with her. She's sure of that."

"Has she ever been with them? I mean all at once."

"She doubts it," said O'Rourke. "Sissy Pierson she remembers meeting—but she doesn't know where. She identified her from the picture. Both the other girls she knows. The first one to die after Sissy—Elsa Ames—she didn't know too well, but had met her around. The third one she knew better. That was Dorothy Sears Briggs. But only met her at parties."

"Have you ever placed the four together?"

"Yes," said O'Rourke. "At the Plaza in April of Forty-four and Madison Square Garden in December of Forty-five. Uptown at the Armory on New Year's Eve of the same year. A lawn fete on the old Untermeyer estate up in Yonkers last May. There may have been other affairs, but we can't be sure. Like the docking of a troop ship in Forty-four. Sissy Pierson is hard to place always. The last Labor Day up in Maine on Moosehead Lake." When I looked up at him, he said, "There were one hundred and thirty-seven guests that came from New York. At the other affairs, all but the Plaza, there were over a hundred, at the Garden nearly two hundred—and no one was killed at the Plaza or the other places."

"She's not keeping anything back?"

"NO," SAID O'Rourke. "It's a wonder she remembers as much as she does. All she did was entertain, sell bonds, and work at the hospitals. Half the time she didn't know where she was going, even when the time came. Says she met a lot of people a lot of places. I was out early this morning, talking to all the girls she knows well. Boy, are they a suspicious lot! I didn't mention her name in particular. I let them think I was asking her questions, too. They remember a lot of the damnedest things and make up a lot of the damnedest things. For my money, I'd bury the Logan girl in the Tombs until we clear up this thing."

"You showed her pictures, I suppose."

O'Rourke chuckled and shrugged.

"Practically moved the rogues' gallery up into her sitting room." He shook his head then. "She recognized one guy for us. Said she didn't know where she had seen him but remembered his face. Nelson hit the ceiling and had every cop in the city after him—picked him up in twenty-seven minutes. He has a record, yes, but the fact was he served the Logan girl at a luncheon in a midtown hotel two years ago. She's got a memory, all right. Nelson wanted to pin something on the bird, but as soon as he spoke of that luncheon, the girl recalled him. Said he had served the soup cold."

"Had he?"

"Well, he—" O'Rourke stopped. "What the devil are you talking about? You're not serious? Cold soup."

"No," I said, "I'm not serious about that. Why tell me all this?"

"Old friends, Race. The police have their place and you have yours. There are a lot of things you can do we can't do."

I asked O'Rourke about Harvey Rath.

"We showed her pictures of him, but

she said she had never seen him. Of course, she couldn't be sure from the pictures. I knew Rath well."

"Tell me about him—his character." And when O'Rourke's eyebrows went up, "We all have character, O'Rourke, good or bad."

"His," said O'Rourke, "was just bad. He fenced things in a small way for years. Then he went in for bigger stuff. We never could lay the finger on him after he hit the high-priced stuff. Suddenly he got real smart. We were sure some big stuff went through him, but we couldn't prove a thing."

"Used blackmail, put the finger on big-shot crooks, too," I said and when O'Rourke nodded: "That's dangerous stuff."

"There was talk he had a little book and that it would go to the cops if he was ever knocked over. I guess it was only talk. He disappeared suddenly. Two, three years ago. He's dead, of course."

"Why of course? No body."

"It is easier to hide a dead body than a live one. Racketeers, politicians, far bigger lads than Harvey Rath have died and their bodies have never been found. I come in to pump you, and you start pumping me. I'll have to be on my way, Race. I'm worrying about the chances this killer will take."

"He can't get through a real police block, O'Rourke," I told him seriously. "But it is a desperate situation for the killer. I think Miss Logan is the last of his victims. So this time it has only to be a quick and sudden death, and no doubt soon. Look at how the other deaths followed one upon the other."

"But we didn't know then," said O'Rourke. "We know now. We've taken every precaution possible without letting the press in on it. The girl has seen pictures of everyone worth seeing." O'Rourke grinned. "She's recognized a few big-shot racketeers, a couple spotted for black market stuff, but nothing to remember about them. Just one." His smile was a tired one. "A pickpocket at the Plaza two years back. He was acting odd. We'll get some small stuff back through it. What a memory that girl has got!"

"That's what the murderer is thinking, O'Rourke. That's what he fears. Four girls saw something that will stand out in their minds when it is forced back into conscious memory through something startling, no. doubt. Something that is going to happen soon. Take care of the little lady, O'Rourke. She's got lots on the ball."

"Don't you worry," O'Rourke said with great confidence, but he was still worrying his head off when he left me. . . .

FOUR days later, what happened knocked the opening of *Aida* with the newly discovered young opera star right onto Page Five. A woman looking out a window saw it. She didn't report it right away. She didn't have a phone and was afraid to go out to telephone.

Early in the morning, along about three, she saw a car come down the side street past a brownstone front that had been turned into a rooming house. She saw the door open, saw something pushed into the street. Saw it roll over and lie in the gutter. And that's all it did, lie there.

She hadn't been able to get to sleep and was sitting at the window. She sat there for quite a long time staring, fascinated. Then she woke up the girl across the hall in the back. It was almost a full hour, though, before the landlady called the police. Yep, the body lay there, undiscovered, right in the city of New York.

The man had been shot dead only a few hours before they found him. He hadn't been identified when Jerry brought me the early editions of the afternoon papers. But there had been a neatly typed card pinned on his chest —not the same terrifying note that had startled millions and struck terror to those who had daughters. It was not the same simple message that had sent the underworld into a panic. It read a little bit differently. It said:

THIS IS FOR YOU
YOU DIRTY LITTLE MAN IN A DIRTY
LITTLE GUTTER

O'Rourke fairly breezed in to see me. His eyes were bright, the wrinkles gone out of his forehead.

"You were right, Race." He patted me on the back, chuckled. "It was Harvey Rath. I knew him well. Been hiding out, all right. What Martha Logan knew about him will never be known now."

"Did she see the body?"

"Her old man hit the ceiling at the very idea. And to tell you the truth, Race, I was timid about taking her down to the morgue." In a matter-of-fact voice he added, "But he wasn't mussed up any. A bullet hole in his heart. We had some mighty good pictures made and sent up for her to look at. She said she had never seen him."

"That wonderful memory!" I took a silent laugh. "So Rath had all his trouble for nothing. Got anything on his killing?"

"No." O'Rourke looked at me steadily. "This Norman lad, the Logan secretary. He hasn't been in touch with you, has he?"

"Not a peep. What's on your chest?" I inquired.

"The pattern. The bullet hole in Rath's chest. Sort of different. Not true to form. Like Grand Central Station."

I came to my feet.

"You think I killed him!" Then I laughed. "The pattern is all right, O'Rourke, for remember, this is a different pattern. This is someone that Rath put the finger on to do some killing for him—out of the book maybe. And this guy—well, he was big or he was mad or he knew where the book was, and he plugged Rath." I nodded. "I'll admit that card on the body was a classic and worthy of me. Was it Nelson's idea?"

"Well—" O'Rourke scratched his head— "don't blame Nelson too much. I was wondering. What's so strange or insulting about it? It's like you, isn't it? Nelson thought maybe Logan had his secretary send you around some dough, too, for the job."

"I'm flattered, not insulted," I told O'Rourke. "And if you never find the lad who dished it out to Harvey Rath, you can give me the credit."

O'Rourke put cowlike eyes on me and went out chuckling. He was in a rare good humor.

CHAPTER VIII

Sitting Duck

OF COURSE I thought that was the end of it. The papers thought so, too. The boys of the press surmised and conjectured and went all out according to their imaginations. They made a lot out of Nelson's ambiguous statement. But never once was the name of Martha Logan brought into the story.

The following day I saw her pictures in the society columns. She was among those who would attend the opera *Aida*.

My first thought was that the police were finally convinced that all danger was past for Martha. Then I saw the point, or thought I did. Dislike Nelson or not dislike him, he was a good cap and a careful one—at least with a name like J. Fletcher Logan. He'd have cops watching that girl at the opera. At that, it seemed like he was setting her out to see if there would be any attempt on her life.

Well, I'd probably never see Martha Logan again, unless I went to the opera to get a peek at her. And that I wouldn't do for any woman.

Logan had sent me a check for twenty-five hundred, so I had made a few bucks out of it.

That night I went to Johnny Swan's Grill to eat. It was surprising the food he could dig out of his vest pocket if you had the money to pay for it. It was surprising, too, the people you could dig up there, and this night was no ex-

ception. As I passed through the grill an important voice spoke up.

"Mr. Williams, sir," it said, "the tables are crowded. I dislike dining alone. Be my guest, please."

A dapper little man was on his feet, half bowing from the waist. I tried to keep the surprise out of my voice, but I knew, or thought I knew then, that Martha Logan's peril was a thing of the past. Riley was back in the city.

"Sit down, sir." He waited for me to fall into the chair across from him. "You've missed me, I see. Well, I went up to northern Michigan for a bit of shooting. Or was it fishing, or was it even Michigan?" He smiled pleasantly as he beckoned to a waiter. "A little business transaction called me back. A deal that came through quite handsomely." He lowered his voice. "No doubt you read about it in the papers." And, with a little bow, "Let me thank you for your promptness in our little deal."

When the waiter had brought my steak and gone, Riley started in again.

"It's like this, Race." He lit up an expensive cigar. "I like to look after my friends. There's a man now, an upright, wealthy, and distinguished gentleman who could use your services. Worked hard, you know, and played a bit too hard. A doctor has kept his body in good shape, but even a psychiatrist can't help his mental condition. You and I can—at a handsome figure."

I looked at him. "And I'm to buy back the letters. I don't like blackmail."

His sharp eyes appraised me. "If I didn't expect to live to a ripe old age, I'd manage you, Race," he said. "Say twenty per cent, and I'd be a millionaire in a couple of years. I don't object to your swaggering in and out of places daring guys to take a shot at you, but I'd see that you got big money for each swagger—plenty of swag! I'll bet you didn't drag down what I got in our little deal."

"I didn't," I told him. "And I wouldn't have wanted to drag down what you would have got that night if we'd been alone. . . . What's the trouble at the bar?"

Riley was out of his seat at once. If there was anything he could cash in on, he wanted to have that nose of his in it first. While others were digesting what had happened, Riley would be at a phone to see what was in it for him. When I reached the door, I saw him disappearing out the side entrance.

SMALL knots of men were talking. Other little knots were breaking up and leaving the place. Then I heard an excited guy blubbering what the commotion was all about.

"I saw it, I tell you! The car came down the street right behind the big Caddie. They poured tons of lead into it. The Caddie hit a pole but didn't turn over. And of all things, a police car shot after that black Packard and dumped it over at the next corner. But she was dead. Her face shot away almost. Conley of the *News* was there. Got pictures."

Things were sort of swimming. I don't think I heard someone asking questions, but I heard the little guy answer them.

"Sure, it was the financier's daughter, Martha Logan. There were cops in her car with her, going to the opera, too."

For the first time in my life my stomach went back on me. I went into the men's room and was violently sick. I must have thought a lot of that girl. And what I thought of Nelson! A sitting duck—a trial ballon to see if things were all right! Harvey Rath. All a plant to get the girl out in the open. A dead man planted to kill a live girl!

Those thoughts came later. At the time, only words were going through my head: Martha Logan's face shot half away. Conley of the *News* had pictures. Cops in the car. Following the car. The killers turned over. Martha Logan.

I had the boy bring me three whisky sours before I got one to stay down. I gave him a five-dollar bill and told him to keep the change, then smacked him such a wallop with my open hand that

he sat down on the floor. Why did I smack him? He'd started to tell me the story of the shooting because he thought I'd been out of the café so long I handn't heard. I slapped him down and went out onto the sidewalk.

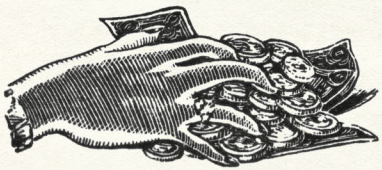
An extra was on the street by now. I got a copy, walked into a strange dump, and read it. Not a thing new. It seemed everyone had been killed until you read the big print over again. And there was nothing but big print. Only one thing seemed to be certain—that

FINANCIER'S DAUGHTER DIES IN CAR AS POLICE BATTLE THUGS

So that was the end. I'd go out and get gloriously drunk.

That wasn't my usual line. Too many people want my hide, and if I were caught staggering or caught reaching slowly for a gun, it would be my last drunk.

Anyway, the stuff went down bad, so I spent my time walking up and down side streets. I didn't want to hear any



ALL IN THE FAMILY

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LIFE plays tricks like this. Albert A. Drigges, 22, Cincinnati, Ohio, was suspected of stealing $8,000 and some securities from the trunk of his deceased friend, John Whaleson, while relatives were burying Whaleson.

Later, Drigges was arrested for the theft. Then in walked an attorney with a will left by Whaleson. The will left to Drigges the money he had stolen and the house he had broken into to get it.

Police hurriedly scanned the state laws in an attempt to hold Drigges on a charge, but failed to come up with anything. They turned him loose.

Police dug up $1,900 that was hidden in scattered places in a park. Drigges, who hid the rest of the money under rocks nearby, isn't sure he can find all of it—without police help, which he isn't likely to get!

—Lew York

was that Martha Logan was dead. Cops had been riding in the car with her, and another police car was following along behind. But you couldn't tell from the newspaper story whether the police car was there by accident or design.

I knew that it had been planted. And Martha had hardly left her house before the gunfire had broken loose. Two machine guns had peppered the Logan's big Cadillac.

If the *News* had pictures, they would be in a later edition, so I didn't buy it. Martha Logan's picture covered what part of the front page was free from black print. The black print read:

more details. I simply walked. Not thinking; only walking.

Finally I shrugged and headed for home. After all, it wasn't as though I'd had a client shot from under me. She was a girl I had seen only one night. Ten to one I'd never have seen her again, anyway. I'd go home, sleep it off. If I could sleep.

I have a nice apartment. Nice guys work there. It wasn't yet twelve o'clock. The doorman was still on the job. He was just about to go off duty. He looked at me, shook his head.

"Bad business," he said.

I nodded and walked back to the

automatic elevators and took myself upstairs. I shoved my key in the lock, pushed the door and got no results. So Jerry had heard, hadn't gone home yet, and was guessing how things would be. Jerry was like a dog. He knew if things weren't right, if they weren't going to be right.

I GAVE the buzzer a couple of shorts and one long and got action. Not that I heard his feet. The walls and the door are too thick for that. I like my joint built well. I like quiet for myself and like quiet for the other tenants if I intend to be noisy.

The bolt clicked off, the door opened the length of the chain.

"Okay, Boss," Jerry said. "Okay."

I remembered my instructions in case I ever walked up to my door with a gun in my back.

"Hunkery dorey," I told him. Sounds silly—but you don't live like I do.

"I know," I told him when he let me in. "You've been reading the papers."

He grinned. "I've been listening to the radio and I'm—"

"I don't want to hear anything about it," I cut in and walked past him into the living room.

He was saying something about a visitor when I turned, half facing him, half facing the bedroom door that was slowly opening.

When it opened wide, I was knocked into a tailspin. If you had put a hand grenade into my mitt and told me it was an apple, and asked me to take a bite and I did, I couldn't have been more surprised.

Standing in that doorway was Martha Logan, or a reasonable fascimile thereof. And me? I stood there with my mouth open.

"Boy," Jerry was saying, "like a play, isn't it?"

The girl ran over and took both my hands. She was real, all right, and her hands were little and soft; and all that stuff on the radio about smooth, soft hands that had sounded like hooey was suddenly true.

"I—I thought—" I said and let it go at that.

"I know," she said. "You thought I was dead. But didn't you hear? It was on the radio after—after what happened."

"Sure," Jerry chimed in. "I tried to tell you, Boss. There was another girl in that car. But it isn't expalined yet how she got there. Miss Logan, here, come in and wanted to wait for you, and I seen the society page you folded to—"

"That's enough, Jerry," I told him. "Beat it into the kitchen. Close the door and don't try to listen."

Jerry went, and and I turned to the girl.

"You shouldn't have come here. Don't you know you're in danger?"

"That isn't like the Race Williams I've been hearing about—from Norman, of course. They don't know I'm here, Race. No one can know. If they wanted to kill me, they think I'm dead. I slipped out. Even the servants watched the other girl go. I climbed out the window. How terrible! How terrible! I don't care what she was paid, I didn't want her to *die* for me! I came to engage you—to have you take me off some place." She stepped back and looked at me. Her smile was something. "Why, Race Williams," she said, "I believe you are really glad to see me!"

I put my hands on her shoulders and shook her up a bit. Like she was a kid. I was glad and relieved and even my stomach felt better.

"I was never more glad to see anyone in my life," I told her and meant it. "But still you shouldn't have come."

"I had to. I couldn't be cooped up there any longer. They hired this girl, Race—maybe a not too nice girl, for her face was hard—but she didn't want to die. They wanted to take her out before that man Rath was found, but I wouldn't let them. Then when it seemed all over, they did take her tonight, and she was killed. I feel to blame."

"You needn't," I said. "How much did they tell you? The police, I mean?"

"They tried to tell me very little, but

I guessed the truth. I had to look at pictures—nothing but pictures. They wanted to know if I kept a diary, but I didn't have one. I had a date book, and they went back over everything." And when I would have questioned her, she said quickly. "Don't, Race—don't. I've thought and thought and thought. I've never seen a murder committed, never been near any place where a murder was committed. It's all a horrible mistake!"

CHAPTER IX

The Regular Routine

JUST as if I believed Martha Logan, I nodded, but I knew it wasn't any mistake. I went down the hall and put the chain on the door. I tried all the windows, but Jerry had locked them.

"You can't stay here," I said to the girl, "and on the level, I'm afraid to take you out alone."

"But I won't go back. I can't stand it! If I get up in the night, there's a rap on the door and a policeman wants to know, 'Are you all right, miss?'"

"Look." I was thinking it over. "I don't like running away. You are too well-known. The safest place for you is home with the cops."

"Race—" she came close to me—"my place is in the hospital, but if that may endanger the patients, I won't go. I saw the truth of that when that understanding Sergeant O'Rourke spoke to me."

The phone rang. I picked it up. I didn't recognize the voice at first, then I knew it was Bill Cruthers.

"You wanted information, Race," he said, and his voice was hard, determined. "I'll give it to you tonight. I want to come around and see you now."

"How much do you know?" I asked.

"Enough to give you a chance to burn this fiend down. And you are the one to do it. Can I get into your apartment without being seen by anyone—anyone, understand? I'm a block away."

I hesitated, then gave him the dope. "The rear door. Jerry, my boy, will have it open." When he objected strenuously, I told him, "It's pitch dark. Jerry will stand there with his back to you, and you can slip into the elevator."

I told him how to reach that door.

Then he began to holler about Jerry. Being seen might mean his life. Girls had been tortured and had talked, and so would Jerry. I saw his point of view and explained how Jerry simply stood downstairs by the automatic elevator that the superintendent had dropped into the basement for my private use. Jerry stood by the door so clients wouldn't make a mistake—his back to my visitors.

"No worry, Bill," I told him. "I've worked it a long time. A hundred guys have come in that way. Big shots in the rackets. Little punks. Millionaire playboys. A couple of society women even, to say nothing of a well-known broker. They didn't want to be seen by anyone but me, either. They never were."

After a pause he said, "Your word, Race, that this Jerry won't see my face or body?"

"My word," I told him, and that word meant something in the underworld. "Just run the car up to the seventh floor. I'll be watching for you."

"Ten minutes," he said. "Exactly."

I was puzzled. Why would Bill Cruthers risk his life to give me a break?

"This may be the big moment," I told Martha Logan. "A lad is coming up to empty his chest." And then, offhand, "This girl who took your place in the car—what did she look like?"

"Oh, about my build and size. And my carriage and features, that inspector said. Feather Falon they called her. . . . What's the matter, Race?"

"Nothing," I said after I rocked back on my toes again.

I knew now why Nelson had been in the Bright Spot the other night. This case was a series of jolts. I knew now why Bill Cruthers was coming over to spill it all. Feather Falon! The girl he was going to marry. The girl he was

going to star. The girl he was going to build up and—

HAD Bill Cruthers known the truth of these murders for some time? He must have had something to go on. But he wouldn't have talked before. After all, he was of the night. Those of the night who talked, died. Now, Cruthers would even chance that. He must have thought a lot of the Falon girl.

I dragged Jerry out of the kitchen and gave him his instructions.

"Usual thing," he said. "No peeking even a little bit?"

"Not even a little bit, Jerry." I was deadly serious. Bill Cruthers was a swell guy, but anyone knew he wasn't a lad to fool with. "We play this always on the level."

After Jerry had gone, I said, "Listen, Martha. I want you to go in that bedroom. I'll lock the door, and you stay there until I tell you to come out. A visitor—maybe a break on the case."

She went without a word. There was no fire escape on that window. I was seven floors up, so she was in no danger from intruders. Then I went to the front door, held it open slightly, and dropped my gun into my right hand.

Bill came quickly, his coat collar turned up, his fedora pulled well down over his face. He was breathing heavily when I let him in, closed the door, put on the chain.

I was seeing a new Bill Cruthers—nothing calm and suave about him now.

"You know why I came," he said and preceded me into the living room.

"Yes," I said. "Feather. Feather Falon. You didn't know she took the job?"

"I never suspected. That devil Nelson!"

He flopped into a chair, got up almost at once, walked to the kitchen, the bathroom, down the hall, tried the closet door, looked inside. All slowly and deliberately. Then he went to the bedroom door, tried the knob, turned and looked at me.

"Your word of honor, Race, that there is no one in the apartment."

I hesitated. He swung on me almost viciously.

"Okay, Bill," I told him. "I have the key. It's a—well a woman."

"I see." He seemed relieved. "All right, Race. I'm not going to waste time. Pick up that telephone book. I'm giving you the name, the telephone number—and the truth."

I started to turn to the phone book, my back half to Cruthers.

Something was wrong. Something was missing from the picture. I swung back, and my gun was in my hand. It didn't seem to make sense. But my hand was steady, and my eyes were straight, and my finger was on the trigger.

I couldn't have shot him to death like that. So he had time to aim and fire and put me out smack through the head if he had waited a second longer.

He must have seen my right hand jerk up under my left armpit as I swung. And he was afraid to wait. He fired as he stood, and it took me high in the chest, spun me around a fraction of a second faster than I would have made it.

No, I didn't have the same chance Bill Cruthers had. The cards were dealt, and he held all the aces. I saw his body as I staggered back and I pumped lead into it. He had lifted his gun for my head. But my head wasn't there. It wasn't there because his shot in my chest had knocked me down and taken my head out of the picture. His bullet cracked against the wall, and I heard the picture crash and I remembered in a dull sort of way that it had cost me seven dollars and fifty cents—and wasn't worth it.

I didn't understand it all when the shooting ended. I simply knew that I was on my feet again and that Cruthers wasn't. He was on his knees and holding his stomach and was bent over like the dying gladiator, only not looking so noble about it.

My vision wasn't too good but it was clearing now, and I heard a woman screaming. Not an hysterical girl pound-

ing on the door. A woman had her head out of a window some place and was shouting into the night.

Cruthers wasn't taking it too well. But who would, full of lead? I leaned down and took his gun from his hand. He rolled slightly and turned his agonized face up at me. Then he went all the way over and stretched himself out on the floor. It was almost too theatrical to be real—but it was real, terribly real. He was unconscious now, and his face wasn't agonized. It looked sort of drawn, but his eyes were closed, and he was white.

NO SOUND from the bedroom. I leaned down and gave Cruthers a quick search. No other gun. But there was a knife. It might have been the knife that—

I jerked erect, felt the sharp pain up by my shoulder. I got my hand in my pocket and went to the bedroom door. My stomach was bad again. But not from the shot. Things were too quiet behind the door. I hoped she hadn't fainted, but she didn't seem the fainting kind. Could she have jumped from the window? But she wouldn't be the jumping kind either.

I swung open the door, and she stood by the open window, holding her throat.

"It's you—you—" she said. "Then I shouldn't have screamed, but I thought that—"

"Stay here," I told her. "I've got to use the phone."

Then I was buzzing around, trying to locate O'Rourke and did get his friend, Detective Kahn. I got my message through, too.

By that time people were pounding at the door. I started toward it. Martha stopped me. Her voice was sort of uncertain, then it wasn't. She was looking straight down at Bill Cruthers. He opened his eyes.

"I know that man," she said. "I saw him. Why, we flashed the searchlight from the boat right on his face. He was kneeling on the dock, or just getting up from it, or something. I remember asking him what he was doing on the dock. It was Dorothy Briggs's boat."

"I was right," Cruthers groaned. "I knew one of them would remember, and it *would* be the last one." Then he passed out again.

When I swung open the apartment door, a tenant who had wanted in jumped back ten feet, and several others crowded behind him made for the stairs. Funny how people will demand entrance and then wish they hadn't.

The cops came, all right—lots of them. I came around and hollered about Jerry. They wouldn't let me out, but they found him in the elevator and brought him in.

"What a skull the kid must have," the doctor said in admiration. "The wallop he took with a gun, I think, should have cracked it like an egg shell. But he'll be all right."

Jerry opened his eyes and winked once at me.

"The regular routine," he said. "You killed the guy, I hope."

"He killed him, all right," said the doctor. "Sort of on the installment plan, but he won't last another twelve hours."

CHAPTER X

End of a Love Life

LEAD I had taken had gone in high up in my chest and far over to the left side and didn't give me much trouble. I was at the hospital when Bill Cruthers made his ante-mortem statement. He was willing to talk, insisted only that I should be there.

Cruthers said it started in Pittsburgh when he was little more than a kid. A few drinks, kidding around at a dance hall with a girl because some tough guy didn't like it, a street fight later, his grabbing the gun from the thug's hand. Cruthers killed him.

"I'd have got a few years at the most," he said, "but I was young and I was scared, and Harvey Rath took care of

me. That was when he first put the hooks into me.

"And here's something no one knew. Harvey Rath had a daughter who lived in Pittsburgh. He kept her out of the picture entirely. She was a devil, all right. Don't ask me how I knew about her—I married her. And I had to visit her once a month, too.

"Why? Well, Rath said to me some ten years back when I was beginning to make the night clubs pay—his clubs, 'I've treated you like a son, Bill, and now I'm going to make you really my son. I'm going to give you my daughter.' He put those ratlike eyes on me then. 'I could turn you in for murder, but you're smart—my child loves you. Shall we say the wedding will take place on Saturday?'

"There wasn't a decent thing about that she-devil, except that she thought I was heaven's gift to this earth. She was the only thing in the world Rath cared about, the only person he really trusted. There was money in those night spots, and none but his daughter and I knew he had a hand in it. I ran everything, and he took the money. No matter how much he made he lived in the same dirty little room alone back of the pawnshop, and some place there was that yellow folder in which he kept everything about me, everything about others. Most people thought it was a book, but it was a folder. He had fenced more stuff than any man in the city. Then when the night club business wasn't too good he began to shake down the boys themselves. When he fenced things, he knew if murder went with it."

Cruthers did a bit of coughing but refused a drink of water. He seemed anxious to spill it all.

"So Rath started to run roughshod over the boys. Then he went too far. He got the Malone brothers to knock over a rival fence in the Bronx with the promise of big money, but paid them nothing —simply threatened them with what he knew about them. He had affidavits and all. Both the Malone boys were hard, but it worked once. Rath tried it a second time, and there are still a couple of bullet holes in his bed to show how much they disliked it.

"He sent the information about them to the police, even planned to have them at a certain spot so the cops could pick them up—all anonymous. But the Malones sensed the trap, got from under, and disappeared. After that Rath was nearly killed twice. He had no threats to hold over their heads now. They were fugitives from the electric chair, and Rath believed—and he was right—that their one mission in life was to get him. That's why he disappeared—hiding until they were caught by the police or he could have them traced. I was to help him." With a grimace that was meant for a smile, he added, "I didn't."

"That was over two years ago. Rath hid out in Pittsburgh. Then he didn't like the way I treated his daughter. Treat her? It was a wonder I didn't crush her skull long ago. Then I met Feather. After that there was one girl only for me—Feather Falon."

"Then you didn't plant her on the cops—on Nelson?" I came in quick with that one.

"No!" he almost shouted the words. "They killed her! On my orders and with the money I paid them and with the threat I pretended came from Harvey Rath. I arranged it all on the phone, but I thought it was the Logan girl."

CRUTHERS seemed to have difficulty in breathing. The doctor shook his head at Nelson.

"We're not interested in your love life, Cruthers," Nelson said brutally. "Why did you kill those three girls?"

"My wife stole that hidden yellow folder from her father and gave it to me," Cruthers went on slowly. "It helped me to get men to bring those girls to me—they thought they were doing it for Harvey Rath. They never saw me. Those girls had seen me up in Maine on a dock at Moosehead Lake. They were coming from some hospital dance, but I thought they had all reached the dock and gone when a big boat dis-

sembarked dozens of them twenty-five minutes earlier. Four girls came in the speed boat later. I couldn't see their faces, but they could see me. Their spotlight lit right on my face. "

"What were you doing?" O'Rourke asked.

"Sinking my wife. I drove her up to Maine, strangled her in the car, and sank her by the dock. No one knew Rath had a daughter. No one knew I had a wife. I don't know how Williams finally suspected. I was pretty clever."

"Very smart," I cut in. "But what made you kill the girls? What made you think they'd know you again, and would suspect you of anything?"

Cruthers gave an odd little gurgling laugh that brought the doctor half erect. Cruthers said:

"I haven't any conscience and I never believed in this subconscious mind business. But it exists. One killing—a gun battle years back, a short stretch would have been all I got—and it all came from that. Sissy Pierson was the first. O'Hara introduced me to her one night, and she tried to remember where she had met me. I knew where and knew she would, too, later. I got a couple of guys to knock over O'Hara in case she had told him anything.

"I went to see Sissy. She swore up and down she knew only one of the girls on the dock that night—and as soon as I mentioned the dock, she knew where she had seen me. I taped her mouth to stop her screaming and put her through the works for more information. I had to kill her.

"The second girl—not too difficult. I got a couple of boys to snatch her and bring her to the loft. They never saw me. And she remembered the name of only one other in the boat! I got that other later with a simple telephone call. The last name came up. Logan's daughter.

"You know the rest. Somehow Logan was tipped off, and Williams killed the guy who had the girl in Grand Central Station. I was almost free—and the police all around the house, and time running short."

"What do you mean short?" I asked.

"The ice would be breaking up in Moosehead Lake. They'd find the body. It would be spread all over the papers. The police were questioning society girls, and the Logan girl might see me and remember. She wouldn't if there was no body. That's that subconscious mind you read about."

"But why would they find the body?" I asked. "You weighted it down, must have picked a deep spot."

"Deep—yes, good and deep, and plenty of weight. But don't you read the papers about Maine? The place belonged to the father of the Ames girl. He sold it for a quarry, no less, wanted deep water. They were going to dredge when the ice broke up. They'd find the body."

"How did you know that Martha Logan was at my place?" Me again.

"I saw her leave her house. I thought she was a maid. She slipped out a window. I could have killed her then—easy. But I thought she was dead in the car. When I learned different, I guessed where she would go, but I made sure she was at your apartment by asking for your word that no one was there. I wouldn't have tried to kill you if you hadn't admitted a woman was there.

"I had intended to toss Rath's body into the picture after the Logan girl was dead so all the blame could rest on him. But with half the cops in the city guarding Martha Logan I had to act. I hoped to convince them that the show was over by dumping Rath into the street. But the cops were still timid and hired Feather Falon to ride in the death car. Feather—well, she gave me my chance to see you, Williams. It would seem natural that I'd talk."

BILL CRUTHERS stopped then, and his pain was apparent, his face contorted. It was to me he spoke now, or rather, gasped.

"I planned it all, Race—carefully. I don't know how I could have slipped up. I didn't even take a chance that Jerry

didn't take a look at visitors. I cracked him because I wanted to be sure he didn't get a look at me. How could you have suspected—and turned shooting like that? How—did you know it was—me?"

Nelson looked at me then. O'Rourke too. I heard Logan breathing heavily from where he stood against the closed door. I almost blurted it out. But I didn't.

The doctor looked up at me, shrugged white-coated shoulders which said quite plainly, "It won't be long now."

Cruthers half lifted a hand. There was a plea in the gesture, in his eyes, in his voice.

"I've known you a long time, Race. We—you always liked me. I'm going out. I want to know. I got to know. It will help me go easier."

"Hurry, sir," the doctor said, and when I didn't speak: "He went through torment last night. Five shots in his stomach. If you can ease things, do it in the name of humanity."

I guess I laughed, but I didn't feel like laughing. I was thinking of the girls who had died, and how they had died—not the attempt to kill me. I was thinking, too, of the load of lead he had had dumped into the machine and which was meant for Martha Logan.

"Ease things?" I shot the words at them. "Let the dirty rat go out with the lead in his insides." And when Cruthers made an agonized twist, I growled, "So you don't like it now. All right—take this with you. You were a fool. I knew it. It all fitted. It couldn't be anyone, but you. You rotten—"

He cried out once, and died. Logan took off his hat. O'Rourke hesitated, put up his hand, dropped it, raised it again and lifting his hat off, held it at his side. Nelson and I stood looking down. Nelson maybe because he didn't know any better. Me—well, I had had a lot of respect for Cruthers living, because I hadn't known any better. But I knew better now, and I didn't have any respect for him dead. My hat stayed on.

The doctor tossed a sheet over Cruthers' head. We turned and left the room. Nelson wanted to know all I knew. Logan wanted to pay. He did, and plenty. I took the check and I told Nelson that if he was half a cop, he would have known the answers long ago. With a wink at O'Rourke I invited him up to my place for a drink.

"It was mighty clever work, Race," said O'Rourke over his whisky—the third, by the way. "The newspapers will get the whole story. I understand Miss Logan is making a hero out of you, so any hush-hush is off the books. Listen, Race, I always knew you had a head, but I never thought you'd bother to use it. Cruthers made a mistake some place, and you caught on. We boys either didn't recognize it or didn't have your chance to see it."

"Yes," I said, "he made a mistake. And my solution and how and when I solved the crime is strictly off the record—and for your ears alone."

"Not for the papers?"

"Not unless I can think up a better story than the truth. I'm still a man of action, O'Rourke."

"Yes, I know." O'Rourke nodded. "You turned your back and gave him a chance to use his gun, and he damn near killed you. What was his first mistake?"

"He made only one," I told O'Rourke. "Otherwise he could have walked in here, shot me through the back of the head and killed me, then shot the girl dead, walked upstairs, straddled a few low walls from roof to roof, and have been as free as the air."

"Yes, I know that. Come on."

"Well," I said, "it was Jerry. You heard Cruthers say that he didn't quite swallow that stuff about Jerry not seeing visitors. He should have believed it because it's true. Jerry does leave the rear door open and lean against the elevator my secret visitors are to enter. It's hard enough to get people to trust me without asking them to trust him. Cruthers thought Jerry might watch, give me some signal. So he flattened him. And that, O'Rourke, was my signal."

"How?" O'Rourke stiffened.

I laughed a little at his puzzlement. "We have a routine," I said. "When the client is in the elevator, Jerry goes out and sees that our meal ticket wasn't shadowed. If things are right, he gives me a buzz. It's a protection I furnish my clients. If Jerry doesn't telephone me, I know that things are all wrong. Well, he didn't buzz. Cruthers had made his one mistake."

"Yet you turned your back and went for the phone book."

"Sure." I grinned. "I never suspected Cruthers. It never entered my head until he put it there. He said for me to take a look at the telephone book. That was to get my back to him. I wasn't suspicious. I was facing him with my hands at my sides. He had every chance to draw and kill me. But he was too careful, had planned things too well. Also, he was a bit afraid of that shooting hand of mine. I turned to the book, saw the phone, missed Jerry's ring—and it was that subconscious stuff that Cruthers was talking about. If Cruthers had waited a breath of time, he could have shot me through the head. I wasn't shooting as I swung, but he thought the swing meant death to him." I poured O'Rourke another drink and said, "And it did."

O'ROURKE downed the drink.

"Sometimes," I told him, "one hunk of lead is worth all the thought in the world. You never saw a fighter think himself out of one of Joe Louis's fights. Cruthers had a sight better head than I have, but I'll be using what I got a lot longer."

"I'll be hanged," said O'Rourke.

Then the phone rang.

"I'll be hanged," said O'Rourke again, when I put the phone down and told him I'd have to give him the air, for I was having lunch with society—Martha Logan herself.

"I'm paying for the lunch, too," I told O'Rourke, "but she says she's needed so badly at the hospital she can only give me forty-five minutes. Blamed if I don't like that girl!" ● ● ●

Johnson came at me then, the rock held high. . . .

THE VIOLIN of CARITO

By RAY CUMMINGS

Through the wind and rain it wailed—
"Find my murderer! Find my murderer!"

OLD GENNARO Rossi fingered the violin lovingly.

"Yes," he said, "it is an instrument of the greatest interest. An instrument with a history and a tradition, most queer."

"You've owned it a long time, Maestro?" I said.

He shook his great mane of white, shaggy hair.

"No. It came to me from my young protégé, Carito, who died. My pupil of whom I would have made a great virtuoso. That was a sad day for me, gentlemen."

"I remember him," George Johnson, the music publisher remarked. "A young gypsy boy, wasn't he? Handsome young fellow. Died about a year ago?"

"A year ago tomorrow night, gentle-

men," Rossi said. "A dark night, like tonight. But I remember that it was raining. A rain that was beating down on his dead face when at dawn we found him in the dell where he had slipped and fallen from the little height beside it. Not far from my house here."

The old maestro was staring at the violin in his hands as though he were seeing not the dark mahogany of the instrument blackening with the patina of its age, but the dead white face of the boy he had loved. His voice had fallen, until now he seemed to be talking only to himself.

"That rain was like Chopin's *Raindrop Prelude,*" he muttered. "Chopin knew the horror you feel when you see the rain dropping on the dead face of someone you love. I think Carito would like me to play the 'Raindrop.' It is very beautiful on his violin."

There were four of us here in the music studio of old Gennaro Rossi. I am John Stanley. I fancy myself as a violinist, but I had done some composing and perhaps showed more talent in that direction. Chance had led me to take a small summer cottage in this artists' colony of Woodmere. I had just arrived today, and tonight the old maestro—from whom I was to take lessons—had invited me to his home to meet some of his neighbors.

There were two of them here now. George Johnson was a big, handsome blond fellow. Rather the businessman type than an artist. A man in his thirties, he was a music publisher, who specialized in violin music. I was thinking now that possibly I might persuade him to publish some of my compositions.

The other guest was Juan Torigo, one of Rossi's pupils. He seemed a few years older than myself. He was short, heavy-set, with a swarthy Latin face, small black mustache, and black hair that was clipped so close over his forehead it stood up like the bristles of a brush.

Of us all, old Gennaro Rossi undoubtedly was the dominant figure. He was a man in his seventies now, but still erect despite his frailness. His patrician face was heavily lined, smooth-shaven, with bushy white eyebrows beneath which his dark eyes smouldered. His head was leonine, seemingly too large for his body because of his mass of white hair.

In his day, thirty years ago, Gennaro Rossi had been a great violin virtuoso. He was retired now, maestro to a few selected pupils whom he had gathered here about him in Woodmere. Most certainly I counted myself fortunate in having been accepted by him. He was sitting now—clad in black trousers, slippers, white blouse open at his stringy throat, and his long black tie hanging loose—with the violin of Carito on his lap.

His grand piano, littered with scores and sheet music, was beside him. The big room, here in his rambling old bungalow, was dim with just a single lamp on the piano so that the shadows were heavy around us. Rossi was reaching for the violin bow on the piano, when abruptly there was a sound behind us.

I TURNED. In the dark studio doorway, draped by a heavy velour portiere, a woman was standing now. It was Mrs. Green, Rossi's housekeeper. She was a big, dour-looking, middle-aged female, almost masculine with angular ruggedness. How long she had been standing there in the doorway listening to us, I had no idea. Her movement had attracted our attention, and as we turned she said:

"You will have refreshments served now, Maestro?"

The old man laid down the violin bow.

"Why yes, Martha," he agreed. "Let us have sandwiches and vino. A very good idea."

Her blank, sour-visaged gaze inscrutably swept us as she nodded and withdrew.

"Vino from the sunny slopes of Palermo," old Rossi was saying. He was smiling now as though to throw off the morbid thoughts of Carito which had been obsessing him. "Palermo is so beautiful. As you know, I am Siciliano, gentleman."

"No more beautiful than my Andalusia," Juan Torigo said, smiling. "But your Italy did produce the best violins. I have to admit that, Maestro." He gestured. "That one of Carito's. You call it a high-arch violin. With a most soft mellow tone, doubtless. An Amati perhaps, from old Cremona?"

"It is unlabeled," the old man said. His fingers again were caressing it. "There is no one now who will ever know its maker."

"You said it has a history—a tradition mos' queer," Torigo persisted. "Tell us, Maestro."

We sat silently listening as the old man told us of the instrument's strange tradition. The boy, Carito, came of a gypsy family who had emigrated here from Hungary. The violin had been in the family for generations. Carito's father, his grandfather, and others behind them had all played it, so that it had become one of them. Almost a living thing.

"A strange people," old Rossi was saying. "Magyars from the dark, forested mountains of Bohemia. A superstitious people, you might say. But the soul of music is in them. And this violin so beloved by them with its haunting, crying voice like a thing that is alive."

Old Rossi went on to say that there had been times when this old violin mysteriously had given voice to music, unaided by any human player. A haunting, crying little Magyar melody. Carito's grandfather had told the tale that his father had told him. A girl of the family, foolishly in love, had been tempted to run away with a man unworthy of her—a man of an unworthy gypsy tribe from the distant hills beyond the Black Forest.

As she made ready that stormy night to slip away, the violin which she and all her kin so loved, had cried out in protest that little throbbing melody. When the girl heard that, she gave up her plans.

"The violin saved her," old Rossi was saying earnestly. "And Carito said his grandfather told him that was only one of several times it had performed such a service. It was as though at a crisis in the lives of those humans who loved it, something was given this old instrument, some power to be of service."

The maestro's sensitive fingers were trailing over the body of the violin as he spoke. A touch like a caress.

"A violin is a strange instrument, gentlemen," he continued. "Responsive. Who shall say but that this instrument has not been given some power that none of us can understand? I cannot actually believe the thing myself. Still—"

He was gently smiling, but his eyes were somber as he stared down at the violin. A gaze faraway, as though now he were trying to see back into those dark forests where the gypsies roamed in the mountains of Bohemia.

"Of course, I do not believe it," he added softly. "And yet, I wonder."

In his hands the old violin lay inert. A thing alive, but quiescent now. A violin that in times of stress, could play itself? Its bow rising up and trailing the strings, so that they would physically vibrate? Absurd. I knew old Rossi had not meant that.

FOR that moment we were all silent, awed. Then young Juan Torigo spoke. "Well, this is most queer, he said skeptically.

Presently the housekeeper was serving us with the sandwiches and wine.

"That violin of Carito's," George Johnson resumed. "Is it valuable? I owned a Stradivarius once. You remember it, Maestro. The one that was stolen from me so that all I got was the twenty-two thousand insurance, which fortunately I had on it. That set me up in my publishing business, as it happened. You should have this violin insured, Signor Rossi, and not take the chance of having it stolen."

"It's value is only to those who love it," Rossi said gently. "There is no violin, unlabeled, having no proof of a famous maker, that has any great value. A value it had to Carito, and now to me."

It was raining outside now—a dark, windless night with the rain dropping in slow, sodden rhythm on the bungalow roof. On a night like this, a year ago,

the boy Carito had died. My gaze drifted to the old violin. Rossi had placed it on a chair beside him. Responsive old instrument. Was something within it now quivering with the sorrow of Carito's death?

Then the maestro was telling us more of his young protégé. Carito had been an orphan, adopted by Rossi. A handsome, romantic boy of nineteen. Swarthy with the blood of the gypsies, with deep, dark eyes and wavy black hair. Carito had gone out in the night, evidently slipped from the rocky path at the edge of a brink, and fallen some twenty feet into the mossy dell. His head had struck a rock so that he had died, doubtless almost instantly.

"But why was he wandering out there at night?" George Johnson asked. "Out to meet a girl perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Rossi agreed. He leaned toward us, more serious than ever. "I remember a queer thing he said to me that evening. I remember he seemed disturbed. He whispered to me hurriedly that he had something to tell me. Then we were interrupted, and all he said was, 'Where the hearts are entwined I want to tell you—' "

There was a silence as the old man ceased speaking. A silence broken only by the uneven drip of the rain outside. I found myself tense, with my heart beating faster. To me it was as though there was something mysterious, momentous.

"That is all he said?" Juan Torigo murmured. He, too, was tense.

"He was going to tell you something about his girl," Johnson suggested. "His love and hers. You suppose it was that?"

"Maybe," Rossi said. "I do not know. The next time I saw him he was lying dead with the rain beating on his face. Like tonight."

My thoughts went out into the dark night outside the studio here. There were perhaps a score or more little bungalows set here in this deeply-wooded, hilly, rocky area. This afternoon I remembered having seen the little dell into which Carito had fallen from the path that went along the twenty-foot brink. A little seat was up there between two trees, like an old trysting place where a romantic boy well might go to meet a girl.

The old maestro had picked up the violin again.

"I will play to you that little melody of Carito's family," he was saying. "It lives in this violin. To me, it is the boy himself. Something of him is still living here."

HE RAISED the bow and with the violin beneath his chin, softly began to play Carito's melody. Just a fragment of the song's minor cadences. Weird little fragments, with the soft, mellow voice of the high-arch violin making it seem almost like the voice of one who was sobbing. It died away, and suddenly Juan Torigo exclaimed:

"That's what I heard last night!" The young Spaniard gazed at us, excited, awed. "It is! I remember it clearly now. I woke up and that's what I was hearing! It came from out under the trees, beyond my house."

"You were playing it here, last night, Maestro?" I suggested.

Old Rossi shook his head.

"It would hardly carry down to my house, from here," Torigo commented. "It seemed to come from the direction of the dell. I think that there was another night also that I heard it. I didn't know what it was, of course, or that it was this violin. But now—"

We could only blankly stare at each other.

"Anyway, to me, that little tune always was Carito," old Rossi murmured. "It is all of him that is left now. And he died, with the rain beating on his face. Like this."

He drew the bow again across the strings and began to play Chopin's *Raindrop Prelude*. Its sweet, plaintive opening melody throbbed through the studio. It was a melody of love, plaintive perhaps with the premonition of coming tragedy. To me it has always seemed like that. And then the rain—and the tragedy. That slow reiterated G-sharp, like raindrops slowly falling.

It came now from Carito's violin with a dull, sodden pound. That single reiterated not seemed to mingle wtih the rain outside. Just that one G-sharp, over and over, so hideously pounding. Rain falling on a dead, white face.

Never before had the little Chopin masterpiece affected me so poignantly as now. I was shuddering. Suddenly, young Juan Torigo shoved back his chair with a clatter.

"Maestro, please!" he protested. "Stop it! It is so gruesome now!"

Old Rossi stopped at once. We were all shuddering. And in the doorway behind us the big, dour housekeeper was standing blankly staring at us.

The rain kept on, all that evening. It was still raining when, before midnight, we visitors went home. My little cabin, where I was living alone, was only a hundred yards or so below Rossi's bungalow. I went to sleep, still with the memory of the weird evening there in Rossi's studio.

I awakened in the night with a sudden start and the realization that a little fragment of the Magyar melody was floating in my open window. The song of Carito! The voice of his violin! A mellow, plaintive timbre. The high-arch violin of Carito, undoubtedly.

For a moment, only half awake, I lay listening. The rain outside seemed to have stopped. The cloudy, oppressive night was dankly silent—a silence broken only by that floating cadence of the violin. Was it coming from Rossi's bungalow? Was the old maestro playing now in the middle of the night?

I was hardly aware that I had slipped from my bed and gone to the window, tensely bending over the sill, listening. No, it did not seem to come from Rossi's. Whence, then? Carito's little melody died away, then began again. Was it coming from that patch of trees, out to my left beyond the dark outlines of the maestro's home?

That would be down in the dell, perhaps, down where Carito had been found with the rain beating on his dead face. Was his melody coming from there now? I could not tell. The song seemed to float everywhere, yet nowhere.

I was certain it was no figment of my imagination. I was hearing it with my ears. If I could get closer, I could determine its source. Or would that be like trying to get to the end of a rainbow?

Hastily I had slipped into trousers and shirt, put on a pair of shoes and was outside with the blackness overhead and all around me the rocky broken woods. The music was still audible, still plaintive. Abruptly now, I realized that it was no longer Carito's song, but another, more modern melody.

I ran down a winding little path toward what seemed the source of the music, but as I advanced, somehow it seemed to recede. What was it playing now? I stopped to listen. It was a plaintive theme, sweetly simple. A slow, rambling litle melody with cadences often unresolved. A melody wholly unfamiliar to me.

QUEER that I couldn't identify it. It's name, the name of its composer—they seemed to tremble just beyond my memory. The tune was unpretentious, like a sketch by some modern composer. I was convinced that I knew it well, that I had perhaps in the past played it myself, in my browsing for my own amusement. . . .

"Oh—you, Stanley?" The unexpected voice, almost beside me in the darkness, made me jump. It was Johnson, the music publisher. He was clad in dressing gown and slippers. He gripped me as he murmured, "That music—I heard it down at my place. Carito's violin. Who the devil's playing it, and where's it coming from?"

Together we advanced. To our right the dark outlines of Rossi's bungalow loomed fifty feet back and above us as we followed the path.

"It sounds as though it might be down in the dell," Johnson said, listening intently. "Do you suppose that what old Rossi told us—"

"What's that it's playing?" I whispered, interrupting.

We had stopped by a tree to listen. The queer rambling little melody was persisting.

"I never heard it before," Johnson murmured. "Queer sort of tune."

"Well I know it. I've even played it, but I just can't seem to remember—"

Abruptly the voice of the violin was stilled. Johnson's grip on my arm tightened.

"Look there!" he muttered.

A moving blob was up on the rocks ahead of us. A man's figure! For a second it was outlined in silhouette against the sky. Old Rossi! His thin form, his great shaggy mane of hair, were recognizable. He was only a few feet from the back door of his bungalow. In that same instant he moved toward it and vanished. Had he come out to listen to the music and when it stopped, gone back in again? Or had he come from somewhere else?

The violin did not sound again that night, though until dawn I lay awake in my cabin expecting it, as no doubt the puzzled Johnson was lying awake in his home, also expectant. But there was nothing.

It rained all the next day, and I stayed in my cabin, pondering, puzzling, trying to identify that second melody the violin had played. A slow, rambling, measured rhythm in four-quarter time. A major key, with ramblings into the minor. It echoed now in my head so that I was humming it to help my memory.

Night came. All evening the melancholy rain persisted. Still I could not get that puzzling melody out of my mind. Why had the violin played it? To me, somehow, it seemed a momentous thing. Something important to the dead Carito was hanging now upon my ability to identify that little, threadlike tune.

The tune was from a modern composer, I was sure of it. Someone whose work I must know very well. Those queer, unresolved cadences— MacDowell!

The name leaped into my mind that night, just as I was going to bed. Of course, it was something by MacDowell. I drifted off to sleep, with it still echoing in my mind. It was a melody that well might suggest a little love song in the woods.

MacDowell's "Woodland Sketches" perhaps? Was it one of them? *To a Wild Rose . . . In Autumn . . . By a Meadow Brook?* No, not any of those.

I must have drifted off, still pondering. And then, quite suddenly I knew that I was awake again. The music! It was trembling in the night outside as the soft, mellow timbre of Carito's violin wafted in to me from some leafy distance. This time, I was determined that I would find its source, probe this weird mystery.

The tune I heard now was the song of the Magyars, that same little crying melody of Carito's gypsy family. Then as it throbbed and died away, the violin voice was murmuring, murmuring that other one which had so puzzled me last night. Something by MacDowell. One of his "Woodland Sketches," and more than ever now, I was sure of it.

I was out of my cabin in a minute, creeping forward along the little rocky path. It seemed to have stopped raining, but the dark, motionless tree branches were heavy with moisture, dripping with a sodden patter. Overhead the sky was black with poised, hanging clouds. Surely the music was coming from the dell into which Carito had fallen.

The dell was beside me now, twenty feet down, dark and somber with shadow. Was my fancy tricking me, or was the threadlike quavering little melody actually coming up from those bowered shadows?

IT WAS so eerie, so tremblingly wraithlike that I could not tell. Like a little will-o'-the-wisp, the voice of the music was floating, darting from one place to another.

I stood tense in the darkness, drawn against a tree as I peered and listened. That weird litle violin voice, was it trying to tell me something? A message— to me, to anyone who would listen and

interpret it? I peered at the dark, broken rock clumps, still wet with the rain.

The sodden thickets, the heavy, wet tree leaves were all suspended, motionless with expectancy at what now would happen. Was I the only one out here attracted by the eerie music? It seemed so. Then I thought for a second that I heard a little rustling behind me. But it was my own fancy. Just the stirring of a thicket as moisture fell on it from the overhead branches.

I moved forward again. The melody seemed to well a little louder. Somewhat quaintly, I though, not too sentimentally.

The words popped into my head. The directions for playing, printed on a sheet of music. I remembered them now! Why, of course! *At An Old Trysting Place.* That was the name of this piece! *At An Old Trysting Place,* from the "Woodland Sketches"! I recalled it perfectly now.

I recalled then that here near the path, just off it and close by the brink over the dell, there was a wooden lovers' seat across the V of two trees which grew with roots together. A little trysting place here in the woods. On one of the trees the bark had been carved into the crude design of two hearts intertwined.

Hearts entwined! Why, Carito had used those words to old Rossi the night the gypsy boy died! I recalled what old Rossi had said when Carito came to him, perturbed, with something to tell him. They had been interrupted, so that Carito had only been able to murmur:

"Where the hearts are entwined—I want to tell you—"

Something about the old trysting place which Carito had learned and had had no chance to tell?

The eerie violin voice was still floating through the night with the quaint MacDowell melody as I pushed my way forward and came to the bench between the trees. They were white birch, ghostly in the darkness. I had a small flashlight in my pocket. I took it out, flashed it. Its little circle of illumination lighted the bark of one of the trees where the entwined hearts were carved.

My imagination, of course, yet it seemed then as though the throbbing little violin voice had gone into a crescendo of triumphant eagerness.

Then, at the roots of the trees, under the seat, my light picked out an opening —a place where the tree-base was decayed. It was a foot-wide irregular space. With my heart pounding, I knelt, thrust my hand and arm into the opening. The inside space seemed far larger.

I was lying flat now, with almost the full length of my arm reaching down. My fingers felt something smooth and crinkly. It was an oiled, moisture-proof fabric covering. Something big and hard was inside it—an oblong, rounded thing standing on end in the deep, narrow orifice which the flat stone had covered. I tugged, drew it out, and in a moment had it on the ground beside me with my little flashlight beam on it.

It was a moisture-proof bag, yellow, semitransparent. Within it was a black violin case! In an instant I had it out and opened. A big violin was inside. Not the violin of Carito. This one did not have a high arch. It was a large concert model.

MY HEART raced as I stared at it. This old instrument, obviously the work of one of the great masters, was immensely valuable. Then I raised it up and peered with my light down into one of its F-holes. A Stradivarius! A genuine Stradivarius!

The eerie voice of Carito's violin, somewhere near in the darkness, had gone abruptly into a triumphant throb of the MacDowell melody. Now, abruptly, it died away and was gone, as though its mission were ended and it was satisfied now that I had found the hidden violin.

For that moment I crouched by the lovers' seat, numbed. A genuine Stradivarius hidden here? Absorbed by my racing thoughts, I was only dimly aware of a sound behind me. I had no time to rise up. I turned, saw a blob coming and a man leaping at me with a big chunk of rock in his hand!

The reflection of my flashlight lying on the ground disclosed him. George Johnson! He who had owned a Stradivarius that was insured for twenty-two thousand dollars! A Stradivarius that supposedly had been stolen, so that he had collected the insurance and used it to start his publishing business!

Thoughts are instant things. In that same second, the plunging Johnson tried to crash the rock down on my head, but my upflung arm diverted it so that it missed me and clattered away. Then he was on me. Locked together, fighting with flailing legs and thudding fists, we rolled at the brink.

I am a big fellow, but so was he. There was a moment when I thought we would go over and crash down into the dell. But I fought him back. Then, with a lunge, I had him pinned under me, pounding him. In a frenzy I lifted his head and shoulders up and bashed him down so that his head was hitting the rocks under him. His strength went.

"Don't! Don't kill me!"

I was aware of flashlights around us. Then there were voices and blobs that came running. The near-by neighbors, roused perhaps by the song of the violin of Carito and then by the commotion of my fight with Johnson. And as I lifted him up they gathered in excitement around me. Further back, coming from the back door of his big dark bungalow, I saw the thin figure of old Gennaro Rossi. His gaunt housekeeper was beside him. They came hurrying forward.

Juan Torigo was here, in dressing gown and slippers. He came at me.

"You, Stanley!" he exclaimed. "And Johnson! Stanley, what have you done to him?"

"Done to him?" I roared. "He tried to kill me! There's his supposed-to-be-stolen Stradi. I found it under that tree near the little bench where he's had it hidden." I shook Johnson as he slumped against me, with blood streaming down his face. "It's your Strad, isn't it?

"And you killed Carito," I fumed on. "He found your hidden Strad that night in the rain, and you killed him to silence him. Hit him on the head with a chunk of rock, the way you tried to do to me?" I was cuffing the trembling Johnson.

"All right," he mumbled. "That's it. He—"

"And then you tumbled his body down into the dell, so that it would look as though he had fallen there and crashed his head." I turned to the excited group of men. "He was frightened last night at that weird voice of Carito's violin. And again tonight, so that he came out here to investigate. Perhaps to move his Strad to some other place. He had no chance to do it by daylight today, for he'd have been seen. And he feared tonight that Carito's violin voice would disclose this hiding place! Well, it did!"

They could only stare with awe when I told them what I'd found. . . .

THAT is all there was to the weird mysterious thing of the violin of Carito. Often I wonder now if old Rossi suspected, from what Carito had said, that there was something queer about that lover's nook, something that Carito had tried to tell him? Had old Rossi suspected enough so that he had played the strange old gypsy violin? Had he played that MacDowell melody to frighten Johnson, to lure him out and make him unmask himself? Was it that?

Or is there, indeed, something of a living soul imprisoned in the violin of Carito, something which that night was crying out in protest and trying to avenge the gypsy boy's murder?

I recall that later, when Johnson had been taken away to the village jail, I went for a moment up to Rossi's. The old man was seated in his studio. Carito's violin was on his lap as his fingers caressed it lovingly.

"Maestro, it told me," I said, nodding at the instrument. "It seemed to lead me to the hiding place."

Old Rossi had no answer. He did not look up, just stared down at the worn patina of the old violin's black-brown body as though he were trying to penetrate the secret that was imprisoned there. ● ● ●

THE BEAUTIFUL

It was Mr. Mac who had died, but the funeral that the cops were waiting to celebrate wasn't his—it was mine!

I hit him as hard as it was possible for me to hit a man

ANGEL OF DEATH

A Novelet by
WYATT BLASSINGAME

CHAPTER I

Death on the Dock

PEGGY said, "I think you ought to speak to Uncle Mac first, Sam."

"Be formal?" I asked, grinning at her. "Ask for your hand in marriage?"

But Peggy wasn't smiling. There was something in her face that I didn't understand, something quiet and removed, something I didn't like.

"I think you ought to speak to him," she said.

"All right," I said. "I'll speak to him. You wait for me."

So I left her sitting there on the porch of my cottage and I walked down to her uncle's place. It was less than a quarter of a mile. This was a spring night with a half moon shining. The road, like so many in the Florida Keys, was made of shell sprinkled on sand and it twisted in and out of clumps of cabbage palm and sea grape and palmetto. The moon on the palm fronds made them look wet and the wind shook them with a steady rattling. Off in the brush a whippoorwill be-

gan to call, the first one I had heard that spring. Some people like the call of a whippoorwill, but to me it has always had a lonely, haunted note. I think of bad luck when I hear them.

Old man McClellan Holmes's house was on the bay, or rather on a little bayou that jutted back from the bay. It was a big, frame house without plan and almost without shape—through the years the old man had built on a room whenever and wherever the spirit moved him. Out front, a small dock thrust into the bayou, and I found the old man sitting there in the moonlight.

"Good evening, Mr. Mac," I said.

"Hello, Sam. Beautiful night."

He sat on a bench facing the water. In front of him the bayou reached out toward the bay, banked by black walls of mangrove and barely tinted by the moon. A rowboat rocked on the water, and the wind was steady against us. I sat on a piling facing Mr. Mac.

"You're my second visitor tonight," he said, "and I can see something is troubling you, too. I'm not feeling too well myself tonight."

"Nothing's troubling me. I'm fine. I just wanted to tell you that Peggy and I are getting married."

"Ummm," Mr. Mac said. He was a big man, slow and deliberate. "You just want to tell me, not ask me. Well, it's nice of you to do that. Whose idea was it?"

"Peggy's."

"Ummm," he said. "Well, nice of you to do it, anyway."

"Now look, Mr. Mac," I said, "I have always liked you."

That was true. There was something about the old man I admired. He was independent as a razorback hog, and stubborn, but he was kind. He wasn't broadminded, but he was fair and honest. And he always seemed satisfied with life. He didn't seem to want anything that he didn't have. And he was considerably less flexible than the concrete dock on which we sat.

"Both Peggy and I are past twenty-one," I said. "We don't have to ask anybody. But I came to tell you. I hoped you'd be pleased."

"And you expected I would be? Well, I can't blame you for expecting that. But I'm not."

I SAT there and stared at him. I had thought the old man liked me. When I came to Midnight Key, he'd helped me get started in business. We had always been friendly. More than once he had gone out of his way to do me a good turn, and although I had no way to repay his favors, I had appreciated them.

"How old are you, Sam?"

"Twenty-five."

"And how old were you when you went in the Army?"

"Nineteen. I've been out two years."

"Ummm," he said. "Maybe it was the Army that did it to you."

"Did what?"

"Or maybe it is the mess the world is in since you got out," he said. "Maybe that's it. You go in the Army as a youngster and you have a tough time of it there. And then you get out, and it's the first time you've had a real chance to look around you and to think about things. And the country is in this mess of greed and strikes and inflation, and everybody trying to cut everybody else's throat. I reckon it's enough to ruin any young man."

"What's the point, Mr. Mac?"

"The point is, it hasn't ruined all the young men. Not all of 'em, thank God. They are not all of them as tough and hard and cynical as you are, Sam."

I just looked at him. He said, "I heard about some of those garage bills you hung on tourists this past winter. And the way you collected from that Simpkins—wasn't that his name?"

"He was a crook."

"Maybe. It's you I'm thinking about. You're going to get ahead, Sam. You're smart and ambitious, maybe a bit too ambitious. The Army taught you how to fight: winner take all. Kill the other man if you have to. You'll get ahead, Sam."

He had been looking out over the bayou and talking almost as if to himself,

as if he were thinking it all out. Now he looked at me. "But I ain't so sure you'll be happy, Sam. And I doubt if the woman you marry will be happy. I want Peggy to be happy." He kept looking at me, frowning a little. "You ever been happy, Sam?"

"What do you mean?"

"No," he said, "I don't reckon you have."

I'd had enough of the lecture. I stood up and said, "I'm going to marry Peggy, Mr. Mac. I'm sorry you don't like the idea, but there's nothing you can do about it."

"Maybe there is."

"What?"

"I'll talk to Peggy and—" He put a hand to his chest and stood up. He moved the hand to his throat. His back was to the moonlight now, and I couldn't see the expression on his face, but I could see his mouth was open. He took a step toward me and swayed.

"What's the trouble, Mr. Mac?"

"I—don't—know. . . ." He seemed to have trouble getting the words out.

And then he fell. He fell like a log, before I could catch him. His head struck the piling I'd been sitting on. It made a soft, dull sound, like a bullet striking. Then he slid off the piling and went over the edge of the dock into the bayou.

I stood and stared at the water. The ripples ran out in waves, and the waves lapped at the dock and the bank. I couldn't swim, but I knew the old man could.

He came to the surface. His face looked up at me from the water. His arm moved. But he wasn't swimming.

I don't remember moving, but I remember the splash the wooden bench made when I threw it in. It was the same bench on which Mr. Mac had been sitting.

"Hold onto that!" I shouted.

THE ROWBOAT was tied up on the other side of the dock. My fingers were clumsy with the rope, and I snatched the knife out of my pocket and cut the rope. Clinging to the dock, I pulled the boat around to the other side.

There were little waves running out across the dark water of the bayou. In places the moon tipped them with mercury that slid in quick beads off the waves into darkness. There was no sign of Mr. Mac.

I couldn't swim, so I couldn't dive and search for him. I used an oar, thrusting it deep in the water, jabbing it here and there, swinging it about, hoping to locate the body that way. But I didn't, and minutes dragged out. I didn't know how long I had been hunting that way when I thought of the snitch hook. Mr. Mac did a lot of fishing and he kept his tackle, including a couple of heavy snitch hooks with long wire lines, on his back porch. I rowed the boat to shore, jumped out, and ran for the house.

There was a light burning in the front room, then a long hallway where the only light was the dim reflection from the front. At the end of the hall was the kitchen, dark now, and beyond that the porch where the fishing tackle was kept. I threw on the kitchen light, still moving toward the porch beyond, and almost ran into Dave Colwell, Peggy's brother.

He stood just inside the door from the back porch. His eyes were bleary. He had a whisky bottle in one hand and he was swaying gently from side to side.

"Hello, Sam," he said, and his voice was as bleary as his eyes.

"Your uncle fell in the bayou!" I was pushing past him to the back porch.

"Well, let him swim out."

"He can't! He's sick! Something happened!"

I found the snitch hook then and grabbed it and started running. I went straight past Dave, down the hallway again, and back to the bayou.

I threw the snitch hook out as far as it would go. When it was on the bottom, I began to pull it back, feeling it heavy in the mud, hoping and afraid at the same time of the weight it might catch. But it came into shallow water, and I picked it up to throw again.

"It was his heart," Dave said. He

didn't sound excited. His voice had that dreamy kind of certainty a drunk's can have. "He had a heart attack. But I'll get him."

He walked past me and down the bayou to where the land curved slightly, thrusting an arm out into the water. He waded out into the water, fully dressed. Two steps and the water was waist deep. Then he leaned forward and dived. I saw the luminous glow of his wrist watch just as he went under.

He found his uncle's body on that first dive, and I helped him drag it ashore. I got the old man's mouth open and started artificial respiration. Dave stood there with the water dripping off him.

"The tide's going out," he said. "Washes everything right onto that point."

"Phone Dr. Greene! Get him over here in a hurry!"

"It was his heart," Dave said.

"Get the doctor!"

HE WENT off toward the house, not running, just walking fast across the lawn. And I kept on with the artificial respiration. The moonlight tipped the mangrove tops. It shone on the lawn and the bayou. But the shadow was dark as a pool of ink.

Dave was a long time in coming back. It must have been ten minutes, and it seemed five times that long. But finally he came. He crouched down and looked at his uncle's face.

"Where's the doctor?" I asked.

"I reckon he's coming."

"You reckon?" It was hard to talk and keep the rhythm of the respiration. The muscles in my arms and back were beginning to ache.

"Greene doesn't like Uncle Mac. At first, he said he'd be damned if he would come at all. I talked him into it." Dave stood up and stepped back from the body.

Dr. Greene was the only doctor on Midnight Key. He was a comparatively young man, in his middle thirties, but about five years before he had given up his practice in a Midwestern city and come to the island. That was because of his health, he said. He suffered from arthritis. On Midnight Key he could make money enough to get by and still spend most of his time sitting in the sun. Of course, there was gossip, as there is about everybody in a place like that.

Some said he had retired at thirty because of an overwhelming affection for liquor, and some gave more vicious reasons. Certainly Dr. Neal Greene did like his drink. He was a small man who kept pretty well to himself most of the time, but he had a limitless supply of dirty limericks on the occasions when he got tight in the local bar.

He arrived about five minutes after Dave came back from the house. He came across the moonlit lawn, and I saw there was a woman with him. For just a moment I thought it was Peggy, then I knew it wasn't. It was Sylvia Rose, and when Dave saw her, he cursed under his breath and moved out of the shadows to meet them.

The doctor had a flashlight. It made a harsh white glare on Mr. Mac's face, showing a bloodless cut that ran from between his eyes across his forehead. I stared at it, not remembering for a moment the way he had fallen against the concrete piling.

"All right," the doctor said.

I stood up. My back ached so I could scarcely straighten. The doctor was kneeling over Mr. Mac, blocking my view. After a while he stood up, too.

"He's dead," he said.

There was a short cry, almost a scream, like the sound of a person in pain. All of us turned. Peggy was standing there at the edge of the moonlight and shadow, and her face was pale as the moonlight. Her face was so pale the lipstick looked black on her mouth.

"Sam!" she whispered. "Sam—"

I stared at her. And then I knew what she meant. "Hell, no," I said. "I didn't kill him. He had a heart attack."

"A heart attack?" the doctor said. His voice was flat as the water in the bayou.

"It must have been."

"He had a bad heart," Dave said.

"He's been taking medicine for it over a year."

"But that cut on his forehead?" Sylvia Rose said.

"He fell against a piling." I told them everything that had happened. They were all listening, but it was Peggy I spoke to. She stood at the edge of the shadow, not moving.

"When he fell," Sylvia asked, "why didn't you dive after him?"

"I can't swim. I threw the bench to him, thinking he could hold onto that."

"The bench?" Sylvia Rose looked down at the cut, showing white on Mr. Mac's head in the glow of the flashlight. "Suppose the bench had struck him?"

I was beginning not to like her. "It didn't hit him," I said.

Dr. Neal Greene clicked off the light. "An autopsy will settle everything," he said.

CHAPTER II

Who Did It?

THIS was my first contact with civilian death, and I had never realized it would be so complicated. Wanting to help Peggy, I said I would look after the details. It was obvious that her brother couldn't; he had gone back in the house and started drinking again and was passed out even before the ambulance arrived. So I had to talk to the undertaker and to Mr. Mac's doctor—Dr. Neal Greene washed his hands of the affair as soon as possible. I had to talk to the coroner and to the sheriff.

This sheriff was named Paul Wycoff. He came from the eastern end of the county, which is over in the cattle raising section of the state, and he wore a wide-brimmed hat and boots. The outfit looked rather silly on him, for he was a short, fattish man, almost bald. He was slow and lazy looking, and at first I thought he was stupid. But his eyes were always watching you, and he kept asking questions. Sometimes he would ask the same question over and over. He never seemed quite satisfied.

I told him what had happened. The way he asked questions I thought he was just slow at learning, but I found that he remembered what I had told him the time before. He called Mr. Mac's doctor and asked about his heart and a lot of questions about heart attacks.

It was all routine. I was tired and sleepy and I was bored when he said, "Well, I better go look at the place where it happened, anyway."

It was three in the morning when we got there. The lights were out in the house where McClellan Holmes had lived with his niece and nephew.

"No need of bothering them tonight," the sheriff said. "Just show me how it was."

We went down to the dock. The wind had calmed a bit. The moon was gone, and the sheriff carried a flashlight. I had to tell him once again what had happened.

"Where's the rowboat now?" he asked.

I didn't know. I didn't remember having seen it since I had run into the house to get the snitch hook.

"It must have drifted away," I said.

"You let it get away before the body was found?"

"I must have. I don't remember."

"That boat might have been a big help in finding the body."

"There wasn't a great deal of time to think," I said. "I must have forgotten to put over the anchor."

"That's kind of bad." He was flashing his light all around and he said, "Show me the piling he fell against."

I showed him. The sheriff bent over it, holding the light close. "Don't see any blood," he said. He patted the piling and then the dock close to it. "Seems like it's been washed. Did you do that?"

"No."

"Looks like somebody did."

When we were leaving, I glanced back at the house. At one of the first-floor windows a white curtain trembled slight-

ly. It might have been the wind, or it might have been somebody watching back of it, watching us. . . .

That day I worked, as I always did, in my garage and filling station. I kept expecting Peggy to show up, but she didn't. I kept remembering the cry she had made last night when she heard Neal Greene say her uncle was dead. I remembered the way she had stood there at the edge of the moonlight and shadow, staring at me. Almost as if she thought I had killed the old man.

AT SEVEN that night I closed the garage. My cottage was in the back, and as I walked toward it, through the blue spring twilight, I heard the whip-poorwill. It was probably the same one I had heard the night before, and I stopped to listen, wondering why so simple a thing as a bird cry should affect me. I'm not an easy man to affect and I don't believe in superstitions. I decided it was a combination of the call itself and the time of day when it was heard and the fact that you almost never see a whip-poorwill. That's what gives it a sort of eerie character, I thought.

A moonvine shades most of my porch, and I didn't see Peggy until I had gone up the steps and she spoke to me.

"Hello," I said. "Come in and help me get supper."

"No." She stood up. Her face and her blond hair were pale in the shadows. She was a tall girl, nicely put together and nice to look at. "Sam—"

"What's troubling you?"

"Uncle Mac was murdered, Sam."

"Don't be silly. You know he had a bad heart."

"It wasn't his heart. Dave telephone me from town."

I stood and looked at her, and there were some creepy things in my head and in my blood. "What do you mean? If it wasn't his heart, what was it?"

"I don't know. Just what Dave said over the phone. Uncle Mac was murdered."

"Dave was drunk," I said. "He didn't know what he was talking about."

"He wasn't drunk, Sam. Not that drunk."

"All right. Don't look at me like that. I didn't kill him."

"I know you didn't, Sam."

"I talked to him. He didn't want us to get married. He thought I—"

"I know what he thought. He had told me that afternoon."

"You knew?" I said. "You knew before you told me to go and see him?"

"Yes. But he wanted to talk to you. He wanted to tell you why he didn't want us to marry."

I went over and sat on the bannister, facing her. The moonvine was against my back, and a wind-moved leaf tickled the back of my neck.

"Would you have married me anyway?"

"I don't know, Sam. I—don't think so."

"You didn't love your uncle a great deal. You didn't know him well enough. You've only really known him in the last year."

"He's taken care of me most of my life."

"Sent you money when you were away in schools. But you didn't love him well enough to give up the man you were to marry because he objected."

"I—"

"So it would be because you thought he was right about me."

She looked at me. It was too dark to see the color of her eyes, but they were steady and deep.

"He was partially right. I love you, Sam. But sometimes you frighten me. You can be so—so cold. You can think so straight toward what you want, without thinking at all about the other man."

"I don't have brains enough to think for anybody but myself. Let the other man think for himself."

I SAT there on the bannister with the moonvine leaf tickling the back of my neck. I looked at her and I thought that I had known a lot of women before I met Peggy. I would know a lot of others before I died. And women are a great

deal alike. In the dark you can't tell them apart, but there is such a thing as love, no matter how much you think about it. I wanted Peggy, not someone else I might meet in the future. If I didn't have her, I would get over it. But I didn't want to get over it. I wanted Peggy. I always try to think straight and I knew this was so.

"Will you marry me now?"

"I can't marry you now." There were tears in her eyes.

I was looking at her and I was talking aloud, but I was the one listening, thinking it out, watching it grow logical. "Your uncle was pretty set in his ways, and a woman's place is in the home, not managing property. So your brother is the one who would profit by his death. He's the only one who would profit."

"No—"

"And you can't know I didn't kill your uncle—unless you know who did."

"Dave wouldn't have. He couldn't."

PICKPOCKET PROBLEM

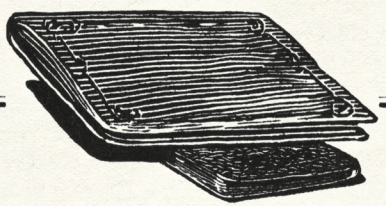
ONE of the most curious letters ever published came from a super-sentimental thief, and appeared in a New York newspaper. It read:

"To the Editor: .Please advise your readers always to leave their names and addresses in their wallets. It frequently happens in our business that we come into possession of private papers and photographs which we would be glad to return, but we have no means of doing it. It is dangerous to carry them about, so we are forced to destroy them.

"I remember an instance where I met with serious trouble because I could not make up my mind to destroy the picture of a baby which I had found in the wallet of a gentleman which came into my hands in the way of my business. I had lost a baby myself the year before, of the same age as this one, and would have given all I had for such a picture.

"There was no name in the wallet, and no way of finding out who was the owner, so, like a fool, I advertised it and got shadowed by the police. Tell your readers to give us a fair chance to be decent—and always leave their addresses in their wallets. We want to live and let live. Yours truly, A Pickpocket,"

—Andrew Meredith



"Because you think I killed him. Or at least, you can't know that I didn't."

"I know you didn't kill him, Sam."

"You can't know it, unless you killed him yourself." Her face was pale and drawn in the gloom. "And you didn't kill him because you had no reason to. Because he left all his money to your brother."

Her lips moved, but there was no sound. "At least," I said, "that's the local gossip I've always heard, that he was going to leave everything to Dave."

"It should have been your uncle's heart," I said. "He was an old man. He was going to die anyway."

I shut my eyes, thinking it out, thinking about Dave Colwell who drank too much and gambled too much and ran too hard after women. He was one of these men you like but have no respect for. He was good looking and fun on a party and he had the brain of a child and the backbone of an eel. But he was Peggy's brother, and she loved him.

I heard her go across the porch, down

the steps. I didn't call after her. I didn't move until she was gone. Then I went in the house and washed and changed clothes and got supper. I was still at the table when I heard a knock.

It was the sheriff. He came in and took a chair without being asked and started in with his questions. He asked about my relations with McClellan Holmes and with Peggy and with Dave. I answered each question. I answered it, but nothing more.

"What about the five thousand bucks you owed the old man?"

I grinned at him then. "You get around, don't you, Sheriff?"

"I got deputies. How'd Mr. Holmes come to loan you the money?"

"The war was just over, and people were still fired with patriotism. That must be the reason. At the time, I thought maybe he liked me. Anyway, I wanted to go in business, and he sold me the land, loaned me the money to build the garage and filling station. He did it cheaper than I could have got it from the bank."

The sheriff seemed more interested in the cigarette he was rolling than in my answer or his next question. "You pay him back?"

"The first day of the month. Every month."

"What time was it you called on him last night?"

"Get to the point, Sheriff," I said. "I've heard it wasn't the old man's heart."

"It wasn't." He lit the cigarette. "It was cyanide."

I could feel the inside of my mouth getting dry. A nerve in my left eyelid started twitching and I reached up and rubbed it. "I thought that stuff was pretty sudden," I said.

"It is, from what I hear. Two or three minutes maybe."

WE JUST sat and looked at each other. Finally the nerve in my eyelid quit twitching, but my mouth was still dry. "I was with him longer than that."

"That's how I figured. And you didn't see anybody else around?"

"No."

"You been buying any cyanide lately?"

There isn't much time for thought when something like that happens. Something has to be said, and the words seem to come of themselves.

"No," I said.

It was the first lie I had told him. Because the week before I had been in Tampa and run into an old Army buddy stationed at McDill Field, and he'd told me about a rat poison they were using. I'd been plagued with field rats coming into the garage and I got some of the poison. It contained cyanide.

The sheriff let the ashes fall off his cigarette. "Well," he said, "somebody must have." He stood up. "You knew Miss Colwell inherited her uncle's money?"

"I thought her brother would get it."

"He got the property but no cash. The money went to the girl. It's tied up so she can't get at it, but she'll have a nice income." He went to the door. "You ain't planning to leave the county soon, are you, Mr. Bird?"

"No."

"That's good. We might need you."

He went out, and the door closed behind him, and I stood there, feeling as though there were not enough air in the room. The old man had died of poison, a poison that acted almost instantly, and I had been with him at the time. Just he and I alone.

I wondered why the sheriff had not arrested me. I had had the opportunity for murder, and nobody else had. I had the motive, if you wanted to stress the importance of the quarrel between us. There was the money Peggy was inheriting—and Mr. Mac had stood between Peggy and me. And there was the five thousand dollars I owed.

It needed only the matter of cyanide to make the case complete. And sooner or later the sheriff would learn about that.

I went out on the porch and let the

breeze blow like cold water on my face. I took ten long breaths, counting them, and then lit a cigarette. When the match was very steady in my fingers, I sat down on the top step and began to think.

The first idea, naturally, was that the old man had committed suicide. I had not seen him, but he might have been able to slip something in his mouth. Yet I didn't believe it. Why would he commit suicide? I simply didn't think he was the sort of man who would do it.

Then how had he got the poison? On that line I got nowhere because I didn't know enough about the subject. I decided to talk to Dr. Greene and to get some books on poisons.

Who had given him the poison?

There was an obvious answer, and the more I thought about it the clearer the answer. Dave Colwell always needed money. He had been trying to borrow from me only the week before. Everyone had expected him to inherit all his uncle's money, and probably he himself had expected to do so. As it was, he got the property. I didn't know just how much that was worth, but I'd find out. And Dave I believed capable of a sneaky murder.

But Dave was Peggy's brother.

The sheriff was building a murder case around me. When he learned about the cyanide, It would be air tight. My only chance would be to know and have proof against the real murderer.

I stood up and threw away my cigarette, a dim tracer bullet arching through the shadows. For my own protection I had to have proof against Dave Colwell.

"If somebody has to burn for it," I said aloud, "it'll be Dave, not me."

I thought of Peggy and I said, "Hell, I sure won't have a chance at her if I go to the chair. Let Dave look out for himself."

And then all at once I remembered the old saying that poison was a woman's weapon and I wondered if Peggy had known that she would inherit from her uncle. I tried to think straight and objectively about that, too, but my personal feelings were tied up in it, and I didn't really consider Peggy as a possible murderess.

CHAPTER III

VENGEANCE

I GOT MY car, a '35 model that looked more battered than Berlin, and drove over to see Mrs. Sylvia Rose. Her house faced the gulf, and you approached it from the back, down a long drive of Australian pines. At the end of the drive was Dave Colwell's coupé. I parked beside it and walked around to the front of the house.

This Mrs. Sylvia Rose was in her mid-thirties, about five years older than Dave, and she had him crazy over her. Which wasn't too hard to understand. She was a small woman with dark hair, a full, lush figure, and a pretty face, and there was a look of experience about her. Her eyes were surprisingly light in her sunburned face, with a slight slant to them so that she looked faintly like the wolf girl in Little Abner. She had been divorced twice and each time, according to the local talk, she'd got out with most of her former husband's worldly possessions. Then she'd gone in the real estate business on Midnight Key and in the town on the mainland, and made more money. Gossip said that in a business deal she was utterly ruthless, and more than once I had wondered how she was in her sex relations, but I'd never done anything about finding out.

She opened the door when I knocked. "Hello, Sam. Come in."

Hers was the swankiest house on the key. The living room was big and not too cluttered with furniture and was glass-fronted to look out over the beach and the gulf. In one corner there was a portable bar, and Dave Colwell was standing beside this, a glass in his hand. He didn't look too happy to see me. His face was flushed, but whether with anger or liquor or both, I wasn't sure. He nodded but

said nothing at all.

"Make Sam a drink, darling," Sylvia Rose said.

"Thanks," I said.

While Dave was there I didn't want to ask the questions I had come to ask, but I was glad of a chance to see him, now that we both knew his uncle had been murdered. I waited to hear what he would say.

"Scotch or bourbon?" he asked.

"Neutral grain spirits," I said. "I'm more accustomed to it."

Sylvia Rose laughed. She laughed often, a low, throaty sound that expressed satisfaction rather than humor.

"I've a friend in Bradenton who's a liquor dealer," she said. "Try the Scotch."

"You have too damn many friends," Dave said.

She looked at him. The dark hair was glossy about her head. Her mouth was lush and painted on in bold strokes.

"Dave's in a filthy humor tonight," she said.

Dave handed me the drink, and it was real Scotch, with that clean, faintly smoky flavor that I had almost forgotten because I couldn't afford Scotch in times like these. I sipped it, and Sylvia Rose and I made small talk, while Dave stood silently at the bar, watching me as he might have watched a snake. There was a feeling of strain, as though I had broken into something that couldn't be carried on while I was there. But the tension was on Dave's part. The girl seemed relaxed enough.

I decided to get on with the matter. I said, "The sheriff was at my place tonight. He told me Mr. Mac died of poison."

"You ought to know," Dave Colwell said.

"I thought it was a heart attack. That's what you said."

"I didn't know then you had murdered him."

It got quiet in the room. I took a pull at my drink. "I didn't," I said. "It must have been suicide, or whoever was with him just before I got there."

"There wasn't anybody else with him."

"How do you know?"

HE DIDN'T answer, although his lips worked without sound. I said, "You ought to know who was there if you were in the kitchen watching."

"I'd been at the Anchorage. I just got home when you came in."

"Somebody had been there. He told me I was his second visitor."

"Baloney." He swayed a little. He was drunker than I had thought. "There was enough poison in him to kill him within three minutes after he took it. You were there longer than that."

"Yes," I said. "But I didn't give it to him."

"Then who did?"

I looked straight at him. "Who had a reason?"

He was suddenly steady on his feet. He leaned back like a baseball pitcher and threw the glass straight at my head. It was a large glass with a thick bottom and it would have cracked my skull if it had landed. It missed by an inch, sprinkling me with liquor, and crashed through the big glass window at the front of the room. The sound of the glass breaking was as loud as a shot. After that came the faint tinkle of falling fragments.

Dave Colwell walked past me and out of the room.

"It will cost him fifty dollars to have that window replaced," Sylvia Rose said. "And I'll damn well see he pays for it."

"He should be able to—now."

She was wearing a black skirt and gray sweater. When she moved, it was the way a cat moves, a silky stretching and retreating. She went past me to the bar and began to make another drink and doing this, she began to laugh. The sound was like pouring a bottle of seltzer water into a glass of ice.

"That's what put him in such a humor," she said. "His sister got all the cash. He didn't get a dime."

"He got property."

She looked at me. "Yes. He got property."

"Mr. Mac owned a good part of Midnight Key, didn't he?"

She kept looking at me. Her eyes were faintly slanting in her sun-browned face, the pupils almost colorless.

"What are you after, Sam?"

I told her. "I was with Mr. Mac when he died. But I didn't give him the poison. And I'm not going to be the one who burns for it."

"I don't think you will," she said. She crossed to the sofa and sat down. She said, "McClellan Holmes homesteaded on this island and he kept every one of the one hundred and sixty-five acres the government gave him and added to them. He owned most of the waterfront, bay and gulf, and a good part of everything else."

"How much is it worth?"

She made a gesture that lifted the smooth outline of her figure against the sweater. "About one half what it would be if the old man hadn't blocked every move to benefit the island. I've got fifty acres down here with no waterfront and I can't even get a decent road to them. He wouldn't sell. He didn't want progress. He liked the island the way it was. And this current boom is ending now. The past winter was the last big one, the way I figure. Prices will be falling from now on."

"But Dave could still get a considerable amount?"

"I'll give him fifty thousand for the whole thing. Cut up into lots, properly promoted, it should be worth twice that over the course of time. If I'd had it to sell a year ago, I could have got three times that."

"Fifty thousand is still a lot of money."

"Make yourself another drink, Sam," she said.

I made another drink and sat beside her on the sofa. It was a wide sofa, springy and soft.

"Did Dave kill the old man?" she asked.

"Who else would it have been?"

"I don't know. Give me a cigarette, Sam." I gave her a cigarette and lit it for her. The smoke was almost the color of her eyes. "Did you know Peggy was to inherit the old man's money?"

"No," I said. "Did anybody?"

"Peggy did. She told me at least two weeks ago."

That surprised me. She and Peggy were not close friends.

"Why?" I asked.

SHE MADE a gesture which said, "I don't know." At the same time there was a knock on the door, the door opened, and Dr. Neal Greene came in.

Apparently he was surprised to see me.

"Didn't know you were here," he said. "I was walking for the exercise and when I saw Sylvia's light, I thought I'd drop in for a drink."

"I didn't know you went in for exercise."

"I don't, as a rule." He crossed to the bar and made a drink. "Where's Peggy tonight?"

"Home, I expect."

"Don't let an heiress slip through your fingers." He turned and looked at the broken window. "Been having a baseball game?"

"It was Dave," Sylvia Rose said, and told him what had happened. "Usually when he's drinking he loves everybody. I've never seen him in such a humor."

"He's been at it pretty steadily for several days," Greene said. "He was over at my place yesterday and the day before. Crocked."

I made my voice as casual as possible. "Could he have got the cyanide there?"

"I suppose he could have." His voice was as casual as mine, but there was a kind of hard twinkle in his eyes. He crossed to the broken window, a small man slightly stooped by arthritis and looking older than he was. "I think—"

We heard the car, the screech of tires. Then there was the sound of someone running.

"Here is the subject of our discussion now," Dr. Neal Greene said without turning from the window.

And then, suddenly, it was like a play, like something in a dream. The door

banged open, and Dave Colwell was standing there. His hair was wind-blown and tangled across his forehead. His eyes were spider-webbed with blood vessels. His lips were pulled back so that his teeth showed. He raised the pistol he was carrying and pointed it at my stomach.

"Damn you!" he said. "I'm going to kill you now!"

I didn't move. I couldn't move. I was too far across the room possibly to reach him before he fired. I was sitting down. There wasn't even a chance to jump behind anything. So I just sat there, sat very still, with the muscles in my throat turning into knots.

I heard Sylvia Rose make a noise, a choked, controlled scream. It was as if she had started to scream, then realized that any loud noise would force Dave into firing.

She began to move away from me, slowly, saying, "Dave, Dave."

Dr. Greene was behind and to one side of Colwell. "Be careful with that gun, Dave," he said calmly. "The damn thing may go off."

"I'm going to kill him," Dave said.

He was swaying slightly. He had the gun in his right hand and now he gripped his right wrist with his left hand to steady it. And it was steady enough. I could feel the gun as if it touched against my stomach.

"What's the trouble, Dave?" I said. "I haven't done anything to you."

"You killed my uncle," Dave said. "And you told everybody I did it. I didn't kill him. But I'm going to kill you."

"Somebody's been lying to you," I said. "I haven't—"

"My own sister accusing me," Dave cried.

His eyes were crazy, Saliva formed over his lips. He leaned forward and began to squeeze the trigger.

I didn't see the doctor move until his hand struck the gun, pushing it down. The sound of the shot was so loud that it was like a blow. It was almost as if the bullet had struck me instead of ripping into the floor close to Dave's feet. Then I was crossing the room in a rush. I saw the doctor's knee come up sharply, and Dave Colwell swayed forward at the same time that I hit him.

I hit him as hard as it was possible for me to hit a man. It smashed him back against the doctor, and they went down together, the gun skidding out across the floor.

Dr. Greene pushed Dave from him. Getting up, he flicked at his clothes.

"I wish you'd be more careful, Sam. You spilled my drink."

CHAPTER IV

Stolen Poison

FIRST, I looked at Dave. Then I looked at Dr. Greene and at Sylvia Rose, sitting motionless on the sofa. It was like waking from a nightmare. I had been shot at in the war, but in a war you expect that; you know when you are going into danger and you get afraid gradually and are relieved when it's over. This had happened so suddenly that the fear came afterward. There was no sense in being afraid when the danger was past, and I was surprised at my own reaction. My stomach felt weak.

"Thanks, Doc," I said. "You saved my life."

"That's all right," Greene said. "I was behind him, and he didn't see me. If I'd been in front, I'd have just let him shoot."

"He must have gone mad," Sylvia Rose said.

"Prolonged drinking," the doctor said, "plus the recent nervous strain. The fringe of delirium tremens."

He turned to me. "You'd best take him home and put him to bed. And try to get a couple of these down him." From his pocket he took a small bottle that contained some pinkish, aspirin-shaped pills. "I just happen to have these on me. They should keep him

quiet." I picked Dave up in my arms. He was almost as tall as I was, but he didn't weigh much.

"I wonder," Sylvia said. "He always carried his liquor so well. I wonder—"

That was all she said, but I understood her because I was thinking the same thing. I was thinking that if Dave had really been as drunk as he pretended, and telling the truth, it meant that he hadn't killed his uncle. For a few moments I had been convinced of that. But suppose the drunkenness was part act, suppose it was meant to convince us of something that wasn't so? On the other hand, suppose he hadn't killed Mr. Mac. Then who had?

I put Dave in my car and drove back down the shadowed, treelined drive. I drove across the island to the rambling, shapeless house that was almost buried in the tropical, untended growth about it. There was a light burning in the front room, and I thought Peggy would be there.

I got Dave out of the car. He was beginning to mumble and move his head. I pulled his left arm over my shoulders, put my right arm around his waist, so that he was half walking, half being carried. We went up the steps and into the big, dimly lighted room.

Peggy wasn't there. Nobody was there, and half dragging Dave, I went up the stairs to his room. I undressed him and rolled him, naked, into his bed. From the bathroom I brought a glass of water and without much trouble got Dave to down two of the pills Neal Greene had given me. I pushed him down flat on the bed, pulled the cover over him, and he went to sleep.

The bathroom was the same one Mr. Mac had used. On a shelf over the lavatory there was a comb with a few strands of long black hair tangled in it, toothpaste, razors, and shaving cream. In the medicine cabinet there were two or three patent medicines, a bottle of hair tonic, iodine, aspirin, mineral oil, the same things you find in most bathrooms. And there was a box of large capsules, filled, according to the label, on the prescription of Dr. Thomas Caster in Bradenton.

DR. CASTER had been Mr. Mac's doctor, and my guess was that this was the medicine Mr. Mac had taken for his heart. Looking at this, I began to get ideas—not about Dr. Caster, of course, because that old gentleman could have killed Mr. Mac every year for the last thirty if he had wanted, but about the way the poison had been administered.

I turned out the bathroom light and started to leave, going back through Dave's room. He lay on his back. The light shone down on his face, but he was perfectly still. His breathing was so light that the movement of his chest was imperceptible.

The bottle with the pinkish, aspirin-shaped pills was on the table beside the bed, and I picked it up and looked at it again. There was no label on the bottle at all. I looked again at Dave, lying so still he might have been dead. I didn't think he was. It didn't seem possible that Dr. Neal Greene, in the presence of another person, would have handed me a bottle of poison to give Dave.

But I remembered Dave saying, "Greene doesn't like Uncle Mac. At first he said he'd be damned if he would come at all."

With my handkerchief I wiped all fingerprints from the bottle. I replaced it on the table, turned out the light, and left.

I was getting in my car when the lights of the other automobile appeared. The lights came forward, beamed straight on me. The drive was narrow, and there was no chance for me to pass, so I just stood there beside my car, waiting. The other machine pulled up, and I saw it was Mr. Mac's old sedan. Peggy leaned from the window.

"Sam, have you seen Dave anywhere?"

"He's in his room."

She switched off her lights and got out. She came close to me. "What's he doing?"

"Sleeping."

"Oh. . . . I was so afraid. I've been

trying to find him, or you."

"Why?"

"He came in a little while ago and he'd been drinking. He said something about you and—I don't remember the exact conversation. It must have been my fault, something I said. But he got the idea you were accusing him of killing Uncle Mac and he ran to Uncle Mac's room and got his pistol. He said he—he—"

"He tried to."

"No! Sam, did he shoot—"

"The only damage was a hole in Sylvia Rose's floor, thanks to Doc Greene."

"What's happened to him, Sam? He's never behaved that way before."

"The D.T.s, maybe."

The moon was high and bright. The sky held no clouds and only a pale sprinkle of stars. The night had that restless, green, alive feeling it has sometimes in the spring. We walked down to the dock where Mr. Mac had died. The tide made faint noises against the piling. Somewhere in the brush, a whippoorwill began to cry.

"Peggy, why did you tell Sylvia Rose that you were inheriting your uncle's money?"

"I wanted Dave to know and—well, I couldn't bring up the subject when I was talking to him. I was sure Sylvia would tell him, and then he would bring up the subject, and we could talk it out. I hadn't expected the money until Uncle Mac told me, about two weeks ago."

SHE looked straight at me. "It was the same time he first told me he didn't want us to get married, until—"

"Until what?"

"Until you changed, until you proved you weren't really as bitter and hard as you seemed."

"Your uncle was no milksop himself."

"He never harmed anyone else in order to get ahead."

"You sound very sweet," I said. "So sweet you couldn't even tell your brother you were getting the money he expected. Why did you send me here last night just at the time you did?"

"I didn't choose any time. I wanted you to talk to Uncle Mac. He wanted to talk to you."

"It was a nice time," I said. "It was just the right time for me to be here when he died."

"Sam, what do you mean? What are you trying to say?"

"I don't know," I said. "I keep trying to think it out, and it gets more and more confused. Your brother could have killed him. You could have killed him."

"Sam—"

"Don't look so hurt. You could have killed him. Doc Greene could have killed him. Why didn't the doctor like him?"

"I don't know exactly. Just some silly quarrel they had when Greene first came here. He wanted to clear off some land betwen his house and the gulf, and Uncle Mac owned the land and wouldn't let him clear it. You know how feuds are in a little place like this."

"Yes," I said, looking at her.

Peggy was tall and slender. She was very pretty with the moonlight trapped in her blond hair. I wanted her more than I had wanted anything in my life, and it made straight thinking impossible. I felt as if I were drunk and the world was spinning 'round and 'round, throwing out ideas the way stars can be sent spinning across the sky when you are drunk.

"Good night," I said. "I'm going home to bed."

I worked the next day. The island road wasn't much of a road, and the bridge which tied our key to the mainland wasn't much of a bridge, so the traffic was light. But mine was the only garage and filling station on the key and did fairly well. I sold gas and had a couple of grease jobs and fixed a flat.

Late in the afternoon a guy with a Hillsborough license on his car came in and after nosing around a few minutes offered to give me eight thousand bucks for the few lots I owned, the garage, and my cottage. That was three thousand more than they had cost me, and I told him I'd consider it and let him know in a few days.

"I'll tell you," the man said. "This joint isn't worth it, but I've got personal reasons for wanting the place. I'll give you a check for ten thousand, and we'll close the deal now."

I thought he was nuts, but he took out his checkbook. "All right," I said. Just then the phone inside the shop began to ring.

The call was from Tampa. It took a minute or so to get through, then I heard the voice of my friend at McDill Field.

"What the hell are you up to down there?"

I asked what he was talking about.

"A deputy sheriff came to see me at noon today. He wanted to know about that rat poison I'd bought and when I told him it was for you, he got all excited. They've had me talking to cops and a couple of colonels all afternoon. This is my first chance to call you. What the devil have you been doing?"

Through the window I saw the car drive up outside. Sheriff Wycoff got out and stood talking with the man from Hillsborough. I hung up and went out the back door. I went fast, keeping the garage between me and the sheriff. A few minutes more and I was past my cottage and in the brush and still going.

LATER, I sat under a clump of sea grape and thought it all out clearly. I had known from the first that if the sheriff learned about the cyanide I'd bought, his case against me would be almost unbreakable. I had known that my only chance was to give him a better case against somebody else. That was what I had to do now.

Dave Colwell was the most logical person. I had to hang the murder on his neck and I had to do it soon. I was no longer worried over whether or not he was actually guilty. To save myself, I had to show that he was and do it quickly.

I walked past Sylvia Rose's house on the way to Dr. Greene's. The broken glass was still in the front window, and through this jagged frame I could see Dr. Greene standing beside the bar. That suited me fine. It was too good to waste, and I started running.

Greene's house wasn't locked. On Midnight Key people rarely locked a house. I went into the rooms at the back that he used for an office. Moonlight was like frost on the windows. It made the inside of the room visible enough for me to move about. On his desk there were envelopes, and I took one of these. I had to use my lighter to find the poison. I was careful to leave no fingerprints and I took only a few grains of the poison, shaking it into the envelope.

CHAPTER V

Fatal Clue

SHORTLY, I dialed Peggy's number, but there was no answer. And this suited me, too. I crossed the island, keeping away from the road as much as possible. And it wasn't until I saw the house, big and shapeless under the moonlight, that I felt any twinge of conscience about what I was going to do. I don't know why seeing the house made me feel that way, unless it reminded me of McClellan Holmes and of the kind of man he'd been.

But Dave Colwell was not that kind of man, I told myself. He was no prize package for me to worry about when my own life was in danger.

I circled the house to make sure neither Dave nor Peggy was there. Then I went in and up the stairs to the bathroom. It was just as I had seen it the night before: the comb, the two razors, the bottles. And the box of capsules.

Now all I had to do was transfer the cyanide from the envelope in my pocket to something, envelope or bottle, which had Dave's fingerprints and to put that where, sooner or later, it would be found. I had an idea Sheriff Wycoff could be trusted to find it. Neal Greene would testify that Dave had been in his office on several occasions, drinking, and could

have stolen it. And there was his attack on me to show what he would do when drunk.

Add all this to the fact that he had inherited the old man's property and had expected to inherit his cash as well.

But instead of making the transfer I sat there on the side of the tub. I put my face in my hands and thought about old man McClellan Holmes and about Peggy and about the things both of them had said to me.

Peggy wouldn't know, of course, that I was the one who had clinched the case against her brother—and the odds were five to one, I thought, that Dave was guilty. Also, I wasn't one to be troubled by whether he was or not. I didn't expect a conscience to bother me.

I told myself all this while sitting on the rim of the tub. I told myself that it didn't matter any more who was guilty. It just mattered that I wasn't. I was in love with Peggy, and this was my only possible chance to have her. I wanted her enough to make anything else seem very small and unimportant.

And then I stood up and went downstairs with the cyanide still in my pocket. I went, feeling sick and not really thinking at all, just feeling. So I didn't hear Peggy until I was face to face with her on the front steps.

"Where have you been, Sam?"

I said, "Upstairs, to frame your brother for murder. And I can't do it. Damn you," I said, "I can't do it." I went past her and down the steps into the night.

I went down the twisting drive to the main road. There didn't seem much to do now, except to go home and let the sheriff pick me up for murder and take my chances. I didn't think much of the chances.

But at the road, I turned away from my house. I was going to the Anchorage and drink a beer and let the sheriff look for me. It wouldn't take him long, I thought.

The juke organ was playing something called "Get Yourself a Redhead, Because a Blond Woman Never Can Be True," the vocalist explaining why not through his nose. I'd heard the song a dozen times before and now I found myself repeating the words. I was humming them when I stepped through the door and saw the man at the bar. It was the man from Hillsborough, who had offered me ten thousand dollars for my place. He had his hat off now and the light shone down on his hair which was oiled and very black. Beside him stood Peggy's brother, and he was as blond as Peggy.

And Mr. Mac had been bald-headed.

"You know it!" sang the man on the juke organ, opening his nose wide. "A blond woman never can be true!"

I STEPPED back into the night, letting the door close behind me. I was shaking like a man with malaria, not just my hands but all through me. I had a feeling as though a spring were being wound too tight inside my brain. For a moment it was like being back in the Army again and hearing a stick of bombs falling, each one of them getting closer to you, and there is nothing you can do but draw yourself up in a knot and wait, knowing it's going to be close, and waiting. . . .

I thought of the bathroom at Dave Colwell's. I could visualize it as though I were standing there looking at it.

Then it was as if the last bomb had fallen, and I was breathing again. The shaking had stopped. I could feel the bay wind, cool and fresh on my face.

I knew who had killed McClellan Holmes. I had no proof, but I knew because it made such complete sense.

I went across the island to the gulf and down the beach to Neal Greene's house. He wasn't there, and I replaced the cyanide, burned the envelope I had carried it in. Then I made two phone calls. I went out and, keeping back from the beach in the sea grasses, I headed for Sylvia Rose's. Halfway there I saw Dr. Greene. He was walking along the beach toward his own house.

Sylvia wore lounging pajamas and a housecoat of dark blue. It was very becoming.

"Hello," she said. "Neal just left a few minutes ago."

"I know." She looked puzzled, and I said, "I was the one who called him. I wanted him to leave so that I could see you alone."

"Well, well." Her face held an expression that was half smile, half frown. Her eyes were light as smoke. "And what is it?"

"May I have a drink?"

"Of course. You could have had one with Neal here." Her laugh was throaty like the purr of a cat. "Make me one, too."

Cozily, she sat on the sofa and crossed her legs. The light in the room was not dim, but confidential. The jagged break in the big front window was almost rose-shaped, and from beyond that came the sound of water on the beach, the fragile clashing of palm fronds. I gave her the drink.

"What's the trouble, Sam?"

"The sheriff thinks I killed McClellan Holmes." Her dark brows arched above her pale eyes. I said, "He's got evidence enough to make a good case."

She said, "You didn't kill him?"

"No. And I'm not going to be the one convicted of it. But I'll need help."

"From me?"

"Yes. If you will."

She sipped at her drink. "I've always had an idea that you didn't like me very much, Sam. I don't know why, unless you were too interested in that blond Amazon of yours."

"Perhaps it was because we're too much alike."

"Are we?"

"We should have found it out sooner. But it's not too late now," I said. "I'm going to need money to beat the case against me. I'll need a lot of it. I'll need my cut of what you make from Dave Colwell's property."

SHE just looked at me steadily. I said, "You knew Dave would get no cash from his uncle, but he would get the property. And you knew he's always in debt. You knew you could buy the property from him, quickly, and for a minimum. You could marry him and get it that way if you wanted, or if he got stubborn about selling. You've had experience along those lines."

Her eyes were like ice, not smoke. "What are you trying to say, Sam?"

"A man from Hillsborough county tried to buy my place today for ten thousand. It's not worth that, but ever since I came here there has been talk about some day having a bridge along the key, a bridge that would put this place within twenty minutes driving time of Tampa. It would triple property values, more than triple them, on an out-of-the-way key like this."

"I've heard the talk, nothing else."

"Maybe such a bridge will be built," I said. "Maybe you know it. Even without the bridge, you would stand to make a sizable fortune from owning the land that did belong to Mr. Mac. It cuts your property off from the waterfront and from an improved road. You told me that."

"Of course I'll make money from it. Anybody but that stubborn old buzzard would have seen the island progress.

"So you already own it," I said.

"I bought it from Dave today. What of it?"

"You'll make more from the old man's death than anyone else. Yet I'm to be blamed for it."

"I'm sorry for that, Sam."

"Perhaps. I'll stand the trial. But I want forty thousand dollars in the bank in my name. And I want the best lawyers it's possible to get. And you better pray they turn me loose, because I'm not going to the chair."

I took a nip of my drink. "You're a friend of Neal Greene's," I said. "You visit him. You were with him when the old man died. You could have stolen the poison."

"Anyone on the island could have stolen it."

"You made more money from his death than anyone." I was looking straight at her. "You were at his house, alone with him, just before I got there.

Probably making a last effort to get hold of his property before he learned about this bridge, or whatever it is."

"I wasn't there!"

"You went upstairs to the bathroom where his medicine was kept. Probably you volunteered to get it for him. He wasn't feeling well. He told me that. And you had the poison with you. You put it in one of his capsules and brought it down and gave it to him. I don't know just how long it would take the capsule to dissolve in his stomach, an hour or so. By then he should have been in bed. And he would have died in bed, an old man with a bad heart. No one would have suspected a thing. But as it happened, he fell in the bayou, and there was a scar on his head from hitting the piling, and because certain persons thought I might have killed him, there was an autopsy which showed the poison.

"You're crazy! I wasn't there."

"You *were* there. About to commit murder, but even so, you couldn't forget you were a vain and pretty woman. You couldn't help looking in the mirror. The wind was blowing hard that night, and your hair must have been tangled. You picked up the comb laying there and ran it through your hair. A few strands clung to the comb—long black hair, and everyone in that house is blond."

I saw the change in her eyes. "There are laboratory tests that will prove it's your hair," I said. "And if necessary, I will swear I saw you."

"I didn't kill him, Sam. I didn't!"

"It's all right with me," I said. "I just want my share of the profits."

She stood up. The robe moved close and thin about her. "I didn't kill him, Sam. But I'll help you. I—"

She put her left hand on my shoulder. Her right hand was hidden behind her. There was a tall, slender vase on the table at the end of the sofa. Her right hand came from behind her with the vase in it, and she swung it at my head.

I DUCKED, caught her as she half turned with the blow. We were still struggling when the sheriff pushed open the door.

He said, "That broken window makes a pretty good listening post, Mr. Bird. And if things work out like you say, we should have a fair case."

Sylvia Rose whirled away from me. She stared at the sheriff, breathing hard, a hand at her throat. Then she flung herself face down on the sofa, screaming.

Sheriff Wycoff looked at her with distaste. "It won't be fun," he said. "Hardly ever convict a woman, a good-looking one. But I never could believe it was you," he said. "To give a man poison, and hit him on the head, and then push him in the bayou was too much. Then there were the capsules he took his medicine in, and Doc Caster told me it took a while for them to dissolve."

I was working the next day when Peggy came. I had on some old GI trousers and a skivvy shirt and a liberal application of grease. Peggy looked lovely. She came over to where I was doing a grease job and she stood first on one foot and then on the other.

"All right," I said, speaking from under the car. "What's wrong?"

"When you left our house last night —when you said you had been about to frame Dave but hadn't—did you know then that Sylvia had killed Uncle Mac?"

"No."

"You thought you were going to be charged with it?"

"The odds looked that way."

She said, "Will you marry me, Sam?"

I came out from under the car. "A couple of days ago," I said, "you were having none of me. What's changed you?"

"I haven't changed, Sam. It's you who's changed. Haven't you?"

I knew the answer because I had been thinking about it. "No," I said. "I haven't changed. But I've learned a few things. My thinking wasn't straight before because I took off from the warped angle that I was the only guy in the world that mattered."

"Oh, Sam—" Peggy said.

She got grease on her, but she didn't seem to mind. ● ● ●

Willie's rolling pin smacked down on the criminal's pate

When a Body Meets a Body

by JOE ARCHIBALD

Could Willie Klump hang a killer—with three stitches from a dead man's noggin?

WILLIAM J. KLUMP, president of the Hawkeye Detective Agency, snapped off his portable radio in disgust one afternoon and deplored the punishment unseen audiences had to absorb these days.

"So that was a detective story, huh?" Willie sniffed. "The corpse had spaghetti sauce spilled on his tie an' the

G-men had it analyzed an' found it was sauce made only by one Evetalian restaurant in Philadelphia and they went there an'arrested a waiter an' finally pinned a rap on him. It is silly!"

He picked up a tabloid newspaper and reread the lurid details of a recent tragic hotel fire upstate. Nearly forty citizens had lost their lives and eleven others were listed as missing. One of the names of the defunct started a small humming sound in a remote cell of his noggin but it was of short duration.

"Virgo Ginzer," Willie mumbled. "Lives, or did, on East Ninety-nith Street, New York City. Seems like I heard it some place before but I couldn't have. I got to stop listenin' to corny radio thrillers. I—"

The door opened, and Willie spun around in his swivel chair. A feminine character, well garnished with cosmetics and wearing a cinnamon-colored fur coat, stood there and appraised him dubiously.

"Don't let nothin' fool you." Willie said. "The Hawkeye don't put up a big front on purpose as it makes crooks think we are so dumb we couldn't if we wanted to. Have a seat."

"I see," the visitor said. "Physiology, huh?" She sat down and crossed her knees and Willie tried desperately to concentrate on Gertrude Mudgett, his perennial fiancée. "Yeah, they're new nylons, Mr. Klump."

"Uh, er, now you come here on business, Miss—er—?"

"Mrs. Louie Kropper. You find missing persons, Mr. Klump?"

"If they ain't too far away," Willie said.

"Well, about eight months ago that dope—my husband, that is—left me one night to git a pack of butts and I ain't seen him since," Mrs. Kropper said. "I don't think he met with no foul play as it wouldn't be my luck it should happen to him. I think he's lammed out on me and no punk like him can do that to me and get away with it."

"You got a pitcher of the guy?"

"Yeah, but not too good a one. Only a snapshot. Louie wouldn't never get a real picture took," Mrs. Kropper said.

"What was his business?" Willie asked as the doll handed him a picture of a guy in a bathing suit. "Citizens generally work at the same thing no matter where they go."

"That's smart, Mr. Klump. It looks like I come to the right place. Louie once ran a cigar store in Shamokin but it was only a blind to take horse bets," Mrs. Kropper divulged, and touched off a third cigarette.

"Not much to go on, this pitcher," Willie sniffed. "But maybe I'll get it blowed up an' see what he really looks like. Now about my fee—"

"Twenty dollars down, Mr. Klump. Five hundred when you turn him over to me," Mrs. Louie Kropper snapped. "That's what it's worth to me."

Willie felt sorry for Louie, but then he thought of the amount of scratch in his wallet. "The terms are satisfactory, ma'am," he said.

"One thing will tag him, Mr. Klump. A mole behind his right ear. It's as big as a nickel. He also bites his nails," Mrs. Kropper said and tossed two ten-dollar bills at the president of the Hawkeye Detective Agency. "I'll leave my address where I'm staying in New York."

"Thank you, ma'am," Willie said. "We shall leave no stones unturned."

"Find him, Klump. I intend to put the worm under one," Mrs. Kropper said. "Good afternoon."

SITTING back in his chair, Willie enjoyed the feel of the lettuce between his fingers. "Four P.M.," he sighed. "Too late to start on a job today. Anyway I feel sorry for Louie." He picked up the phone and dialed a number.

Gertrude Mudgett said, "Hello," and Willie said, "Hello yourself, sugar. I got an advance and so how's about dinner this evening?"

"I sure acquiesce, Willie."

"We got a bad connection, Gertie. Operator, I can't understand a word she says! I—"

"It means I will, lemon-head," Gertie sniffed over the wires. "I keep forgetting you never got no further than elemental school. Pierre's Rotisserie, huh?"

"Wee," Willie said. "At set hers. That's seven P.M. in French."

At the appointed hour William J. Klump met Gertie in front of Pierre's and he was just escorting her into the refueling café when a familiar and particularly repulsive voice brought him up short.

Gertie said, "Why, it's—"

"I know," Willie said as he turned his face to the left. "I'm sure it is someone I hate."

"Aloysius!" Gertie snickered. "What a coincidence."

"It's worst than that," Willie groaned. "What are you doin' here, Satchelfoot, to say nothin' of what you are doin' anywhere?"

"Why I come here to get a half-sole job on my shoes, you flathead. I got to eat like anybody else."

"I could argue that point forever," Willie sniffed.

A few minutes later, Satchelfoot Kelly, from Centre Street, waxed garrulous over a plate of beef a la mode.

"We're on the trail of somethin' big, Gertie," the detective disclosed. "Can't tell what it is, but even the Feds are on the prowl. I'm workin' on a big lead right now an' if I have any luck I'll be a pretty big guy in this town. But you don't need to think I'll pass up my old pals on the street—"

"That won't be good news to them," Willie cut in. "You're about as subtile as a belt over the head with a baseball bat. The only thing the G's are workin' on right now is that breakout from San Quentin where a guard was rubbed out, Gertie. One of the tough boys on the loose is Harry the Ox Hake. The character was doin' thirty to life for murder, arson and bank robbery. Harry the Ox can bend a crowbar with his teeth and tear two telephone books in half at the same time."

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed for you, Aloysius," Gertie said.

"That is not enough," Willie said. "You should better give him an ax and an atom bomb. If Satchelfoot catches Harry I will do a bubble dance any day at high noon in Times Square."

"Sour grapes," Kelly sniffed. "Anythin' is possible."

"You ain't kiddin'," Willie snapped. "Just look in a mirror."

"Shut up, Willie," Gertie gushed. "You are just envious of Mr. Kelly. He is—"

"Did you come into this joint with me or him?" Willie yelped, and customers began to stare.

"A big citizen in a tuxedo came over. "You seem to be the troublemaker here, mister." He tapped Willie on the shoulder. "Who called this restaurant a joint?"

"Who called this joint a resturant?" Willie countered.

"Outside, bum!"

"Awright, I know where I ain't wanted," the private detective sniffed, and hurriedly made his exit.

"You come back here, Willie!" Sachelfoot howled. "You ain't stickin' me with no check, you—!"

The boy in the tuxedo ejected Aloysius Kelly. Gertie called the manager. "They flang out both my gentlemen friends and you don't think I'm going to get stuck with the whole bite, Buster? You'll hafta call the Marines!" she screeched.

Pierre called the cops instead, and Getrtie was given her choice of washing dishes for the remainder of the evening, hiving up in the hoosegow, or leaving her wristwatch and ankle bracelet for security. Shorn of her jewelry, Miss Gertie Mudgett finally trudged home, mentally murdering Willie Klump and dissecting his cadaver. . . .

WILLIE was at work very early the next morning, calling morgues, hospitals, and police stations but no one by the name of Louie Kropper had been seen at any of the establishments.

"Guess I'll have to git a list of all the cigar stores in the classified an' check

on them," he said wearily. "Huh, me workin' on a penny-ante skip-tracin' job an' Kelly on the hunt for Harry the Ox. There's a chance he might be dumb lucky enough to fall over the criminal. Huh, the bangtails are runnin' at Jamaica right now an' maybe Louie would be out there. With twenty bucks I could take a afternoon off to myself."

So Willie went to Jamaica and on arriving was hailed by a citizen in loud clothes and with a louder mouth, who called him by name and slapped him on the back.

"You look familiar, pal," Willie said. "All the same you got me."

"There was the time you had me once, Klump. You forget? Me. Nolly Okum. You once grabbed me with my hand in a citizen's pocket in the subway, an' afterwards you went to sleep on the way to the hoosegow with me."

"You see a guy around here named Louie Kropper?" Willie asked.

"Never heard of the character, Klump. Say, wasn't that tough about Virgo Ginzer gettin' burnt up in that fire? His wife went up an' identified him."

"I was tryin' to place him," Willie said.

"Ginzer? Huh, to think cops would forget him. He was a smart gee an' they never could pin anythin' on him or get him mugged or fingerprinted. They was sure he knocked off that wholesale drug company that night an' took eight grand an' a load of morphine. All the hopheads from here to Philly would tell you. I heard Ginzer dropped all his dough, includin' his bar an' grill, on the nags."

"You knew him, huh?" Willie asked.

"Not too good," Nolly said. "Once I was in his joint when some gorillas tried to shake him down with their own brand of booze. There was quite a brawl an' Ginzer got hit with a bottle. They took three stitches in his noggin. But I got to be goin', Klump."

On the way back to Manhattan, Willie picked up a newspaper. It said that the law was fast closing in on Harry the Ox. Citizens were warned to act with extreme caution if they came upon the escaped convict, for Harry the Ox had once taught judo to G.I.s and had snapped a guard's neck at San Quentin as easily as he would have snapped a stick of macaroni.

JUST five days later, William Klump was getting ready to lock up his office when the phone rang.

He picked up gadget. "Hawkeye Detective Agency. William J. Klump—what was that?"

"I said this was the morgue," an eerie voice said. "Wasn't you the detective that was askin' about a Louie Kropper a few days back?"

"I am."

"Well, we got him any time you want to pick him up, Klump. He was found up near the Mt. Vernon line about two hours ago as stiff as a Harvard exam."

Willie hung up. He consulted a notebook on his desk and found Mrs. Kropper's telephone number. He dialed it and soon her voice tickled his ear. "Hello, Mrs. Kropper. This is Klump," Willie said. "I have found Louie. Now try an' get ahold of yourself as—"

"Oh, just wait until I get hold of him, Mr. Klump! Great work. Don't leave him get away, I'm starting out right this minute for—"

"He's at the morgue," Willie gulped.

"What's he doin' there? Wha-a-a-a-a-t?"

"That's right. You better meet me down there to identify him," Willie said. Then he heard a thump. "I guess I could of been more tackful."

Willie Klump met Mrs. Louie Kropper at the cadaver lockers half an hour later, and the deserted doll was very teary and weak at the knees. Together they went in and asked could they see the remains of Louie, and an attendant obliged and finally pulled out a drawer on which reclined a citizen departed from this world. Mrs. Kropper let out a yelp and caught Willie by the arm.

"It's not Louie," she said. "Is this a gag, you dumb flatfoot?"

Satchelfoot Kelly and two cops joined the party. "What are you doin' here,

Willie?" Kelly barked like a terrier.

"Representin' my client here, that's what," Willie sniffed. "I been lookin' for Louie through my missin' persons booreau for days. Why do they think this is Louie?"

"Got his name in his hat," Satchelfoot said. "Had a receipted hotel bill from Trenton in his pocket."

"Well, you're crazy," Mrs. Kropper snapped. "This is not Louie. I don't have to look to see if he had the mole behind his ear even. And look at his fingernails. Louie always bit his off like they was made of chocolate."

"Was this citizen murdered, whoever he is?" Willie asked Satchelfoot.

"He had his neck broke. It looks like he was throwed out of a car as he has no other marks on him to show he was struck by one." Satchelfoot said. "If the dame says he ain't her husband, she ought to know. But it looks pretty screwy to me. I could believe in two John Smiths but not two Louie Kroppers. What's the gimmick, sister?"

"Look, you ape!" Mrs. Kropper yelped. "Who are you accusing of what? I say it ain't Louie and it ain't!"

"Let me look at that stiff!" a voice squawked from some distance away. "Who ain't got a right? If I been murdered I ought to make sure, huh? I'm Louie Kropper!"

They all stared toward a door that was opening. A character with his mouth hanging open and his eyes bugging out stepped into the cadaver filing room, and the doll let out a battle yell and went in swinging.

"So I got you at last, you rat!" she yelled.

"Claudie, listen! You stop that! I can explain everything, except being dead."

"Grab those people!" a morgue flunkey yelled. "We don't want no trouble in here."

"Willie, what's the scare?" Kelly pleaded.

"I wish I knew," Willie gulped. "Somebody was murdered but it wasn't Louie. He just proved it."

HUSKY citizens finally subdued Claudie, and Louie Kropper got slowly to his feet and tested his front teeth, tried to open an eye that was closed tight, and then limped toward the cops.

"Some chiseler's been doubling for me," he moaned. "Let me look at the stiff. Maybe I can tag him for you. Anybody got some bandaid or liniment?"

"Yeah," Satchelfoot said. "Take a good look at the deceased, Kropper."

Louie took a long gander, shook his head. "Don't place him. This beats the aitch outa me, pals. Let's go get a snort, Claudia, and bury the hatchet."

"No!" Willie howled and wound his arms around the still embattled doll. "Kelly, git the fire-axe out of her hands. Louie, you better stay somewhere tonight where—"

"I know where," Kelly piped after subduing the doll. "He is goin' to be held for questionin'. I don't like the looks of this whole business. Murder has been done an' the corpse bears his name."

"Lock me up," Louie said. "I'll kiss your hand."

"Well, I found Louie," Willie said to the irate babe. "You agreed to pay me fi—"

"You found him?" Claudia screeched. "Try an' chisel me for even a nickel, Klump!"

"Pal, listen to me," Louie sighed. "Don't try."

"I'll take her to court," Willie protested.

"Stop making me git stitches in my sides laughing, Klump," Mrs. Kropper sneered.

Followed a day that proved to all concerned that truth is crazier than fiction. Louie Kropper was released by the cops inasmuch as they could not prove a thing on him, and Louie's ball and chain called Willie at noon.

"We've made up, Mr. Klump," she said happily. "Drop around at seven P.M. and have a snort with us and pick up a C-note for what you did for us."

"Thanks," Willie said. "You help to

put faith in human nature back in me, Mrs. Kropper."

William Klump walked into a hotel room uptown at seven bells, and the Kroppers already had a bottle open. After downing one that rolled his eyeballs around in their sockets, the president of the Hawkeye Agency asked Louie how in the world would anybody else think of using the name of Louie Kropper.

"On the radio I wouldn't believe it," Claudia said.

"You know, I tried to think of an answer when that flatfoot Kelly grilled me this morning, Klump," Louie said and tried to refresh his memory with a heavy belt of bourbon. "But nothing would come to me. . . . Wa-a-ait a minute. I remember something. The reason I was so hard to find all these months was that I used another alias. I got a dozen of 'em, Klump, my real name being Ronald Tish. So I meet a guy two or three months ago I ain't seen in a couple years. He calls me Louie and I says to him lay off that one as I have tossed it away. 'Pal, I am now Eddie McGinnity,' I says."

Willie sighed deeply and pawed his face with his hands. Louie kept on talking.

"But later on I took the name of Louie back again, the only one the wife here ever knew me by, see?"

"I wish I could follow you," Willie groaned, his head full of cotton waste.

"So that guy I met, figuring I ain't using that alias no more, picks it up as he maybe needed a new one himself," Louie Kropper said. "Baby, pour me another as I need it."

"Me too," Willie gulped.

"I wonder why Ginzer got in need of a phony name," Louie said and tossed off a stiff hooker.

Willie spilled his drink down the front of his vest and nearly dropped the glass.

"What was it you just said, Louie? You said Ginzer?"

"Yeah. I did a job or two with him once," Louie said. "Lost track of him until that day he—"

"That explains it then," the doll said.

"It can't," Willie choked out. "It couldn't of been Virgo Ginzer took the name. How could he be in the morgue now when he was rubbed out in a hotel fire upstate not more'n a week ago? His wife identified him. She brought back his wallet an' his watch."

"Gimme another drink, babe," Louie said. "Klump is right. It couldn't be Ginzer as Ginzer always had a black mustache and a gold tooth in front. I give up. When I heard it was me on the morgue slab I sure broke my neck to get there and find out."

"The stiff broke his neck to get there, too," Willie said, and gremlins with icy cold feet began to hold a track meet the length of his spine. He wondered what he was trying to think of and couldn't.

"It's a shame I ripped your new suit at the morgue, Louie," Claudia said. "I'll stitch it up later. You look whoozy, Klump. Here, take the bottle."

Willie's brains curled. Broken necks —stitches—bottles!

"Say, did you pick up a racing form today, babe?" Louie asked his wife.

Willie at once thought of Nolly Okum and of other things that scared him.

"Could I borrer paper an' pencil?" he asked. "I have to put things down quick when they come to me as they don't stay long."

"Humor him," Louie said *sotto voce* to his mate. "Then pay him off and get him outa here."

Willie jotted some words down on paper and when he had finished Claudia Kropper was handing him his hat and a C-note. He took both, thanked his hosts and hurried out of the room. An hour later he was in the morgue and looking down at a corpse once more. An employee of the city seemed quite irritable and asked Willie why didn't somebody hurry up and claim ownership of the cadaver.

"I'm not used to handlin' stiffs," Willie gulped. "Would you examine his dome an' see if at any time he got stitches in his scalp?"

"Awright, but why should anybody

be afraid of these things. They can't make no pass at a guy," the attendant growled. He leaned over the remains and looked for what Willie had mentioned, and found it, and said, "Yeah, looks like about three stitches. You know him now?"

"I'll let you know for sure inside of twenty-four hours," Willie said in a voice that needed oiling.

William Klump's next move was to go to a newspaper office and see an editor he knew. He found out that Ginzer's widow lived in an apartment house on East Ninety-ninth Street and he went up there and saw the superintendent, and flashed the badge.

"I would like to ask you about a Mrs. Ginzer," he said.

"A copper, huh? Yeah, I been wondering about that babe," the super said. "She plays a squeezebox at an East Side joint named Minnie's an' Manny's. Lost her husband in that hotel fire upstate."

"Yeah," Willie said. "You notice anythin' suspicious about her?"

"Just one thing. That babe always went out a lot, as she was a stepper, but tenants say she's been living like a hermit since her husband was killed."

"Maybe I'll pay the doll a visit," Willie said. "Cops can't overlook nothin'. Thanks for the corporation."

A few minutes later Willie Klump rapped his knuckles against a door, and a glamorous dish opened the portal just wide enough to get a gander at the private detective.

"Well?" she snarled.

"I would like to ask you a thing or two," Willie said. "I am the law."

"I got nothin' to say to no flatfeet," Mrs. Ginzer said quite impolitely. "Haven't I been through enough? Beat it!"

"Wait, baby. Let the guy in!"

It was a male voice, and Willie was reminded of the noises he had heard once in the zoo at feeding time. His knees got rubbery, and good sense told him to turn and run for it.

"Okay, come on in," the dame said, and Willie obeyed like a sleepwalker and crossed the threshold.

"Lock the door, baby!"

Willie saw the gee, then. Mrs. Ginzer's guest had a head and neck of the same width and a pair of eyes that would worry Peter Lorre. He was built along the lines of a subway kiosk.

"Well, pal? So you was smarter'n the other cops, huh? Reckernize me?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry to say," Willie gulped, and knew that this was Harry the Ox.

"Why'd you let him know you was here, Harry?" the doll yelped.

"He did know, baby. Don't be so dumb! I gotta take a chance he's a lone wolf," Harry the Ox growled, and flexed his muscles. "I wanted him in because nobody can liquidate a dope by remote control. He's wise you once was my moll before you hooked up with Ginzer. So he came here figgerin' he'd find me. Too bad."

"You broke Virgo Ginzer's neck," Willie choked out.

"See, babe? He knows everythin'."

"Don't talk so much, Harry," Mrs. Ginzer snapped. "How do you know he does?"

"Shut up! Don't tell me my business. I been cooped up here in the kitchen so long I'd even tear you apart with my bare hands if you needled me too much," Harry the Ox said. "It is bein' stir nutty all over again. I'm rubbin' this flatfoot out in just a minute or two."

"Yes, Harry."

"No," Willie gulped.

"Nobody's goin' to stop us from gettin' that fifty grand, baby," Harry the Ox ground out, and started rolling up his sleeves. "No cops are goin' to get me again."

No roscoes about, Willie thought desperately. Harry the Ox never had to be a noisy murderer. First, the judo expert had to get a hold on his man. Willie wasted no time, for he knew how brittle his neck was. He leaped at Mrs. Ginzer and sent her sprawling right in front of Harry the Ox who tripped over her and hit his massive chin on the floor.

Willie was almost at the door when Harry the Ox got him by the ankle, and he was pulled down on top of the convict. Then Mrs. Ginzer brought a vase down on the wrong skull, and Harry the Ox blinked for a moment or two, called the doll the dumbest dame he'd ever known, and tried to stop Willie from tearing himself loose.

The private detective extricated himself, straight-armed Mrs. Ginzer like a Michigan ball carrier, and tore for the kitchen. There was a window there, but Willie saw right away that it could scarcely accommodate a midget and so he got set for a last stand. He heard Harry the Ox come tearing along the short hall, snorting like a rhino, and Willie wondered how he would look with no head.

Then Willie saw the neat row of condiments. He quickly snatched up a white jar bearing a certain label, ripped the cover off and threw the contents at the kitchen door just as Harry the Ox barged through it.

Black pepper engulfed the noggin of Harry the Ox. He inhaled of it deeply and then went into convulsions. One of his sneezes blew a newspaper off the kitchen table. Harry the Ox coughed and sneezed and gasped for breath. Brine made his peepers opaque. Willie picked up a heavy rolling pin and cracked the dishonest criminal on the pate.

Harry the Ox spun in a half cricle but did not go down. Willie repeated the treatment, and the judo dispenser sighed deeply and settled to the floor.

"You get him, Harry?" the doll called.

"Yeah, babe," Willie answered from deep in his throat.

He picked up a sauce pan and took a stand just inside the kitchen door. Mrs. Ginzer thrust her head in. Bong! The widow dropped down beside the hulk of Harry the Ox. Willie reeled out of the room and to a telephone.

IN THE D. A.'s office some time later, Willie Klump sat near Satchelfoot Kelly listening to Mrs. Ginzer tell a story he almost doubted himself.

"Yeah," the widow said. "Virgo wasn't in that hotel fire. That's his corpse in the morgue. Harry the Ox arranged for it to be there. It was like this. Virgo called me from Trenton on the morning after the fire where he went to look over a hijacking proposition. The day before he got his pockets picked and the crook must have gone to that town upstate and registered at the hotel. He says for me to be sure to identify him as my husband, as then we could collect double indemnity on a twenty-five-grand insurance policy which would be fifty grand."

"Oh, brother," Satchelfoot Kelly squeezed out.

"Virgo said for me to give him time to change his looks and that he'd stay away under another name until we got the sugar. But the dope sneaked into the apartment one night an hour after Harry the Ox knocked on my door," Mrs. Ginzer forced out. "Me and Harry found out we was still that way about each other and I told him about Virgo and what had happened, and then we cooked up we would take the fifty-grand insurance for ourselves, and run away to Rio or some place far away—where we couldn't be nabbed.

The D.A. said, "Only you could have uncorked a rhubarb like this, Willie. If anyone else had, I wouldn't believe it. Go on, Mrs. Ginzer. So you had to make sure your husband was really defunct, that right?"

"Harry the Ox did," the widow said, letting the floodgates down. "I weakened at the last minute, but he did the job while I wasn't looking and later on we got Virgo out the back way and into a car. We dumped him and came back to stick around until—"

"So he took the name of Louie Kropper when he saw he was burned in a fire," Willie said. "I wouldn't of got into this if Mrs. Kropper hadn't hired me to find Louie. And if Nolly Okum out at Jamaica hadn't told me about the stitches in Virgo's noggin—"

"Well, Klump," the D.A. said after the doll was led away, "the F.B.I. should

reward you for this. Somebody look out for Kelly quick. I think he's got a fit or something."

"This time I don't blame nobody for throwin' one," Willie said. "I hope they'll build a special Alcatraz for Harry the Ox else I'll never rest comfortable in my bed from now on."

"Don't worry, Willie," the D.A. said, "Harry the Ox will sit in a gas chamber."

Gertie Mudgett called Willie up the next morning. "What makes you think I would stay mad with you, sugar?" she cooed. "That was a laugh on me what you and Kelly did at that rest'rant. Ha ha! That was a swell picture of you in the tabloid, honey lamb." Butter could've melted in her mouth.

"So six other babes told me that called up," Willie needled. "I got to sign off as more reporters are here to see me."

"I thought maybe we could see a movie tonight, darling," Gertie persisted. "Borgart is in that picture playin' at Louie's Lexington called 'The Corpse Sends Flowers.'"

"Oh, they are silly," Willie said. "They are always so farfetched." ● ●

"Ferry, we'll suffocate!" Julie cried

WANTED

By O. B. MYERS

Jim and Julie ran and ran. But somewhere they'd have to stop. . . .

JIM TOOLE was down in the pit, under the Plymouth, when Julie came out looking for him. He had used some asbestos packing to tighten the tail-pipe clamps as best he could, but the car really needed a new muffler. Like all these heaps that had been on the road for six or seven years, it was about ready for the junkyard. But Jim knew that he couldn't get a new muffler in Dunkirk; it would have to be ordered from the manufacturer, might take a week to come, and this young fellow had said he wanted to get to Buffalo

that evening. It looked hopeless.

He rapped lightly on the muffler shell with the end of the wrench. The metal dented too easily; it was almost burned through. He shook his head and turned as he noticed a moving shadow on the concrete wall of the pit.

"This won't last long—" he began, and then saw that it was Julie. She had crouched on her heels to peer at him under the edge of the running board. Her face was a little higher than his and hardly more than a foot away, and as soon as he looked at her, he knew that something was wrong. Her eyes were big, even bigger than usual, and there was a white, drawn look along the edge of her jaw.

"Jim!" she said in a half whisper.

He knew something was wrong, and already he knew what it was, too. He could see it in her eyes and the way her lips trembled. But he had to ask her, anyway.

"What's the matter, Julie?" His voice was low, rough.

"Jim," she whispered again, and he could see her clench her teeth. "It's Ferry!"

He knew perfectly well whom she meant, had guessed what was coming. Just the same, it hit him with a shock.

"Ferry?" he repeated stupidly. "Ferry Diamond?"

"Yes." Her hands gripped the edge of the running board. "He came in a couple of minutes ago, sat down in one of the booths. "Oh, Jim, what'll we do?"

Jim Toole laid the wrench down with slow, unnecessary care and stared blankly at the flat, oil-spattered brickwork. It seemed that this decision had been thrown at him repeatedly and relentlessly ever since he had married Julie Baker. Since before their marriage, in fact; ever since that afternoon when he had walked into Ferry Diamond's swanky office in the Consolidated Building to announce, "I'm quitting."

HE HAD been working for Ferry for almost three months then, and as far as pay went, it was certainly a good job. Almost too good. On the Liberty ship, coming home from Europe, Ferry had told him, "You're a smart man with a wrench, Jim. If you ever get to Brooklyn, look me up. I've got ideas; I'm going to make real money, not nickels and dimes. I can use you, Jim; don't forget."

Yet Jim had forgotten. It was by accident that he had bumped into Ferry in Columbus Circle, after he'd quit the service station in Charlott to come to New York looking for better prospects. Ferry, looking very prosperous, had been tickled to see him, and the very next morning he had started work in the shop in downtown Brooklyn.

The garage and repair shop was only one of the Diamond enterprises. Ferry had a finger, and a profitable finger, in a number of apparently unrelated ventures. A couple of his mechanics were specialists in the repair of pin-ball and slot machines, and Jim, in talking with them, found that they knew how to juggle the adjustments so that the "take" could be increased to a maximum. Another man, Waxy Symes, wasn't exactly a mechanic at all; he "sold" the machines and collected the take, in the course of which he used methods that smacked more of the bandit than of the engineer.

There were others on Ferry's payroll, who came into the shop only occasionally or who might be hanging around the office when Jim went up to get paid. Brother Berlin, a short dark fellow with extremely heavy eyebrows, who seemed to spend most of his time at the ball parks or in the sporting cafes; and Pete Zarneski, who knew more about how the horses were running at Belmont than how the cars were running on Flatbush Avenue.

It was a little too complicated for Jim, but he didn't try to figure it out; he just dug into his job in the auto shop and tried to earn his salary

Diamond's place was really more of a used car dealer's than a straight repair business. Jim seldom saw an owner.

Ferry himself, or Kite Foley, the foreman, bought second-hand heaps and brought them in and then sold them again after a complete overhaul.

A queer assortment they brought in, too. Some were wrecks that had to be trucked in on a flat-top trailer; others, nearly new, hardly needed the touch of a screwdriver. Yet each one, no matter what its condition, always got a wholesale overhaul under Kite's watchful eye.

After a time it began to dawn on Jim that he was overhauling motors that did not need overhauling, replacing parts that required no replacement, and repainting fenders and hoods that hardly had a scratch on them.

At first, he felt only curious and uneasy. But when those two Buick coupes came in the same day, his suspicions were intensified. Kite told him, "We'll switch bodies complete, from one to the other, numbers and all." Jim made no reply, except a nod, and went to work on the chassis bolts, but when he quit that afternoon, he headed for Ferry's office.

There were several big leather armchairs in the outer office, and tall floor lamps cast a soft light over the framed prints on the walls. Beyond a second door was another office, even more luxuriously furnished, as Jim knew; but the door stood open now, and he could see that the inner office was empty.

JULIE sat at her desk in the outer office, her hand on a telephone as if she had just put it down. She wore a light gray tailored suit and under it a red blouse with some kind of Egyptian figurines printed on it. Jim didn't know it then, but he would always remember that blouse. Her hair, burnished blond, gleamed golden under the lamp, and her eyes were clear and bright.

"Oh, hello, Jim." she greeted him.

"Where's Ferry?" he asked bluntly.

She shook her head. "He's not in." Then she added uncertainly, "He hasn't been in for—two days."

Jim gestured impatiently. "Well, I'm quitting. You can tell him when he comes in. I'm through, finished."

Before he ended the last sentence, she was on her feet, staring at him round-eyed. "You're quitting, Jim? Why?"

He smiled crookedly, without mirth. "You can just tell him the pay is too darn high. I don't want it."

Jim noticed now the fright that quivered behind her eyes, and he was strangely stirred. He and Julie had seen each other quite often, evenings; had taken naturally to each other, perhaps because they both had come from small towns. They had never discussed Ferry Diamond's business, and Jim wondered how much she really knew about it.

"Is it because of the—the hockey scandal, Jim?" Julie asked hesitantly.

The papers for the last few days had been full of an attempt to fix hockey games by bribing two or three key players. Brother Berlin had been arrested and questioned by the D.A. He had insisted that he was acting only on his own, but nobody believed that. The police, and the sporting world as well, were sure that he was backed by a syndicate of big-time gamblers, and the D.A. was making strong efforts to link certain notorious names with the deal. Brother Berlin had always spent a lot of time here in Ferry's office.

Jim shook his head. "They're running stolen cars through that shop. I'm sure of it. And I don't want any part of it." He eyed Julie sharply. "Was Ferry in that hockey fix?" he demanded.

Her lips trembled. "I don't know. I don't know, Jim."

"Brother Berlin was supposed to be released on bail this morning. Has he been in here?"

Now her cheeks were ashen. "No. He—he's been killed."

"*What!*"

"It was on the radio, half an hour ago. He was shot, over in New York, just after noon. They don't know who—"

Jim nodded slowly, his face set. "His backers—to keep him from talking. But Ferry—you don't know where Ferry is?"

"The newspapers said he was in the district attorney's office day before yes-

terday," Julie told him. "He's phoned here several times. He called just before you came in."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing about business. Just for me to meet him at Penn Station at seven o'clock without going home." She dropped her eyes. "He wants me to go away with him for a little while."

"Are you going?" Jim's voice was as hard as granite.

Julie raised her head and looked him full in the eye. "No," she said quietly but firmly. "Ferry's a good boss and he's taken me out to night clubs and given me little presents, too. But he never meant that to me, Jim."

Jim read her eyes and he believed her.

"I guess I've been dumb," she went on, her fears rising again. "I never knew he was a—that he was mixed up in rackets like this. Now I don't know —Oh, Jim, what'll I do?"

SHE SWAYED a little, and he put out his hand to steady her. Then suddenly she was in his arms, and he was holding her tight. His lips were close to her ear, whispering.

"Julie! It's all right, Julie darling. Don't worry. You've got to get out of here. You never belonged here in the beginning. We'll both get out of here—clear out. Come on!"

"But, Jim, what'll we do?"

"We'll go to Hartford, Boston—any place where you don't get a train from Penn Station. We'll get married tomorrow or the next day. I've got money enough and I can always get a job. We'll forget all this dirty business."

"Yes," she murmured, and her arms tightened about his neck.

When Jim kissed her, he knew that everything was going to be all right. He held her for a moment, then let her go. Julie picked up her coat.

"Jim, what about Ferry?" she asked fearfully.

"Forget him, too," he told her. "He'll never find us. You can mail his presents back to him."

She stripped off a tiny gold wristwatch and unpinned a brooch from the neck of her blouse. Then, stepping into the inner office, she put them on Diamond's desk.

"There! That's all," Julie said as she came out. Suddenly she stopped in her tracks. "Oh! This suit I'm wearing! He sent it up only yesterday and particularly asked me to wear it today."

"Well, you can't walk out without a suit on," growled Jim. "Keep it. It will cover this last week's pay."

Then they walked out. Out of the office—but not out of Ferry Diamond's reach.

Jim Toole and Julie Baker were married in Providence three days later, and Jim got a job with the Studebaker distributor. He had been there almost three months when, about to descend from a bus one morning, he looked out and saw a familiar face in the crowd that was waiting on the corner. He didn't get off but rode a few blocks further and then took a bus in the opposite direction and hurried back to their rooming house.

"Come on, Julie. Get your things together, quick!"

"What it is, Jim?"

"I saw Waxy Symes. He didn't see me."

"But, Jim, what'll we do?"

"We'll get out of this town in a hurry. Where's that bag. . . ."

They were in Wheeling almost a month when Jim stopped in a cigar store for some smokes. As he stepped out, two figures closed in, one at either elbow, and something prodded his ribs.

"Into that sedan, bimbo," growled a low voice.

Jim looked quietly from Waxy Symes to Pete Zarneski. "Wait a minute!" he cried. "What do you want with—"

"Do you want it right here? Get in there!"

Pete took the wheel. Waxy followed Jim into the rear and showed him the automatic before slipping it into his outer pocket.

"Where's the dame?" asked Peter over his shoulder, letting in the clutch

with a jerk. Waxy held the gun on him.

Jim thought fast. They could do what they wanted with him, but they'd never lay hands on Julie.

"I don't know," he lied. "I haven't seen her."

Waxy made an uncomplimentary sound with pursed lips. "Tell that to the boss," he snarled. "Step on it, Pete."

Pete stepped on it—and fate intervened for Jim. As the sedan hummed through a narrow, curving street, a huge truck backed out of a side alley. Because the driver's view was cut off, it kept on backing after their horn squawked. Pete was already going too fast to stop. He went up on the curb and tried to make the shrinking gap, but the lamp post foiled him. There was a slamming crash, followed by the shriek and grind of crumpling metal.

Waxy's head hit solid roof, and he was temporarily out. Pete was draped over the wheel, gasping. Jim was sprawled over the back of the front seat, his breath knocked out, but before the others could move, he managed to open a door and stagger out. In the crowd that instantly assembled it was easy enough to walk away.

NEXT, he and Julie tried a small town in central Ohio, a whistle stop outside Bucyrus. But no sooner did Jim find a job than he saw a man climb into a taxicab at the railroad station. It might have been Kite Foley and it might not. But Jim was in no position to rush up and slap him on the back. They moved on again.

By the time they got to Dunkirk their capital was running low, and Julie took a job as counter girl in the diner next to the service station where Jim worked. Old man Foster owned both places, as well as the big, old-fashioned house that stood back among the trees. He took a liking to them, especially Julie, and let them occupy a couple of rooms on the ground floor at a truly nominal rent.

As the weeks stretched into months, they gradually relaxed, came close to actually enjoying life. The work, for both of them, was hard but satisfying. Their pay envelopes, added together, made a respectable sum, and their expenses were few. They got a deep, real enjoyment out of each other's society, and in addition, began to make a few friends in the town. They were beginning to get the feel of being settled, could almost forget the strings that tied them to the past. They were happy. . . .

"Oh, Jim, what'll we do?" Julie said again as she looked anxiously at her husband down in the pit.

Jim squirmed up the steel-runged ladder. His face was set, his eyes cloudy.

"We can't keep running away forever," he muttered.

"Jim, I'm frightened." Julie seized his sleeve. "Why can't he leave us alone! What do you suppose he wants?"

Jim looked at her steadily. "He wants, *you*," he said bluntly. Then he put his arm around her waist. "But he won't get you. Come on inside. I'm going to stop this."

"Jim! What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to call the police."

"But you can't do that!" She stayed at his side, telling him all the logical reasons why he couldn't.

"I know, Julie," he said grimly. "But anything is better than this. We can't always be hiding and trying to live our lives at the same time. We've got to face it. What if they do give me a year or two? We can start over again when I get out."

At the police station the sergeant lifted his phone.

"Who did you say? Jim Toole? . . . Oh, yes. Go ahead."

He listened for more than a minute. Then he consulted an indexed folder on his desk.

"We've got no 'Wanted' on Ferry Diamond now," he said. "Sure, I remember the case. I tell you what. I'll send a man down there to keep an eye on him. Meanwhile, I'll put in a call to New York, see if they want to talk to him again. If they do, we'll pick him up."

He cradled the instrument. "O'Hara!"

he shouted. To the broad-shouldered young cop who entered from the next room be explained the circumstances. "Don't make a pinch until I give you the word. Call me back in about fifteen minutes, and I'll let you know."

"Sure enough," grinned O'Hara. "'Tis not a bad stint for a cold night. That taffy-hair behind the counter has the neatest ankles and makes the tastiest hamburgers this side of Chicago."

"Long distance," said the sergeant into the phone, and to the man in uniform he added sternly, "Keep your mind on the hamburgers, O'Hara! She is already the young man's wife."

O'Hara grinned and vanished through the door.

TWENTY minutes later he was calling from the telephone booth in the service station. He listened briefly, nodded, and hung up. Then he stepped out to face Julie and Jim, both gray-faced and tense.

"New York doesn't want him," O'Hara told them. "They say they asked him all the questions once, and unless he's ready to sing about the big names behind that deal, they're not interested. His racket is busted up, and they've got nothing on him."

Julie was astonished. "Do you mean —you can't *do* anything to him?"

"No." O'Hara shook his head. "Not unless he starts something." He eyed her curiously. "What makes you think he's trailing you around?"

"Well, you see—" said Jim, looking at Julie.

"Well—" began Julie, looking at Jim.

"I see," said O'Hara with a faint smile. "Look, now. I'll sit down in the diner for a bit, long enough to eat a hamburger or two. Then if he gets fresh, I'll be right there. Okay?"

Jim was unable to think of any alternative. He nodded silently, and the policeman went out, unhurriedly crossed the gravel by the gas pumps and entered the diner by the door at the end. When he had disappeared inside, Jim turned to Julie.

"You go in the back way, the way you came out. And stay in the kitchen until you see me out front."

"What—what are you going to do, Jim?"

Jim's jaw stiffened. "I'm going to talk to Ferry. I'm going to tell him to get the hell out of Dunkirk and leave us alone."

Julie paled. "But, Jim—what if he—"

Jim knew her fears without asking, but he couldn't let her see his own. "What if he what?" he repeated with careful scorn. "He can't do anything in the diner, except give me a bang in the jaw maybe. And I've got a bang ready to give right back to him."

They both knew that it meant a great deal more than that, but Julie was momentarily reassured by the carefully simulated confidence in Jim's voice. She stepped out bravely, Jim following on her heels.

Mr. Foster's eatery was a super-diner, almost a restaurant. The counter and fittings were of black plastic edged with stainless steel, the booths and tables of imitation walnut paneling. Besides the overhead lights, each table had its own little individual lamp with a parchment shade, and the shoulder-high partitions encouraged a pleasant air of privacy.

Half the stools at the counter were occupied and several of the booths. The dinner crowd was beginning to flow in from the radiator foundry and the locomotive works. Jim saw O'Hara on the end stool and in the next to the last booth caught a glimpse of a sleek dark head. His hands clenched, his nails bit into his palms.

AS HE approached, Ferry's head came up. His eyes met Jim's momentarily, dropped to his plate, and then jerked up again—the sort of double take that registers complete surprise. Then Ferry was on his feet, a warm smile on his handsome face, and his hand extended so spontaneously that Jim involuntarily took it.

"Jim! Jim Toole! Well, I'll be damned."

"Yes, it's me," said Jim stiffly. "You looking for me, Ferry?"

"You're the last man in the world I expected to see walk in that door," avowed Ferry. "But there's not one I'd rather see—and that's the truth. Sit down, Jim. You going to eat something? Sit down, anyway. Tell me, how's everything? How is Julie?"

Julie's all right. She told me you were in here." Puzzled but on guard, Jim moved to take a seat on the opposite bench. As he did so, he glanced over his shoulder, saw Julie framed in the door leading from the kitchen, watching him with an anxious, rigid stare. He added, "She's right over there now."

Ferry turned his head, then smiled and waved his hand in greeting. "You mean she works here? Heck, no wonder the food tastes so good! So she can cook, too—you're a lucky man, Jim!"

Jim nodded but forced the conversation onto a different tack. "What are you doing here, Ferry?"

"Me? Oh, I'm just working my way out toward Toledo. I've got a friend there who might give me a job." He chuckled without embarrassment. "It's not the old days any more, Jim, when the money burned holes in my pockets. There isn't enough now to scratch a match on, and I treat it with respect."

"You're not in Brooklyn any more?" Jim said cautiously.

"Haven't been there in months," replied Ferry. "That gang's all busted up—and a good thing for me, too, I guess. I didn't realize what I was getting into there, Jim. They were pulling a lot of stuff behind my back that I knew nothing about, and I nearly got into serious trouble. You stepped out at the right time, Jim, and you sure grabbed the right girl when you took Julie with you."

Jim could not help feeling his suspicions and fears being lulled by Ferry's genial and open manner. But he noticed one corroborative detail: the other's clothes. In his heyday Ferry's suits had always looked as if he were wearing them for the first time. His hand-painted silk ties were trimly knotted, his linen immaculate, his shoes highly polished.

Now his suit, although originally of good material, was rumpled and frayed, his tie was spotted, and his gray shirt had obviously been worn a lot longer than one day. But if it were true that Ferry was having a hard struggle to make an honest living, his troubles did not seem to have depressed him.

When Julie came to the booth, he took both her hands in his, told her she was as lovely as ever, and admonished her laughingly to be sure to look him up if ever Jim started beating her. At six-thirty, when her trick ended, she took her dinner and Jim's over to the gas station, and they both ate while Ferry talked.

FERRY had always been a smooth and entertaining talker. Now their unexpected company seemed to spur him on to make the evening lively and gay. He brought up incidents of their army life together that made Jim chuckle reminiscently. He spoke of the days in Brooklyn with a rueful nostalgia; the days when he thought he had the world by the tail. And always he admired and flattered Julie, telling her she ought some day to be in pictures, envying Jim for being lucky enough to have married her.

"Man, but I wish I were in your shoes!" he told Jim fervently. "A job in a small town full of decent people, a home, a wife like Julie—why, you've got everything!"

Jim could not recall afterward who first mentioned the gray suit. He thought it was Julie, but it might have been that Ferry adroitly led the talk up to that topic.

"I would have given it back with the other things when we left," explained Julie, "only I couldn't walk out without a suit on, and Jim said to keep it for the salary that was due me."

Ferry made a broad gesture with his arm. "Of course, Julie. You should have kept them all. I sold those baubles long ago for lunch money—but I'll wager you've still got the suit."

"Sure she has," said Jim. "She

wears it Sundays. It's too good for every day. What's more, Ferry, I've always wanted to pay you for that suit. I'm sure it cost more than the half week's pay that Julie had coming. What did you pay for it, Ferry?"

Ferry protested, suggesting that they call it a wedding present, but Jim was stubborn. Seeing that it was rather a point of pride with him, Ferry finally admitted he had paid a hundred and twenty dollars. Jim gave a low whistle.

"I'll say it's a good suit! Look. My spare cash is tucked away, back in the rooms. I'll go get it."

"The rooms?" said Ferry inquiringly.

Jim was explaining about their little apartment in the big old house behind the service station when he noticed a faint shadow cross Julie's face. In spite of Ferry's demonstrations of charming personality, it was apparent that the thought of being left alone with him had raised in her a slight qualm of misgiving.

"Let's all go together," suggested Jim, chuckling. "We'll show you our suite at the Ritz."

A few moments later the three of them took the path back to the house. It had started to rain, and they walked rapidly. In a moment the house loomed before them, a huge pile of masonry and sprawling verandas. A single light glowed over the front door, but all the windows were dark.

"Old man Foster is a mighty good egg," Jim told Ferry. "He lives here himself, but we hardly ever see him—except pay day. He stays upstairs most of the time; his bedroom is in the back."

"Sounds like a swell arrangement," commented Ferry.

Jim led the way to a side door and produced a key.

"This used to be the dining room and a library next to it, I think," he explained. "Not a bad setup for us."

He snapped a switch, and a lamp flooded the room with a soft radiance. The round center table and the heavy, old-fashioned chairs were no better than you would expect to find in furnished rooms, but Julie had given it a homey touch with bright curtains and pretty colored prints on the walls.

"I'm insisting on one thing," Ferry was saying with his quick smile. "Since I seem to be selling the suit to you, it's only fair to let me look at it once more. I might be overcharging you."

"Why, of course, Ferry." Julie smiled and went into the next room.

Jim unlocked a drawer of the cupboard, came up with a brown envelope, and drew out the meager handful of bills that constituted their financial reserve. He counted off six twenties and turned, suddenly aware that the room seemed very silent.

FERRY was standing motionless in the center of the room, fingers interlaced behind his back, head thrown back slightly, his eyes bright and fixed. For some reason he made Jim think of a pointer that scents game. His features were frozen in a half-smile, and he looked almost as if he were holding his breath in anticipation. Jim, sensing the sudden tension in the quiet room, opened his mouth to say something, but before he had time to speak, Julie came back from the bedroom.

"The skirt is at the cleaners, Ferry," she was saying, "but here's the coat. How does it look? The same as you—" She stopped when she saw Ferry's face.

It was as if a mask had been jerked off and thrown aside. Ferry had been playing a part, the part of an urbane, indulgent friend making light conversation. Now with his goal in sight, he threw aside his role and reverted to type. With his gaze riveted to the object in Julie's hand, his smile had vanished, and the lines about his mouth hardened. The once amused gleam in his eyes had become a steely glitter.

No one spoke. Ferry reached out and seized the coat. With quick, nervous movements he reversed it, felt up under the inside of the shoulder. To give the suit that modern, squared-off silhouette demanded by fashion, thick, triangular shoulder pads had been sewed in place. He ripped one of them out

now and crammed it into his side pocket. Twisting the other shoulder toward him, he fumbled for the second pad, his hands trembling with eagerness.

Jim was dumfounded. He had sensed the abrupt change in Ferry but could not understand it. If the other man had suddenly slapped Julie's face, Jim would have reacted instantly and violently; but this he couldn't figure out for the life of him.

"Ferry," he began. "for heaven's sake, what—"

Ferry's reply was a savage, impatient curse. In jerking out the second shoulder pad, he had ripped open its seams. Several dry, greenish wads cascaded to the floor, where they broke apart on the threadbare carpet. Jim saw that they were bills, and they looked as though they had once been soaked in water so that the maximum number could be stuffed into the pads. Five-hundred-dollar bills—hundreds of them!

Jim took a step forward. "I don't know what this is all—"

"Stay where you are!" Ferry interrupted. He hurled the coat aside, and his right hand slid under his own lapel. It came out holding a blued-metal automatic. Even in that tense moment, Jim recognized the P-38 that Ferry had picked up in Germany.

"What's that door behind you?" Ferry's tone was a rasping growl. Beads of sweat stood out on his pale forehead.

"It's a closet," Jim muttered.

"Open it," commanded Ferry. He held the gun steady as he motioned them toward the closet with the gun barrel.

Jim turned the key and swung the closet door open.

"Leave the key where it is," directed the other man. "Now get in there, both of you. Hurry up; this isn't slow motion!"

At this point Julie recovered her voice. "Ferry, we'll suffocate! You don't have to go through—"

"Keep still, you little tramp!" snarled Ferry. "If you'd stuck with me, instead of this mug, you'd be sharing this pile. As it is, you can take what's coming to you—and like it! Get in there!"

Jim felt his blood boil, but the muzzle of the automatic was a menacing round hole staring him in the face.

"Take it easy, Julie," he murmured, and guided her into the closet. Stepping to the threshold himself, he turned, preparatory to backing in after her when the quiet of the room was rent by the tinkle of shattering glass.

"Stand right where you are!" barked a strange voice.

JIM facing the big window that opened onto the veranda, saw that the center pane had been knocked in. A hand darted through the opening to flick the old-fashioned lock; almost at once the lower sash was thrown up. In the blank square he saw the bulky form of O'Hara, service pistol in hand.

The action quickened in tempo. Ferry, twisting his head, saw the same thing. Moving lightly on the balls of his feet, he took one long step. This put him directly in line between the window and the closet and set up his defense neatly. The officer in the window could not fire without the almost certain risk of hitting either Jim or Julie. O'Hara's quick expression of futile rage showed that he understood this, too. Nevertheless he barked another order.

"Drop that gun!"

Ferry grated something incoherent. Having taken care of his defenses, he turned to the offense. With hunched shoulders, right arm stiff as he took aim, he prepared to shoot down O'Hara in cold blood.

Jim's muscles leaped into action then. His arm snaked under Ferry's chin and jerked back savagely. The P-38 blasted once, hitting the lamp, and the scene was instantly plunged into darkness.

As they struggled blindly on the floor, Jim was not worried about the final outcome. Ferry was the bigger man, but he was soft from too little work. Crawling under and over automobiles had toughened Jim, made his muscles limber and hard.

O'Hara, charging in through the

window, was taking no chances. In the blackness he could not tell one antagonist from the other. His method was to feel around for a head and then slam it with the flat of his pistol. Jim saw a blinding flash, and then everything spun black.

When he came to, he was sprawled in a chair, and Julie was mopping his head with a wet cloth. He opened his eyes, but the glare of the ceiling lights made him close them again.

"I'm sorry I had to do that, Jim," said O'Hara.

"It's okay," Jim muttered and opened his eyes again, shifting his position so that he wouldn't see the glare. Ferry sat on the floor, his back against the wall and his wrists in steel bracelets. His shirt collar was torn, and blood still dripped from a cut on his head. The money was stacked in a heap on the table.

"A pretty pile," commented the police officer. "Looks to me like fifteen, twenty thousand dollars there."

"Twenty-four thousand, five hundred, to be exact," growled Ferry sullenly. "And it was in *her* possession!"

"Not when I saw it, it wasn't!" snapped O'Hara. "She never knew it was in that coat. Maybe you can double-cross your smart playmates in Brooklyn, making off with the dough they gave you to bet, but you can't double-cross a little lady like this!"

"How can you prove that dough came from Brooklyn?" sneered Ferry.

"Well," drawled O'Hara, picking up a crumpled piece of paper that had been with the bills, "this seems to be a list of names with figures after them. It wouldn't surprise me if they were the names the D.A. in New York is so anxious to learn. Nor would I be surprised if the same D.A. were glad to pay a reward to the parties instrumental in recovering this information for him."

He looked pointedly toward Jim, but the young mechanic shook his head negatively.

"I'm not interested in claiming any reward," he said emphatically. "I never want to go near the city again. All I'd like is to stay right here in Dunkirk and be left alone." He looked toward Julie. "As Ferry said this evening, I'm a lucky man; I've got everything. He didn't mean it when he said it, but I see now it's true."

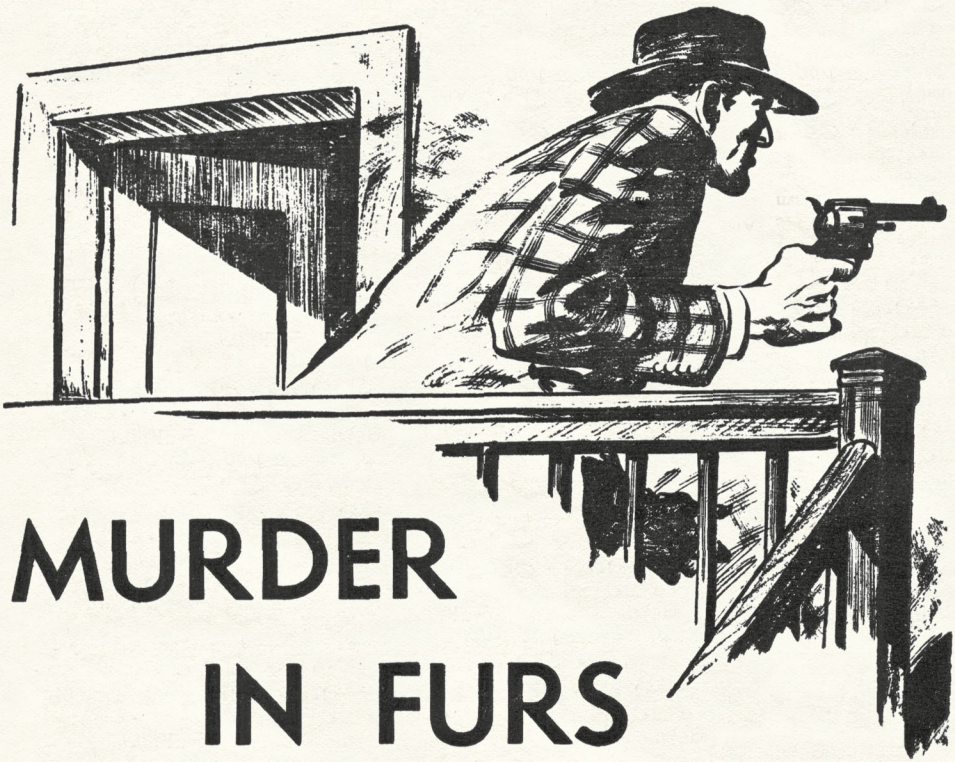
O'Hara rose, his eyes on Ferry. "This is one galoot that'll be letting you alone a lot from now on—especially if those fancy laboratories in New York find that the bullets that killed Brother Berlin came out of his German shootin' iron, here." He turned to Jim. "And if you do stay in Dunkirk, there'll always be a fella named O'Hara who's walkin' the street without holes in him because of what you did tonight. The O'Haras don't forget." ● ● ●

Know Your Man

WHAT should you try to remember about the appearance of a masked stickup man who held you up or stuck up a store where you were? (1) Where the stickup's chin would come as measured against your own. This gives a reasonably good idea of height. (2) His ears. Pointed lobe? Dewlap? Lobeless? Fan out or close to head? (3) Hands. Particularly the one holding the gun—because that's the one at which you'll get the best look. Big knuckles? Scars? Small wrist or large? Nails broken or dirty? Skin smooth or wrinkled or discolored? (4) Shoes. Big or small size? Pointed toe or round top. Even glasses or hair dye won't switch his preference in shoe lasts.

—Carl Campion

Steve Corey had to wrap up the case fast. For the down



MURDER IN FURS

A Novelet by FREDRIC BROWN

CHAPTER I

Death in a Doorway

I WAS walking past and happened to look out through the glass of the revolving door. There was this guy with a camera standing on the sidewalk outside, pointing it at the door and bent down over it.

Undoubtedly it was on the up and up. There's no law against taking a picture of the side door of a department store—even a swank Fifth Avenue store like Moley's—but then again the management pays me a weekly salary to look into everything that goes on, and this *could* have been something.

It seemed kind of silly to take a picture of a door unless the guy had a reason. And it could have been something that was to be used in some kind of suit against the store, for one thing. You'd be surprised about some of the things people try to sue department stores for—especially a store that's rich enough to

payment on this deal was death—with installments still due!

It was just the right height and distance, so I brought up my right foot. . . .

lose as much money as Moley's can. I couldn't think offhand how a photograph of the revolving door would help in a suit, but then I couldn't think of any reason why a guy would want to photograph it otherwise.

Anyway, being store detective, I revolved myself through the merry-go-shut and headed for the camera. It was a reflex camera, one of the kind that you look through a telescope extension of the top to see the objective on a ground glass down inside so you'll know just what your picture will look like.

The camera clicked as I came out, and the guy looked up and handed me a little pink slip. I glanced at it and saw it was one of those things—"Send this slip with 25 cents to such and such an address and you will receive the unposed action-photograph of yourself which our operator has just . . ."

"Oh," I said and felt a little foolish because I was going to turn around and go in again, and the guy would wonder why I'd come out in the first place. So I told him who I was and why I'd come out, and he grinned. He was a tall, skinny chap with a little black mustache that was smaller and not quite so dark as his black bushy eyebrows.

I'd stepped aside, of course, and a couple of dames came through the door while we were talking. He snapped them and handed them pink slips. He gave me another grin when the door was out of use again.

"Revolving door's a natural for this. They've got to come through one at a time and they're lined up perfectly. You don't have to guess at focus or anything."

So I went back in and stuffed the pink slip into my pocket, figuring I'd send in the two bits and if the picture was any good, I'd give it to Marie. Maybe she wouldn't want it, but I hoped she would.

I made a round trip of the first floor, then came to a halt, leaning against my favorite post, which overlooks the west elevators. The view is fine from there, what with Marie Nolan working as elevator starter.

Marie has red hair and the kind of figure that would look well even in a Mother Hubbard. In the cute little monkey-suit she wears on the job and with a sassy little green pill-box cap on her head, she makes you wonder how the movie scouts miss her.

I'd been taking in the view for maybe five minutes when DeVillers got off the elevator. I didn't notice him particularly until he spoke to Marie and smiled that oily smile of his. Then I felt myself getting hot under the collar.

He'd been trying to date Marie, she'd told me, and even if I'd liked him otherwise, I'd have found enough reason in that to hate his—well, not his guts, because I didn't think he had any. But I hated his looks and I hated his smell, which was a blend of hair tonic and eau de cologne, and I hated the way he walked and the way he talked.

MAYBE part of it was jealousy, not only of Marie, but because I was just a store dick, and he was a big-shot buyer who probably drew more per week than I did per month—not that I wouldn't still be a store detective if dressing as he dressed and smelling as he smelled were part of a buyer's job.

Anyway, Marie smiled at him, and he said something to her that made me mad, even if I couldn't hear it, and then went on. He went maybe six steps and did a double-take. You know what I mean—you've seen actors do it in the movies. He stopped short, as if he'd suddenly run into a stone wall.

An elevator was just loading to go up, and he dived toward it. Then he looked at his wrist-watch and stopped again, started toward the street door, turned back again. His mental agitation was as obvious as though he'd stood there fluttering his hands. You could just hear the wheels grinding out—"I got to go back. I'll be late if I do. I got to go back. I'll be late if I do."

If there'd been a daisy handy, I'd have gone over and handed it to him and suggested he decide by pulling off petals.

He came to an abrupt decision and

didn't do either. He went back to Marie and spoke to her, and I could see he was talking seriously and urgently about something. Then he fished a white envelope out of the inside pocket of his coat and handed it to her. She nodded and shoved it down inside the neck of her monkey jacket, and it made me madder than ever that an envelope his hands had touched should end up there.

But he whirled around and headed for the side doorway at what was practically a trot.

From the way he'd acted about it, that envelope must have been damned important. For some reason or other, he hadn't wanted to take it with him and hadn't had time to go back upstairs and leave it in his office on the sixth floor. So he'd left it with Marie until he got back. Or had he, maybe, told her to give it to someone he hadn't time to take it to himself?

I was still wondering when a woman screamed.

I ran toward the sound almost before I heard it, because when a woman screams in a department store, it means trouble for the store detective. Whatever she may be screaming about, it's still trouble.

The sound came from the general direction of the side entrance revolving doors and sounded just a little muffled, as if she were inside the door. She was.

She was half in and half out and she couldn't move the door either way. On the outside, lying mostly on the sidewalk but with his feet in the revolving door so it wouldn't move, was the body of a man.

She'd quit screaming by the time I got there.

"Just a minute, lady," I said and went through one of the regular doors to one side of the revolving door to see what was wrong with the guy and move him so the dame could get out.

There was a crowd beginning to gather on the sidewalk and another inside, but I pushed through. Nobody had touched the guy before I got there. It was DeVillers. He was lying face down, and from the way he lay, I knew I wouldn't have to hate him again, ever.

I didn't touch his skin to see if it was cold, because there's a law against moving a corpse, and the police are very annoyed with private or store detectives who move same. So, acting on the assumption that he was alive and had fainted or something, I caught his shoulders and pulled him so his feet came out of the door. At the same time, I turned him face up.

The woman who'd yelled came on out. Her face was so white that the rouge spots on her cheeks showed up like oversize polka dots. She didn't look at all but started to push her way through the crowd to one side. I grabbed her arm, gently but firmly.

"Sorry, ma'am, but I'm afraid you'll have to stay around. You're a witness."

"A w-witness!" she said and made herself look down to see what I'd already seen—the blood spreading around the bullet hole in the left side of DeVillers' chest. She made a funny little noise, like an asthmatic peanut whistle, and fainted. I caught her.

THE policeman on the corner had seen the crowd by this time and was pushing his way through it. He and I knew one another slightly, so I didn't have to identify myself.

"It's murder," I told him. "Stick here, and I'll take care of this dame—she's a witness—and phone in about it."

I carried the woman back into the store and ordered one of the floorwalkers to phone the Homicide Bureau while I carried her across a couple of aisles to the shoe department where I could park her on a sofa. Yes, Moley's is so swank we don't have regular stall-type seats in our shoe department. We have overstuffed chairs and sofas.

I grabbed one of the salesladies, who had had first aid training, put her to reviving the woman, and told the manager and two clerks in the shoe department to keep an eye on her and not let her get away when she woke up, even if they had to put her back to sleep again.

Then I ran back to the door. The first policeman had another one with him by now, and the second was trying to watch both the regular doors alongside the revolving door and not let anybody in or out. The revolving door itself was safe—nobody could go through that without stepping over the body. I gave him a hand by locking one of the doors.

"Thanks," he said; then: "Anybody near the shot?"

Up to now I'd been so busy I hadn't had time to think, but it dawned on me that there hadn't been any shot. Or anyway, I hadn't heard it. Of course, I might have taken it for a backfire from where I'd been standing, but—gosh, if someone had stood here on the sidewalk and fired a gun, *somebody* would have heard it. Of course, anyone in a passing car might have fired it and got away unnoticed, but how'd he known just when to be passing by? Even so, it would probably have been a gun with a silencer or—

"Steve, you dope!" I told myself and shoved through the crowd to look for the tall, skinny guy who'd been watching that particular entrance with a reflex camera. But, of course, he wasn't anywhere around. I didn't expect him to be, once I'd thought of looking for him.

It had been a perfect setup for a killer waiting for someone to come out that door—and that was the door DeVillers always used because he kept his car in a parking station just across the street.

CHAPTER II

Money Means My Job

QUICKLY I felt in my pocket for the pink slip he'd given me, and it was still there. The address was in the Bronx, and the name of the company there but not the phone number. I hotfooted it for the nearest phone booth and looked up the company in the Bronx directory. It wasn't listed.

That made it likely but didn't prove the case because the phone might be a new one not yet listed, so I rang the main phone office and had them look it up both ways. There had been a company there by that name, but it had gone out of business nearly a year ago.

Which made it certain. The killer had got his hands on the left-over slips somehow. The police might be able to trace them to him, but it was a thousand-to-one chance they wouldn't, because he wouldn't have used them if he'd come by them in some traceable manner. He'd have had his own printed instead. Either he'd had a genuine camera and a silenced gun in his pocket or the camera itself had been rigged with a gimmick to make it shoot more than pictures.

Then I remembered that double-take scene in front of the elevators while DeVillers was on his way to get his picture taken. He'd given Marie an— I was running toward the elevators without stopping to analyze my reason for deciding it might not be a healthy thing for her to have under the circumstances. It would be better for her if that envelope were found in DeViller's desk, whatever was in it.

She was still at her post, looking curiously down the aisle toward the excitement. When I came up, she jumped.

Steve, what's up? Somebody said that somebody was dead. Is that—"

I let her have it straight.

"DeVillers was just murdered as he went out the door." And because I was human, I watched her face to see if that meant anything to her. I must have been *still* jealous of the guy because I felt big relief when I saw excitement and consternation in her face but nothing you could tag as grief.

"Steve! How—who—"

"Dunno," I said. "Listen, that envelope. I saw him give it to you. If you're dragged in on a murder investigation they'll bounce you here—you know Moley's. Slip it to me, and I'll put it in his desk instead."

She reached for it without hesitation, and I slid it into my pocket.

"What'd he tell you it was?" I asked.

She shook her head. "He didn't. Just said it was very important, that he'd meant to leave it upstairs and didn't want to carry it with him and would I keep it and be awfully careful of it until he got back about four o'clock."

"Fine," I said. "He intended to leave it upstairs, and that's where it'll be. Don't forget our date tonight—unless I got to work late on this thing. I'll—"

I broke off because I saw some men coming, who were obviously the homicide boys. I went to meet them and took them upstairs to the office. While we were in the elevator and going down the hall, I told them what I'd done thus far and about the woman who was being held for questioning and the man with the camera and the pink slip—everything except about the envelope the buyer had given Marie on his way out.

They already had the dope on the guy with the camera, it turned out. Several people had seen him apparently snap a picture just as a man had—as they thought—fainted in the doorway. Nobody had noticed him slip away, though, while the crowd gathered. There'd been pink slips on the sidewalk, dropped by some of the people he'd handed them to. And there was a radio-car broadcast out for a man with a camera.

WE WERE in DeVillers' office by then. And that was when J. R. Moley himself blustered in, and Clark Wentworth, the general manager, came with him. They both lit into me, as though *I* were the one responsible for the unfavorable publicity. With them, it wasn't murder—it was unfavorable publicity.

Then another police detective came in and spoke to one of the first ones.

"Hey, Lieutenant, we questioned the dame. She don't know anything."

"Did she see—"

"Naw, she was right behind him and didn't even see the man with the camera. And we've checked up on her. She's okay. Her husband's a big-shot surgeon. But say, I got something else."

"Yeah?" says the detective looie, "what?"

"The store detective here, whoever he is, may be pulling a fast one. I got some dope from a gal at the glove counter. She says this murdered guy gave the elevator starter an envelope, and after the murder, the store detective runs back and whispers to her, and she—"

Well, there it was. I brought out the envelope and tried to explain, and it didn't go over.

Manager Wentworth glared at me. "You're—" he began, but he was watching out the corner of an eye while the detective looie tore open the envelope—and that tore everything.

There were greenbacks, big ones—hundred-dollar bills—and there were twenty-three of them. The looie looked up from counting them, and he looked at me.

"Did you know what was in this when you tried to hold out on us, or did you just have a hunch?"

"How could *I* know what was in—"

Moley didn't even wait for me to finish. "Corey, you're through here," he said. "Now. Get out quick, and we won't prosecute."

"Prosecute for what?" I asked belligerently. But I knew he had me by the short hair. Just because that glove counter cat had got her story in before I'd been able to plant the envelope in DeViller's desk, I was on the spot. I'd held it out until they'd asked for it, and there'd been money in it—twenty-three hundred dollars. Hell, if I'd been in their shoes, I'd have been suspicious myself.

Wentworth, the store manager, glared at me. "I don't know why Mr. Moley is being so generous as *not* to prosecute. If you're smart, you'll get out of here quick before he changes his—"

I started to say something, and he hauled off and hit me on the chin.

"Just a minute," said the looie, then turned to me as I picked myself up. "Pal, in case you haven't got the idea yet what these guys are talking about,

you've been fired. But first, tell me what you know about why this DeVillers gave the envelope to the elevator dame."

Well, it wasn't the looie's fault I was bounced, so I gave him the whole story, and he semed to believe it.

"Okay, run along," he said. "And don't try to leave town. We'll want you tomorrow to get a detailed statement and have you sign it.

As I was going out the door, because there wasn't anything else even worth trying just then, he called after me.

"Send up that girl—hey, no, don't. We want to get her story before you've had a chance to compare notes with her. You go get her, George."

He gave the detective he sent for her a minute's start on me, and I probably passed Marie coming up while I went down in another elevator.

I waited for her outside the employees' entrance, and she came through it in less than half an hour. I took her arm, and we started walking.

"Honey," I said, "I'm sorry as hell that—"

"Forget it, Steve. It wasn't your fault. You tried to keep me out of it. Blast them!"

"Check," I told her. "I can see why they fired me, but *you* didn't do anything wrong. I was store detective, and you didn't know any better than to hand that envelope over to me when I asked you for—"

"They didn't fire me. I quit. Listen, Steve, shall we get married or go to a movie?"

I said "Huh!" because here I'd been proposing regularly for months, and she'd been saying no, and now suddenly we're both out of work and in trouble and she says yes. I couldn't figure it out, but it made me so darned happy that I didn't care about reasons.

We went to a movie, though—not because I wouldn't have given my right arm to marry her then and there, but because I told her it was no dice until I had another job. And I explained one thing maybe she hadn't realized—I was through, as far as I could see, as a private detective. Try to get a job in that line with a reference like the one Moley's would give me!

SHE said why not sell vacuum cleaners, and I told her okay but wait until I found out whether or not I *could* sell vacuum cleaners, and took her to a movie. We sat in the balcony and held hands, and I haven't the faintest idea what that movie was about, I was so mixed up between being happy and miserable.

But I must have seen it, because finally some scenes on the screen started to look familiar, and I thought wasn't this where we came in, and it turned out that it was.

It was dark when we got out. We ate at an Automat, and then over coffee, Marie looked up at me.

"Steve, haven't you forgotten one thing?"

"What?"

"You're a detective."

"That's right, I am." Then I saw what she meant and I thought it over, and she was right.

"You want to wait here while I find out who murdered DeVillers, or shall I take you home first?"

She grinned at me and put her hand over mine.

"Attaboy," she told me. "But neither. If you know anything to start in on, I'll take a bus home. Your time is valuable."

That semed highly doubtful, but she won the argument and took a bus home alone.

Then I realized what had happened and stood there and cussed myself. With Marie looking at me, I would have admitted my ability to move the Empire State Building one block west and put the Chrysler Building on top of it single-handed.

But I started thinking how the hell I, on the outside, was going to beat the cops to the guy with the gimmick camera, and it didn't make sense. For that matter, why should I? It wasn't any skin off my nose who had killed DeVil-

lers, and I wasn't sure I even cared. But women do funny things to a guy.

Anyway, there I was, walking back toward Moley's and it was eight o'clock when I got there. I knew Pop Eggert, the watchman, would be just inside the receiving-room entrance around this time, and maybe I could pump him to find out if anything had happened since I'd left.

I rapped on the steel sliding door, and he opened it.

"Hi, Pop," I said and ducked in under it, and he lowered the door again. "What's happened?"

"They're all gone now," he told me, "except two C.P.A.'s going over the books. You going up and help 'em?"

"Huh?" I said. "Me go up and—" Then I got it. Pop didn't know I'd been bounced. He hadn't come on duty until the store closed, and nobody'd thought to mention the fact to him, what with the excitement of a murder on a sale day.

"Sure, I thought I'd drop up and see how the audit was coming," I said and pumped him as much as I could without giving away the fact that I hadn't been at the store since three o'clock.

As far as he knew, nothing important had developed. No motive for the crime had been thought of so far. Because of that suspicious twenty-three hundred dollars, the management was having the books audited to see if it showed up as a shortage. If it didn't, they couldn't claim it, and it would go to DeVillers' estate.

"But how," Pop asked me, "could he have swiped it when he ain't in the cash department? Buyers don't handle cash in department stores, do they?"

"No," I said, "but they okay bills for payment. It's been done that a buyer okays a bill that's too high and gets a kickback from a crooked company on the outside."

And that isn't all. There are so many angles to the department store game I could write a book about it and still be a couple of volumes short. Not that high-finance buyers are the rule. But I guess there's termites in every woodpile. You know how it is.

It was, as far as I knew, the only way a buyer could beat the game—getting a kickback on buying overpriced merchandise or hot merchandise. The latter was the best bet—if a buyer pays too much for stuff, the fact becomes pretty obvious when the merchandise goes on sale. But stolen goods can be bought low enough to provide kickback and profit.

CHAPTER III

THERE'S PELF IN PELTS

POP took me up to the sixth floor on the freight elevator, and I walked into the general office as though I owned the place Neither of the accountants who were poring over books and files paid any attention to me.

"Found anything yet? I asked.

One of them jotted down a total and turned to me. "Not a thing."

"How soon will you be finished?"

He looked surprised. "We told you it would take three nights to do this.

I nodded. "Sure," I said, "but I thought now that you were started you'd know whether that was a good guess or not."

"It wasn't a guess." He turned back to his figures.

I walked on past them and switched on the light in DeVillers' private office. I sat down in his leather-covered swivel chair and put my feet on top of his mahogany desk. No use bothering to search that desk—the coppers would have done that.

There I was, sitting in DeVillers' chair at his desk. Maybe I'd get an idea if I tried to think I was DeVillers. There's the old story of the idiot boy who found the horse that was lost and that nobody could find, and explained it by saying he just imagined he was a horse and figured out where he'd go and went there.

"All right," I told myself, "you're DeVillers and you're crooked and you want to make more money than this job

overpays you. You're buyer for wearing apparel, all kinds of it. Now you can find crooked companies that will sell you any of that stuff at maybe five per cent more than it's worth and kick back two per cent, but that isn't much percentage.

"But suppose somebody had some stolen goods. They'd be glad to sell you at half price and bill you at three-quarters price, and there's twenty-five per cent profit for you, and you're getting stuff you can show a profit on when it sells retail.

"Yeah, hot—"

The word *hot* did it. I thought of furs. There'd been an unusual number of fur burglaries around the city of late. And DeVillers bought furs for Moley's. Suppose DeVillers had bought hot furs. That meant he was dealing with a dangerous class of crooks. Fur loft robbers are big timers—killers. Suppose—

Well, whatever you suppose, furs looked like the best bet offhand among the things DeVillers bought.

I got up and strolled into the general office and walked along the bank of invoice files until I came to the drawer marked "Furs." Neither of the C.P.A.s paid any attention to me.

There were file folders for sixty-some companies in that drawer. It looked like tough going until I got an idea. I ran through them, looking at the date of the latest invoice in each folder and eliminating the companies from whom purchases had not been made within the last couple of months. That cut me down to fewer than twenty companies.

I looked each one of those up in the phone book, on the chance that one of them was a complete false front. But they were all listed. Well, I'd expected that. Invoice checks went out by mail, and the hot-fur dealers would have to have a front with an address and a phone.

I took out those files. There were eighteen of them in all, and I took them into DeVillers' office and began to run through them. Three were fairly well known companies—anyway, I'd heard of them. I eliminated those. Then I eliminated six, because purchases within the last sixty days had totaled less than two thousand dollars.

THAT left me nine for closer study. I went through two of them without getting anything like an idea and started to study the next one. It was the most recent, apparently. There were only three invoices in it all together, and all were dated within the preceding month. We pay bills on varying dates, according to departments. All three of these were stamped as paid on the fifth, two days ago, and all were marked "OK.DeV." One was for $2000. The other two were for identical amounts—$10,500.

I studied it a while longer and then took the next one. While I was looking at it, it came to me. Those three invoices, all paid two days ago, totaled *twenty-three* thousand. The money in DeVillers' envelope had been twenty-three *hundred*.

It might be coincidence. Or it might be ten per cent.

The company was the Continental Merchandising Company, and the address was 1100 Canal Street, which was down in the warehouse district.

It might mean something and it might not. But I put the file folders back in the drawer and before I left, I filled my pocket with cigars from the humidor on DeVillers' desk. If I was going to try to solve his murder for him, he owed me that much. Anyway, he couldn't smoke them any more himself.

I passed the time of night with Pop, then went out and caught myself a cab and directed it to 1100 Canal Street. I didn't want to pull up in front of the building until I'd had time to give it the once-over.

So I walked the last block. Eleven hundred was a depressed-appearing six-story brick building that looked like any other old six-story brick building on Canal Street. There was a light in the hall downstairs, and each window in a perpendicular row above the hall was lighted. But as far as I could tell from the outside, all the offices—or whatever they were—were dark.

I entered the dingy hall and looked over a directory, which was painted on a wooden bulletin board. The freshest paint job was for the Continental Merch. Co.—Room 503.

There was an automatic elevator that was much newer than the rest of the building. But I heard someone swinging a mop in one of the hallways above, so I walked up instead.

He was on the third floor—a fat, sloppy-looking janitor with a big mustache that was blond, except where the tobacco stains had made it brown. He wore blue overalls and a peaked workman's cap marked "Janitor," which should have been the tip-off if I'd stopped to think about it. He looked *too* much like a janitor if you get what I mean.

But I didn't see it then, and I thought he looked dumb enough to bluff, so I braced him.

"Detective, I said authoritatively. "Got a search warrant for 503. Let me have your passkey." When I said "search warrant," I pulled a folded paper halfway out of my pocket. It was a bill from a jeweler for repairing my wristwatch.

"The hell," he said and looked at me wonderingly. Then as though he'd just realized what I'd said, he went on, "I ain't got no passkeys, mister. I don't clean in the offices. They do that in the daytime."

Maybe he was lying, I thought, but I'd noticed the kind of locks on the other doors, and if 503 had one like them, I could open it without any trouble. So I nodded and went on up the stairs before he had a chance to object.

Number 503 had a door with a lock like the others, and it took me less than half a minute to get it open with a bent paper clip. But as I swung the door inward, I heard a faint sound downstairs. It sounded like the dial of a telephone whirring.

So before I went into 503, I slipped quickly out of my shoes and went back down a flight and a half of stairs to the landing between the third and fourth floors and listened.

YES, it was the janitor, and he'd gone into one of the offices on the third and had just got his party on the phone. By listening intently, I could catch most of what he said.

"Yeah, just got here. He's up there now. A pause and then: "Hell, maybe he *is* a copper. I didn't want to monkey with him. . . . Right away, huh? You'll call the boys, and they'll get here in fifteen minutes? . . . Hell, yes, if he's going to search up there, he'll be longer'n that. He doesn't know I'm onto him."

Well, that was all I needed to hear, and I was on my way back up the stairs. I didn't have a gun and I wasn't going to stick around until "the boys" got there. I'd allow myself ten minutes and then scram with five minutes to spare.

I looked at my wrist-watch as I switched on the light in 503. There were two desks and a file cabinet. I looked at my watch again to make darned sure and then started in on the file cabinet.

It was easy. Right in the top drawer were a few folders, and one of them was marked "Moley." In it were duplicates of the three bills I'd seen at the store. But these had penciled notations on them. Somebody'd figured twenty-five per cent first and then changed the figures. That tied it all up as far as I was concerned.

I stuffed the papers into my pocket and, just for routine, slid the other drawers open and shut. The middle two were empty, but there was something interesting in the bottom drawer—a forty-five automatic. I stuck it in my pocket.

My watch showed me I'd been in there only four minutes, and I was through searching. That gave me an idea, because it showed me I could risk a few minutes more, especially now that I had that forty-five. So I ran to the phone and dialed Marie's number. Luckily, she answered right away.

"Honey, this is Steve. I'm in room 503 at 1100 Canal Street. Jot that down while you listen. I know why DeVillers was killed. Here's the dope." I talked fast and gave her the works.

". . . and they probably agreed to give him twenty-five per cent and then sent

him only ten, and he squawked. He raised hell over the phone and made an appointment for this afternoon to come over and raise some more. Probably threatened to give them away. They decided to bump him instead of arguing with him.

"These fur racket boys are tough. They knew what time he'd be leaving the store for that appointment and they—well, you know the rest. I got to scram before they get here. S'long." I hung up the receiver.

Now if anything went wrong here, at least somebody would know where to look for what was left of me. I don't know why I figured there was a percentage in that, but I did.

Nine minutes had gone by my watch. I looked to see that the door to the hall was still closed, ran to the window, and climbed out on the fire-escape. Number 503 was a room on the back west corner of the building, and I'd noticed that fire-escape from the outside.

I started down and passed the fourth floor. The window on the third floor was closed like the others, and I didn't pay any attention as I edged past it. That was where I made my mistake.

Suddenly there was a gun in my back, and a voice that sounded like the voice of the tall, skinny guy who'd used the camera that afternoon spoke.

"Up!" it said loud enough to carry right over the crash and tinkle of broken glass. He'd been waiting inside, and when I went by, he'd simply stuck that gun through the pane as though it weren't there.

So I put up my hands.

CHAPTER IV

Marie is the Marines

STAND still with your back right to to the window," he said. I heard the sash go up, and then he spoke again. "Back in. Careful."

A light flashed on in the room behind me, and I followed orders.

"Wait. Hold it," he said when I was halfway through and in an awkward position. The gun muzzle pressed hard into the small of my back while he reached around to frisk me. He tried the wrong side first, and while he did it I got in a word.

"You're early. You weren't supposed to be here for five minutes yet."

He chuckled. "So you heard Fatso phone, huh? That was the boys I called who'd be here in fifteen minutes. Me, I live just a block from here." He felt the gun in my coat pocket now and reached in after it.

He pulled it clear and then, a gun in each hand, moved away to let me step down. I took a chance and fell instead, threw myself down backward off the sill, hoping to knock him down as I did and maybe twist around and be on top. I twisted, all right, but I landed on my face on the floor because he'd stepped aside and not back.

It was a good thing I'd done a little tumbling and acrobatics and knew how to fall, or that one would have broken bones. It put plenty of bruises here and there as it was, and when I looked up, Skinny was grinning at me.

"We haven't got time to play games," he said. "Get going, up to 503 till the boys get here."

We went out into the hall with me leading the way. Skinny was more careful, now that I'd tried a break, and walked right behind me with the gun in my back so I could feel it.

The janitor lookout, whom he'd called Fatso, was out there. He had a gun now, too, and he'd been posted in a doorway where he'd have had a clear shot at me if I tried to go down the stairs.

We got up one flight to the fourth and then heard someone, several someones, come into the hallway downstairs. The skinny guy behind me told me to halt, his voice suddenly tense. Then he whistled.

There was an answering whistle, and there was relief in Skinny's voice when

he spoke—not to me but to the janitor.

"It's them. Keep your heater on this mug while I—"

He walked over to the well of the staircase and yelled down for them to come up, and one of them answered him. I heard several men getting into the automatic elevator. The door slid shut, and the machinery started to whir.

That meant there were at least two of them on the way up, and when all of us got together in 503 on the next floor, they'd be at least four to one. I wouldn't last as long as a bottle of beer at a clambake when they started working on me.

So what the hell—I had nothing to lose by trying again. Skinny was still somewhere behind me, but his gun wasn't making contact and maybe it wasn't even aimed at me at the moment. Fatso was standing just three feet in front of me with his gun held waist high and aimed at my belt buckle.

That was just the right height and distance, so I brought up my right foot. The gun went off as I kicked it, but the bullet went wild, and the gun itself flew up in the air between us.

I wasn't waiting to see what the one behind me was going to do. I dived straight at Fatso and swung him around in front of me. While I was doing that, the gun behind me roared, and my scalp suddenly felt as though a red-hot poker had been used to part my hair. Then I had Fatso between me and the guy with the gun and I shoved Fatso into him, and they both went down.

I didn't have time to go for a gun, either the one on the floor or the one that was probably still in Skinny's hand. The elevator was whirring nearer with reinforcements, and I had to stop it before it got there. It took me only two steps to reach the door and slam my fist through the glass.

I had to unlatch the door from the inside because, with an automatic elevator, the doors are locked while the elevator is in motion. But when I unlatched the door and shoved it part way open, the elevator stopped right where it was between floors.

The men in it let out a yell.

Then I was able to turn back to see why Skinny hadn't shot me yet. He'd gone part way down the stairs from the shove and was just getting to his feet. He still had his gun—and mine—and he aimed one at me and triggered it. But shooting up a staircase is tricky, and he missed.

BY THAT time I'd scooped up the gun I'd kicked out of the janitor's hand. My own hand was sticky with blood from smashing in the glass of the elevator door, but there didn't seem to be any bones broken.

I stepped back out of range for the moment, heard a hasty conversation on the stairway and deduced that my gun—the forty-five I'd taken out of the file cabinet upstairs—was being handed to Fatso and that I'd be bucking two of them again. But I had Fatso's revolver with only one chamber empty—five to go.

I snapped one shot down the staircase and ran up toward the top floor. I'd have a better chance to make a stand there, because they couldn't bracket me from above and below. I knew I couldn't guard both the stairway and the fire-escape to keep them from getting upstairs past me.

On the fifth, I stopped long enough to knock out the glass of the elevator door with the butt of the revolver. I looked down and saw that top of the elevator cage was grille-work and that it wasn't worth wasting any of my four precious bullets trying to shoot through it. But I could see that there were three men in the cage and that they were working to open the third-floor door, the lower half of which was accessible to them.

One of them raised a gun and fired a shot at the catch that held the door, and I knew they'd be out in a minute or two. Five armed men below me, and me with exactly four bullets—but I'd have to make a stand the way I was.

I ran on up to the sixth and picked myself a doorway that commanded the head of the last flight of stairs and also

gave me a good shot at the doorway of 603, the room into which the fire-escape would open.

I heard the elevator door give way and a lot of talking below me. Then there was sudden silence, except for the scrape of feet on stairs and the sound of a window opening. I knew they were coming for me both ways at once.

I found I was leaning back against the door behind me to keep from falling and that I was so weak I could hardly stand up, even that way. There were little red dancing spots in front of my eyes, too.

I didn't realize why until I saw the spreading pool and looked down.

The blood wasn't dripping off the hand I'd smashed through the glass; it was running off. Diagonally across the back of my hand was a four-inch gash that showed the bone.

But there wasn't time to put on a tourniquet. They weren't more than one floor below me by now and coming closer. Well, it looked as if all I could do was try to take a couple of them with me.

To hell with waiting here for them and bleeding to death while I waited—I staggered numbly toward the head of the stairs.

Then I heard a sound that changed everything—the wail of squad-car sirens—and I realized that Marie had phoned the police, must have phoned them the minute I'd hung up the receiver on her, and given them the address here.

The crooks heard them, too. Suddenly there were footsteps, no longer trying to be silent, pounding *down* the stairs, trying to get out of the building and away before those squad cars got there. They weren't going to waste time shooting me before they went.

I was at the head of the stairs now, with no one in sight below me, and I tried to stop there. I even tried to throw myself backward to keep from falling down that staircase, but my motions seemed to be slow and meaningless like a man trying to run under water.

I came to lying in a bed, and there was someone working over me.

"Did the cops get all of them?" I asked.

"Sure," said the man, but he might be saying that just to keep me quiet.

"How many?" I asked.

"Five," he said, and I knew he was telling me straight. I let go and went away again.

When I came around the second time, it seemed to be the next day, because it was light outside. There was a nurse near by, and when she saw my eyes open, she asked how I felt.

"Swell. How am I?" I said.

She smiled. " You're all right. You should be, after sleeping fourteen hours. No bones broken, but you lost a lot of blood and you'll be here a few days."

"There are two people waiting to see you. Feel well enough to talk?"

"Sure," I told her. "One of them got red hair?"

She nodded, and I said to send the red-headed one in first. But it turned out that Marie—who'd been there most of the fourteen hours—had gone to the hospital kitchen to wangle a cup of coffee, and the nurse came back with Mr. Wentworth, the manager of Moley's.

He stuck out his hand. "Steve," he said—it was the first time he'd ever called me by my first name—"we made a big mistake yesterday. Will you overlook it and come back with us as soon as you feel up to working again?"

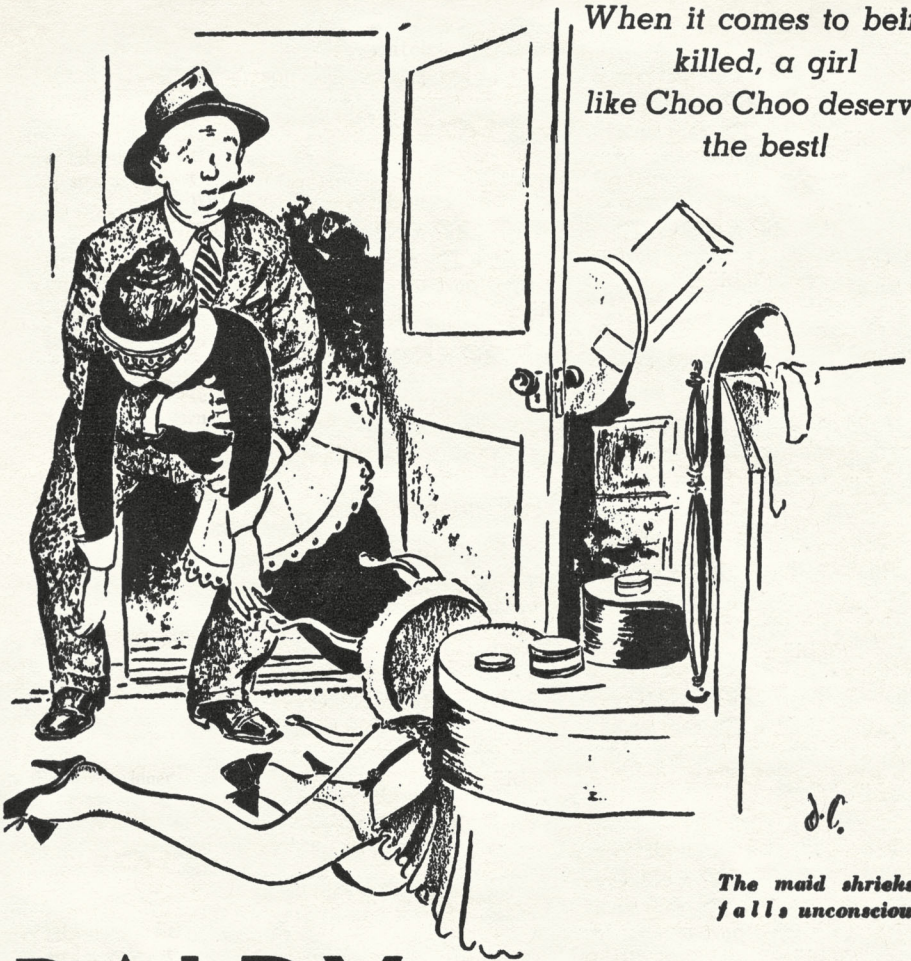
"Sure," I said. "Say, did they get enough of a story out of those fur racketeers for you to keep the money?"

He nodded. "And it ought to finance a raise for you, by the way. I won't say just how much until I've talked it over with Mr. Moley."

"But about Marie," I said. "I mean Miss Nolan. Is she going to take her job back, too?"

"I think she has other ideas, Steve."

That was what I'd wanted to be sure of. Not that I'd have had to wait long to find out, because Marie was coming through the doorway then. Wentworth was considerate enough to scram quietly without even wasting enough of my time to make me say good-by to him. ● ● ●



The maid shrieks, falls unconscious

BALDY AND THE STRIP-TEASE MURDER

By JACK KOFOED

MISTER BALDY SIMMONS is not in the habit of visiting burlesque theaters, because the jokes are at least thirty years old and the chorus girls sometimes even older. However, there is a strip-tease character named Choo Choo Wallace, whose figure makes even the Venus de Milo look like an old bag.

It is unfair to Mr. Simmons to say he

goes to the Bijou just because of Choo Choo's figure, though thousands of other people do exactly this.

Miss Wallace is the daughter of a fellow Baldy is acquainted with from 'way back when Rum Row is better known than the Stork Club. He is Light Fingers Wallace, one of the best liquor dealers of his time. Light Fingers, however, has the misfortune to spend all his money hiring lawyers to keep him out of the sneezer during prohibition days, so when Choo Choo gets into the dough, she has to keep pappy as well as herself.

Choo Choo is not too cheerful about this situation, because she finds it necessary to spend plenty of potatoes on such things as diamonds, sables, and a Park Avenue penthouse. To make it more complicated, Light Fingers is unhappy if he is unable to bet a sizable wad on the horses and he is one of the worst pickers in the entire world. This combination keeps the Wallace bankroll in a tired and frazzled condition.

As a matter of fact, just this very afternoon Choo Choo calls Baldy and speaks in this manner: "It is up to you to sell a bill of goods to the old goat I am unfortunate enough to have for a pater. He loses more dough on the horses than Nick the Greek is able to win at dice, and I am getting sick and tired of paying off bookmakers. Unless he stops playing the ponies, I cut him off my payroll and let him break his heart by going to work."

"This is a very drastic thought," says Baldy. "There is only one job Light Fingers knows, and since there is no longer any profit running illegal wet goods from Bimini, I am unable to think, offhand, of anyone who hires him. Besides, he is out of practice at working."

"I do not care," Choo Choo tells him. "Light Fingers chooses between me and the horses."

Since getting Mr. Wallace to stop betting is about as easy as turning a dipsomaniac into a Carrie Nation, Baldy decides to stroll down to the Bijou, and have a little chat with Choo Choo. It may be she relents a little bit.

It is about ten o'clock when Mr. Simmons appears at the stage door. Dad, the doorman, greets him affably.

"What do you do in these parts?" Dad asks. "I understand you spend no small amount of your time solving murders and such things. Nothing is murdered around the Bijou, except a sense of humor and the English language."

"I am here to see Miss Choo Choo Wallace," says Baldy.

Dad clicks his tongue.

"I guess there is no cure for it," he says. "I do everything in my time from running booze to driving a taxi, and a guy seldom reaches an age when he figures it is good policy not to chase after dames any more. You are too old for such nonsense and do not have money enough to fool around with Choo Choo Wallace, anyway. She is strictly a dame who requires a champagne pocketbook of her boy friends, as well as a Barrymore profile. This is true, with a single exception, and you are not it."

"Be yourself," Baldy says. "I am here on business, and it is not the business you obviously have in mind. While I am not old enough to go haywire about Miss Lillian Russell, I realize quite well I am not young enough to do likewise about Miss Choo Choo Wallace. I hope and trust I arrive between her appearances on the stage, since I do not have time to hang around this rat trap very long."

"You are in luck," the doorman tells him, "since she finishes her strip number and does not go back into action for another forty minutes. I admit the customers do not like this, because our chorus is made up of honest grandmothers, and our comics never read a joke book that is printed after the McKinley administration. But even Choo Choo cannot go out there and take off her clothes twenty times a day. As she says, there must be interludes."

BALDY offers Dad a Corona Bravura cigar, which costs him no less than half a buck. He does not do this entirely out of the goodness of his heart but be-

cause Dad knows everything that goes on around the theater and once works on the rum boats with Light Fingers. Thus, chances are, he keeps an eye on Choo Choo and is able to tell the score at practically any moment of the day or night.

"The situation shapes up something like this," Mr. Simmons says. "Choo Choo and her daddy are in something of a dither. To be perfectly frank, they are not getting along."

Dad lights the Corona Bravura, and meditates.

"I know the family from beginning to end," Dad tells him. "As a matter of fact, Light Fingers and me is pals from 'way back, and I do not wish to hear anything bad about him. If anyone causes the current upheaval, it is a character named J. Biddle Salisbury, whose real name is Mickey O'Toole."

"This Salisbury personality is new to me," admits Baldy. "Where does he fit into the picture?"

"He is a very good-looking wolf, who makes passes to Choo Choo like Sammy Baugh does to his receiver on the football gridiron. I give you six, two and even that Choo Choo does not miss a single one of them, because J. Biddle is calculated to make the heart of any dame go pitter-patter. But he has no more dough than I have and is putting the bite on his girl friend for so much that she cuts down on Light Fingers. When I am a taxi jockey, I find out it is ethical to cheat some people and not others, and I do not believe Choo Choo has any right to hold out on her pappy."

As he says this, Dad pulls a face as sour as though he bites on a pickle. It is clear J. Biddle Salisbury has a very low rating in his book. This is perfectly understandable to Mr. Simmons, who does not like gigolos very much, either.

"I hope to straighten this out when I have a chat with Choo Choo," he says, "and then I think I have a word or two with Mr. Salisbury."

"Well," says Dad, "if you stroll over to the Somersetshire Hotel after a bit, you find him there. As a matter of fact, you only miss him by a little in this very spot. He is here to see Miss Wallace. By the happy look on his puss when he comes out, I deduce that Choo Choo hands him a neat bale of lettuce. But if you wish any kind of a conversation with the lady, you better go in now, because you may not finish by the time she has to take off her clothes for the public."

"When do you see Light Fingers last?"

"About five minutes before J. Biddle Salisbury is here. When Light Fingers takes his departure, he looks like a rainy afternoon in Panama. I suppose Choo Choo turns him down when he asks for a bob or two to bet on the bangtails. Some children are very ungrateful."

Since it seems there is nothing more to be learned from the doorman, Mr. Simmons goes into the theater. The place smells of mustiness, grease paint, powder, and sweat, which is not an uncommon thing in a burlesque joint. He goes down a hall, lit by a couple of electric bulbs, looking for Choo Choo Wallace's dressing room. In front of it is a middle-aged crone, with more wrinkles than somewhat, trying to open the strip teaser's door. Her name is Madeleine Haggerty, and she is Choo Choo's maid.

"Oh, Mr. Simmons," she says with a little sigh of relief. "I am glad you come. Something is wrong. The door is locked, and Miss Wallace does not answer, though she is supposed to go on in twenty minutes or so."

Baldy knocks on the door but gets no answer. Since he investigates murders, robberies, mayhem, and such, he always carries a skeleton key, because he finds it very handy. He slips it into the lock and opens the door.

Whereupon the maid utters a perfectly horrible shriek and falls unconscious into Baldy's arms. There is a very good reason for this.

Choo Choo Wallace is lying beside her dressing table, and it does not require more than a single glance to see that she is very, very dead!

Miss Haggerty's scream brings the stage manager on the double. Apparently the first thought that comes to his

mind is that it is necessary for someone to take his star's place. Murder or not, the strip-tease must go on!

"Tell Bubbles to get ready," he shouts. Then he turns to Mr. Simmons. "What is this all about?"

"Somebody obviously bumps Choo Choo off," says Baldy. "I take charge of this unpleasant situation until the police arrive. Tell Dad to allow no one to leave the theater. If anyone does, Detective Lieutenant Johnny O'Keefe is very sore at you. When Johnny gets sore, bumps and bruises develop. You better phone him right away."

WHEN the stage manager, whose name is Kittlebock, departs to carry out the order, Baldy make a quick examination. Choo Choo meets her fate by being bashed over the noggin with a very hard object. It is a tire iron such as is often used in automobiles. There is no doubt about its being the lethal weapon, because it has blood and hair on the business end.

There is no sign of a struggle. Nothing is upset or disturbed, so the supposition is that whoever it is who commits this crime does it in a sudden burst of rage.

Detectve Lieutenant O'Keefe arrives in short order, accompanied by a couple of plainclothesmen. The show is stopped and the audience dismissed. Then the company is gathered on the stage for questioning. This questioning gets nowhere.

During the show everyone is busy—much too busy to notice who goes in or out of Choo Choo Wallace's dressing room. No one hears screams or anything, which is natural, what with the band making a racket, and people singing and dancing, and so on.

Of course, it occurs even to O'Keefe that one person ought to know. This is Madeleine Haggerty, the maid, though there is no known reason in the world why she boffs her employer over the head. However, she soon proves Choo Choo gives her the day off and she spends it with her sister's family. However, she begins to worry about the stripper getting her costumes mixed up. Though how anybody gets mixed up on the scanty apparel Choo Choo uses is quite beyond all imagination. So she returns.

The only story that makes any sense is the one Dad tells about Light Fingers Wallace and J. Biddle Salisbury.

"Now, we are getting somewhere," says Johnny O'Keefe. "This Salisbury character is the last one to see her alive, so he is the murderer. It puts the finger on him beyond any doubt. The motive appears to be clear enough. Miss Wallace's maid says her mistress has no less than five grand in her handbag today—and the handbag is now empty, save for the usual collection of lipsticks, compacts, and other such junk dames carry around with them. Clancey, go over to the Somersetshire Hotel and put the clamp on Mr. Salisbury. The rest of you go now, but be around in case I want to ask more questions. Mulligan, take that iron to the lab and see what the smart guys have to say about it."

After this, Detective Lieutenant O'Keefe and Baldy Simmons go to Pappadopulous's place for something to eat.

"I like a deal like this," says Johnny, digging into an onion and limburger on rye. "Nice and clean and the murderer cuffed in a hurry. This makes my record look very good, indeed, and gives me more time to play gin rummy with Pappadopulous."

"What makes you think it is all cleared up?" asks Baldy. "Maybe you find somebody else's fingerprints on the murder weapon."

"Not a chance. J. Biddle is the last one in Choo Choo's dressing room. He takes dough from her—needs plenty to keep up appearances. Five thousand clams are missing from her bag. Besides all this, it is a cinch the lady does not give herself the boff on the noggin. Who else does this but the last character who sees her?"

"Conceding all these things," agrees Baldy, "I do not yet see Mr. Salisbury

being strapped into the hot seat."

"Why, may I ask?"

"I do not believe there is enough proof that J. Biddle is the last visitor. So far as Dad knows, he is, but is it not possible that another gets in?"

"Go on," says Johnny O'Keefe a little moodily.

"Leave us examine the scene," suggests Mr. Simmons and outlines the backstage terrain.

THE hall on which Choo Choo's dressing room faces is an offshoot from the one which leads from the back door to the stage. Two comedians occupy cubbyholes, which are about the size of a closet, and not too big ones at that, on either side of Miss Wallace's place. The rest of the cast, including the chorus, have their dressing rooms on the next floor, which is reached by a spiral iron staircase.

"Now, here is the dope, as I see it," Baldy says. "The only people who come to visit Choo Choo are her father and sweetheart. This is vouched for by Dad, the doorman, and no one gets in without him seeing them. However, it is entirely possible someone in the company slips into this dimly lit hallway and enters Miss Wallace's dressing room without being observed. I also learn that the two alleged comics, who dress in the tanks next to her room, are in plain sight of somebody at the time she is being knocked off."

O'Keefe studies this for a moment.

"I see what you mean. It is possible for someone to come off the stage and while a lot of other people are swarming up that stairway, to slip in here unnoticed. Then he is able to boff Miss Choo Choo and duck out again. Even Dad is unable to see this, because of the angle of the wall. At any rate, even if it does not happen, it is certainly a possibility."

"It sure is," agrees Mr. Simmons.

"But I still hold with the idea that J. Biddle Salisbury is the murderer. He is the logical person, and I am a great guy for logic."

"Logic is grand, but killings do not always ride with it. By all means lock J. Biddle up in a nice, comfortable cell, but do not stop investigating on this account. It is entirely possible that a comic or a chorus girl or the stage manager does the job. Do you not remember *The G String Murders,* written by Gypsy Rose Lee?"

"Yeah, but—"

"So do not be surprised if one of the company is guilty this time, too."

"For what reason?"

"If the five grand is a motive for Salisbury, it is one for a guy like Kittlebock, for instance. The finance company is hot after him. Maybe Bubbles Houlihan gets tired of being an understudy. Maybe Madeleine Haggerty comes back in time to do the job herself. I see various possibilities aside from this gigolo."

"I play my cards," said O'Keefe a little grumpily, "and you lay yours. Gosh darn it, we always seem to have different ideas!"

"Brother," Baldy tells him, "what I do or think is not important. The police pay me nothing. I get no rewards. But if you make too many wrong moves, it is your neck, and not like losing a few bobs to Pappadopulous at gin rummy, either."

Now, Detective Lieutenant Johnny O'Keefe has a very high regard for Baldy Simmons. He knows Mr. Simmons is often right, and it is also clear that coppers who frequently arrest wrong characters find promotion difficult and painful.

"Give me the dope," he urges. "If J. Biddle Salisbury is not guilty, tell me who the killer is, I do not wish to get fouled up. Ever since I put the arm on Crimpy Joe for an arson job it turns out was committed by Wacky Will, the commissioner is keeping the evil eye on me."

"I do not know who the killer is," Baldy tells him. "All I say is, do not jump off the deep end by assuming J. Biddle Salisbury is the guilty party, even if it seems so at the moment."

WITH this, he takes his departure and goes immediately to Choo Choo

Wallace's expensive penthouse on Park Avenue. Light Fingers is there, in his shirt sleeves, with a glass of bourbon in his hand. He looks unhappy and down in the mouth, which is to be expected, since the police inform him only a little while ago what happens to his daughter.

"If I get my hands on J. Biddle Salisbury," he says, "I save the state the expense of a trial and execution. This moozler is putting the bite on Choo Choo for months. It is a cinch he kills her and gloms onto the five grand she has in her handbag. A guy like this deserves to be chopped into very fine pieces, such as they prepare hamburger."

"What I do not understand," says Baldy, "is why your daughter has so much change in her handbag. As a matter of fact, I understand she is running close to the deadline as regards money and plans to trim expenditures."

"Cutting down on me. Sure." Light Fingers gets up and rambles about the living room. "I am only her father. It is all right for her to stop the handouts to me but not to that profile, Salisbury."

"This discussion, of course, sheds no light on why Choo Choo has so much lettuce in her handbag."

"No mystery there," Wallace insists. "I put down a bet for her on Hotspur at Belmont this afternoon. The nag waltzes in at 20 to 1, and I take the money over to her."

"Who else knows she has all these potatoes on hand?"

"Salisbury, the big bum. Choo Choo tells me she promises him half of what she wins on the bet."

"Anybody else?"

"This I cannot answer. Choo Choo, however, has a lip as loose as a banana skin, and chances are she brags all over the theater about winning. But do not try to put the finger on somebody else. J. Biddle Salisbury is the murderer, and if the police do not take care of him, I personally attend to the matter in no uncertain terms."

At the finish of this dissertation, he hands Baldy a goblet of bourbon and water, and they meditate in silence for a while.

Then Mr. Simmons speaks to Choo Choo's pappy in this fashion:

"Light Fingers, I know you from 'way back in Miami when you deal in the best assortment of liquors ever brought into port. You have a logical mind, but in this matter, it seems to me you go haywire. There is a reason, because you are in a distraught condition. But I do not see why this gigolo put himself in the shadow of the electric chair for five grand, particularly when the doll intends to give him half at once, and sooner or later he gets the rest, anyway. If so, he is a much dopier character than I have been led to believe."

"In reaching this decision, Baldy," says Light Fingers, "you do not take into consideration one fact. Choo Choo and J. Biddle quarrel frequently of late. As a matter of fact, no later than yesterday evening she remarks that the whole deal is off and she wants no part of him any more."

A statement like this just shows how upset Light Fingers really is. It does not match at all with what he tells about Choo Choo planning to split her winnings with J. Biddle Salisbury. Why is it necessary for the deceased judy's pappy to lie? If a guy lies in a murder case, chances are he is trying to cover up somebody, who, very often, is no less than himself. Certainly Choo Choo and her pappy have plenty of quarrels.

Personally, Baldy says to himself, I think suspicion in this head-bashing business is pretty equally divided between J. Biddle Salisbury and Light Fingers Wallace. However, since Salisbury is supposed to be the last to see her, the graver suspicion falls on him.

SO MR. SIMMONS bids his host a very pleasant good evening and goes off to the bastille to have conversations with Miss Wallace's lover, who has already been taken in by Johnny O'Keefe.

Salisbury turns out to be a big, blond, good-looking guy, the sort for whom dolls go in a great big way. It is not hard to see why Choo Choo hands him dough when she has it and he has none, though Baldy is never able to understand a man who takes money from a woman.

"Johnny O'Keefe tells me about you," says J. Biddle Salisbury, "and I am very glad, indeed, to see you here. They tell me your batting average in getting murderers is something like one thousand per cent. This is bound to help me, because they hand me an exceedingly bad rap. Nothing makes me harm a hair of Choo Choo's lovely head."

He begins to sob in a very quiet and gentlemanly manner.

When he has this slightly out of his system, Mr. Simmons starts with a few questions.

"Though you love her so much, I understand Choo Choo and you do a lot of pretty fast quarreling of late."

"We do not," Salisbury declares. "We are as close as adjoining fingers on the same hand. My darling is temperamental, and there are times when she blows up like an atomic bomb over practically nothing at all, but never at me."

"Not even when you ask for too much dough?"

J. Biddle Salisbury flushes to the roots of his blond hair.

"I know I am a rat about this, but I figure to pay it back one way or another if I am ever able to make a strike."

"And you know she wins five grand on Hotspur?"

"Of course. Choo Choo is very happy about this and, as a matter of fact, hands me a chunk of it."

"And," says Baldy, "you bop her over the head and take the rest!"

The young man springs to his feet, his eyes blazing.

"This," he cries, "is a complete and utter lie. When I leave the dressing room, Choo Choo is in a very happy mood."

Mr. Simmons takes out another Corona Bravura and lights it thoughtfully, then blows out the match.

"It is possible you tell the truth," he says, "but if you do not bump the lady off, who does?"

Salisbury shakes his head unhappily, looking real puzzled.

"I have no idea."

"Tell me in detail what happens."

"I come to the theater at nine-eighteen. Though I am by no matter of means a clock watcher, I notice this because of the big timepiece in Dad's cubbyhole. Choo Choo is doing her Oriental number, so I wait until she is through. She kisses me, and—"

"Gives you your cut?"

"Yes."

"Does she say anything about her pappy being there?"

The blond guy looks genuinely surprised.

"No, and I am quite sure he is not, because Choo Choo is angry with him and is certain to tell me if he shows up."

"Dad insists Light Fingers leave there at nine-fifteen, just before you arrive."

They stare at each other. The same thought occurs to each simultaneously. It is possible that Mr. Wallace comes after Mr. Salisbury departs and deals the knockout punch to his daughter. After all, he and Dad are old friends, and it is not too much to assume the doorman lies in order to cover up for his old pal.

"Does Choo Choo lock the door as you depart?" Baldy says.

J. Biddle Salisbury shakes his head.

"Not that I recall. Of course, I assume with all the cabbage she has on hand, she does this when going onto the stage, but there is no need while she is still in the dressing room."

This makes sense, but what Mr. Simmons does not understand is the fact that when he examines the strip teaser's handbag, he does not find the key. Then, the character who kills her, locks the door and takes the key with him!

Baldy takes his leave. It is now about two o'clock in the morning, and he needs a bit of shuteye.

WHEN he awakes next day, he lies in bed for a while thinking things out. While he warns Johnny O'Keefe to keep his eyes on Mr. Kittlebock and Bubbles Houlihan and Madeleine Haggerty, he does not really believe any of these people is likely to turn out to be the murderer. It is just a precaution.

If the killer is discovered, he must decide who really sees Choo Choo last; who locks the door; and to whom the tire iron belongs. Turning over in bed, he calls the automobile license bureau and holds a lengthy conversation with a person named Ribblesmoot, who does him favors at one time or another when he is need of information about this or that. One thing he learns is that the tire iron is a peculiar one that is used only on automobiles made by the Gnome Company. The Gnome people manufacture everything, including trucks, pleasure cars, and taxicabs.

Without rising, he calls Detective Lieutenant O'Keefe.

"Johnny," he says, "it is just as well to call off your bloodhounds, who cover the activities of Mr. Kittlebock, Bubbles Houlihan, and Madeleine Haggerty. I have an idea that, by discussing this matter with Dad, the doorman, we are able to clear up one point vitally necessary to solving the crime. This is who really is the last person to go into Choo Choo's dressing room last night."

"But, Dad says—"

"Sure, Dad says it is Salisbury. Maybe it is. But I like to be sure about things. Maybe it is Light Fingers or one of the others. I have a feeling he is covering up for somebody.

"Arrange to have Dad, Light Fingers, and J. Biddle at the Wallace apartment this afternoon at three o'clock."

"Roger!" says Johnny O'Keefe.

Whereupon Baldy arises, bathes, shaves, dresses, and wanders out into the sunlight. He goes to the apartment building, where the Wallace habitat is located, and stations himself across the street. Within a little while Light Fingers comes out and strolls down the avenue.

So, though it is technically illegal but in a good cause, Baldy enters the building, and with his skeleton key, admits himself to the ménage Choo Choo pays for with her strip-teasing. He gives it an expert frisking—and comes up with a packet of bills amounting to twenty-five hundred dollars and a key that looks as though it is made for the door of the fatal dressing room.

He leaves those things exactly where he finds them and takes his departure in a most unobtrusive manner.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, there is a gathering in the big living room of the Wallace apartment.

"I do not quite understand this deal," says Light Fingers, "but if there is any way in which I can help you gentlemen, please call on me. I am in such a nervous condition, however, that I may not be as good a witness as you desire."

"There are several points on which we wish to shed some light," Baldy tells him, "so leave us get down to brass tacks as soon as possible. For one thing, you tell me J. Biddle Salisbury and your daughter have a bitter quarrel. Not only does Mr. Biddle deny this, but he is substantiated by a number of Choo Choo's girl friends, who know all about the romance."

Light Fingers becomes confused and upset. He looks this way and that like he is real nervous about something and finally speaks like this:

"I am sure Salisbury kills my daughter. It is open and shut, but I do not know how the coppers feel about this. So I want to convince them."

"If you lie about this, you lie about other things."

Mr. Simmons rises and walks to a table by the window. He opens the drawer and brings out a key and a roll of bills.

"If you are in the clear," he says, "why do you have the key to Choo Choo's dressing room and a sum of money that, strangely enough, is just half of what she wins at the race track? It is conclusively proved Choo Choo gives the other half to Mr. Salisbury."

LIGHT FINGERS becomes as white as a dish of vanilla ice cream and stares at the evidence.

"Add to these things," adds Baldy, "the fact that Choo Choo owns a Gnome sports roadster, and the tire iron which kills her is only used on Gnome cars!"

Still, Light Fingers says nothing but only stares. Johnny O'Keefe rises and takes a pair of handcuffs from his pocket.

"Wallace," he says, "the jig is up."

"But," says Dad, the doorman quietly, "you overlook the fact that Mr. Salisbury is the last person to visit Choo Choo, and she is alive when her papa leaves her dressing room."

"Strangely enough," says Baldy, "this I believe—about Choo Choo being alive when her papa departs, I mean. But I am sure he does not come after Mr. Salisbury departs. Otherwise, she certainly tells him about Light Fingers' presence."

"I do not kill Choo Choo," protests Light Fingers, "and in the second place I do not know how this key and bale of lettuce gets in that drawer."

Johnny O'Keefe says a little doubtfully:

"This evidence is strong, but we still have no proof that Dad lies when he says Mr. Wallace visits Miss Wallace before Mr. Salisbury shows up."

"It is immaterial, anyway," says Baldy, "because neither Light Fingers nor J. Biddle bops Choo Choo."

"Then who does?"

"Dad, the doorman!" says Baldy.

Dad reaches for a gun, but Johnny O'Keefe knocks him on his derrière before he is able to get it. The doorman is propped up in a chair and speaks in this wise:

"All right—I do it. This dame deserves everything she gets, and I am not unhappy about it. Light Fingers arrives just after Salisbury leaves and when he takes his departure, he tells me Choo Choo not only refuses him money but hands out a fine tongue lashing to boot. I look in on her. She starts to bawl me out and hands me a slap in this face. So I get my tire iron, which I use for protection, and part her marcel wave.

"Pretty nearly everybody in the company is on stage, and no one see me. Then I begin to worry that Light Fingers is blamed for this deed, so I tell you and everybody else that J. Biddle Salisbury is the last character to see Choo Choo alive. Thus, I kill two birds with one stone."

"But why," asks Baldy, "do you hide the key and money here?"

"From the way Lieutenant O'Keefe talks, I figure the heat is off Light Fingers and I can find no better spot."

"Okay," says Johnny O'Keefe to the two plainclothesmen waiting in the hall, "take him away."

WHEN the others have departed and Light Fingers is mixing several goblets of bourbon and water, Johnny naturally wants to know how Baldy manages to pin the crime on the old doorman.

"This is, indeed, very simple," says Baldy. "The presence of the tire iron intrigues me, in view of the fact that Dad is once a taxi jockey. I check the license bureau and, sure enough, find that he owns two Gnome cabs. Besides, no one in the burlesque company is likely to see Dad enter or leave Choo Choo's dressing room. Besides, he likes neither Choo Choo nor J. Biddle Salisbury and if he is lying, he lies in favor of Light Fingers. I became convinced that Light Fingers leaves after Salisbury, which means Dad is the outstanding suspect, taking the tire iron into consideration."

"But how do you figure out the key and dough are stashed here?"

Baldy smiles faintly.

"Do you remember the story about the moron who finds the lost horse when nobody else was able to do it? When he is asked how he does it, he says: 'I just think where I'd like to go if I am a horse, and I go, and there he is!' "

"And you figure out what Dad considers the ideal hiding place?"

"I am just that kind of a moron," says Baldy Simmons. ● ● ●

She'd been the kind of girl who'd always had playmates around. She was the kind of corpse, now, who needed someone . . . to burn in hell with her!

HANG

Olney fired — into the window drapes

A Novelet by

ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

MY KILLER HIGH!

CHAPTER I

Playing With Fire

THE penthouse was silent except for Michael Olney's harsh unsteady breathing. Olney stood in the middle of the living room, a tall tawny man too thin for his clothes; a man with a gun in his hand and a corpse at his feet.

Presently his harsh breathing became whispered words, spoken in the soft glow of the room's single lighted lamp. "Sorry, Karen. You can't know how sorry I am. You'll never know—now." Bending over, he touched the dead girl's forehead; brushed a stray strand of her glossy black hair away from those open eyes that saw nothing. "I'll try to make it up to you, though."

Even in death Karen Bradbury was still beautiful. Death hadn't yet altered that beauty—if you overlooked the small neat hole in the soft white flesh over her heart where the bullet had gone in. It was the one flaw in a body otherwise flawless. Her negligee fitted snugly, revealing to Michael Olney the perfection of her curves. She was like an alluring princess turned to ivory by malign witchcraft, a princess whose careless reign over men's hearts had come to a sudden and permanent end.

He studied her smooth, impassive face for a long moment, almost as if expecting her to speak. Then he straightened up, pushed the gun into his coat pocket and began doing what he had to do.

It was a tedious job, erasing fingerprints. The penthouse had four rooms: a kitchenette, a bath, a boudoir, and the living room. Every plane surface had to be gone over carefully. Every electric switch had to be wiped, every liquor

bottle and glass, every table and chair and doorknob. Olney couldn't remember all the things he had touched when he'd been here three hours ago, so he had to make his work thorough. And it took time.

It took more time than he realized. He was completing a final checkup when he heard a key in the lock of the front door.

A scowl darkened his sharp face, freezing there the way all his other muscles froze to immobility. His mind raced over the layout of the penthouse as he considered possible exits. First, he thought of stepping quietly out through a French window onto the side terrace, but he realized this would be trapping himself, because there would be no way off that terrace except back through the apartment. Unless, of course, he leaped over the coping and hurtled sixteen stories to the street—and he wasn't ready for suicide yet.

He considered the kitchenette with its back door to a service hallway and freight elevator. This, too, he rejected; he'd have to ring for the apartment building's janitor to bring the cage up to him. That wouldn't do at all. It would mean a witness who could later testify that Olney had been here in the penthouse at this particular hour.

No, he decided, there was no avenue of escape other than the front door and the self-operated passenger elevator beyond it. And that channel was blocked by someone with a key, someone who even now was pushing the door open.

SWEATING, Olney stole quickly across the room, noiseless as a moving shadow, and slid behind a swirl of scarlet window drapes which hung in long folds from valance to floor and afforded precarious concealment. Pressing himself into the shallow embrasure, he silently hoped he didn't bulge the drapery too visibly.

A man came into the room.

Through a slit in the drapes, Olney watched him and recognized him. Carl Reznak was like a hammered-down giant—squat, powerfully built, broad of shoulder and muscular of body. His face was square and heavy, his head completely bald, and he walked with the rolling gait of a sailor. Or an ape.

There was nothing apelike about his mind, though. He was one of the most intelligent men Michael Olney had ever known. Also, he was head of the homicide squad and Olney's sworn enemy.

Reznak took exactly seven steps and then he saw Karen Bradbury's corpse. His exhaled gasp was a sharp hiss, and his movement was as fast as a boxer's as he went to his knees by the dead girl. With a practised forefinger he touched her throat, unerringly seeking the spot where the artery would pulsate if she lived. There was no pulsation, of course.

Then Carl Reznak did a very odd thing. He went over to a phone on the far side of the room, dialed it, and disguised his ordinarily resonant voice by pitching it to a squeaky falsetto.

"Police department? . . . I want to speak to Inspector Carl Reznak of homicide." He waited. "Hello. . . . What? Inspector Reznak isn't there? Well, then, perhaps I'd better report this to someone else. It's a murder. In Penthouse A, the Whitby Manor—that's on Paxton Boulevard. . . . Oh gracious, I can't give you my name, No, indeed. I don't wish to be involved." He hung up.

As he set the instrument in its cradle, Olney surged from behind the window drape and leaped at him, smashed him across the top of his hairless pate with the gun that had killed Karen Bradbury. Reznak grunted like a pig and made an absurd little mincing backward lurch. Then his left leg gave way under him, and his head sagged as if in ponderous thought. Very slowly and very heavily he fell on his side.

Olney got out of there—fast. But not quite fast enough—for when he reached the building's main lobby downstairs, he ran into the one guy in the world he didn't want to meet at a time like this.

Somebody had once maliciously called

Wally Kirk "the keyhole that walks like a man" In a sense, this was both untrue and unfair. Kirk, whose gossip-and-comment column appeared in the *Daily Blade* and dozens of other papers throughout the country, was not a keyhole peeper and never had been. But he had an astonishing network of pipelines feeding him information from an unbelievable variety of sources, so that hundreds of his paragraphs today became the front page headlines of tomorrow.

He operated on underworld tips, high society whispers, and news morsels from all the strata between. His diligence in digging up facts had made him more than a reporter; he was practically a seer.

He wore no turban, though, and carried no crystal ball. What he did wear was the lastest thing from London's Bond Street, dapper tweeds, a jaunty Homburg, oxblood, hand-stitched bootmaker shoes, a tan topcoat, slung casually over his arm, and a mauve silk scarf around his throat and knotted there like a Windsor cravat.

But you didn't notice any of that when you saw him. The first thing that registered was his mustache. It was black and flowing and grotesquely big in the Colonna fashion, so tended and nurtured that it subordinated the rest of his healthily suntanned face. The mustache was his badge, his trademark, the thing that made his thumbnail picture stand out three-dimensionally at the top of his daily column. When you saw him, you knew at once that he was Wally Kirk. You couldn't miss.

HE WAVED at Olney as Olney emerged from the automatic elevator. "Hiya, shamus. Been counterpane-crawling?"

"Perish the thought." Olney forced a good-natured smile. That smile cost him a terrific effort. Within himself he was cursing the foul luck that had brought Kirk across his path tonight of all nights. "Just drumming up trade."

The columnist laid a hand on his arm. "Come, come my lad! You wouldn't try to kid a man, would you?" Then, mockingly: "Or beat a man's time with the capricious Karen?"

"Very funny. I don't get it."

Kirk's white teeth glistened under the fabulous mustache. "My friend, you wound me severely. Here I am, about to ascend to the penthouse of a veritable goddess for an evening of innocent pleasure, and I find you coming from that same direction. Could it be that you had the same idea ahead of me?"

"Hey, wait." Olney made his tone bantering match the other man's. "I didn't know you were interested in Karen."

"She's a girl, isn't she?"

"Sure."

"Then I'm interested. By an odd coincidence, I'm a sucker for girls, especially the beautiful kind. And to think that you would have similar notions. For shame!"

Olney's heart was pounding, and his palms were moist. "You're crazy. That elevator runs to other floors besides the penthouse. In fact, I never saw a busier elevator. I just told you, I've been drumming up trade. In other words, calling on a prospective client. You know—snooping business."

"I scent news. What gives, pal?"

"Now cut that out. You know a private eye never talks about his cases before they're hatched. Unethical." Olney started to move away, but he did it casually, when actually he wanted to cut and run. He wondered if sweat showed on his forehead. He didn't dare take a handkerchief and mop it. That would be a dead giveaway. He mustn't show excitement, he told himself. He mustn't reveal the panic that crawled inside him like worms.

Kirk laughed. "A detective with ethics. A paradox, that's what it is. Frankly, chum, I think you're a liar. I think you've been indulging in romance, Karen by name."

"And I think you have an evil mind," Olney countered lightly. "Come out of the sewer, Wally. Would I be romanc-

ing with a quenched memory when I've got a readhead waiting for me outside in my car?"

"Come to think of it, I did notice the gorgeous Norah sitting around the corner in solitary state. Almost stopped and made eyes at her but I didn't want to poach. Okay, I retract my accusations. But don't forget, I get first dibs on any new cases. A deal?"

"A deal," Olney said. "Now go have fun." Fun, he thought. You won't have much fun visiting Karen now, you lip-hairy peacock. I wonder what you'll say when you find her murdered and Reznak on the floor by her body? You like news beats, but you won't like that one.

He watched Kirk go into the elevator. Then he turned and hurried out into the night.

CHAPTER II

Plan of Campaign

NORAH VALENTINE was sitting patiently at the wheel of Michael Olney's convertible, parked around the corner from the Whitby Manor. When Olney came loping toward the car, she regarded him pertly.

"No lipstick?" she drawled, looking at his thinned mouth. "Don't tell me the wolf is slipping."

"Be cute some other time," he said and slid in beside her on the green leather seat. "Drive. Hurry!"

She touched thumb to the dashboard starter, accelerated the Caddie through its hydromatic gears. It rolled as smoothly as a yacht in calm waters, whispering its power through an exhaust that chuckled mirthfully. A soft night breeze toyed with Norah's bright red curls, and she gave Olney a last sidewise glance out of the corners of her purple eyes.

"You intrigue me, sir."

"Save the small talk. Drive faster."

"And risk a ticket? My, my! You, of all people. The great Olney who has such respect for traffic laws that he's forever begging people to do his driving for him—so he won't run afoul of the cops. Olney demanding speed? It's an evening of miracles."

He sank his chin on his chest and huddled down on the leather cushion. "It would be a miracle if you'd shut up."

"Really? Her drawl became a purr of anger. "Maybe you'd like a new secretary, one who won't mind twiddling her thumbs in the office while you're out pitching curves at brunettes. One who won't object to coming back to work after supper to take dictation. Only instead of dictating letters, you have the gall to ask me to chauffeur you to an old flame and wait at the curb while you go up and make passes—"

"I made no passes at Karen Bradbury tonight, Norah."

"Why? Were you ill?"

"In a way," he answered quietly. "I found her dead."

The car swerved slightly. "Dead?" Norah said in a small choked voice.

"Murdered." He showed her the little gun. "With this."

A long block flowed past. Then: "Poor Michael. You loved her very much, didn't you?"

"Once I thought I did. She was very beautiful," he added as if to himself.

"And greedy and selfish and cruel. She wouldn't marry a decent guy like you, a private detective with no money and no prospects. She didn't know you'd be lucky and climb up to the Cadillac class in a year. She had to pick somebody with a bankroll she could see—Tony Bradbury of the drinking Bradburys." Norah touched his hand. "Poor Michael." she repeated gently.

He had a harsh impulse to tell her he didn't want sympathy. Instead he said, "Let's not rehash what's past and done. It's murder I'm thinking about, now. You say you sat around the office this afternoon while I was out pitching curves at brunettes. You're wrong."

"Wasn't Karen a brunette?"

"All right. But it was a professional

visit. She begged me to come to see her. She and Bradbury separated last month. He asked her to give him a divorce so he could marry somebody else. She refused. She told me he'd threatened her and she wanted protection."

"Oh."

"I didn't believe her. I thought she was making a play for me because I was in the chips. Michael Olney, egotist. I had a couple of drinks with her to string her along, then I gave her the horse laugh and walked out. Michael Olney, heel."

"Stop saying things like that," Norah said sharply.

"You know the rest of it," he went on. "I asked you back for some dictation at the office this evening, and Karen phoned me again. She said she was afraid Tony was coming to kill her. She really sounded frightened, so I got you to drive me to the Whitby Manor. Only I was too late. The penthouse was open, and she was dead."

NORAH swung the convertible into a dark side street and parked it. "Michael, this is serious. You've got a —a vindictive reputation, a reputation for getting even with people that cross you. And Karen crossed you when she married Tony Bradbury. To the law, that's a possible murder motive."

"I've thought of that."

"Have you thought of the fingerprints you may have left up in the penthouse when you were there tht first time? What if the police find them and identify them as yours?"

"They won't. I wiped everything I remembered touching. Plus a lot of things I don't remember having touched, just to be safe."

"Are you sure? You know how you stand with that fat buzzard Reznak of homicide. He hates you. He'd love to pin a murder on you."

"Reznak's fangs are pulled."

"In what way?"

"He walked in while I was there and almost caught me, but I ducked behind a drape. Funny thing about that, Norah. I'd closed and locked the door, but Reznak had a key."

Her purple eyes grew thoughtful. "Does that mean what I think it means, or am I just a cat?"

"I don't know. I can't quite picture Karen going for anybody like Reznak. He's too old for one thing. And homicide inspectors don't draw big wages."

"Yet you say he came in with a key."

Olney nodded. "And he knew his way around. Found the phone right away, without even looking for it. He'd been there before—often. What's the answer?"

"This, Michael. Karen was a flirt and Reznak a conquest. I wonder if he's got more money than we give him credit for? Graft fattens a wallet. And Karen worshiped fat wallets."

"Reznak is no grafter. I've never understood his dislike for me. It's so intense and so groundless it's almost psychopathic. I have to defend his honesty, though. He never took a crooked penny in his life. I know. I've investigated him, tried to get something on him to pay for the way he's pushed me around this last year. He's square, Norah. And as poor as a square cop always is."

"Then what did Karen see in him?"

"I won't even try to guess. All I know is that when he came in and found her dead, he was in a jackpot. Duty made him report the kill to headquarters, but self-protection made him disguise his voice when he phoned in. He even asked for himself, which was clever. I trumped that one."

"How?"

"I knocked him unconscious. He'll have a tough time explaining how it happened. If he lies out of it without involving himself, he's good."

"Michael! Did he see you?"

"No. I slugged him from behind." Olney's grin was ironic. "I'm no hero."

"At least, you're not a fool." Norah sounded relieved. She sounded almost possessive. "And stop disparaging yourself. You took the only way out."

"But only a temporary way," Olney said.

She squirmed around, faced him. "Temporary? Now look, Michael Olney. Up to now, you've played it smart. There's nothing to link you with Karen's murder. Stay smart—keep it like that." Her eyes searched his. "You're not listening to me."

"No."

"You want to meddle in something that's none of your business. You're asking for trouble."

You're letting sentiment distort your sense of values."

He frowned. "It's not sentiment. I destroyed clues. Now I have to do something about it."

"Such as what? You don't even know for sure that Bradbury killed her. Just because she told you he threatened her, that doesn't prove anything."

"Now you're splitting hairs, Norah."

"Am I? Well, I still say you don't have to do anything except keep quiet and stay in the clear."

THE TELL-TALE CORPSES

●

By BESS RITTER

COLONIAL AMERICANS, as late as 1740 in some of the colonies, employed a medieval test to indicate guilt or innocence in those suspected of murder. The suspected person was required to place his or her hand on the heart of the corpse. If guilty the corpse would give some sign that its murderer was near. The experts said the signs varied; sometimes the entire body would quiver, at other times sweat would appear on the dead brow, and occasionally a hand would close and then open again.

At one such trial in Virginia, an entire family was under suspicion. Every member was required to place his hand upon the heart of an aged servant who had been killed. But as the body gave no sign of recognizing the proximity of its murderer, all were acquitted with apologies by the court.

"She was frightened," he said softly. "She wanted my help, and I thought it was an act. She needed me, and I let her down, let her die. I remember the last thing she said, 'Mike, if Tony kills me, see that he's punished. Hang him for me, Michael, hang him high!' And I laughed in her teeth. I brushed her off and walked out. Now I owe a debt to the dead."

"Punishing her murderer is a police job."

"Ordinarily, yes. But remember, to save my own neck I cleaned that place of fingerprints. Not only mine, but others—including the killer's. I wiped away any trail he may have left. That makes me an accessory."

"Technically, maybe, but not actually.

"And let her murderer go unhanged?"

"You and your sense of duty! All right, Sir Galahad, just how do you intened to hang Tony Bradbury? With your own hands?"

He patted her hand. "You needn't worry. I'm not that crazy."

"Then what *will* you do? Find him and turn him over to the law? That's a routine job the police can take care of without any help from you. Any time a married woman is murdered, they always bring her husband in for questioning. You know that."

"Bradbury probably knows it, too," Olney said. "He'll have a nice glib story to tell them, maybe even a rigged alibi. But I'm not going to let him get away with it."

Norah Valentine made a thoughtful mouth. "Well, then, handle it this way: Wait until the news breaks about the murder. Wait until it's in the headlines and on the radio."

"And then?"

"Then go to headquarters. Tell them how Karen phoned you this afternoon and you went to see her. Tell them what she said about Bradbury's threats. That will put him in it all the way up to his neck. But don't mention anything about going back to the penthouse a second time and finding Karen's body and slugging Reznak when he walked in. Keep that to yourself, and you won't be implicated."

He considered this. "It sounds reasonable, except for one little flaw. You know Wally Kirk?"

"I read his column. I've met him. What's he got to do with it, Michael?"

"I ran into him in the lobby as I was coming out."

She gasped, "Michael, you didn't!"

"He was going up to see Karen. The way he talked, it would appear that he's been on the make for her. He accused me of having just come down from the penthouse and asked me if I was trying to beat his time."

Norah gnawed nervously at a kunckle. "You—you didn't tell him anything, did you?"

"No. Fortunately, I still had some of my wits with me. I lied. I said I hadn't been anywhere near Karen. I said I'd been calling on a prospective client."

"But you can't make that stick when the chips are down," she said in a worried voice. "You can't name any prospective clients in the Whitby Manor because you have none there. If you're questioned—"

"Questions be damned," he said irritably. "A private detective has one thing in common with attorneys. Information concerning clients can be considered privileged, which is legalistic doubletalk meaning you don't have to answer. Let them ask me the name of the party I was calling on. I'll tell them to go jump in a lake." He grinned sardonically. "And I'll make them like it, even if they don't want to."

"All the same, Wally Kirk can testify that you were in the building tonight. That's grounds for suspicion, Michael. I can't even see why you wanted to drive away in such a rush as long as he'd seen you there."

"I wanted to be long gone when he found Reznak and the body. I wanted a chance to think—to lay my plans. The more I mull it over, though, the more I believe you're right. I'll lay low until the news breaks. Then I'll speak my piece. If I watch my step, I probably won't have any trouble. And believe me, Norah, I intend to step carefully.

It was an optimistic hope. But, of course, he didn't yet know about the blackmailer.

CHAPTER III

DONALD, THE LEECH

A SLACK-CHINNED youth with impudent voice and pimply complexion came out of the shadows on Michael Olney's front porch.

"Just a minute, bud," he said. "I got something I want to show you."

Olney had taken Norah Valentine home and then had driven directly to his own pretentious bungalow in the Congress Heights district. For the sake of expediency, he had left the Cadillac parked out front instead of running it into the garage behind the house. He would be using the car again pretty soon for his trip downtown to police headquarters. It was just a matter of going indoors, turning on the radio and listening until he heard a report of Karen's murder. He would then go to the Homicide bureau and tell what he knew, or at least enough of the story to get Tony Bradbury started on his way to the hangman.

Except that it wasn't quite working out that way, because here was this

unpleasant young man on Olney's porch with some sort of thick envelope or packet in his hand, waving it under Olney's nose.

"This, pal, you got to see," the youth was saying.

In the thin reflection from a street lamp a short distance away, Olney peered at it. There was something furtive, something repulsive about the man. It wasn't just his lack of chin, his bad complexion, his evasive eyes, or his impudence, but a combination of all those things—and more. It was a feeling you had, a vague disgust, the way you'd feel if you accidentally brushed against something filthy.

"I'm busy now," Olney said.

"But not too busy to talk to me and see what I got to show. I'm sure you ain't that busy, Mr. Michael Olney."

"So you know my name." Olney gestured toward the porch steps. "So lots of people know my name. Beat it."

"I know more than your name, bud. Open the door and let's talk inside. Let's talk private."

"About what?"

"Oh, about dead dames, for instance."

Olney stiffened imperceptibly. "I don't get that."

"Okay, then. Not just dead dames. One particular dead dame. In a penthouse. A dead dame with black hair and a figure. A dead dame in a frilly kimono or something and not much on underneath. She was very nice, you understand, but dead on account of somebody shooting her. *Now* do you get it, palsy walsy?"

"Come in," Olney said and thrust a key into the lock. He walked in ahead of his visitor and made a light in the living room. It was a surprising room, compared to the bungalow's modest exterior. Much money had been spent here and with taste.

It was a man's living room, a bachelor's room, leathery but colorful—and above all else, comfortable. A room to live in, for a man who could afford what he wanted, yet you noticed a certain austerity, the lack of a woman's touch.

Once Michael Olney had daydreamed of a place like this and of the woman who should have shared it. Well, the room and the cottage had come true for him, but not the woman. That part of the dream would never come true now, for the woman lay dead in an uptown penthouse with a bullet through her heart.

HE LOOKED at the pimply youth, who didn't seem quite so youthful in the light. He was about twenty-five or so, give or take a couple of years, young enough to look half-baked and adolescent but old enough to have eyes that comprehended vice. There was a word for him, Olney thought. Vicious.

Aloud he said, "Well, say what you've got to say."

"I got lots of time. Take it easy."

Olney's tawny eyebrows drew together. "Listen, punk—"

"Don't be formal. Call me Donald. Yeah, Donald's good enough. It ain't my name, of course, but so what? And let's not rush this little transaction. We got lots to talk about."

"Have we?"

"And how." Donald showed badly spaced teeth that needed cleaning. "I work in a hotel. I hop bells."

"So you hop bells."

"I got a friend. He's the hotel electrician."

Olney snapped his fingers. "Come on, come on, get to the punch line."

"I like to string it out," Donald said. "This electrician, he works in a shack on the hotel roof. You wouldn't call it no penthouse—just a work shack. He gives me the run of the roof when I'm off duty."

"And?"

"I got a hobby in my spare time. Two hobbies, in fact. Want to hear about 'em?"

"No," Olney said.

"I'll tell you anyhow. One of my hobbies is a candid camera—the kind with a telephoto lens. The other is field glasses. You'd be surprised the things you can see, looking down a hotel roof. Especially when there's a lot of apart-

ments around that ain't as high as the hotel. Brother, could I write a book!"

"I doubt it," Olney said. "I doubt you can write your own name, but let it go."

Donald uncovered his bad teeth again. "Let me show you some of my telephoto snaps." He opened the envelope packet, fanned out an assortment of minicam prints. "How could you go for this babe?"

It was a snapshot of a lush blonde taking a roof-top sun bath. Olney said, "So you're a Peeping Tom."

"Yeah," Donald answered without shame. "I got a lot of pix of her." He leered. "But she ain't the only one. I could show you dozens. This brunette, for instance."

Michael Olney glanced at the second print, and drew in his breath so sharply that it pinched his nostrils to narrow slits. He was seeing Karen Bradbury on her penthouse terrace, relaxed, unaware that she was a camera's target as she sunned herself.

"That's just to prove I could see down in her direction, too. You know," Donald added meaningly, "the Whitby Manor."

Olney knew what was coming. "All right. What of it?"

"Oh, nothing much. I just happened to be looking her way this evening through the glasses. Know what I seen?"

"You tell me."

"This black-haired doll, here, the one in the terrace picture, she was laying on the floor of her front room. She sure had a nifty shape, didn't she, chum? Not that it meant much, with a bullet in her. Then a guy leaned over her—"

"Who?"

"Well, come to think of it, he was about as tall and skinny as you. Dark yellow hair like yours, too." Donald's tone lost its bantering quality. "In fact, pal, the guy *was* you."

"Was it?"

"You ought to know. You went in all the other rooms and then you come back and wiped some things and then ducked behind a drape. Another guy barged in, a short little tubby guy, and seen the dead jane and touched her and then went to the phone, and then you come at him and slugged him with a gun and scrammed."

Olney was sweating. "Go on."

"Well, I thought maybe I could catch a gander at you when you went out of the building, so I looked down through the glasses, and sure enough, I seen you. You got into a Caddie convertible with a red-headed babe, and she drove away. I tabbed the license plates, and it's easy to trace a number if you got a pipeline to the Motor Vehicle Bureau. Imagine my surprise when you turned out to be Michael Olney, the famous private flatfoot. I done a little quiet asking around and found out you got a red-headed secretary, name of Norah Valentine, which I wouldn't be astonished if she was the wren that was driving your car. I'm a pretty good snoop myself, eh? So I come right over to talk with you, natch."

"Why?"

DONALD giggled. "Don't be dumb. I want to make a deal." He rubbed the ball of his thumb over the tips of his fingers. "Moolah," he said.

"Spelled blackmail," Olney amended.

"That's one name for it, I guess. Of course, if you'd just as lief have me go to the cops and tell them what I seen, okay."

"You didn't see me kill her, I know that much. Because I didn't do it."

Donald giggled again. "Well, no, I didn't see *you* kill her. I watched you wiping things, though, and I seen you slub that tubby guy. I could put you in mighty bad with the bulls."

"Perhaps you could, at that," Olney admitted. Then, in sudden reaction to the peculiar emphasis Donald had put on one word, he said, "Wait a minute. You say you didn't see *me* kill her. Did you mean you saw someone else do it before I got there? The real murderer?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!"

"I've got to know," Michael Olney said harshly. "If you actually witnessed

it, your testimony can send the killer to the gallows."

The younger man took a backward step. "I ain't talking. Not as long as I figure I can make more money clamming up."

Olney understood. "So that's how it is. You'd like to shake me down because you saw me in that penthouse after the murder was committed. And you hope to blackmail the person you saw there ahead of me, the one who fired the shot. If you can collect enough hush money, you're willing to let a murderer go free."

"Sure. What's wrong with that?"

"Everything's wrong. You can't do it."

"For dough I can do anything, buster."

"That's an idea," Olney said. "For dough you can do anything, all right, what's your price for testifying to the police that you witnessed the shooting? I'll pay you for naming the killer."

"You'll pay me how much?"

"Set your own figure."

"A grand?"

"Okay. A grand."

Donald grinned. "Maybe I can get more from the other party by keeping quiet."

"I see. You'd like to proposition the murderer and get him to bid against me. No dice, sonny. I won't let you."

"You can't stop me," Donald said. "Remember, I got *you* over a barrel, too. I can dump you in the grease any time I want to. You ain't giving no orders, shamus. You're just going to slip me some long green to keep your name out of the mess."

Olney said quietly, "No. I'm going to give you to the cops and let them sweat you." He lunged forward.

The younger man sidestepped, and there was suddenly a knife in his hand. It was a spring-latch knife whose long, slender blade snapped out with a click of a button, a six-inch blade honed to the sharpness of a surgeon's lancet. Donald made a whining noise, high in the back of his throat, and then slashed at Olney with an accurate series of rapid criss-cross movements almost too fast for the eye to follow; too fast, at least, for Olney to get away from them.

The hand that held the knife was deft and sure and calculating. It had done this trick many times before, to many another victim. It knew exactly how to cut without inflicting serious injury. It was a practised savagery, bullying, deliberately ruinous to a man's clothing and a measured menace to a man's life. Olney felt a sharp metal slicing the front of his coat, his shirt. He felt the blade's bite as it gashed shallow, skin-deep furrows in his unprotected flesh. Criss-cross and criss-cross again, slashing, cutting, slashing, cutting—

Olney's fist bashed at the blackmailer's face. The impact was brutally explosive. Donald went back, eyes glazing, spine arched, body stiff. Olney struck again, and the younger man fell like an axed tree. Olney kicked him three times, twice in the ribs and once on the side of the head. Then he leaned down, picked up the knife. It's point was red and wet.

"If I didn't need the evidence you can give, I'd open your throat," he panted.

Donald didn't answer. He was unconscious.

CHAPTER IV

Slip of the Tongue

SLOWLY, very slowly, the rage drained out of Michael Olney, a rage that had momentarily made him crazy. Then, as sanity came back, he tossed the knife aside. He knew what he had to do.

He must take the blackmailer down to headquarters, turn him in. Also, he must confess everything that he, Olney, had done at Karen Bradbury's penthouse. He would tell the whole story and take his medicine. He would admit

destroying fingerprints and knocking Inspector Reznak senseless. It would probably cost him his license to operate a private investigation agency, he realized, and it might even land him behind bars. But it was the only way he could force the police to go to work on Donald. It was the only way he could make the thing valid.

By sacrificing himself, by admitting what had happened, he'd be able to show why Donald had tried to blackmail him. Once this was established, the men of homicide would start pounding away at the pimply-faced youth. They would make Donald tell everything he had seen through his field glasses. The murder. A description of the murderer—Tony Bradbury. Whatever the police might do to Michael Olney after that, he would be satisfied. He would have kept a plea that Karen had made: Hang him for me, Michael, hang him high!

So that was how it would be, that was how it had to be. Olney walked to his bathroom, holding the ripped ribbons of his clothes. In the bathroom he stripped, poured mercurochrome liberally into the criss-crossed knife slashes oozing blood on his stomach, his lower chest. Then he made narrow gauze pads, applied them to the gashes, affixed them with lengths of adhesive tape. He put on a fresh shirt and a different coat. He wasn't badly hurt; he felt fine. He went back to the living room.

Donald wasn't there. Donald had recovered consciousness, had sneaked away.

In a sort of blind fury, Olney lurched toward the front door, flung it open, and started to launch himself out into the night. A man came up the walkway from a parked police car, a squat, hammered-down giant of a man in shabby serge, a man who moved with the rolling gait of a sailor—or an ape.

Inspector Carl Reznak said, "What's your hurry, Olney?"

Michael Olney's mouth was dry; when he used his voice, it came out rasping, almost shrill. "Reznak, did you see a man, a young-looking guy—did you see anybody coming out of here and running, getting away?"

"I saw nobody," the homicide detective rumbled. "What's the matter with you?"

Olney shoved him. "He can't be far. He's got to be around. He can't escape. I mustn't let him!" He started for the street, sprinting, his feet hitting the walkaway hard.

"Hey!" Reznak raced after him. "Where do you think you're going? Come back here. I want to see you. Come back!"

Olney had already gained the sidewalk. Now he halted, peered up and down the street. There was no sign of Donald. And then Reznak's hand was heavy on his shoulder, spinning him around.

"Didn't you hear me say I want to see you, Olney!"

"I heard you, yet. But I—"

"But you what?"

Olney was silent, debating with himself, trying to decide how much to say. With Donald gone, the entire picture was changed. It would no longer do any good to tell the things he had intended to tell. He'd planned to use his own confession as a lever, a weapon the police could turn against Donald to make him testify. But the slack-chinned youth had escaped, and without him any such sacrifice on Olney's part would be pointless.

FOR the present, he concluded, he had better keep a guard on his tongue—at least, until he found out why Reznak was here, what he wanted, how much he knew or suspected. Tracing and nabbing Donald could come later; it shouldn't be too hard, Olney told himself.

In the immediate neighborhood of the Whitby Manor, where Karen had died, there was only one commercial hotel of any consequence, only one that stood several stories taller than the surrounding apartment buildings. That would be where the blackmailer worked as bellhop—where he could be caught. All Olney needed was time, a chance to move around.

He looked steadily at Reznak. "All right, you want to see me." He went up onto his porch, stood by the open front door. "Come in. What's on your mind?"

Reznak said, "Murder," and followed Olney into the masculine, leathery living room. Reznak looked old. Deep lines were etched on his face, shadows were under his eyes. "A woman was shot tonight, killed in her apartment. I found your phone number on the top leaf of her scratch pad, in her handwriting, as if she'd jotted it down recently, as if she may have called you."

My phone number, Olney thought. My phone number on a sheet of scratch paper and I overlooked it. But Reznak never overlooks anything. He's too careful,. too smart.

Aloud he said, "I get lots of phone calls. Who was this murdered woman?"

"An old flame of yours. Karen Bradbury."

Olney pretended just the right measure of shock. "Karen!" he said. "So her husband carried out his threat, after all. The drunken swine!"

"Threat?" Reznak rasped. "Tony Bradbury threatened her?"

"Yes."

"How do you know that?"

"Karen phoned me. I went to see her this afternoon. She wanted protection. She was frightened. Bradbury had asked her for a divorce, and she refused. She told me he said if he couldn't have his freedom any other way, he would kill her."

Olney felt safe in revealing this much of the truth now.

He was pointing suspicion straight at Tony Bradbury, where it belonged. At the same time he was keeping himself in the clear, not mentioning his second visit to the penthouse. With luck, that might give him a chance to go after the blackmailing Donald later. And Donald's testimony would finish wrapping a noose around Bradbury's neck.

Reznak said slowly, "So you went to see her this afternoon." His face was expressionless. "And again tonight." He was not too good an actor. He spoke the words offhandedly, but his very indifference betrayed the thought he was obviously trying to mask. He was like some crafty elephant getting ready to charge.

"Tonight?" Olney met guile with guile. He summoned up a look of puzzlement and then of sudden comprehension. "Oh, oh. You've been talking to Wallace Kirk of the *Daily Blade.*"

"I have. He says he saw you at the Whitby Manor."

"Sure, he saw me. In the lobby. He told me he was on his way up to call on Karen." Olney widened his eyes. "Was it Wally who found her dead?"

"Never mind that. I'm asking you if you were in that penthouse tonight."

"I was not," Olney lied evenly. "Kirk asked me the same thing. As I told him at the time, I hadn't been visiting Karen. I'd been to see a prospective client in another apartment."

"So he said," Reznak rumbled. "Pretty odd coincidence, wasn't it, you calling on somebody else in that building around the time Karen was being murdered?"

MICHAEL OLNEY made an indignant gesture. "Now wait a minute. I don't know just what you're getting at, but if you think you can hook me into this kill, think again. I know you dislike me, but don't let it go to your head. I'm shooting straight with you, Reznak. Don't try to put the screws on me—I won't have it. After all, I've given you the angle you need. I've handed you information that will break your case wide open."

"Lying comes easy when you're under pressure."

"Pressure! I'd have brought you the story voluntarily as soon as I heard about the murder. Can I help it that you came to me with the news instead of my hearing it on the radio or reading it in the papers? Quit being so suspicious. Bradbury is the guy you want. He's the one that threatened her."

"You say."

"I'm telling you what Karen told me. You take it from there. You've got the

authority and the goldfish room and the length of rubber hose. Sweat the truth out of Bradbury. Make him confess."

"Don't worry, I'll do exactly that," Reznak said darkly. "As soon as I lay my hands on him."

"You mean you haven't picked him up yet for questioning?"

The big policeman nodded reluctantly. "The order's out. We'll get him. No matter how long it takes, we'll get him." The homicide man started toward the door, and Olney suppressed a weary breath of relief, of relaxed tension. He'd put it over, he had convinced Reznak. It had been tough, but he had made the grade. He heard Reznak muttering, as if to himself, "Her own husband. She didn't want to give him a divorce, so he killed her." Then: "Funny. She wanted protection, and she turned to you for it. Not to me, but to you."

"Why should she turn to you?" Olney said. Here was his chance to find out something he'd been wanting to know. "What were you to Karen?"

"I was her father," Reznak said.

Michael Olney blurted, "Good God! So that's why you had a key to her penthouse!"

Then, after the words had been uttered, when it was too late to recall them, he realized what he had done—realized he had given himself away.

CHAPTER V

SPARE GUN

IN A sort of numbed helplessness, Olney saw Reznak whirl and stalk toward him. There was sudden hate scrawled across the homicide detective's face, and his deep voice was as cold as a polar storm.

"You know I had a key?"

Olney said, "I can explain that."

"You slippery eel, there's only one way you could know that. You were there, hiding, when I walked in. You're the rat who slugged me."

"Now wait!"

"And if that's true, all this other stuff you've been telling me is lies. You've been trying to frame Tony Bradbury. You wanted him to take the fall for you."

"No. Reznak, listen—"

Reznak lunged. "*You* murdered Karen. Blast your cowardly soul, you killed my daughter!"

With an upflung arm, Olney parried the punch Reznak threw at him. "You fool, don't! Give me a chance to explain."

"A chance to tell more lies, you mean." The chunky man slammed a fist into Olney's ribs. "I'm going to kill you. I'm going to tear you apart with my hands."

In desperation, Olney countered with a driving smash to his attacker's middle. "You've got to listen. You've got to hear me." He struck again.

Reznak doubled over, staggered backward. He hit against a coffee table, overturned it with a splintering crash. Then he came upright and went for his gun.

"A bullet's too good for you. Too quick. Too painless." He moved at Olney. "But if that's how I have to do it, all right." He aimed.

Diving sideways to get out of range, Olney stumbled over a red leather footstool and fell heavily. Impact with the floor jarred him, shook him to his bones. Somehow his feet flew up and accidentally kicked the gun from Reznak's grasp. The weapon went skittering across the room to land in a far corner. Reznak tried to hurl himself after it, recover it. Olney, squirming, grappled him around the ankles and brought him down.

The two men locked, then, in a writhing tangle of arms and legs. Reznak, hard as granite under his deceptive layer of fat, strained to wrap his thick, muscular fingers around Olney's throat.

"For a year I've hated you!" he panted. "Ever since you jilted Karen

and broke her heart!" Fury seemed to redouble his immense strength as he slowly and inexorably closed down on Olney's gullet. "And now that you've killed her—"

Olney clawed at those closing fingers. He was fighting for existence, fighting to live. "So that was why—you started —pushing me around." His breath was labored, wheezing; sweat ran into his eyes, smarting, stinging. "That was why —you made—it so tough for me—in this town. You thought—I jilted her!" He tugged at Reznak's wrists. "But if she —told you that—she lied!" Then he used a knee, knowing it was foul but knowing, too, that you didn't stick to the rule book when somebody was trying to throttle you.

THE knee sank home, and he felt the older man's muscles twitch in agony, felt the pressure on him relaxing. He thrust violently upward, dislodged Reznak, rolled over on him. They hit against a chair, and it toppled, taking a pedestal lamp with it. The lamp struck a bookcase, shattered its glass front in a sudden explosive burst of tinkling fragments. Olney pinned the homicide man to the floor. "Now, you'll have to listen."

Reznak bucked. "I don't listen to murderers!" He freed a hand, groped with it, picked up a shard of broken glass, and jabbed with it blindly, seeking Olney's eyes. Pure reflex made Olney dodge and draw back. He lost his advantage, and Reznak started crawling toward the corner where his gun was.

Olney shouted hoarsely, "No, you don't!" and propelled himself headlong over an impeding davenport. The davenport spilled like a ship on a reef, dumped its cushions in helter-skelter tumble. Olney crashed beyond them, landed against the wall with a bruising jolt that drove the last ounce of air from his lungs and left him stunned, motionless. Through a misty blur he saw Reznak's gun. He also saw Reznak's hairy hand reaching for it.

Flailing out, Olney got it first. Then he propped himself in the corner, lifted the weapon. It seemed to weigh tons. He drew a wavering bead on the homicide man. "I've got—just enough left— to pull the trigger," he said painfully. "Don't make me."

"You wouldn't dare," Reznak said. But he stopped crawling.

Olney grinned. "Try me."

"Now listen, you dog. Listen, Olney—"

"No. *You* listen," Olney said. "You're going to hear what I've got to tell you, understand? There's a lot of it, so pay attention. It goes back a year. It goes back to when Karen gave me the gate because I was poor, because she wanted to marry somebody with money. Maybe she told you I jilted her and she married Tony Bradbury on the rebound, but that's not true. She lied. Karen was born to lie. She was beautiful and she didn't know the meaning of truth. She liked to hurt people, especially people who loved her."

Reznak looked dully at the room's wreckage, then at the gun Olney pointed at him. He seemed beaten, apathetic. "You shouldn't talk like that about the dead," he said wearily.

"I'm showing you what she was. Look at the way she treated you. She never acknowledged you as her father. She didn't live in your house. She—"

The older man made a defensive gesture. "She was ambitious. A name like Reznak wasn't glamorous enough. And she thought it would stand in her way if folks knew she was a cop's kid. I'll admit she liked to make people uncomfortable, like giving me a key so I could drop in now and then, and then telling me she was going to get the lock changed. She had a warped sense of humor. Maybe that was why you killed her. You got tired of taking a beating."

"I didn't kill her," Olney said patiently. "It was Tony Bradbury who got tired of taking the beating. He wanted free, and she had him on the hook, wouldn't let go. That's the point I'm making. Karen was selfish, twisted, capricious. It makes you understand Bradbury's murder motive."

"So you're still trying to pin it on him."

OLNEY stood up. "Not trying. I can get proof." Tersely, he told of his second trip to the penthouse, his discovery of the body. "She'd just been shot, maybe during the few minutes I had waited in the downstairs lobby for somebody to get through using the automatic elevator. I was rattled—I don't deny it. I did some stupid things. For instance, taking the murder gun for evidence—and cleaning the place of fingerprints so you couldn't railroad me on a bum rap. Then you came in, and I had to slug you."

"I got out of it." Reznak's voice was remote. "Wally Kirk's a heel in some respects, but he knows when to do a favor. I persuaded him to say he and I walked into the penthouse together and found Karen's body."

Olney made a cynical mouth. "That will cost you plenty. You'll be giving him important news breaks ahead of the other reporters from now on."

"But it got me out of a jam you put me in. And now you're in a worse one. You've admitted enough to hang you."

"I think you'll change your mind about that when I bring you the eyewitness who saw Karen killed."

Reznak pushed himself off the floor. "A Peeping Tom. A hotel bellhop who watched the murder through binoculars," Olney said. "He's the one I was chasing when you showed up here a while ago. He tried to blackmail me, and I nailed him but not hard enough. He got away."

"Who is he? Tell me where to find him."

"No. He's mine. It's a personal thing. You can have him after I'm through with him, but I'm going to take him first."

Reznak palmed sweat off his face, then reached for a handkerchief. "I don't trust you, Olney. Maybe you've been feeding me a pack of lies. Maybe you're going to take a runout and forget to come back."

"If I wanted to do that, I wouldn't have to feed you anything—except a bullet. I've got your gun."

Reznak's hand moved. "You've got one of my guns. I always pack a spare." Instead of a handkerchief he brought out a stubby little Banker's Special. "Drop it, Olney. You're under arrest."

CHAPTER VI

Narrow Escape

FOLLOWING a night of blunders, Michael Olney realized he had made his most serious mistake in thinking Reznak harmless. Reznak was never harmless. He was tricky, crafty, dangerous as a cobra. And yet, though the odds were even, Olney knew he couldn't risk a gun duel with the headquarters man. No matter which way it ended, he couldn't win. If Reznak shot him, he was done for. And if he shot Reznak, he would have the whole police force after him, for nobody shoots a cop and gets away with it.

Reznak's finger tightened on the trigger of the Banker's Special. "Drop it, Olney. I mean what I say."

"All right." Olney threw Reznak's other gun on the floor. "So I'm a coward."

Reznak's eyes fleetingly followed the weapon as it landed. It was the merest flick of inattention, and it was Michael Olney's last slim shred of hope. There was a window directly behind him, and he went backward with all the spring he had in his legs. The pane erupted outward into the night, and Olney tumbled over the sill with a vaulting reverse somersault. Reznak's oath and the simultaneous bark of his gun blended into a single sound. Olney felt the bullet score his right ankle, like the kiss of a red-hot wire. Then he landed on spongy earth.

Crawling, he hugged the bungalow's rough stucco so that Reznak would have

an awkward angle at which to fire if he leaned out the window to shoot again. There was no second shot. Instead, Olney heard the front door being smashed open violently, heard Reznak's heavy running footfalls hitting hollowly on the porch.

But Olney wasn't going in that direction. He had no intention of trying to get his Cadillac at the curb. He had gambled on heading for the back yard, and the gamble was paying off. He'd outguessed the homicide official. Now he came upright, sprinted headlong through the darkness. He hurdled a privet hedge, angled across a neighbor's garden, and pelted along somebody's driveway to the next street over and kept on going.

After that, the next few minutes consisted of a dark panoramic blur, a seemingly endless succession of sidewalks, intersections, sidewalks again. He heard a siren, saw the red stab of a spotlight, and ducked behind a clump of bushes as a police car came screaming around the corner ahead. That was Reznak, quartering the neighborhood, driving in a widening circle, a concentric search of the blocks immediately surrounding Olney's house. Reznak must have realized how he'd been tricked and now, singlehanded, he was giving chase, intent on finding Olney himself.

Olney waited until the car roared by, then ran again. He ran until exhaustion pounded at his leg muscles like the blows of unseen sledge hammers, when he would slow to a drunken, shuffling walk until cramped flesh relaxed to let him run once more. He was like an automaton, a robot with a mechanically fixed destination and a machine-like inflexibility of course.

Again he had to lunge for cover as Reznak's car thundered along this new street, again he managed to avoid being impaled by the stabbing beam of Reznak's seeking red spotlight. Finally, after the danger had passed, Olney resumed his running, not noticing another car drifting up behind him until a voice called, "Want a lift, shamus?"

AS IF drenched with a sudden deluge of ice water, Olney stopped in his tracks. Eyes blurred, he stared at the coupé moving in to the curb.

"Wally Kirk!" he panted.

The columnist's teeth showed white under that tremendous mustache. "Hop in, pal. Tell papa about it. What cooks?"

"You—you—what are you doing here?"

"Come on, get in. We can talk in motion, can't we? And you look like a guy that needs some rest."

"Kirk, if you think you can win a feather in your cap by handing me over to the law, you're wrong."

"Now cut that out, Olney. Don't be childish. I'm a newspaperman, not a fly cop. I'll grant I sicked Reznak onto you, but only after he found your phone number on Karen's scratch pad. That's why I'm in this district now. I knew he was coming to see you, and I followed as soon as I could. I wanted the story for tomorrow's column. I still want it. By the time I got to your house, Reznak was tearing away like somebody had prodded him with a hot bodkin. He yelled that you'd escaped and he was going after you, so I did some around-the-mulberry-bush driving myself. And hit the jackpot." Kirk beckoned with a crooking finger. "Get in and tell all."

Michael Olney hesitated. Then it occurred to him that he might be able to use Kirk, not only for transportation but for information. He crawled laboriously into the coupé and subsided, fighting for breath.

"Okay," he said presently. "But don't try anything. I haven't got a gun on me, but I'm big enough to take you if you do any doublecrossing."

Kirk geared into high. "Relax, relax. I'm no doublecrosser, and you know it. Unless you really did kill Karen. If so, all bets are off. I don't play ball with murderers."

"I didn't kill her."

"Do you know who did?"

"I'm going to find out. And maybe you can help me."

"Whistle the tune to me, Michael."

Olney drew cool night air into his lungs and started talking. He told of his fight with Reznak and what had led up to it. He explained his second visit to the penthouse, his discovery of Karen's corpse, and the things that had happened afterward. He told of the blackmaliing bellhop who had actually witnessed the murder.

"He's the guy I'm after now, Kirk. He's the key to the riddle. I have to find him—fast."

"I can see that," the columnist agreed. "And you think he works at the Hotel Emperor?"

"He's got to work there. It's the only hotel higher than the Whitby Manor in that neighborhood. That's where you come in. Maybe you can find a way to pinpoint him for me."

Kirk nodded. "Could be. I've got a grapevine into the Emperor. Several, in fact. A clerk, a waiter, and oddly enough, a couple of bellhops. Describe this lad for me."

Olney complied. Then he gave Kirk the address of Norah Valentine's house. "Take me there and leave me. I'll wait while you do your legwork. If you get a line on Donald, phone me, and I'll handle the rest of it. But remember, lay off him. He's mine. I owe him something that nobody else can pay."

"Suits me as long as I have first crack at the story."

"You've already got it." Olney scowled. "And, Kirk, if you tip the cops they can find me at Norah's, so help me, I'll fix you if it's the last thing I do."

KIRK laughed. "Remind me to remind you of those unkind words when this mess is over. You'll have to mollify me with a case of champagne at the very least." Then, seriously: "Here's the street. I've got work to do. Is Norah's phone listed?"

"Yes." Olney alighted from the coupé.

"Good. You'll be hearing from me." Kirk drove off, and Olney walked the last block and finally reached Norah Valentine's bungalow.

Norah herself stood framed in her front doorway as he lurched up the two flat steps to the tiny wooden porch. Soft light behind her put reflected glints of fire in her wavy red hair and silhouetted the feminine curves of her lovely figure. Her dress was not the one she had worn earlier in the evening. It was a severely simple frock of some caressing silky material, purple to match her eyes.

Olney said, "Going somewhere, Norah?"

The girl stared at him and grew pale when she saw his bruised face, his rumpled clothing. "Michael! You—you're hurt!"

"I'll be all right. I need a drink, is all. And a car and you to drive it. Sorry to be such a nuisance, Norah." He went into the house with her, his arm around her waist. He was not quite leaning his weight on her—it was more the gesture of a man seeking reassurance and comfort after too many disillusionments. In the front room, he pulled free, dropped into an easy chair. His eyes were deep-sunken and ineffably tired.

"I'll be all right," he repeated as if to convince himself.

"But, Michael, what happened? Those marks on your face—your clothes all torn—and your ankle! It's bleeding!"

"I was in a fight. A bullet nicked my shin."

She knelt down, looked at the wound, and then pattered out of the room, returning soon with iodine and gauze and adhesive. Olney winced at the burn of the disinfectant and when the bandage was on, he grinned the characteristically satirical grin that made his mouth sometimes seem almost ugly.

"Funny how much pain a man can take when he has to."

"Michael, tell me what happened!" She was pouring him a stiff drink of bourbon now, handing it to him. She stood over him as he tossed it down. "Tell me!"

"I tangled with Carl Reznak. It's a long story, and let's skip it. I'm waiting for a call." Even as he said this, he

looked at his strap watch and came out of the chair impatiently. Counting the time it had taken him to walk from Wally Kirk's car at the corner and the time Norah had spent doctoring and bandaging his nicked ankle, about fifteen minutes had passed since he'd left the columnist. If Kirk had learned anything, he should have phoned by now, he thought. Then he reflected that he shouldn't expect miracles, even from Kirk.

For that matter, why should he depend upon Kirk at all, when he might be able to find out for himself the things he wanted to know? He limped to Norah's telephone on the opposite side of the room and began riffling the pages of the phone book.

Norah followed him. "Why should you and Reznak tangle? You're in the clear."

"Not entirely. Remember, I was seen in the lobby of the Whitby. And anyhow, Reznak didn't seem inclined to buy the notion of Tony Bradbury's guilt. He'd rather hang it on me."

She frowned. "But I just heard a flash on the radio a moment before you got here that they had found Bradbury and taken him in for questioning."

"Good. Maybe things are shaping up." Olney found the listing he wanted. "Hotel Emperor, Paxton Boulevard at Pine," he read aloud. Then he dialed.

Norah said sharply, "Michael, what are you up to? What about the Hotel Emperor?"

"I'm hunting a blackmailer. Shh-h-h . . . Hello. Manager's office, please." Olney waited briefly. "This is Michael Olney calling. I'm trying to locate one of your bellhops—tall, thin, pimply complexion, receding chin, badly spaced teeth. Makes a hobby of photography. I think his name might be Donald, or . . . Oh, I see, *Mac*Donald, James MacDonald. Yes, that's probably the one Could you give me his home address? Off duty tonight, I believe. . . . Right. It's quite important. . . . No, I don't mind waiting." Olney covered the mouthpiece. "Pencil and paper, Norah."

She got them for him. He listened, wrote something, mumbled a "Thank you" into the phone and hung up, turned. "Let's get your car, Norah. We've got a visit to make, and it's got to be right now. I think this is the last mile."

CHAPTER VII

Killer's Mistake

LATER, as she was driving him in her little coupé, he told her about the slack-chinned blackmailer. "He saw Karen murdered. If I can make him talk, his testimony will convict the killer and get me out from under." Olney looked at the slip of paper in his hand. "We're almost there."

She shivered. "Yes, I know." Then presently, she stopped the coupé in front of a seedy-looking U-shaped bungalow court. There were six tiny, boxlike houses on either side, a larger one toward the back. The narrow center courtyard had a cement walk bordered by unkempt and scabrous patches of grass, and the clapboard cottages were shabby from long need of paint. Olney and Norah Valentine went to the third bungalow on the right. Olney rang the bell and heard its tinny jangle inside.

Nobody answered.

He rang again, then tested the doorknob. It turned to his hand. He pushed the door open and looked into darkness. Feeling along the inside wall, he found a switch. It brought a sickly flood of dull orange-colored light from ornamental wall fixtures spaced around the four sides of the room.

Norah whispered, "Look! Michael, there on the floor!"

Olney had already seen the body. He stooped over the pimply-faced blackmailer. "Nice shooting. Straight through the heart. He didn't live long enough to know what hit him."

"Bradbury!" There was shock and

panic in Norah's voice. "Tony Bradbury! He must have done it before the police picked him up for questioning. This Donald person probably tried to blackmail him because he had seen him killing Karen."

Olney looked around the room, at the shoddy furniture and the draped windows and the wisp of gunsmoke still drifting in the air. Then he smiled bleakly at the girl.

"You've got it right, Norah, except for one important detail. It wasn't Bradbury who was the murderer. It was you."

Every vestige of color fled from her cheeks. "Wh-what?"

"A while ago I put my arm around you. I felt strips of gauze and adhesive tape under the front of your dress, the same kind of gauze and tape you put on my knicked shin. The same kind of gauze and tape I'm wearing on my chest and belly."

"Michael, are you insane? I haven't any tape or gauze—"

"Don't lie to me, Norah. There's only one reason you'd be all taped like that. Only one reason you'd have changed your dress. Somebody scratched you up with a knife. Somebody who knew exactly how to slash the cloth without cutting your flesh too deep."

"You're out of your mind, Michael."

"And the only person capable of savagery like that was Donald, here. I know because he did it to me, too. He tried to shake me down, and I fought with him, and that's how he drove me off. It's obvious, Norah. After he got away from my place, he must have gone to you and demanded hush money. Maybe you tried to give him a battle, so he cut you. He left his trademark on you, his personal brand, to let you know he wasn't fooling."

"You don't know what you're saying!" she whispered. "Nobody cut me."

"Yes, baby, I do know what I'm saying. And I hate every word of it, every foul, rotten syllable. Why did Donald blackmail you? Not just because he'd seen you driving me away from the Whitby Manor in my Cadillac. He wouldn't try to shake you down on anything as weak as that. And you wouldn't fight him if that was all he had on you. But suppose he knew you were Karen's murderer, the one he had watched shooting her as he looked through his binoculars from the Emperor Hotel roof? That would make it plausible."

"Michael, please," she whispered.

OLNEY made a bitter grimace. "So he slashed you to demonstrate how dangerous he was. Maybe he got some cash from you or some jewelry. Whatever you had available you gave him as the price of his silence. But you knew he would want more, that he would always want more, so you traced him by phoning the Hotel Emperor, the same as I did."

"Don't," she said desperately. "Don't do this to me, Michael. Call the police and we'll wait right here for them but don't say things like that to me."

"I've got to because it's part of the design. You came here and shot Donald through the heart, then you went home. You must have just arrived when I showed up. I remember I asked you if you were coming in or going out. You were coming in, Norah. Returning from a murder trip. Your second murder tonight, to cover the first one, to cover the fact you killed Karen."

"Michael, you're wrong. Horribly wrong, hideously wrong. Let me say something to you, Michael."

"Not until I'm finished." He pressed his palms to his temples. "It never dawned on me that you could have shot her. You were sitting in my car when I went into the apartment building. How could you have got to the penthouse ahead of me? It's so remote I never even considered it. And yet it was so easy, so simple. Someone was using the automatic elevator between various floors.

"I had to wait several minutes in the downstairs lobby before my button-pushing brought the thing down to

ground level. That was when you made the play, Norah. You must have gone in the service entrance and sneaked to the freight elevator in the rear. You must have taken yourself up in that freight elevator without arousing the janitor. So you reached the penthouse before I did." He looked at her. And after you killed Karen, you left the same way. You left her body for me to find."

"Michael!"

"There's only one thing I want to know. Why? *Why?*" He took a step toward her. "Are you the girl Tony Bradbury wanted to marry? And when Karen refused to divorce him, is that the way you decided to set him free of her?"

Tears glistened in Norah Valentine's purple eyes, streaked in little mascara-muddy rivulets down her pale cheeks. "That's rotten of you, Michael. You fool—you poor, blind fool! So smart and yet so stupid. I've never even met Tony Bradbury. The only man I ever wanted to marry was—was you, Michael. God help me, I'm in love with you. I've been in love with you since the day I first went to work in your office. But you never seemed to see, never seemed to understand." Her lips quivered in a wry smile. "Now you've made me cry. I'll bet my nose is red. I look awful when I cry. So what does that mean to you? Nothing. You think I'm a m-murderess."

"You are. Why did you shoot Karen?"

"I didn't. I swear I didn't."

"Maybe we can make it easy for you, Norah. Let's say you were afraid she was going on the make for me again. You thought she'd get me back. She had jilted me fror Bradbury, but you figured I'd go back to her if she beckoned. And she was beckoning. She was frightened, wanted protection. But you thought that was just a trick I was falling for. So you sneaked up to tell her so. Maybe you pulled a gun to intimidate her and there was a struggle and it went off. Maybe you didn't intend to kill her. Maybe it was an accident. Was that the way of it, baby?"

"No. No, Michael."

He reached out, grabbed her handbag. "The police may believe you. I don't. Do you still carry a spare gun?" He opened the bag. "Yes, you do." He hefted the little automatic. "Let's go, Norah." He prodded her toward the front door.

THEN he did a crazy thing. He struck her on the shoulder with his open left hand, knocked her staggering. And with the same motion he pivoted, raised the gun he had taken from her purse, and fired pointblank at one of the window drapes.

The man hiding behind those drapes screamed, weirdly, pitched headlong from his concealment. He, too, had a gun; and as he fell, he fired. But his bullet went harmlessly into the floor, and then he toppled down over the scar it had made.

"Got you, killer," Michael Olney said. "Got you, Wally Kirk."

Norah Valentine put the back of a hand to her mouth and whimpered. Her eyes bulged as she stared at the fallen columnist. "Kirk—Kirk?"

"I knew he was there, Norah. It's all right now, baby. Take it easy." Olney took her hand, squeezed it. "I saw his shoes when we first walked into the room. Ox-blood, hand-stitched bootmaker shoes. I noticed them right after I looked at Donald's body. And I saw the bulge of the drapes. I'd be likely to notice a thing like that. I've used drapes myself to hide behind."

"Michael, you are clever."

"I saw another bulge, too. A different kind of bulge, the kind a gun makes when it pokes against cloth. I knew we were covered. We'd been covered from the instant we walked through the doorway. We had come in before the killer could make a getaway. And if we made one wrong move, he'd have plugged us. Both of us."

"Oh, Michael!"

"I knew it was Kirk. I recognized the

shoes. And if I'd done what you asked me to do—if I'd gone toward the phone to call the cops—he would have blasted his way out. That's why I accused you, Norah. That's why I built up that long, crazy story. I was sparring for time, constructing a climax so it would seem logical for me to grab your handbag and shove you to the floor. I prayed to God you'd have a gun in the bag. And, thank God, you had."

"Mike, he's moving!"

Olney leaped. The columnist was crawling snakelike from where he had fallen toward his dropped gun. Olney jumped, and both feet landed on Kirk's outstretched hand. The wrist bones made a crunching sound. Kirk yelled.

"I guess I didn't plug you dead center or you wouldn't have that much breath left," Olney said. He rolled the man over, looked down into the pain-whitened face, the mouth that twisted under its fantastic mustache. "Hm-m-m. So you'll live for the hangman, after all."

"I should have shot you," Kirk said. "I blundered."

Michael Olney nodded. "Very likely. But you'll go to the death chamber. That's one satisfaction." He paused thoughtfully. "Incidentally, a lot of the things I said to Norah actually applied to you. You're the one who used the Whitby's freight elevator to go up to the penthouse. You're the one Donald saw shooting Karen. You didn't know there had been an eyewitness until I myself told you, in your car, when you picked me up and gave me a lift. That scared you, didn't it?"

WITH a rasping sigh the columnist admitted, "I was afraid of you, Olney. You're too slick."

"And when I described the bellhop, you must have known at once who he was. You mentioned having grapevines into the Emperor Hotel. Maybe he was one of those grapevines, one of the very bellhops you spoke about. And when I spilled my story to you about how he'd tried to blackmail me, you realized the spot you were in. If he hadn't already shaken you down, he soon would. And so, knowing where he lived, you came here to shut him up—permanently."

"I'm not admitting a thing."

"Bah! We got you dead to rights. Get a new tune. Such as telling me why you murdered Karen. Did she have you on the string, Kirk? Were you in love with her, and you found she was just playing you for a sucker the way she did everybody? Was it jealousy and frustration and the other things?"

Kirk didn't answer. He only closed his eyes and turned his head, but that was as good as a spoken yes. It was good enough for Michael Olney, and it would be good enough for Inspector Carl Reznak until Reznak could beat a confession from the newspaperman.

Olney said, "Call headquarters, Norah. It's over and done."

"Is—is he dead?"

"Oh, no. He'll live to stand trial. I've kept my promise to Karen. I'm free of her now, Norah. I'm free, at last."

She went to the phone then, made her call. Later, after the Homicide Squad had come and taken the bellhop away in a wicker basket and taken Wally Kirk away in handcuffs, Michael Olney looked down into Norah's violet eyes.

"I'm sorry for the things I had to say, baby."

"It's all right, Michael. I understand."

"You realize that I knew you weren't knifed? It was all play-acting to save both of us?"

"Yes, Michael. There's nothing to be sorry about now."

His mouth quirked in the old, satirical smile. "There's one thing you said, Norah. I wonder if you're sorry you said it? When you told me you loved me?"

"I'm not sorry for that, either," she whispered.

He put his arms around her and kissed her. Then he took her out into the night, to her waiting coupé. And this time he made a big concession. He did the driving. ● ● ●

For a fellow in Jimmy's spot it was no time to be—

GUN-SHY

IT WAS fall. The night breeze sent a flurry of half dead leaves rustling over the concrete in front of the darkened gas station. Jimmy Erlin extended a thumb hopefully as twin lights rushed down upon him. There should be enough glow from the corner arc-light so the driver could see him. Jimmy hoped there was anyhow. Groton City was seventy miles away, and he had to be there by morning. He had to be there, or almost anything could happen.

The hammer crashed down on Jimmy's fingers

by CLARK FROST

The big coupe stopped noiselessly, without effort after its seventy-mile-an-hour pace.

A girl was behind its wheel. She leaned over and opened the door. The dash light was off, and Jimmy couldn't see her very well until she had done that. Then he sucked in his breath sharply.

Shiny black hair cascaded to her shoulders. Her oval face was a rich olive color. Under an open coat, she wore a red-silk blouse, fitted close and very revealing. She was, Jimmy thought, the prettiest girl he had ever seen, and he felt a wave of sadness when he observed an obvious defect. She had the use of only one arm.

Her eyes met his, appraisingly.

"How far are you going?" she asked in a tight, nervous voice.

"Croton City, Miss. I'd like to get there—"

"Hop in. You can ride there with me."

She threw the car in gear. They shot forward, tires purring softly on concrete. A cool breeze licked at Jimmy's face.

Out in the open country, under a white November moon, the needle touched seventy, seventy-five, and came to rest on eighty.

Against the silvery-blue night, Jimmy could see the girl's profile. It was even and delicate, like Hedy Lamarr's.

Trembling a little with new-found emotion, he turned toward her.

"Gee, I'm sure glad to get this lift. I've got to be in Groton City by seven in the morning, and I haven't got bus fare. Of course I could've got it, but up until the last minute, I wasn't going to go, and—well, I just changed my mind."

SHE offered no comment, and it dawned on him that she probably wouldn't be interested in his reason for going to Groton City. Yet, somehow, she had seemed pleased that he had said it was his destination.

"Anyhow," he finished awkwardly, "I've got to get there now, and it's sure nice of you to take me."

"That's okay." She slackened the car's speed a trifle. "What's your name, kid?"

"My name? Jimmy Erlin. I live over by—"

"Mine's Florence Dupree."

"Gosh, that's sure a pretty name, Miss Dupree."

"Call me Flo. Everybody does." She switched on the dash light for a moment and smiled.

He could see her white even teeth, her full red lips and her dark eyes on his. His heart gave a violent thump.

"Gosh!" he said. "*Gosh!*"

The light was off again. The car picked up speed, streaking silently throught the night.

She leaned toward him.

"Jimmy, I'm tired. It's tough driving so far—with one arm."

He was all sympathy.

"Did—did you lose it when you were small? I mean—"

She broke into a laugh, a rather grim laugh.

"I've got both arms, kid. I just—just hurt one of 'em tonight." She paused. "It's made me tired driving. How about you taking the wheel?"

He was overjoyed to be of some help.

"You bet, Miss—Flo." He changed places, after she had stopped the car, and switched on the dash light to get his bearings. As he did so, his gaze fell on a metal object which had become uncovered on the seat between them. He stared, a wave of acute fear engulfing him. The metal object was a small, thirty-two caliber revolver.

Flo was staring at him.

"What's the matter, kid?"

He couldn't answer. He felt weak and dizzy, and the wave of fear was growing stronger, choking his breath and bringing out a cold perspiration all over his body.

She reached out and shook him with tense, nervous fingers.

"*Say!* What's the matter? Are you having a fit? I've got to keep moving, kid. Can't you drive, or what?"

"The—the—" with a tremendous effort he brought the word out—"the gun. I can't—"

"This?" She saw the thirty-two and scooped it from sight. "What's wrong with me having a revolver? A girl traveling by herself—"

"Throw it out!" he said thickly.

"I will not. D'you take me for a dope? I mean—well that is, Jimmy, I've got to have it for protection. Don't you see? Why should it scare you?"

With the revolver out of sight, some of his vertigo passed. He drew a trembling breath, his hands locked on the wheel, and he stared straight ahead.

"What's the matter?" Flo persisted, anger making her voice sharp. "Can't you talk?"

He had to face it. She was already contemptuous of him. He couldn't change that.

"I've got—I've got a phobia for guns, Flo. I can't help it. I just—"

"You've got a *what?*"

"A phobia. That means a fear—a fear you can't shake no matter how you try to reason it out."

"You mean you're scared silly just because you see this rod—revolver?"

"Yes," he admitted. He threw the car in gear, looking straight ahead. "Keep it out of sight, Flo."

WITH a scornful laugh she said, "I knew a guy like you once. He'd get all upset about doing things wrong. Maybe he'd buy a pair of shoes, and after he'd have 'em on, he'd get worried that they weren't right or something, and he couldn't rest 'til he'd get rid of 'em. He was a queer bird."

"That's not exactly the same thing," said Jimmy. "He has what's called a *compulsion neurosis*. That is, he feels compelled to do certain things—say, like getting rid of his shoes—without knowing why. My trouble's known as an *anxiety hysteria*. I don't feel compelled to do anything. I just get darned scared when I see a gun, any kind of gun. You'd be surprised how many people have phobias that way."

"Can't you do something about it?"

"Sure. According to my doctor, a man's real fear, when he has a phobia, is usually hidden, and another takes its place. Once the hidden fear is discovered, it can often be corrected."

"That sounds mixed up, kid. Couldn't they cure you?"

Jimmy was silent a moment.

"Well, you see I've had it a long time. I guess I know what it came from now, but—well, it's hard to shake, sort of. When I was little, about three, my mother was killed by a car. There was a Fourth of July celebration going on, and a man near by was shooting a revolver off. I guess that fastened on my mind, instead of on the car that hit Mother.

"The revolver was sort of a symbol of the terrible thing that happened to her. Anyhow, the doctor told me if I'd use a gun some day, maybe go hunting, I could get over my phobia, or at least have a chance of getting over it. But I've never tried that. It's, well, it's harder than you'd think."

Flo shrugged with flagging interest. "I'll keep my rod—my revolver out of sight, kid. I don't want you to have a fit before we get to Groton City. Right now, my arm hurts so much I don't guess I could drive this car ten feet."

At eleven-fifteen they reached their destination. At Flo's direction, he parked in front of a modest hotel entrance. He stood aside while an aged bellhop got a suitcase from the rear compartment.

Flo turned to him, linking her good arm through his. Her coat remained thrown over her injured one.

"Come in with me, Jimmy." She smiled brightly. "We'll have something to eat, then you can take a spare tire that needs to be fixed."

"But—" he was embarrassed—"but—"

"The meal's on me. I owe you that for driving the car. C'mon—don't be scared."

They went inside and crossed a small lobby. Under the lights, Flo Dupree looked more beautiful than ever. Stares followed them to the desk.

Jimmy hung back self-consciously. He heard the clerk call out a room number, saw him toss a key to the bellhop. Flo

went to the elevator and waved. With thumping heart, he sank on a leather lounge to wait her return.

He dug in a pocket and extracted a stick of chewing gum. Several minutes passed. Two men drifted to Jimmy's lounge. He looked up casually. One was small, hard looking, with a thin face and tight lips. The other was heavy and had a pair of cold eyes in his fleshy face. They both watched him.

The small man spoke.

"Ain't you the guy who drove up in that big Packard? Uh-huh, I thought so. Well, listen, pal, did you know you got a flat? Uh-huh. The right rear's like a busted derby. You better have a look."

Jimmy thanked them and went outside. There were no flats on the car. He started to turn away, then stopped short. The two men had come out and were standing near him.

Again the small man spoke.

"Climb in the car, pal."

Jimmy's heart began to pound. He could see that both men had their hands jammed into their pockets. He knew what that meant. He got in the car, uncontrollable fear shooting through him.

The big man got the keys from Jimmy and took the wheel. The car shot out into traffic with a smooth, powerful roar.

Cold sweat covered Jimmy's body. They drove ten or twelve blocks, then stopped. The small man went into a drug store. Some minutes later, he came back with a grim look.

"Okay, we gotta work on this guy," he muttered, and they drove off.

BEFORE a dismal tenement across the street from a maze of yard tracks, they stopped again. The building was dark and vacant. They went to a room on the third floor. The big man lit a stub of a candle. Jimmy, in the sickly yellow glare, could see that the room's windows were boarded up. There was no furniture. A hammer and some wire lay in one corner.

"Okay, pal," said the small man, "it's up to you. Take it the tough way or get off easy." Thin hard lines creased his face. "Where's Flo's dough?"

Jimmy's body was drenched in sweat. He shook his head, bewildered.

"I don't—I don't know what you mean."

The big man leered at him.

"Get this straight, chum. You can yell your head off, but nobody'll hear. A gov'ment housing project emptied this dump last week. See?"

Jim saw, but he still didn't understand. He tried to explain. The small man froze up on him.

"Get the wire, Mike," he snapped to his companion. He swung a fist against Jimmy, keeping a pistol in his right hand.

Jimmy landed on the floor. He ground his teeth into his chewing gum. He closed his eyes, cutting the pistol from his sight. Hot waves swept through his body.

Mike, the big man, nailed one end of a short length of copper wire to the floor. He drew the wire across Jimmy's throat and nailed the other end likewise.

"How about it, pal?" said the small man. "Where's Flo got the money?"

Jimmy had no answer.

Mike smashed his hammer down on the tip of one of Jimmy's fingers.

Jimmy gasped. His head jerked up. The copper strand cut his throat. Gagging, he beat the floor with his hands.

"Let him have it again, Mike," said the small man.

Mike grinned. The hammer rose and fell. Jimmy's fingers felt as though they were being sliced away. The copper wire cut his throat. His breath seemed clogged in his lungs.

"Again!" cried the small man. "Let him have it again."

The hammer crashed down.

"How d'ya like it?" asked Mike.

Jimmy couldn't answer. The wire was cutting his throat.

"Again," chanted the small man. "Sock him again!"

A thumbnail was shattered. Jimmy's heels pounded the floor in agony.

"Gonna tell us?" asked the small man. "Where's the money?"

Jimmy's eyes rolled.

"If I ever get out of this!" he moaned to himself. "Oh, God, if I ever get out of this!"

"Give him another tap, Mike."

"No!" Jimmy lunged against the wire. He had to do something to stop the torture. "The money's in the—in the car. Yeh, in the car."

The small man bent close to him.

"Whereabouts in the car, pal?"

Jimmy's brain raced. He wished now that he had said the money was back along the highway, but it was too late to change his story. "It's in—it's in—"

"Yeah, where?"

"In the spare tire." Flo had told him there was a spare tire. She wanted it fixed. "It's in the spare tire, under the tubing."

That would gain a few minutes relief. Afterwards, they'd kill him, but they'd do that anyway.

"Get down to the car, Mike," ordered the small man. "You've got the keys."

Mike dropped his hammer, staring at Jimmy.

"If this is a bum steer, it'll be just too bad. Y'ain't seen nothing yet, kid. Has he, Sam?"

He pounded down the dark stairs.

Sam, the other man, watched him go. Jimmy's eyes rolled. He wished the flickering candle were closer, so he could snuff it out. If there was no light, he couldn't see Sam's pistol, and the small man couldn't see him, either. Then—well, he could grab the hammer and with it yank one end of the wire loose.

AS IT was, he dared not seize the hammer. Sam would whirl with the slightest movement. It would be hopeless then. The pistol would crash, and everything would be over.

Sam was still half turned, his head cocked in a listening attitude. Jimmy bit into his chewing gum. He rolled it with the tip of his tongue. An idea began to form. His breath came fast. His eyes fastened on the candle.

The gum was a near-round pellet now. Sam shifted his position suddenly. With a prayer in his heart, Jimmy blew the pellet from his mouth. It shot to its mark, nipping the candle's flame neatly. The room was suddenly inky dark.

Sam swore. Jimmy got the hammer. He yanked the wire loose and bounded to his feet.

Sam was fumbling in the darkness. A match scratched, and its small flame flared up. In desperation, Jimmy swung his hammer. It caught Sam below one eye, sinking with a pulpy crunch into flesh and bones as the match spluttered out. Jimmy struck again. He heard Sam's body flop on the floor. It was black in the little room, but he knew blood was running down that thin hard face.

Jimmy turned to the door, his heart pounding. Mike was coming up the stairs with a measured tread, moving with grim deliberation.

At the door, Jimmy drew back, waitting. It might have been wiser to have lit the candle again. Mike would then be unaware of trouble. But Jimmy couldn't bring himself to do it. He needed darkness. Mike came to a halt in the narrow hall.

"Sam?" he called. "Hi, Sam, what's the matter?"

There was no answer. Mike took a cautious step ahead. A low groan came from Sam's lips. Mike halted, then rushed forward.

Jimmy couldn't see his pistol, but he knew the big man had one. He was still sick and faint, and his heart pounded wildly. It was a terrifying sensation. Other people, normal people who weren't troubled by phobias, couldn't understand him. To them, a phobia was something queer, something which might make good reading at times, but which was nonetheless just another queer item in a topsy-turvy world. It wasn't funny to Jimmy.

Fear rooted him to the floor. Yet he had to do something. He had to because his very life depended on it and because he could not face the thought of more torture. He crouched low, the hammer swinging at his side.

Mike came blundering toward him,

roaring threats of reprisal. With a desperate effort, Jimmy swung the hammer. It crunched against a hard skull. There was a groan, a dull thud as a big body hit the floor, then silence.

Before he remembered that Mike had the car keys, Jimmy raced down to the Packard. That was all right. He didn't want the car anyway. He wanted to get as far away from it as possible. He wanted to get as far away from Groton City as possible.

He'd change his name, go clear across the country, and live the rest of his life in some out-of-the-way place. That was the thing to do. He'd be a hermit, a recluse. He'd never have to face a revolver again. He'd never have to face anybody again.

But he remembered Flo. He turned and made his way back to the third floor of the dismal tenement. In the stale blackness, his body soaked with cold sweat, he found Mike's limp form. The big man was alive, breathing noisily. Jimmy squatted on the floor and began to search. The minutes passed, suffocating minutes. Mike's pockets were crammed with paper. At length he found the keys.

SOMEHOW, he got back to the car and started its motor. He drove through the dark streets to the hotel, to Flo Dupree. It was the thought of her, of the possible torture she, too, might face, that had prevented his flight.

He remembered her room number and went directly there. No one answered his rap. The door was unlocked. He pushed inside and pressed a light switch.

Horror struck him full in the face, flinging him back against the wall, sending waves of panic through his body. He slumped to his knees and buried his face. Then at last he looked up.

Flo Dupree had removed her coat, but she still wore her close-fitting red silk blouse, revealing the curves of her rounded breasts. Her shiny black hair still tangled in curls about her slim shoulders. Color had left her soft oval face, and it was no longer beautiful. Her small trim shoes dangled six inches above the floor. She was pinned, literally pinned, to a closet door by two long-handled knives driven through her body directly under each shoulder blade.

A low sob choked Jimmy. She was pinned to the inside of a door which stood open against the wall of the room. Above her head was a coat hook. Bluish marks marred her white throat. Apparently she had first been strangled, then pinned to the door. There was no blood. She must have been dead by the time the knives entered her slim body. Somehow Jimmy got her body down and put it on the bed.

Jimmy's eyes went to the rest of the room. It was in wild disorder. A suitcase lay open and empty on the bed. Feminine garments were scattered in all directions. Bureau drawers yawned wide. Two pictures lay on the floor, their frames shattered. The rug was turned back in several places, the bedding disarranged. A thorough search had undoubtedly been made.

Not, however, by either Sam or Mike. They wouldn't have had the time. Jimmy recalled Sam's stop in the drug store. Possibly Sam had called a third man who had let him know Flo Dupree was dead, that she didn't have the money they sought. She, like Jimmy, had been tortured, but her torture had ended in death.

The hall door opened. It closed gently. Jimmy turned, his face white.

Another man was standing in the room. He was slim, with black hair and a pallid skin. His eyes were a brilliant black and metal-hard, and his tight lips had a buttoned up grimness. He wasn't a whole lot older than Jimmy but he looked tougher.

Something leaped to the man's eyes as he stared. They were fastened on Flo Dupree. He didn't cringe and he didn't get any paler than he already was, but a wild surge of pain appeared in his gaze.

He took a step toward the girl's body. He paused then, his jaw muscles knotting. He whirled toward Jimmy, whipping out a shiny revolver.

His voice came soft, like the purring of a cat.

"You'll die—lot worse'n Flo did. Hours, where it took her minutes." He laughed, as though his shock was too violent for his senses to absorb—a wild laugh, a little bit crazy. "You'll go back to Dort in pieces—in little pieces."

"No!" With his eyes on the revolver, Jimmy couldn't say more. He was conscious of a feeling of unreality about the man, about Flo, about everything.

"Did you find the money?" snarled the man suddenly.

"No. I—"

"Then it's in the car. It's gotta be there. Dort won't see it, but you will. You'll see it while you die—while you die slow, slower than Flo did."

YES, the man was crazy. He looked it, with those staring black eyes, and he sounded it. Even if he weren't, things wouldn't be improved. Jimmy's body was bathed in sweat. Still staring at the revolver, fascinated by its shiny metal, he sank down on the bed.

Again the man laughed.

"A new guy, huh? Dort sent a new guy. He wouldn't come himself."

Jimmy got a grip on himself. He had to.

"You've got this all wrong. I didn't kill—didn't kill Miss Dupree."

The man came across the room, holding the revolver.

"C'mon, we'll get in the car. You'll go with me. You won't try to run. You know I'll shoot. That'd be easier for you, but you'll hope for a break." He laughed once more. "You won't get one. You'll die a lot worse'n Flo did."

Jimmy stood up, desperate.

"Look at my hands!" he cried. "Look at my fingers. You know who did that? They were smashed less'n an hour ago because I wouldn't tell where Miss Dupree's money was, because I *couldn't* tell where it was. Look at them! How could I've killed her? I can't hardly move my fingers at all."

A puzzled frown replaced some of the wildness in the man's face.

"I had to get to Groton City tonight," went on Jimmy hurriedly, "and Miss Dupree picked me up along the highway. After we got in, I waited downstairs, and two guys got me. They took me to a dump way over on the other side of town. I got away and beat it back here to warn Miss Dupree. I found her this way."

"Who were those guys?"

"One was called Mike, the other Sam. That's all I know."

"Dort's boys. Why were you waiting downstairs?"

"Miss Dupree told me I was to take a tire to be repaired. First she was going to buy me a meal."

"She wanted you to take a tire—yeah, I get it." The man's eyes narrowed. "Tell me about those guys. How'd you get away from 'em?"

Jimmy repeated his story.

"Hold on," interrupted the man. "You mean Mike went down to look for the money and came back without it and—"

"It was black. I couldn't see him. I just swung the hammer and landed."

"We're going there," said the other grimly. "C'mon."

There was no sign of life about the grimy tenement when they pulled up to the curb in front of it. Jimmy led the way up its worn stair. He paused at the door of the room. Inside, a man was groaning.

"There's a candle somewhere," Jimmy whispered.

The other struck a match. It flared up briefly. Jimmy saw Sam sitting cross-legged on the floor, his head in his hands. He was covered with blood. He didn't look up. He rocked from side to side, moaning.

Mike, the big man, was still stretched on the floor, his breath coming in jerks, like a drunk who has passed out. A sheaf of crisp bills protruded from his pocket. Others, mostly tens and twenties, were scattered around him.

The black-haired man got the candle and lit it.

"Mike found the money," he said thinly. "Yeah, he found it. You gave him a good steer. When Flo told you

about the tire, she meant you were to bring it to me. She must've gone to her room to phone me. I was out. Dort got to her first."

There was a slight noise behind them. A man, so broad and heavy that Jimmy wondered how he got up the stairs unheard, stood in the doorway. He held a heavy automatic.

"Yeah," he agreed grimly, "I fixed Flo. You seen her? How'd you like the job?"

"Dort!" barked the black-haired man.

"It's me, Tony." The man waddled into the room. "Keep your rod down, Tony. Keep it down." Small piggish eyes swept the room quickly. "My boys got the dough, and you got them, huh? Well, you seen what I done to Flo. You know what a doublecrosser gets."

Tony wet his lips.

"There was no double-cross, Dort I—"

"Cut the lying, Tony. I'm wise. After Eaton and Carroni got croaked on the bank job, you figured on all the gravy. You spent three years in stir, just three years because I furnished a good mouthpiece, and you were going to get it all. Eighty grand. You said some guy had got it, some guy none of us knew. You lied. No split for us, that was it. Flo played along. You skipped when you got out, phoned her where to pick up the dough—"

"I didn't, Dort! Honest to—"

"Cut it out! We tailed Flo. Sam smacked lead through her arm, but she got away. She wished she hadn't when I last seen her."

"Dort, I'm tellin' you—"

"Shut up! Lemme talk, punk. Flo, she wanted to live just like you do. She was my girl while you was in stir, Tony. You didn't know that? It don't matter. Maybe you wish you was back in stir now, but you ain't goin' back, Tony—"

"Dort! I don't want the dough. I don't want—"

"You ain't going outa this room, Tony." The big man's pistol crashed once. Tony flopped to the floor, groaning, and coughed up blood. There was another blast. Tony stopped twisting.

AFTER the shot echoed away, there wasn't any sound for a few moments. Dort glanced over at Jimmy.

"You're the guy who came in with Flo, huh?"

Jimmy knew escape was impossible. He had seen violent death. He had seen it in its cruelest form. In another moment it would touch him. He, too, would die. Strangely, he no longer thought of escape, of hiding away from terror, of hiding away from everything.

The heavy man's eyes gleamed. His mouth tightened.

On the floor lay Tony, arms outflung. Near him was the shiny revolver. Near him also was the spluttering candle.

Jimmy dove for it. The automatic thundered. The candle was snuffed out under Jimmy's body. In the black room, the pistol crashed again and again.

Jimmy's hand closed over Tony's revolver. Its metal was cold and hard. He raised it. He pressed its trigger. It roared in his ears, sending out a pencil-thin jet of fire toward the flashes across the room.

The automatic stopped. It clanked to the floor. A heavy thud followed it. Then there was deep silence. After a while, Jimmy laid his revolver down carefully and went out of the tenement. He drove the Packard back to the city.

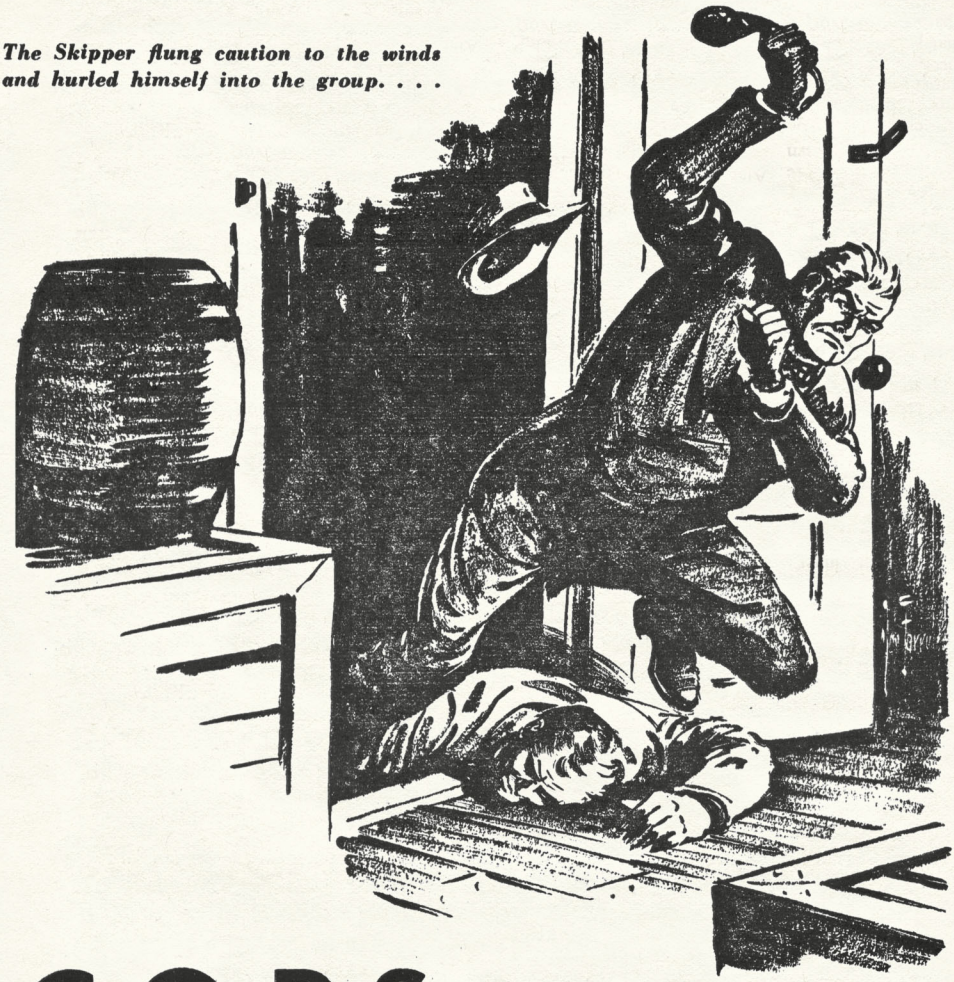
A skeptical desk sergeant listened to his story. He wasn't so skeptical after his detectives returned from the tenement.

"Dort Magee's an Eastern gangster," said one. "He's got a record a mile long, I guess. All of that crew has. Kid," he said to Jimmy, "you've had a tough time. We don't want to make it any tougher, but we want you to stick some place where we're sure to find you when you're needed."

"You can find me," said Jimmy. "Where I'm going, I'll stay put. I didn't want to come to Groton City. I put it off 'til the last minute because I was scared of guns. But I guess I've got over that. I'm glad I'm here."

In the morning, after a sleep of several hours, Jimmy Erlin reported to the Army Induction Center. He was on time to the very minute. ● ● ●

A Novelet by LESLIE T. WHITE



The Skipper flung caution to the winds and hurled himself into the group. . . .

COPS CAN'T QUIT!

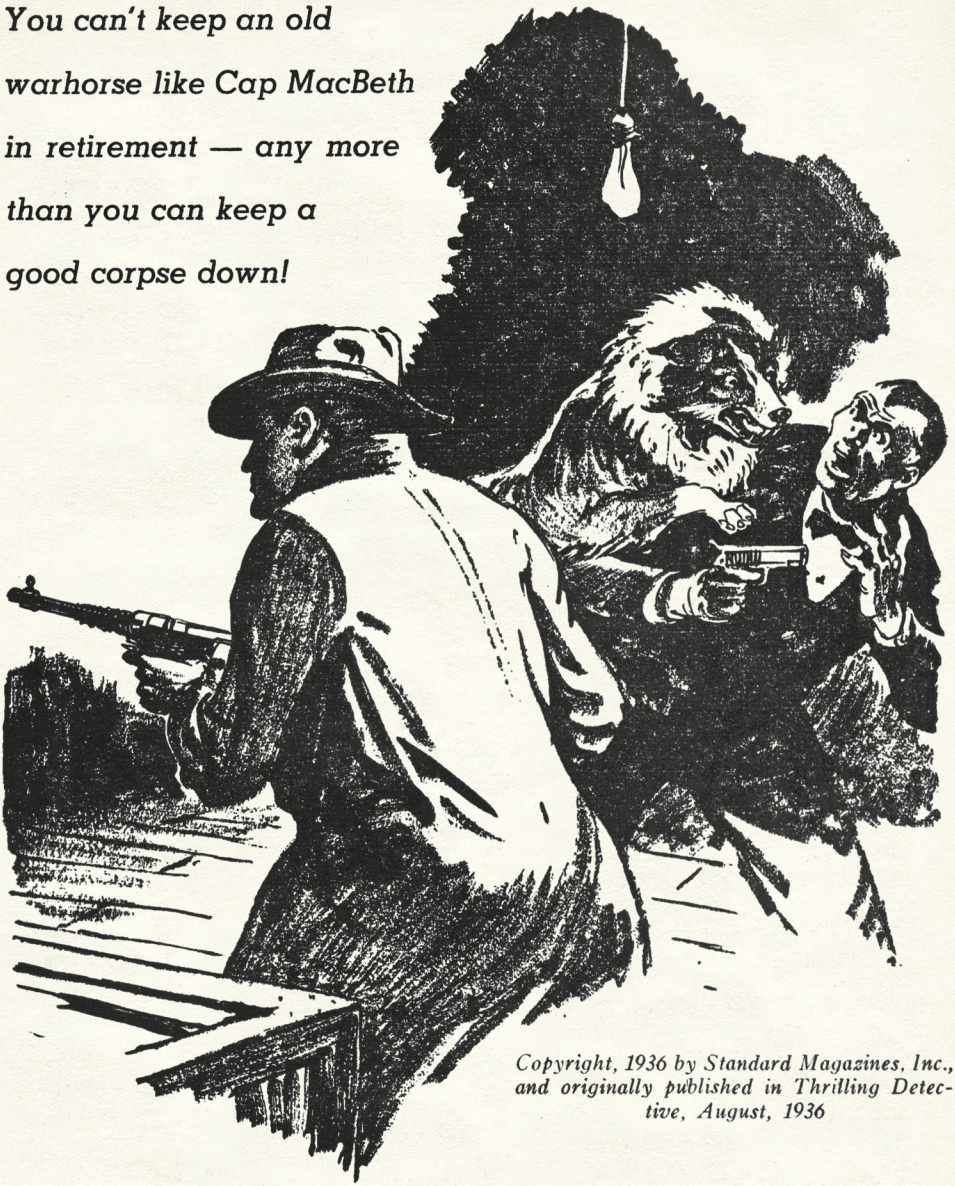
CHAPTER I

MIDNIGHT VISITOR

MACBETH came suddenly awake without knowing just what had disturbed him. He raised his head, rubbed a horny paw over his bald pate, stared into the darkness, listening. Except for the rumble of a street car far in the distance all was quiet.

He sighed, relaxed. Twenty years a

You can't keep an old warhorse like Cap MacBeth in retirement — any more than you can keep a good corpse down!



cop made a man suspicious and now that he had retired, reaction made his nerves jumpier than ever. Just as his head touched the warm pillow, he heard the noise which had awakened him, a furtive rapping somewhere in the house below.

Sliding out of bed as gently as his huge bulk would allow, he padded, barefooted, toward the door. It creaked a little as he moved into the corridor. At the head of the stairs, he paused. The sound came from the back of the house.

When he pushed into the kitchen, he knew someone was rapping on the back door. He eased across the cold linoleum and groped for the knob. He switched on the light as he jerked open the door.

A woman stood framed in the open-

ing, and for a full minute the veteran copper stared into her gray, haggard features without recognition. She met his stare with brown eyes which mirrored the terror of a trapped animal. She swayed, as though she might faint, and braced herself upright against the wall.

MacBeth's mouth went taut.

"Frieda Chandler! What did you come here for?"

The sound of his harsh voice broke the spell. She gave a strangled sob, fell against him and clutched his shoulders.

"I had to see you, Captain! Oh, why did Kent have to spoil it all by this mad break!"

Cyrus MacBeth winced at the harshness of her voice. Wind whistled through the still open door, sucked at his chubby legs, and plastered his flannel nightgown tight across his massive frame. He wormed out of the woman's grip, closed the door.

"You shouldn't have come here tonight, Frieda," he growled. "I'm retired, done with all this stuff, an' you know it. Another thing, Lieutenant Osborn of the police and a hawk-faced dick named Sloan, an inspector of the Railway Express detectives, were here a couple of hours ago. They wanted me to work on the case. I refused. They're lookin' for you."

She shivered. "They're not the only ones who are looking for me!"

"Kent Ashley?"

She shook her head. She tried to light a cigarette, but her hands trembled so that MacBeth had to assist her. She sucked a smoke into her lungs. Then words flooded from her mouth.

"Captain MacBeth, Kent Ashley didn't pull that express robbery! I know it! I can prove it—almost!"

"Somebody beat hell out of the express agent and got two hundred thousand dollars," the veteran ex-copper grumbled. "The jury said Kent Ashley did it. Anyway, tellin' me doesn't help one way or another. I arrested Ashley in the first place, although I never thought much of the setup, and if the state can't keep him locked up, that's their lookout. I'm on a pension an' I mean to stay on it. I don't give a damn about the dirty mess."

"But you've got to care!" cried the woman. "You sent him up when he was innocent; you're responsible for that, and anything that may subsequently happen."

"Nerts!" grumbled MacBeth. "Ashley was just a cheap bootlegger. I wouldn't put robbery past his kind any day. If he was innocent, why did he make a break and escape from prison? Does that sound like an innocent man's trick? Anyhow, what's eatin' you? He was never anything to you."

She turned on him like a tigress.

"Listen, you smug old flatfoot!" she spat, "I'm Ashley's wife—get that—his wife!"

"Yeah," grumbled MacBeth defensively. "You must have loved him, scramming for nearly a year, then going sweet on another guy, Georgie Gosliner."

HER face was so close to his that he could feel her hot breath against his cheek. "Listen, Captain! I'm going to tell you something that nobody but Kent knows! I went away to have a baby—Kent's baby! I went away so that the little fella would have a chance, not be hounded by a lot of newspapermen and clumsy old cops. You say I went for another man. Sure I did—you don't know why, do you? No, not by a damn sight! Well, I've put in several years of hell with a man I loathe to clear the one I love—can you understand that?"

MacBeth whistled softly, rubbed a hand over his sweating pate. "I'm afraid I don't," he admitted. "What's Georgie Gosliner got to do—"

"Gosliner knows who robbed that express office! In another week or so I'd have had enough evidence to take before the governor to send up the right man and get my husband back. Maybe that isn't your brand of love, flatfoot, but it's mine! And now he's out in the night some place with cops hunting him down like a wild animal. Maybe he hates me —maybe he'll—" She stopped.

MacBeth tried to clear his throat by growling, but only produced a hacking cough.

"I was a sap to come to you," she said spasmodically. "Forget it. You were always hard, but straight. I'll handle this my own way." She turned abruptly, headed for the door, then paused with her hand on the knob. "Would you do one little thing for me, personally? Just —well, deliver a message?"

"Who to?" MacBeth asked.

"My kid—Sonny!" She took an envelope out of her purse, smoothed out the wrinkles and offered it to him.

"There's five one-thousand-dollar bills in that," she said flatly. "The address is on it—take it to the people who have the kid—their name is Weber—and tell 'em to give Sonny a break. He isn't to know anything about his parents—ever. Get that?"

"But you, Frieda—the police will want to talk—" MacBeth began, but she cut him short.

"To hell with the police!" she flung at him and slammed out.

MacBeth stared at the envelope in his hand. Five grand! He whistled softly. He'd have to turn it over to Osborn so he could check the serial numbers with the numbers of the stolen loot. He took one last look at the door through which Frieda Chandler had vanished, then he turned off the lights and shuffled up the stairs to his bedroom.

Sleep was not to be recaptured. He thought of Frieda, of the amazing story of sacrifice she had recounted, and he felt ashamed for the things he had said. Frieda had claimed that in another week or so she would have secured evidence to prove that Ashley had not robbed the express office. If Ashley were innocent —she had said he, Captain MacBeth, was responsible.

Mac squirmed. That was not exactly correct. True, he had arrested Ashley on evidence submitted by the express company and his own corps of dicks, but a jury had really sealed Ashley's doom.

Gosliner! Georgie Gosliner had lifted himself by the bootstraps from a successful bootlegger to a politician; he now held the office of Commissioner of Public Works.

MacBeth groaned, turned over restlessly. He lay with his hands cupped behind his bald head and relived every moment of the Ashley case. When the sky faded from black to gray, he rose, padded downstairs, and built a fire to take the chill out of the house.

At eight o'clock he called headquarters and tried to get Dave Osborn on the wire, but Dave was out. Mac decided to take his flivver and drive down to headquarters and pass along the address which Frieda Chandler had written on the envelope. Dave would probably want to know something about these Webers who were harboring the blonde's kid.

He told Stella, his wife, he was going down to headquarters and mumbled something vague about getting his pension checks forwarded to her sister's.

ONCE in his flivver, headed uptown, his old restlessness returned. Why the devil, he demanded of himself, had he allowed his wife to talk him into retiring? He was still a comparatively young man; he was a damn sight better copper than most of the rookies who had sprung up after him. Anyway, after twenty years a cop, you just stayed a cop until you died.

Fishing the envelope out of his pocket, he rescanned the address. It was 9923 Dupont Street. MacBeth's didn't need a directory; there were mighty few square feet of the city he didn't know by heart. He swung north at the first intersection, and after another fifteen minutes' driving, piloted the old car into the ninety-nine hundred block on Dupont.

It was a street of small homes. Number 9923 was a small board house with shutters and a white picket fence around a grassy lawn. As MacBeth drove slowly by, he saw a youngster playing with a collie in the yard.

At the first corner, he turned and stopped. He left the flivver and walked casually along the street. When he came

to the white picket fence, he looked over at the boy.

The youngster, MacBeth judged, would be around six years; a healthy lad with tousled blond curls and tanned skin. As the Skipper slackened his pace, the collie ran toward him, barking. The boy turned his head, grinned, and called to the dog:

"Stop it, Kirk!" When the big dog continued to bark, he said to the man, "Don't be afraid of him, mister. I won't let him bite you."

MacBeth returned the grin.

"Okay, kid, and what's your name?"

"Sonny. What's yours?"

MacBeth was saved a reply by the sudden appearance of a buxom woman at the front door of the little house with the shutters. She wiped her hands on a gingham apron and looked straight at him.

"Were you looking for someone?" she asked.

MacBeth nodded. "Yes, I'm tryin' to locate a family named Shane. Somebody in the next block said they lived in here close."

He thought she looked a trifle relieved.

"I'm sorry," she told him. "You've the wrong block. We've been here for ten years and there's nobody named Shane ever lived in this block."

"That's too bad," MacBeth murmured, and strode on down the block, turned at the corner and circled back to his machine.

His forehead wrinkled thoughtfully. So that was Sonny—son of a convict! He climbed into his car and drove to headquarters.

CHAPTER II

SUDDEN DEATH

THE old nostalgia returned as he slapped open the door of the detective bureau. He shook hands with the grisly desk sergeant and pushed in to his old office. He found Osborn pouring over a coroner's red-tinted report. The young man jumped to his feet with an exclamation of welcome.

"Darn glad to see you, Skipper! Changed your mind about working on the case?"

MacBeth dropped into a chair, pushed his feet onto the battered desk and took out his pipe. This was like a home ought to be!

"No, Dave," he growled. "I came in to see you about Frieda Chandler. I—"

Osborn gave him a bewildered frown and cut in. "How the devil did you hear about it so soon?"

It was the veteran's turn to scowl. "Hear about what? I was just goin' to tell you—"

"You know about this?" Osborn patted the report before him. "They found her about two hours ago."

MacBeth took the pipe out of his mouth and sat up straight.

"Found who? You don't mean Frieda?"

Osborn sniffed and thumbed the paper. "The whole works," he said grimly. "Throttled, six slugs in the abdomen and her head caved in with a length of pipe. A new harness bull named Peterson found her propped up against the call box on the corner of Harrison and Front Streets near the harbor. Nice playmate, this Ashley friend of hers. I've given the boys orders to shoot first and worry later."

MacBeth whistled, stroked his jaw. So Frieda had got it! Yet, he told himself, he shouldn't have been surprised, for she had foretold something like this last night when, in reply to his remark that the police were looking for her, she had retorted: "They're not the only ones who are looking for me!"

Now the police blamed Ashley. Twin seams deepened between MacBeth's brows. Frieda had been quite decisive in stating that it was not Kent Ashley she feared. Who then?

He reached into his pocket for the envelope Frieda had given to him; he was going to turn it over to Osborn.

He hesitated when the door opened suddenly and Inspector Sloan pushed into the cubby office. MacBeth did not like Sloan.

Sloan saw MacBeth.

"Well, Captain, what do you think of your Ashley boy now, eh?"

"About the same as when I saw you last night," MacBeth snapped. "Why?"

Sloan snorted, glanced at Osborn. "Didn't you tell him about the dame?"

MacBeth answered for Osborn. "Sure, Dave told me about the Chandler woman getting the works, but the evidence wasn't mentioned that tied Ashley into the killin'."

Sloan gave a derisive sniff and shook his head. Osborn said defensively, "There couldn't have been anyone else, Skipper."

The veteran grunted, pushed out of his chair.

"No? What about the other million or so people that live in this town? I don't suppose there's another person in this world that might want to bump off a woman—nobody but Kent Ashley, eh?" He snorted. "Keep on goin', boys, you're doin' swell. If you bump off Ashley without a trial, you ought to satisfy your superiors, even if it don't get back the loot for the express company." He didn't give them a chance to reply, but walked out of the office.

He tramped over to his flivver, swore as he trod on the starter and headed the old machine homeward. It was good to be out of it; what did he care whether they bumped off Ashley or not?

BUT all his self-arguments couldn't quiet the unrest that stirred within him. Frieda Chandler had picked him out of all the men she knew to confide her secret, to seek his help. Of course, he reasoned, he should have turned the five thousand over to Dave Osborn; there might be a clue in the serial numbers of the bills. It was childish to let a mug like Sloan get his goat.

Frieda had given everything, even her life, in a vain attempt to prove the innocence of the man she loved. By her own statement, she had died on the eve of success. MacBeth censored himself bitterly. He should have been more sympathetic and got the setup as she knew it. Now, even if he wanted to—which he didn't, of course—he couldn't carry on her work, for she had died without giving an inkling.

Or had she? He rummaged through the files of memory. "Gosliner knows who robbed that Express office!" Frieda had declared.

At the thought of Georgie Gosliner, MacBeth's features automatically contorted into a scowl. He disliked the man personally and frowned on a system of municipal government that made it possible for a gutter bum to hoist himself into an important public office. Gosliner had been a waterfront saloon keeper when MacBeth had been flattening his own arches on the harbor beat—the same beat, ironically, where the rookie cop had found Frieda Chandler's body.

His scowl cut deeper. With the advent of prohibition, Gosliner had given up his waterfront traffic in doped seamen and turf walkers and had gone into booze on a wholesale basis. Endowed with unusual cunning, he had anticipated repeal, cleaned up his skirts and gone into politics. Because the Commissionership of Public Works offered the most lucrative spot at the time, Gosliner had become Commissioner.

The Skipper grunted. Even if Frieda's statement were true, if Gosliner did know that Ashley was innocent, he, MacBeth, couldn't expect to do much about it. In the first place, Gosliner hated Kent Ashley; in the second place, he hated Captain MacBeth almost as much. Ashley had defied him in the booze-dealing days; and MacBeth, when a police sergeant, had made many raids on Gosliner's old saloon and on one memorable occasion, in answer to a challenge, had peeled off his uniform and given the massive Gosliner a thorough beating up.

Could that be the reason, MacBeth mused, why Frieda had come to him personally? Did she know of the old feud?

MacBeth finally decided that he owed

it to his own conscience to visit Georgie Gosliner, so he made a U-turn in the middle of the block and headed across town.

The Crest Apartments were located on the summit of Dome Hill on the north side of the city and commanded an excellent view of both the harbor and financial districts. The Crest was an exclusive dwelling—in so far as exorbitant rents can make a building exclusive—with a penthouse on the roof. Gosliner owned the Crest and lived in the penthouse.

MacBeth parked his flivver and, with misgivings, entered the building and went aloft in a soundless elevator. He had no plan of action, for after twenty years of police work he had learned that it is utterably impossible to follow a prechartered course.

He emerged from the elevator into a modernistic anteroom where he was met by a grim-faced manservant. MacBeth was starting to get uneasy when Gosliner himself entered the room.

Recognition was mutual, although it had been five years since they had last met. Gosliner had changed considerably. His jowls hung lower, and the sacks beneath his eyes were quite purple. But he had developed a certain suavity, and the paunch at his waist line added an air of benevolence. Only his eyes remained unchanged. They were hard, fogged and inscrutable.

Without offering his hand, Gosliner said in a flat voice, "You want to see me?"

MacBeth nodded. "Kent Ashley's out—escaped."

GOSLINER shrugged his shoulders. It was difficult to guess whether the information was a surprise or not.

"So I heard," he said after a pause. "Why should that be of interest to me?"

"You can't figure that one out without a diagram, I suppose."

Gosliner gave MacBeth a quizzical stare.

"Suppose I could—what's your interest? You're out of circulation as far as police work is concerned, and I don't guess it would break your heart if Ashley did nail me."

MacBeth pursed his lips. "There's some truth in that. I was just wondering if you knew about Frieda?"

Color darkened the face of the other man. His voice became saw-edged. "I'd like to get Ashley for that—personally!"

MacBeth said, very low, "You think it was Ashley?"

"Don't you?"

"Frieda didn't," said MacBeth musefully.

"Frieda—Frieda Chandler?"

"Sure. I had a long talk with her last night, Gosliner." MacBeth put a lot of emphasis into the statement.

A tide of color ebbed from the other man's features.

"That why you came here?"

MacBeth nodded. "That's just one reason—there are others."

Gosliner grunted.

"Suppose," he said finally, "you quit beating around the bush. You came here to get something—"

"I already got it."

"And that is—"

MacBeth's mouth twisted into a cynical grin.

"An idea," he told the other man, and swung on his heel.

He thumbed for the elevator, and found it waiting. As he entered, he turned. Gosliner had not moved.

CHAPTER III

FRAME-UP

FROWNING, MacBeth returned to his flivver, slumped under the wheel, and tamped tobacco into his briar. Among the fragmentary thoughts that whirled through his consciousness was the fact that Frieda had been found dead in the harbor district; it might mean everything or nothing.

He knew he ought to go straight home and help Stella with the packing; too,

he had the envelope with the five thousand still in his pocket.

The sudden appearance of a big sixteen-cylindered phaeton at the front door of the Crest cleared his mind and held his full attention. He knew that car and was not surprised when Gosliner slipped through the revolving door and ducked into it. When the phaeton glided into motion, MacBeth piloted his own old crate in its wake.

The sixteen-cylindered job cut several corners, doubled back on itself, and finally tooled to a stop beside a large storage loft. He saw a fat figure separate itself from the expensive machine and disappear into a narrow passage between two huge warehouses. Simultaneously the phaeton pulled away from the curb and whisked out of sight.

MacBeth backed his flivver into an alley and got out. For several minutes he studied the front of the abandoned loft. Finally, he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, jammed it into a baggy pocket, and padded across the street. Keeping close to the buildings, he moved toward the opening in the wall through which Gosliner had vanished.

It was simply an air space between two windowless walls. There was a sense of decay about the place; rubbish stood in dust-covered piles; at the far end was a blank wall. MacBeth was about to turn away when he noticed a small door half hidden in the shadows.

He took a quick glance up and down the street—there was no one in sight. Then he squared his shoulders and moved swiftly toward the door at the other end of the passage.

It was closed, and when he pressed one ear against the jamb, he could hear nothing. His big paw closed over the knob. The door was unlocked. He spread five fingers against the panel and eased it open enough to let his big hulk squeeze through. Closing the door behind him, he pressed his back against it and tried to force his eyes to pierce the gloom.

Then a light blinded him. Instinct screamed a warning—he lunged for the light. Something hit him on the head, light splayed before his vision. One knee buckled, and he turned toward the direction of the blow. His clawing hand scraped cloth, but before he could grip it another blow caught him from behind. The blinding light was increased, then it started to revolve.

It had taken on the proportions of a gigantic pinwheel by the time the floor jumped up and crashed into his face. After that there were no more lights.

He came out of it hearing voices. At first it was a confused jumble of sound, and he felt that someone had him by the wrist, although his eyes were still too much out of focus to differentiate shapes. He did the best thing he knew how—he swung wildly, successfully. Someone yelped, and the hold on his wrist was broken.

Then the fog lifted, and he could see.

He found himself sprawled in the front seat of his flivver, the radiator of which was bent in the shape of a U around a telephone pole. The man he had struck was sitting on the edge of the curb nursing a sore jaw. He was a young man, dressed in the white uniform of a hospital interne.

On the opposite side of the flivver stood a uniformed cop, staring. And over the whole scene hung the odor of gin.

IT TOOK MacBeth about three minutes to realize that he was the source of the gin smell. And the remark of the orderly suggested that the knowledge was general.

"Drunk as a hoot owl!"

MacBeth looked at the cop, recognized him, "Where am I, Slattery? What in hell's coming off here?"

The policeman looked embarrassed; he recognized the Skipper. "You've had a mite too much, Captain."

"Mite hell!" stormed the interne, struggling erect. "He's dead drunk! I try to take his pulse and he smacks me like—"

MacBeth jerked around in his seat. The interne backed up hastily, tripped over the curb, and sat down.

"Shut up, you!" To the copper, he said again, "What happened?"

Slattery pushed back a few spectators who stood gawking, enjoying the spectacle.

"Some guy told me he seen you careen down the street and run into this post. I came over an' found you. I smelled liquor an' called the ambulance. It wasn't until the doc got here I recognized you, Skipper." He added the last apologetically.

MacBeth grimaced, ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth, and tasted gin. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand, found his tie askew. The front of his shirt was wet with liquor and his head felt like the inside of a boiler with a crew of riveters on the outside.

It was simple enough, he thought furiously. He had simply walked into a trap of some kind, taken a rap on the head and passed out. When he was cold, someone had poured a lot of liquor into his mouth and over his clothes and propped him up in the flivver. They had probably aimed him down this street and let the car run free, certain it would wind up around some post or crash into a building.

Why would any sane person, or persons, perpetrate such a childish trick? Certainly, since he was no longer a member of the police department, it could hardly be considered a serious frame; of course, he might be arrested, but anyone on the inside would know that a copper with the reputation of Skipper MacBeth could squash a thing like this.

He couldn't find the answer—until he happened to reach into his pocket. A cold, clammy feeling akin to panic clawed at MacBeth's diaphragm. He shook his head to clear it, kicked open the side door, and climbed unsteadily to the sidewalk.

Slattery came over. "You'd better let me take you home, Skipper," he suggested soothingly.

Mac silenced him with a gesture.

"Don't be a damn fool, Slattery! I'm not drunk."

"Sure you're not," Slattery said. "Sure, you're not. Just a wee nip wouldn't make—"

MacBeth jerked free of the restraining grip. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed a cab hovering on the edge of the interested crowd that circled close. He flagged it over.

To Slattery he said, "You can make all the damn reports you want, but have a reliable garage tow in this heap of mine and get it fixed up."

The patrolman stretched his neck.

"Sure, Skipper, but you better let me take you home. I can't allow you to roam around in that condition now, because—"

MacBeth flattened a horny hand on Slattery's chest. He shoved. Patrolman Slattery tripped over the curb and by the time he recovered his vertical stance, MacBeth was gone.

WHEN the taxi reached the ninety-nine hundred block on Dupont Street, the Skipper was out on the running board. He hit the pavement in front of the little house before the machine stopped rolling. The collie dog lay stretched on the front porch. MacBeth pounded up the steps and knuckled the doorbell.

The buxom woman opened the door. Fear leaped into her eyes at the sight of him, and MacBeth suddenly realized that his own appearance must be anything but reassuring.

"Where's the kid—Sonny?" he demanded hoarsely.

Her lips made a convulsive movement. "Why—he's gone to his mother!" she faltered. She sniffed, and must have caught the odor of liquor. Contempt joined the fear on her face, and she made a firm, determined attempt to close the door.

MacBeth slammed it open, caught her arm and drew her toward his scowling face.

"Now, listen to me, Mrs. Weber," he thundered. "You tell me who got that kid!"

"His mother—" began the woman, but

he shook his head and cut in.

"His mother was murdered last night! Now will you wake up long enough to tell me who got the kid, if you know?"

Her mouth trembled, words tumbled. "A man—his name was MacBeth! He came with a letter from Mrs. Kent that said to—"

"Who's *Mrs. Kent?*"

The woman gasped.

"Why, Sonny's mother, of course. I thought you knew her because you said—"

"Never mind that," MacBeth snarled. "What did this mug look like?"

"This MacBeth? He was husky, with mean, little eyes, funny ears."

"What about the ears? What kind of ears were they?"

"They—that is the left one, was swollen into an almost solid lump like—like a cabbage." She clawed at his coat sleeve. "What has happened to Sonny? Why don't you tell me? I'll get the police after you! What—what's your name?"

"MacBeth!" he flung at her and, jerking around, ran out of the house. The collie was stretched on the porch.

At the gate, the Skipper hesitated, swivelled and called the dog.

"Kirk! Come here!"

The animal raised his head, paused.

MacBeth said, "Let's find Sonny, Kirk!" He held open the gate.

The collie whined, loped down the walk, and pawed at his coat. The veteran jerked open the door of the cab, snapped his fingers, and ducked inside. The collie followed.

MacBeth ordered the driver to head for the harbor district and threw himself against the cushions. The dog dropped onto the seat beside him and nosed his hand.

"Maybe we'll pick up a trail along the waterfront, Kirk. Gosliner will head there, like the wharf rat he is, so there's no use wasting time at his penthouse. He put that booze on me so's to discredit anything I might testify to regarding the stolen letter. I'm just a plain damn fool, Kirk, but we'll try to find Sonny somehow."

At the mention of the youngster's name, the dog whimpered and raised soft eyes to the man's face. MacBeth took his hand off the silky head, balled it into a calloused fist, and reamed it into the other palm.

Who was the man with the cabbage ears?

As the cab swung into the street that fronted the docks, the driver slowed, thrust his head back into the tonneau.

"Whereabouts did you want to go?" he asked.

MacBeth gave the name of a saloon and drew a quizzical glance from the driver. He finally brought the cab to a stop before a shabby old building.

CHAPTER IV

MANHUNT

REMINISCENTLY MacBeth surveyed the saloon through the window of the cab. Memories rushed through his mind a kaleidoscopic whirl. The Fo'csle had been the breeding place for trouble in the old days when it was captained by Georgie Gosliner — Big Georgie, as they used to call him.

If rumor still could be believed, Gosliner still owned the disreputable hole. Through it he maintained his contact with the scum of the docks, a useful thing for a man of his stamp.

MacBeth gave the driver a bill, told him to wait, and strode across the sidewalk. He glanced down and found the dog at his heel.

The Fo'csle was dimly lit, and for a long minute MacBeth's eyes were unable to pierce the gloom and the shifting fog of smoke that hung in restless layers. The place, he noted, had not changed.

MacBeth strode over to the bar and met the appraising stare of the big bartender.

"Where's Big Georgie?"

"He ain't been here in two weeks," shrugged the bartender.

MacBeth squinted. "Don't lie! He told me he was coming here this afternoon!" That was a pure stall, and failed.

The barkeeper slammed his towel into the sink and placed two hammy hands on the polished surface.

"Listen, mister," he growled ominously. "You ain't lookin' for trouble, by any chance?"

With his nerves tensed to the snapping point, the Skipper was doing just that—looking for trouble. He wanted to cut loose, to work off his rage on someone worthy of it. His quarrel, however, was interrupted by the sudden snarling of a dog.

MacBeth whirled, flattened his back against the bar. He saw Kirk evading the clumsy feet of a squat, swart individual.

The collie barked, looked over at MacBeth, then lunged for the swart man's legs.

MacBeth was puzzled for a moment. There was something familiar about the subject of the dog's attack, but he couldn't quite place the man. It wasn't until the other jerked a gun from a shoulder holster that he remembered where he had seen the man.

It had been behind the wheel of a sixteen-cylindered car! The man was Gosliner's chauffeur!

MacBeth cleared the room in two jumps. The man got his gun clear, and MacBeth thought he was too late. It was the collie who handled the situation. He took a flying leap that terminated with both forepaws on the chauffeur's chest. The gun exploded but the shot only bit plaster from the ceiling.

The swart man tried a backward jump that tripped him. He went down with the dog riding his chest.

MacBeth pushed the dog clear and made a big grab for the man. The latter yelled, "Copper!" and started to fight.

A man seated at the same table swore and went for MacBeth with an empty beer bottle. The Skipper ducked the swing of the bottle, kicked the gun from the chauffeur's hand, and grabbed a chair.

He broke two rungs over the bottle-wielder's head, threw the remainder of the chair at a third man who charged out of a booth, and made a lunge for the chauffeur, who was making an attempt to escape under the table.

The bartender did his part—he turned out the lights!

MacBeth swore, groped for the swart man, and found only air. He tripped over the fallen chair, sprawled on his chest. He crashed into a squirming figure, took a blow on the side of the head, and lashed out. He felt a knuckle kiss hard flesh, heard a rewarding sigh.

Then he heard Kirk snarling and snapping over to his left.

MacBeth pirouetted, groped that way. Memory, quickened by necessity, traced a mental map of that saloon. There was a door—a door leading to an alley that way. And when he heard a door slam, he dived straight for the sound. When he yanked open the door, he felt, rather than saw, the dog zoom into the corridor.

THERE was a little light this way. At the far end of the long hallway he glimpsed a running figure, then across his line of vision streaked the hurtling form of the collie. Mac roared his encouragement and stumbled in pursuit. A scream echoed back, and then the thud of tumbling bodies told him that Kirk had caught up with his quarry.

A turn in the corridor brought him to an open doorway where the collie was struggling on the floor with the chauffeur. A door slammed somewhere behind, so the Skipper went into action.

He gripped the dog by his stiffened hackles, jerked him clear of the man, and hurled him aside. The swart man came to one knee, yanked a sap out of his pocket, but the Skipper swung his powerful right in a short arc. The chauffeur slammed sideways against the wall, started to sit down. MacBeth hauled him erect and threw him over his shoulder.

Heavy steps pounded behind, led by the excited barking of the dog. MacBeth

swore at the dog, stumbled out into the alley and as soon as the collie was out, jerked shut the door.

The alley looked blind, but MacBeth knew different. He started to circle the building in the hope of reaching his cab.

Then he saw the sixteen-cylindered phaeton!

He sprinted for it, catapulted his still unconscious prisoner into the rear seat and tore open the door beside the wheel. He had his foot on the starter when the rear door of the saloon opened, showing a small group of men headed by the angry bartender.

The engine, still warm, sprang to life at his touch. He meshed his gears, flattened the accelerator to the boards and swung on the wheel. He headed for the gray opening at the far end, made the turn, miraculously, on two wheels and kept on going.

He slowed, looked over his shoulder into the rear of the machine. The dark man lay on the floor, one foot on the back seat beside the collie who perched there, fangs bared.

MacBeth sighed—his prisoner was safe for the moment under the watchful eye of the dog. He drew the back of his hand over his eyes and the knuckles came away wet with blood.

Skipper MacBeth smiled. Once again he glanced into the rear. The chauffeur was stirring. MacBeth's smile thinned until it resembled a knife scar, and the mirth was menacing.

He and the chauffeur were due for a little talk.

At the next intersection, MacBeth turned west. Here in the estuary rose the masts of forgotten ships and along the banks were crumbling warehouses, long since abandoned to the play of rats.

Even the streets reeked of disuse and as the Skipper piloted the big phaeton down a narrow cobbled street, he had the sensation of moving through a cemetery.

Before a small, two-story structure he stopped the machine and climbed out. He pulled open the rear door and smiled at the tableau of a cringing man and an angry dog. When Kirk had first attacked the man in the saloon, MacBeth had regarded it as pure luck, but now he saw the logic of it.

This man had something to do with Sonny's removal—the dog's antagonism proved that. His presence in The Fo'csle suggested that Gosliner was somewhere in the district, probably had ordered the man to wait a call in the saloon. That was the only hypothesis which looked logical to MacBeth, and he intended to act on it.

He stretched a big hand into the machine, grabbed a handful of coat and hauled his prisoner to the curb. The man squirmed in his grip, tried to argue, but the Skipper slapped him into silence. Roughly propelling the man before him, and followed by the collie, he crossed the sidewalk, kicked open a sagging door, and passed inside.

IT TOOK a moment for human eyes to gain their focus in the semi-darkness, but finally they saw a flight of rickety stairs twisting upward. Up these creaking stairs the three proceeded, then down a corridor and into a small backroom with a window from which it was too high to see out. Then for the first time, MacBeth spoke.

"You're a long way from help, feller," he said quietly, and there was an edged quality to his voice that made the listener shudder in spite of himself. "You're going to do a lot of talking in the next few minutes, or a lot of dying."

The captive pressed stubby fingers against his temples and stared, first at the man and then at the dog. He whipped his eyes back to the man, jerked his neck, and demanded:

"Say, what's the rap? You're a cop, ain't you?" Then without waiting for an answer, he went on: "Well, why in hell'd you bring me to a joint like this? I got rights now—"

MacBeth's open hand terminated the monologue. The chauffeur-gunman squealed, bounced back against the wall, and massaged his flaming cheek.

"You work for Gosliner," the Skipper growled. "What's your name?"

The man hesitated, muttered some-

thing under his breath, but when he saw MacBeth ball a fist, he coughed out his answer.

"Sure, sure, I drive for him. Louis Dunlap's the name. There ain't no crime in—"

"Shut up!" thundered MacBeth. "You got a kid from a house on Dupont Street. You took that kid some place. I want to know all about it."

"You're nerts!" Dunlap shrilled. "I don't know what you're yappin' about. I never snatched no kid—"

MacBeth braced himself, leaning well forward. He brought up his left hand, fingers stiffly straight, and stabbed the other man in the solar plexus. Dunlap gave a strangled bleat and jackknifed, but he got no ease that way.

The Skipper caught a handful of dark hair and jerked his head back. Black eyes bulged in pain. MacBeth twisted the head way back, then struck the protruding Adam's apple with the heel of his other hand.

Louis Dunlap's gagging scream echoed through the deserted structure. MacBeth let go, and the other crumpled into a dejected, sobbing heap at his feet.

"That's just a sample of the tricks I know," he snarled. "Don't get me opened up! I've got no use for dirty rats that snatch six-year-old kids. Talk, Louis, or s'help me, I'll beat you to a pulp."

He followed his threat by pulling Dunlap erect by the hair. Their eyes met, and Louis Dunlap knew complete defeat.

"I'll talk, honest! We weren't gonna hurt the kid—"

"Where'd you take him?"

Dunlap was sobbing. "I didn't—I only drove the car. It was Jake Sharkey who got him! We took him to Big Georgie down—" His courage failed him, and he began to whimper.

MacBeth straightened him with a belt across the mouth. "Where—"

"The Slater storage plant on Booth Street!"

"Did they contact Ashley yet?"

Dunlap's head sagged.

"I think so—I was to wait in The Fo'csle for a call from Big Georgie."

MacBeth, paused, then he clipped up his right and caught the man on the jaw. Dunlap toppled into his arms, out cold. He lowered the man to the floor, tore strips out of his coat, and trussed him hand and foot. With the collie at his side, he charged down the stairs to the street below.

WIND, freighted with a thick fog, whipped through the darkened streets of the harbor district as the expensive phaeton curved into Booth Street. MacBeth glared through the spray-laden windshield and hunched his shoulders against the cold. He slowed, got his bearings, and turned the machine into an areaway and stopped.

He spoke a word of warning to the collie, climbed out, and padded back to the street. For a moment he stood in the shelter of the building, squinted into the misty darkness.

He cursed himself for a fool to go it alone. His common sense told him to call Osborn and Sloan, but some stubbornness prevented him. Perhaps, he tried to argue, they'd think he was crazy. After all, he was going by hunches. Hunches had taken him this far and now his hunches told him not to call in for help.

Vague doubts crept into his mind. Suppose Kent Ashley were teamed up with Gosliner? Uh-uh! No, as he saw it, Gosliner had taken Sonny to force the appearance of Ashley.

But that didn't make much sense either! Why should Gosliner have any interest in Ashley? MacBeth could not answer that one, but he knew someone who could. He turned the collar of his coat across his throat, pulled his hat low, and padded through the drizzle. In one massive hand he cradled the blackjack he had retrieved from Louis Dunlap; he wished it were a gun, but Louis' gun had fallen in the fight at the saloon.

He tramped a half block through the murk and ducked into the shallow doorway of a loft directly across the street from the Slater storage building. It was

a gloomy pile of cement with few windows. MacBeth's eyes roved over the structure. Abruptly he stiffened.

Framed in a window three stories above the street was the figure of a child, silhouetted by a light from inside!

Sonny!

MacBeth knew it intuitively, knew it without the verifying whimper of the dog at his side. He reached down, put a restraining hand on the collie.

What was the child doing in that window? Then the Skipper found the answer, for the collie growled, turned.

MacBeth tensed, waited, and out of the surrounding darkness slowly emerged the form of a man.

The figure approached, his eyes, too, fixed on that window high above the ground.

MacBeth froze immobile. The dog strained, but the Skipper held one hand tight around his muzzle. The newcomer was within six feet of MacBeth before he recognized him.

It was Kent Ashley!

For a moment MacBeth was disconcerted. The untimely appearance of the fugitive clashed with his plan to get the child out of the clutches of Big Georgie Gosliner.

Hesitation left him with the knowledge that he would be discovered if he waited too long before acting. As Ashley drew abreast of the doorway, MacBeth stepped out and jabbed the blunt end of the blackjack into the other's spine.

"Hold it, Ashley! Not a murmur! It's MacBeth!"

For a long moment he thought the fugitive was going to make a fight out of it.

"Don't do it, man, you won't have a chance!"

Ashley relaxed a little, shrugged. "I haven't got a chance, anyhow," he grunted huskily.

The Skipper dipped his hand into his prisoner's pocket; he found no weapon. Still substituting the sap for a gun, he propelled Ashley down the street to the big phaeton.

"Listen, Ashley, tell me the truth. Why did you come down here tonight?"

The man was silent, sullen. MacBeth

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made a sucking noise with his teeth.

"I know—you came down there to see your kid, didn't you?"

ASHLEY cursed, came close. "What do you know about that kid? If you cops have hurt him—" He left the threat unspoken.

MacBeth whistled softly. He was beginning to grasp things.

"You think it was the police who lured you down here?"

Ashley gave a nasty chuckle. "Think? Am I a fool? But if you've hurt him, by heaven I'll—"

MacBeth pushed him down onto the running board and towered above him.

"Now listen, you fool! Gosliner's back of this, not the police. I don't know any of the details, but he and a mug named Jake Sharkey brought your youngster down here."

"Gosliner? The dirty— But what have you got to do with Big Georgie? How do you know anything about my boy?"

"Frieda came to me last night—"

Ashley spat an oath. "The two-timing dame!"

MacBeth grabbed him by the shoulder, slammed him against the car.

"You damn fool! That woman sacrificed everything, even her life, trying to prove you innocent. I'll knock your thick, ignorant head off if you make one crack against her. Get me?" He was surprised at his own emotions.

Ashley muttered. "I don't understand—"

"Tell me who sent you here?"

The man was silent, uncertain. Seconds lengthened into minutes, while the fog chilled them both.

"I was in hiding," Ashley whispered at length, "when I was tipped that my boy was held here. He was to be shown in that window until nine, then unless I came, he would be—"

MacBeth asked: "What else?"

"I was to come to the door, rap four times, and they'd let me in."

"Who is *they?*"

Ashley shrugged.

"I don't know. I thought it might be cops, but I was afraid to take a chance. They wouldn't kill my kid, but if it was anybody else, after what happened to

Frieda last night—"

"Then you heard about that?"

Ashley nodded, slowly. "I heard about that."

MacBeth stroked his jaw, stared into the darkness at the building where the child was held.

"I'll phone the department," he said finally. "We'll throw a cordon of cops around that building and get back the little feller. Then we'll find out what this is all about."

"You'll play hell!" moaned Ashley. "It's nine o'clock now—there's no time to phone anyone. Let me go in there! I'll give myself up just as soon as I make sure my kid's okay. I've never seen him, Cap. Let me get one look, then you can salt me back in the Big House—"

MacBeth slapped him across the mouth.

"Snap out of it! If I let you go in there, they'll blow you full of holes and maybe kill the boy too!"

"What in hell's the difference!" pleaded the man. "Maybe you could get Sonny out of it alive!"

MacBeth pulled him erect. "Maybe we can anyway," he growled. "You come with me." He took the other's arm and propelled him down the fog-obscured street. Kirk, the big collie, padded along without sound.

Suddenly Ashley jerked to a stop. "He's gone!" he rasped, pointing aloft.

MacBeth cursed. The light still glowed in the window, but the youngster was not in sight. Even as they watched the light vanished.

Ashley coughed out a strangled sob and would have bolted, but the Skipper restrained him.

"Easy, man, easy," he rumbled. "We got to move carefully!"

The dog, as if he, too, understood, growled low in his throat.

THERE were two doors to the big storage plant; a small wood-paneled door and a large entrance for trucks. The latter was of sheet iron and worked on a roller. MacBeth surveyed them both and walked over to the small door.

Ashley stepped before the panel and would have knocked, but the copper pulled him aside. The fog mingling with

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the darkness was dimly translucent, nearly opaque. MacBeth took his sap, edged along the building, and keeping his body well clear of the door, reached over and rapped briskly on the panel with the tip of his sap.

The sound echoed in the darkness with a frightening clarity. Lead churned through the panel like an explosion. The Skipper's arm stung, went numb as he let it jerk to his side. Automatically he shifted the sap to his right hand and dazedly watched the tiny flashes of flame spurt through fresh holes in the door as the machinegun inside the building traced a flaming pattern in the fog.

Ashley screamed in surprise, clawed forward.

MacBeth had to restrain him forcefully from charging the doorway. The gunfire ceased as abruptly as it had started. Then a voice inside said, "That got him, Jake!"

MacBeth's heart froze for an instant. He swiveled, swung his sap, and brought it down on Kent Ashley's head. The fugitive stiffened convulsively, lengthened, and then sagged to his knees. MacBeth swore and pushed the stumbling figure in front of the door.

Ashley was prone by the time the door opened and three men crowded out of the building to form a ring around his inert figure.

The Skipper flattened his back against the damp surface of stone. His mouth was a purple scar across his square, bloodstained features; his eyes burned like a welder's torch as they traveled in swift recognition over the three hulking men.

In the dim light spilling through the open door he saw Gosliner, fat, paunchy, with an automatic pistol in his hand. The big man beside him, the one holding the sub-machinegun, had two cauliflower ears.

MacBeth remembered him — Jake Sharkey, a third rate leather pusher and bouncer for a water-front dive. MacBeth glimpsed the thin spiral of smoke that coiled from the equalizer on the gun muzzle, then he swung his eyes to the third man.

And that third man was Inspector Sloan!

CHAPTER V

CLEANUP

A SIREN wailed in the near distance, and broke the spell that had settled over the group.

"Cops!" snarled Sharkey and backed toward the open door.

Sloan pocketed his service revolver and jerked the machinegun out of Sharkey's grip.

"You guys fade!" he ordered crisply. "Leave this to me. We finally got this damn case settled once and for all and we won't have to be worrying about new evidence cropping up. You can get rid of the kid now, Big Georgie. We can't take any chances with his identity being found out."

The siren screamed closer.

Gosliner gulped a lungful of air, nodded. "Okay, Sloan, okay! Damn those prowl-car cops!"

Sloan chuckled, shifted the gun into the crotch of his elbow. "It's a break, you fat fool! I'll get credit for the kill. Beat it, you two."

MacBeth froze immobile, uncertain for the moment. He was unarmed, save for his sap, and these three were killers. If it weren't for the kid, he'd await the arrival of the cruising car. Ashley was in no danger so long as he did not recover consciousness, for Sloan apparently thought him dead.

Sharkey was already inside, and Gosliner was turning to follow when the choice of decision was jerked from MacBeth's hands.

Somewhere inside the fortress of cement echoed the frightened wail of a child!

"Damn that kid!" fumed Sloan. "Kill it—"

MacBeth had forgotten the dog. But the child's first cry had not faded when the big collie streaked into action. A strange half-scream ripped from his furry throat as he catapulted out of the darkness behind the Skipper.

He shot past Sloan and landed on the back of the partly turned Sharkey. The ex-pug shrieked in terror and went

down under the unexpected onslaught of the half-mad dog.

Sloan whirled, blinked into the darkness where MacBeth stood immobile. The sub-machinegun started to come up when the Skipper flung all caution to the winds and hurled himself into the group.

The sub commenced its song of lead, but Sloan, his eyes still filled with the light of the hallway, was uncertain of direction. His first impression of MacBeth's position was his last, for the Skipper caught him across the bridge of the nose with his sap.

Sloan shrilled in pain, stumbled, and fell across the figure of Ashley.

MacBeth, pirouetted, looking for Gosliner, only to find him gone. Sharkey, too, had disappeared, but the thunder of running feet was thrown out of the open door. A shot, then the angry shriek of a wounded dog.

The siren hurled its banshee wail to the heavens. It was close now, but not close enough for Skipper MacBeth to wait.

Anyhow, he didn't want to wait. He was having the time of his life. He scooped his left hand down to retrieve the machinegun. He touched it only to find that his hand was useless. He kicked the still form of Sloan aside, swept up the sub with his right, and charged into the building.

He had little trouble following the men, for the snarls of the dog were as a storm beacon at sea.

On the second floor he came to a closed door. There was a light inside; the shrill cries of a terrified child mingled with the yelp of a fighting dog. A gun blazed, and the dog snarled in pain and rage.

MacBeth called, "Open that door!"

Gosliner's voice knifed through the panel. "Keep back, or damn it, we'll kill the kid! We don't mean to be taken—"

THE SKIPPER didn't waste time in words. He took three steps backward, tightened his grip on the machinegun, and charged. His big foot caught the door beneath the lock. The panel burst inward, swayed crazily on its

[*Turn page*]

hinges. MacBeth hurled himself through the rectangle.

Sharkey was diving for the youngster, gun turned toward MacBeth. The Skipper slid to a stop, and the machine-gun spat a burst of lead. Sharkey's right leg jerked up; his knee was under his chest when he collapsed on his face at the feet of the screaming child. He was dead.

Gosliner shot—twice—but the fear of death paralyzed his arm. One slug churned through the calf of the Skipper's leg. MacBeth came down to his knees. There was a grim smile on his face as he turned the little black muzzle of the machinegun toward the Commissioner of Public Works.

Gosliner read the light in MacBeth's pale eyes. He squeezed the trigger of his automatic, but it was empty. With a scream he threw it from him and groveled on his knees. Foamy saliva drooled from his chattering mouth. "D-d-don't kill me! For God's sake, MacBeth!"

The Skipper extended the gun, squinted along the barrel until the equalizer was pointed full into the sweat-streaked face of the other man. Below, in the street, there was the squeal of brakes and the fading of a siren as a cruising prowl car slid to a stop.

"You got one chance, Gosliner, just one! Talk fast, or I'll let you have it now!"

Gosliner melted to his stomach on the cold cement floor. The dog dragged himself across the floor toward him, snarling. Gosliner screamed and shrank into a corner.

"Take him away! He's mad!"

MacBeth grinned. "So am I!" he growled. "Talk! What was Sloan doing here?"

Gosliner got to his knees. "We were both in it!" he cried hysterically. "Sloan planned the job in the first place, and I handled the details."

"You framed Ashley, didn't you?"

The fat man sobbed in the affirmative. "We had to have a goat!"

"You chose Ashley because you hated him and because you wanted Frieda?"

Gosliner nodded mutely.

MacBeth tensed the gun. "You murdered Frieda—"

Big George screamed, "No, no! Be-

fore God, I didn't! It was Jake. Sloan insisted on it after we suspected she was doublecrossing us. Jake followed her to your place, then killed her. He followed you after that, and we baited you down to the docks to see if you had anything. Honest to—"

Gosliner stopped as two young harness bulls charged into the room, guns drawn. He searched their hard, lean faces, sighed, and toppled forward unconscious.

It was after two o'clock in the morning before Gosliner completed his statement at headquarters and was taken away to a cell. Sloan had refused to talk, but Louis Dunlap knew enough about the frequent meetings to corroborate enough of Big Georgie Gosliner's testimony to make a case. Sharkey, of course, was dead. . . .

AS THE beefy Gosliner was half carried out of the chief's private sanctum, the Old Man sighed heavily and let his hard eyes travel over the ill-assorted assemblage. On his right was the male stenographer who had taken the notes of the various statements.

Against the north wall sat Kent Ashley, his trembling arms tightly wrapped around a sleeping child. Kent Ashley's gaunt, pale face was swollen and streaked with tears, and crowning his head was a white bandage. He sat very straight and every time anyone in the room moved, his grip on the boy tightened as though he feared someone might attempt to take him away.

At Ashley's feet stretched the big collie. A bandage girdled his middle, and one forepaw was in splints, but his eyes were soft, restful.

Old Skipper MacBeth sprawled in a chair across the room. His head, too, was bandaged, his left arm was in a sling, and one leg was held straight before him. His mouth curved down, but his pale eyes were alive and dancing.

Osborn sat next to the Skipper; his expression was one of bewilderment.

The chief himself rose, took a slow, meditative turn around the room. As he passed Ashley, he noticed the convulsive tightening of the arms around the child. The youngster whimpered, opened his eyes, then snuggled closer to his father.

[*Turn page*]

"You don't have to worry, Ashley," the Old Man said kindly. "Nobody's going to take that kid from you, ever. You've been wronged, and I'm sure the state will make restitution for the time you've served because of this frame. I think you're man enough not to let it get you. You've got a fine lad there, and it's up to you to make him forget the horror he just passed through. You owe everything, as I suppose you know, to Captain MacBeth."

THE Skipper grunted. "He owes everything to that wife of his," he growled. "There was a woman."

Ashley gave a strangled sob.

"God, I know it. I'll try and make it up to Sonny. And you, MacBeth, I'll never forget what—"

MacBeth grimaced wearily.

"Aw, cut it! What the hell else could I do?"

Osborn ran a handkerchief around his neck, sighed. "I guess I'd better resign my office," he said. "The newspapers'll raise a lot of hell about this. Gosh! To think that Sloan was back of it all the time an' me workin' right with him!"

"Don't be a damn fool!" the Skipper cut in. "Didn't you recover the remains of the two hundred grand from Gosliner and Sloan? Didn't you bust up about as vicious a setup as we've ever had here in the city? Why, the way Sloan worked that, him right in with the cops, knowing every move and able to tip off his confederate, Big Georgie—why say, Dave, this city owes you—"

"Me?" gasped Osborn. "Are you crazy? Why, I figured it was Ashley—"

MacBeth gave him a sour glance. "Listen, chump, you got to take the rap for all this hell. If my wife finds out what I was doing—" He winced.

The Old Man whistled understandingly.

"That's right, Mac. I forgot you are married."

The Skipper made a wry face. "So did I. Say, have any of you guys got nerve enough to take me home? You know Stella—"

Osborn puckered up his nose and made a clucking noise with his teeth.

"That's the trouble!" he said grimly.

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