TERROR

DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

OCTOBER

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EXCITING HOMICIDAL THRILLERS BY TOP-NOTCH WRITERS

Fredric Brown
V.E. Thiessen
Jim Harmon
others

IT'S BEEN A LONG, LONG CRIME

Sensational crime novel by THORNE LEE

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DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

No. 1 October 1956

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Put smoke in their eyes, baby, and we'll make one last killing—with you playing the corpse!

IT'S BEEN A LONG, LONG CRIME

by THORNE LEE

CHAPTER ONE

Death Gets in Your Eyes

HE SPUN the dial to 18, dropped a dime in the slot. To a man in Ladd Chamberlin's position that was a precious dime. It would have bought a cup of coffee, a doughnut, a good fresh egg, or a big juicy orange at the market. Instead it went down the music slot. There had to be music too.

Ladd wandered back from the juke box to the corner stool

and his glass of beer. In the glass above the bar his own face squinted at him. It was a pleasant face, but there was something lacking, something that distinguished the doers from the bums.

Not that he actually looked like a bum. The hair was trim and black, the face a clean, hard white, decently shaved. No ragged edges on the blue shirt collar. Everything was there except the spark. There was no spark!

Ladd shrugged and switched his mind to the music. The record was Glen Gray's *Smoke Rings,* an old one, tangled up with memories. College stuff. Above the bar the fog of tobacco smoke seemed to take suggestion from the melody, forming a soft, fuzzy halo overhead.

Ladd felt mellow. He lit a cigarette and blew some rings to the sentimental rhythm. He could do that, blow smoke rings. That was one of the brilliant accomplishments he brought out of university. That and the Phi Beta Kappa key on his watch chain.

He discovered suddenly that the woman at his right was blowing smoke rings too. He hadn't really noticed her before. She was good; the rings came away from her working lips as neat and round as doughnuts.

It may have been just a coincidence, but her eyes were aware of Ladd up there in the glass. He found himself blowing larger rings that drifted up, spreading rapidly to engulf hers. She was joining the game now, without any pretense. He wondered if this was a new kind of pick-up, or just a little alcoholic sociability.

She hardly looked the type. Little red bird of a hat parked on a nest of black hair. Grim whiteness edging the lush red mouth. The brown eyes kept shooting out fine little darts of nervousness. Her hands were shaky on the whisky glass. Aside from that she was all nice, too nice to be exchanging smoke rings with a stranger.

"I like that song, *Smoke Rings,*" Ladd ventured. "It reminds me."

She didn't even hesitate. "Of what?"

"It just reminds me. You know how songs are."

"Sure." Her voice was husky, tight.

They blew some more smoke rings, timing them to interlock in sinuous embraces. There was something almost sensual about it, but Ladd didn't feel disgust-

ed. He felt warm.

She broke it. "Do you like smoke?"

"It's my favorite color," he said. "Grey against black. And it goes nowhere."

She inhaled. "Where there's smoke there's fire."

This, Ladd thought, *is beginning to get corny.* Oh, well, let the girl have her fun. "I like fire," he said, turning coolly to look at her instead of the mirror.

Her eyes concentrated on the stiff line of his jaw. "Fire is dangerous to play with."

You've been seeing too many movies, girlie, Ladd thought. He killed a smile at the corners of his mouth. "I like fire," he said. "And I'm not playing."

HER eyes closed and her head swayed back for an instant, exposing the white line of throat. The eyes came open and she glanced cautiously around. The bartender stood dreamily at the far end of his stall.

She lifted her drink and spoke across it. "In the phone booth at six-four-five. The classified directory. Section X."

She drained her glass, crushed out her cigarette, drew on black gloves. She no longer seemed aware that Ladd Chamberlin existed. She paid for her drink and strolled up to the telephone booth, stepped inside without a glance back at Ladd.

He sat there limply, trying to figure that one out. A telephone booth might make a cozy rendezvous, but the classified directory would be a trifle cramped.

Ladd chuckled. Probably there would be a phone number marked in the directory. In the classified directory? A business phone? He turned back to his beer, snorted, "Sister, I'm not in business any more!"

He heard her come out of the booth and leave. He didn't even look at her. He noticed a clock over the bar. Past 6:44. She had said six-four-five, the idea being that in less than one minute Ladd was supposed to follow her into that booth.

It was a silly play and Ladd wanted none of it. A lot of men would have taken her up on it, even a lot of good men. She looked good. But Ladd Chamberlin was not exactly a man of action. Afterward he would get to thinking about that invitation and be sorry, but now he couldn't move. Below the neck he was dumb.

He watched the minute hand around the clock, fascinated.

Then her face got up there between him and the clock. He took a good look at the eyes and found himself getting off his stool, walking down to that phone booth. He felt silly, a little drunk. What was it about her eyes?

He stepped into the booth. Light came on with the closing of the door. The yellow classified directory was underneath the green book. He drew it out, thumbed toward the back. The first page in the X section felt heavy; on the back of it he found a long sealed envelope, lightly glued. He jerked it off, ripping away thin strips of yellow.

This was not at all the thing he had expected. The envelope was light but slightly bulky; the front of it was blank.

He slid the envelope under his coat, went out and looked up the street. No woman was in sight. He came back, ordered another beer and walked down to the end booth where the bartender couldn't see him.

He pried up the seal carefully with his pocket knife. Inside the first envelope was a second one, also sealed. It had passed through the mails, showing the postmark on a three cent stamp. An address was typewritten on the front—the local post office, Box 4815. There was no name with the address, and no return.

If the letter had not shown a postmark, Ladd might have dropped the thing in a mail box, gotten rid of it, but now, with curiosity tugging at him, he had to open that second envelope. There was money inside that one, wrapped tightly in brown paper, rubber banded. Five bills—one thousand dollars apiece.

Ladd didn't yell or get up and do a little dance. He put the money back, noted the postmark—Arnheim Postal Station—replaced the small envelope in the larger one and put the whole thing back in an inside pocket.

Five thousand dollars, just like that! What for? He had done nothing worth five thousand, was going to do nothing.

The answer was right there of course, though he didn't care much for it: The girl had given the stuff to the wrong man.

In that case she might discover her error and come back. Ladd ordered a whole quart of beer and waited. He was a patient man.

AN HOUR later a tapping finger on the shoulder told him the girl was back. A

white flash of relief—a strange fleeting glimpse of terror—crossed her face and the effect was as coldly shocking as a bucket of water dumped on his head.

"Hello there! Remember me?" she said tightly.

"Yeah." He waved her into the booth, pressed a palm over each eye, clearing it. Then his face came up sharply, studying. "You're the gal who walks out just when things begin to get warm."

Her giggle sounded like a fake. "I was drunk," she confessed, black lashes flickering. "I do the most incredible things when I'm drunk!"

"You certainly do!" he agreed.

She was trying to be coy but it wasn't going very well. "You'll give it back, of course?" she said, smiling vaguely.

On an impulse Ladd decided to stall. After all, this was the most interesting thing that had happened since he got out of the army. "Give what back?" he asked blankly.

"The envelope."

"The envelope?" He scratched his chin. "You're still a little drunk, aren't you?"

Her eyes showed that trace of fright again. "Probably. But not that drunk! I remember everything."

"You do? Shall we try the whole thing again? It might come out better—"

"Oh no!" Her hand darted out, touched the back of Ladd's. "Please give me the envelope. Don't make trouble for me!"

"Trouble?"

"I'm in a very embarrassing position. I delivered a sealed envelope to you tonight. Later I received word that you were—the wrong man."

"You keep talking about some mysterious envelope. Could you describe it a little better?"

"Just a plain white envelope. There was a second envelope inside with an address."

"What address?"

"Box four-eight-one-five."

"What was in that second envelope?"

"I don't know what was in it," she whispered.

"You don't know?" He lit a cigarette. "Do you realize you're getting pretty ridiculous? This weird yarn about an envelope and you don't even know what's in it!"

"It was sealed," she said. "I was only the delivery agent. Please don't try to deny that

you got it! I saw you go into the phone booth!"

"If you didn't know the contents, weren't you being pretty careless with other people's property?"

"Oh yes, I was careless!" Her lips trembled. "I—I didn't care, any more—"

If this gal was acting, she was plenty good.

"How did you get the wrong man?" he demanded.

"It was the time, the wrong time," she said quickly. "I made a mistake!"

"Was the time all you had to go by?"

"Oh no, I had a description. Dark hair, medium tall, thin—"

"Just call me skinny!" Ladd grinned, thinking it over. "That's still pretty weak identification for the delivery of anything as important as you make this out to be."

She looked down at her hands. "You followed the cues," she said quietly.

"What cues?"

She didn't answer, directly. She sat back, nervously lit a cigarette. Slowly her head twisted up in a peculiar, graceless position. The throat and the mouth worked carefully and he could sense what was coming. Smoke passed her lips, boiling up into a perfect pinwheel of white.

Smoke rings! There was the cue, the identification. He had walked right into that one.

"A lot of men blow smoke rings when they get in a mood," Ladd commented.

She looked fiercely at the end of her cigarette. "You didn't fit perfectly, but you were almost right. I was overanxious, and I—I didn't care!"

SHE seemed to be apologizing. Vaguely he felt she was trying to convey something beyond words. Not actually trying perhaps, but there was some submerged terror in her that was crying out, clutching for a straw of sympathy, of comradeship.

Her hand came out again, caught his wrist. "You will forget all about this and let me have the envelope?"

"Tell you what: You bring me a signed receipt, stating the exact contents, from the rightful owner, and I'll let you have it!"

"Oh no!" she gasped. "Don't make me do that! Please! This has nothing to do with you!"

Ladd looked up at the ceiling to avoid being influenced. He was susceptible to eyes, nice brown eyes. "It has something

to do with me now. I'm in it up to my neck. I just want to get out of it neatly, all clear. Do you understand? I don't want anyone to say I robbed that envelope."

She tried to argue, but it was futile. Ladd could be stubborn, especially when forces were coming in at him.

She gave up finally, crushed out her cigarette. "All right. I'll see what I can do. Whatever happens, don't blame me. I gave you your chance to get out— Can you meet me here again tonight?"

"Sure. I'm footloose."

"All right, then. Just before midnight. Eleven-fifty. The bar will be open then."

"Right."

There had been a veiled threat in her words, but there was no threat in the slump of her shoulders as she walked out, the cheap little black coat, the red hat, the small, graceful figure dragging a little. No spark in the beat of the heels.

No spark—

Ladd stood up finally, straightened his shoulders. "What's a matter, buddy?" The bartender winked one red-shot eye. "Didn't you make the grade?"

Ladd laughed emptily.

The barkeep chuckled. "Tell you what, buddy, I think she's got a husband. Drinks like a fish!"

Ladd felt a sudden chill he didn't want to analyze. The clock over the bar read 8:30. A long wait until midnight. He went out. The street seemed deserted. He had gone a block toward home when a man stepped out of a dark alley behind him, jabbed him hard in the ribs.

"That's a gun on your spine!" a taut voice explained. "Step back in here!"

They went into the black depth of the alley. Ladd felt dry mouthed and queer.

"Get your arms up and no talk!" the man snapped. "Not a word, or I'll let you have it!"

Ladd obeyed. An arm looped around him, hand dipping deftly under his lapel and out with the double envelope. Behind him a flashlight glowed dimly. He could hear fingers crackling paper.

The arm reached around again and got his billfold. Then solid steel struck him, blindingly, in the back of the head. He went flying down on his face. Painfully he tried to push away the flood of dark concrete that seemed to be rushing up to drown him.

The billfold thudded softly

beside his ear. "Let that one soak in, buddy!" a voice said.

CHAPTER TWO

Slay You Later, Pal

HE HAD to nurse his head for twenty-four hours; it hurt that bad. Lying in bed he thought over the things he might have done, but hadn't. Husband or not, he had let that girl get away from him with the terror in her eyes. He'd been just a little late on the uptake.

Little Late Laddie they ought to call him; that fitted Ladd Chamberlin right down to the ground. Even in the army, where some men find themselves, he had been a washout. Coasted through officer's training, but he wasn't the kind of officer that got promoted. Just couldn't seem to work the angles. He did a good job so mechanically that nobody ever noticed nim doing it.

"Your time is running out, Chamberlin," he groaned, wrestling with his bed sheets. "You're in a power dive and you've got to pull out!"

That was no kidding. His savings were dwindling. There were jobs to be had, of course, but he had a mortal terror of being a square man in a round hole like a lot of people he had known.

The friendly landlady brought in some tea and the evening paper. He finally dragged out of bed, gulped the tea, and began the usual attack on the news, postponing the agony of searching the want ads until last.

Only a half-dozen headlines arrested his attention. The last one read:

DEFENSE FACTORY
TOTAL LOSS
IN HUGE FIRE

A fire of unknown origin razed the Hanover Small Arms plant in South City this morning, breaking out shortly after midnight and sweeping through the highly explosive store rooms before an ocean gale. Estimated loss in surplus stock was placed tentatively at $200,000.

Arthur Kelly, night watchman, could not account for the exact source of the blaze, but early reports by officers of the city arson squad indicate spontaneous combustion.

The paragraph at the very bottom of the column caught Ladd's eye.

The owner, George Hanover, of the exclusive Arnheim Drive set...

That Arnheim struck a distant note. It drifted away from him and then came up slowly out of his memory: The post-

mark on that inner envelope had been *Arnheim Postal Station.* Arnheim was a small suburb, way out on the million dollar fringe.

He was beginning to feel sick again, so he crawled back into bed. The sickness went away but Arnheim still stuck there, clogging his brain.

Smoke is my favorite color, he had said to that girl. *Grey against black...and it goes nowhere....*

"Where there's smoke there's fire!"

Fire of unknown origin, breaking out shortly after midnight... Exclusive Arnheim Drive set....

Arnheim Postal Station.

Arnheim.

Smoke.

Fire.

Five thousand dollars.

"Can you meet me here again tonight...just before midnight...."

Fire...shortly after midnight.

Five thousand dollars.

Exclusive Arnheim two hundred thousand fire.

Oh, to hell with it! Chamberlin, you're nuts!

Ladd went to sleep.

It was still on his mind in the morning—the girl was still on his mind—and it still did not make sense, but a man had to be moving, doing something.

Just to satisfy his restlessness Ladd took a bus trip down to the site of the burned-out factory in South City. It was early dawn. The usual sightseers were not out yet. The long brick factory was a charred ruin of grey and black.

There were no human guards around the dead factory, only a few warning signs. It reminded Ladd of some of the shelled-out towns, a futile epitaph to civilization.

He walked into the mess, not because it was necessary or even safe, but because the twisted, blackened steel, the tortured splinters of wood, the crumbled mounds of brick cried out to him in mortal terror, like the cry in a woman's eyes. He strolled around the cement floor, avoiding the swept-up piles of ash and the heaps of shattered glass. There was one huge mound of fallen brick that reminded him especially of a grave and then he stood rooted in horror because a body seemed to be digging itself out of that grave and there, unmistakably, was the white, clawing arm of the enlivened corpse!

The arm did not move—it was only imagination that had

made it move—but it really was an arm, a hairy forearm, protruding stiffly from the mass of brick, a gruesome white flag of the last surrender.

THE local variation of the third degree was not as tough as Ladd had imagined, or was it that he himself felt tougher than usually? Anyway, the police couldn't shake his story.

"Sounds almost fishy enough to be true, Inspector," commented Detective Sergeant Rowe, a short, stocky man with a bull head carried tightly against the shoulders.

"My own opinion," grunted Inspector La Mont. His grey, remote eyes regarded Ladd Chamberlin distastefully. "Fella, we're temporarily agreed to believe your story, though it's an insult to the intelligence! You haven't the slightest idea who the girl was?"

"Never saw her before in my life!"

"And you just sat there blowing smoke rings?"

"That's right."

"Now, ain't that cute!" sneered the lieutenant from Homicide.

La Mont scowled. "Chamberlin, we've got to locate that girl! It's the first break we've had in a deal that's giving us grey hair! I'm going to turn you over to Sergeant Rowe, here, of the arson detail. Rowe has a special interest in this case; it was his buddy, Sergeant Dempster, you found buried under those bricks. Rowe will tell you what to do."

"Inspector, I was thinking—" Rowe swung toward Ladd—"Did you say you were out of a job, son?"

Ladd nodded.

Rowe snapped his fingers. "I got an idea. Wait for me a minute."

Actually it was fifteen minutes before Rowe returned with a pale, mustached, shy little man carrying a brief case.

"This is Fred Reiser," Rowe said. "He's a private operative hired by a pool of insurance companies. Inspector, Reiser thinks he can get his boss to hire Chamberlin!"

IT SEEMED to Ladd that his fortunes suddenly had gotten out of hand. Here he was with a new job, a new, exciting assignment, and he hadn't even lifted a finger.

Here he was, in fact, eating lunch at the expense of an ugly, friendly detective sergeant.

"You ever hear of Murder Incorporated?" the sergeant asked.

Ladd was startled. "Sure. Who hasn't?"

Rowe's mouth was fleshy, drooping. His tongue stirred speech like a ladle in thick soup. "If a guy can incorporate murder, I guess he can incorporate anything."

Ladd fingered a water glass nervously, waiting.

Rowe lifted one shaggy eyebrow. "How do you like Arson Incorporated?"

"Arson?"

"That's just an idea. La Mont and the Fire Chief cooked it up between them. There've been a lot of unexplained fires."

"I don't quite get the angle."

"Well, insurance is one. We're trying to think of others."

"I can't fit the word 'payoff' into it either. That five thousand was passed to me before the Hanover fire," Ladd noted.

"Sure. When you're dealing in risky goods you get an advance payment, don't you?"

Ladd felt an odd ball of pain at the back of his neck. "Do you think the girl was really one of the gang?"

Rowe's eyes peered up sharply over a forkful of pie. "What d'you think?"

Ladd consulted his coffee cup. "I don't know. She seemed scared, scared to death."

"Like she wanted help, but didn't dare to ask for it?"

"That was it!" Ladd said eagerly.

Rowe's eyes took on a look of friendly cunning. "Laddie, how would you be as an actor?"

Ladd scowled. "Why do people call me Laddie? I get that all the time."

"Well, kid, it's probably that name of yours on top of the fact that you look so innocent."

"Innocent!" Ladd protested.

"No offense. At my age you wish you had the same look. Laddie, you given me an idea how to operate. If we find this girl again, let's play it like this: Let's you pretend that you have gone overboard for this gal. You ought to know the moves, having been in the army. Give her a rush, and you'll find out a lot more than you would by acting like the law."

Ladd shut his eyes, felt strange, cold waters closing around him. He had already swum out too far.

"I don't know. I—"

"If you really like her, kid, the better the act! You got to be hard in this business. Let me tell you now, you got to be hard!"

Ladd's eyes snapped open. "Tell me one thing: Has anybody ever died in these fires?"

A RED flush crept up Rowe's neck, engulfed the chin, flooded through his cheeks. "Yeah," he said thickly. "Six months ago. A whole family got themselves trapped in an apartment house. We figure the apartment was not on the program but the fire was swept over to it from a burning warehouse by a heavy wind. Then you saw what happened last night to Sergeant Dempster."

"Do you think that wall falling on him was really an accident?"

Rowe glanced sharply at Ladd, surprised, perhaps, at the rapidity of his ideas. "I don't know," he grumbled. "Dempster and I went all over that wall during the day. What was Dempster doing back there at night? He knows enough to watch out for those gutted walls. He's been in this business as long as I have. We came in together."

Ladd could see the picture. "It wouldn't have been so hard to murder him at that. Beat in his head with a brick, then drop him in there and push the wall over on his dead body."

"You talk like a man of some experience."

Ladd gulped. "It seems obvious enough."

"Except what would be the object of bumping Dempster?"

"He might have found a clue and followed it up."

"Yeah. He might," Rowe agreed.

Ladd did some thinking. "How would they make contact with a man who would benefit by a fire?"

Rowe snorted. "How did Murder Incorporated get its business? I don't know how, but they sure got it!"

"Somewhere they'd be bound to strike an honest man."

Rowe laughed out loud at that. "An honest man in this town I got to see!"

Ladd laughed. "Rowe, you strike me as a professional cynic."

Rowe's eyes were suddenly shrewd, withdrawn. "Laddie, this is a rough business. Sometimes it will make you sick. There'll be times you'll get awful sick!"

LADD began his quest for the mystery girl at the cocktail

bar where he had first met her. The bartender recognized his description.

"Yeah, I remember you and her. Still making a play there, buddy?"

Ladd scowled. "I'd like to locate her."

"I think I could point you out her husband, if I'm not mistaken. He's a sort of barfly around this town. I've seen her when she had to lead him home."

"Do you keep your eye on the barflies or their wives?"

The man grinned, displaying ragged teeth. "We like our customers to get home alive. When they're not alive, they're not good customers."

That, Ladd thought, *is one way of looking at it.* "If she comes in again, would you tell her the man who likes *Smoke Rings* was looking for her?"

"Sure. Dan Cupid, Junior, that's me." That ugly display of teeth again. "Where will you be?"

"I'll be around."

"What'll I tell her husband if he comes in?"

The bartender thought that was hilarious, but Ladd didn't laugh. He went outside, haunted the downtown streets. This hunting a lost woman was a slightly at a loss. Late in the afternoon he went back to the same cocktail lounge and was surprised to get a sign from the bartender. The man leaned knowingly across the bar, polished vigorously.

"She's back there in the last booth," he whispered. "I told her about you."

"Did she ask for me?"

"Nope." The man smirked unpleasantly. "Was you expecting her to?"

Ladd shrugged, ordered a drink. It had been easy to locate her, much easier than he expected. From now on it was going to be rough.

He went over and dropped a nickel in the juke box. The number was *Smoke Rings* and it yanked her head out of that booth like an apple on a string.

Ladd tipped the barman, took his drink down to the booth. "You must live here," he remarked, sliding in.

"No, not really!" she said quickly. "I'm not—like that. I mean I—"

"Sure," Ladd offered. "You're a nice girl and you don't drink much. Now that's settled. What else do I like about you?"

Her brown eyes swept over came back?"

"How do you know I came back? Maybe I live here."

"The barman said—"

"Sure, I asked him to say that. I wanted to see you again."

Her breath came in tight, swift, rushes. "I wanted to see you, too. I was—I was afraid they might have hurt you."

Ladd felt the back of his head. "They did, a little."

She winced. Her hand reached out to him, then stiffened, withdrew. "I was afraid of that," she repeated.

"Afraid? Why? Am I different from the others?"

"What others?"

"Those rough boys you swap smoke rings with."

She looked down at her black gloves. Her face was pretty, even when it was wretched and uncontrolled. For a moment he thought the twitching lips and the corners of the eyes were going to get away from her. She finally wrenched out, "I can't talk here. Would you walk home with me?"

"It's a date." Ladd gulped his drink. "Provided you have no more boy friends lurking up dark alleys."

"I have no boy friends."

It was getting dark by the time they got away from the heavy downtown traffic. Ladd was glad of that. Acting was voice alone. Of course it would be easier for her too.

"I've got to tell someone, some time, and it might as well be you," the girl said.

"Let's have some names first. I'm Ladd Chamberlin."

"Ladd? Like in Laddie?"

He winced. "That's me! Who are you?"

"Eva Renner."

"Eva? Like in Little Eva? You troubled by bloodhounds, Eva?"

IT WASN'T much of a joke and neither one laughed. Where the street dipped into a tunnel of darkness under thick evergreens her hand came out and caught his wrist.

"You were right," she said. "I am troubled by bloodhounds. Whatever I do, wherever I go, I can't get away from them. Every move I make—oh, it's impossible!"

"They trailing us now?"

"I'm not sure, but I have a feeling that they know everything about me as surely as if they were looking in a crystal bowl—" She hesitated.

"You might as well tell me the whole thing," he suggested. "The way you've got me roused, I'll find out anyway."

"Aroused?"

"The hair on the back of my neck."

"Then you must know how I feel."

"I have an idea," he admitted.

"No one has ever known how I feel. I only wanted to live, to make my living. I just went to the employment agency for a job."

"A job? And they put you on this?"

"They sent me to a man. I'll never forget him, that devil! He was so nice. A detective agency, he said it was, and so did the sign on the door. They needed a woman, an ordinary looking woman—"

"Ordinary! Did you hit him?"

She laughed, a bitter, wintry laugh like the stirring of late autumn leaves. "A woman who would fit into scenes without attracting too much attention. He offered—it sounded to me like an awfully good salary for a girl with no experience. He said I would carry messages and things between their detective agents." Ladd could feel her shudder. "Mostly it's been between saloons. I have to go shouldering up to men, striking up conversations—ugly, hard-eyed men I wouldn't dare to be alone with."

"Like me?"

"You were different. I should have seen that. I was too anxious to get it over with. Every time, every new job, has been like dipping my hands deeper and deeper in some unseen, dreadful filth!"

"Are they men you would recognize again?"

"Oh, I don't know. It seems to me they were never the same twice, but I wouldn't swear to that. You were the first one who ever looked me square in the eyes—at first I did exactly as I was told, made the contacts, delivered the messages and kept my mouth shut. Then—I don't know how it happened—I began to get afraid. I felt as if every minute of my life were haunted by those men."

"Couldn't you quit?"

"I tried to. I did try to! I told the man over the phone—they always gave me orders by phone—that I wanted to quit and he said, 'Sister, to quit us you got to belong to the union.' 'What union?' I asked him and he said, 'The union down on ninety-fifth street.' . . .He gave me the address and I actually went down there, and do you know what it was?"

Ladd figured it out before she spoke.

Her voice sounded like wind at the corners of a window,

trying to get inside. "It was a cemetery!"

It did get inside of him—the terror. He had known moments like this in the army. A guy would be doing all right and then some other poor devil would let the fear come out and it would seize upon the rest, a darting Simon Legree of fear, whipping their souls.

His hand shot out automatically and gripped hers. "Do you remember the name of the detective agency?"

"Yes. The Ryan Detective Association."

"Ryan?"

"It's not in the phone book. I went back there once when I first became suspicious, and it—it wasn't there!"

Ladd whistled. "How about that employment agency that sent you to the job in the first place?"

"Oh! oh, I didn't even think to go back there!"

"Do you remember the name?"

"I could if I thought about it—" he let her think and she came up with—"the Private Home Employment Agency."

"Why didn't you try the police?" he asked.

Her voice was flat, sardonic. "Here? In this town? I wouldn't go to the police with anything!"

CHAPTER THREE
Crash Value

SEVEN BLOCKS from the business district she stopped off at a little market. She thought it would be better if he waited outside for her. She came out with two sacks. The one he carried for her was jammed tight with four loaves of rye bread.

"That's a lot of bread," he remarked.

"My brother eats an awful lot."

"Brother? You're not married?"

She laughed. "You thought all this bread was for a family!"

"Oh, sure. You look like the mother of five at least."

She laughed again. The tightness went out of her voice like water breaking from a dam.

So that bartender had mistaken a drunken brother for her husband! Ladd felt himself going warm all over. "Couldn't a brother give you a little help in your trouble?"

"My brother is—he's not well."

That, Ladd thought, is one

way of putting it. "Pardon me for being personal, but you got me into this and I'm trying to get us both out. Do you have to support your brother? Is that why you took this crazy job?"

Her answer was abrupt, sharp. "You have the most wonderful, penetrating mind I have ever known!"

Ladd was taken back. He was glad his blush was unseen. "That," he muttered, "would be a matter of opinion. If I'm not too penetrating, why do you put up with him?"

"With whom?"

"Your brother."

"Oh! Well, if you have a cripple in your family, you usually put up with him."

"Sure," Ladd said. Funny about family ties. Ladd had gotten away from them in the past ten years, so far away that he had been ashamed to reach for them again.

They came to a big frame house, at least fifty years old, which had survived the decades by conversion into an apartment. There seemed to be four flats, two up, two down. They went along a tightly fenced driveway to the back stairs. She went up first by herself and quickly came back down.

"I guess you can come up for a minute," she said thickly, as if she were afraid he would get away.

He walked up quietly into a small, clean kitchen. There were signs of a haphazard meal on the table, a dirty knife, a loaf of rye bread, half gone, slices spilling out of the wax wrapper, crumbs. He followed her into a small living room. The furniture seemed dull, ragged, a little tired. There was a table serving as a sort of desk, littered with papers, envelopes, pencils, a telephone.

She had gone out into a hallway, rapped at a neighbor's door. Her own voice was inaudible but the other woman had the shrill tongue of deafness.

"Yes,, he did, dearie. He went off just a little while ago, about fifteen minutes. There was a phone call woke him up, I guess—you must of hid it good, dearie, because he sure couldn't find it. Said he'd go out and get some more—and he cursed you, dearie. It was a fright how he cursed you! Enough to shake down the walls, it was! Honestly darling if I were you—"

THE VOICE thinned down like a noisy radio suddenly switched low. Ladd slipped back to the kitchen. He and

another man, a tall, thin shadow of a man, came into the kitchen light at the same time through opposite doors.

The man lurched, caught a chair, dragged up on it. His black hair hung raggedly, veiling the red-veined, furious eyes. The face, if it were twisted into shape, could very well be handsome.

"What're you doin' here?"

Ladd spoke easily, riding his temper. "I just helped your sister carry some—"

"Eva? How'd you know her? Are you where she goes to at nights?"

"I just met her."

"Just met 'er? The little—" Ladd must have looked threatening, because the man staggered back. "Does she pick 'em off the streets now?"

Ladd felt himself burning from the collar up. Why couldn't he get his hands up there and smear the guy?

The long man beat him to it, spilled loosely across the table, snatched at a ketchup bottle, came up again, waving it. "Don't want guys, see! No guys—"

Ladd hit the lean wrist sharply with the side of his hand. The bottle shot out of the sprung grip, skidded across the floor, trailing ketchup.

Ladd had handled drunks, but he'd never fought one. He just pushed at the face and the man folded at the knees and came down loosely, flat, soft. Except for the cushioning limpness, the fall might have way he slid across the floor and head on into the cupboard. The lean face twitched sharply and then settled, loosened. The breath came out with saliva through the open mouth. Ladd was on his knees, rolling the man over, lifting up the head. He could feel her panting breath, warm behind his neck.

"You'd better go," she whispered. "I didn't expect him—so soon."

"I'll help you get him to bed."

"No—Just leave him," she said angrily. "A floor, or a bed, or a gutter—what difference does it make?"

"He doesn't get tough with you?"

"Tough?" Was that a curl or a tremble on her lip? "He's not that much of a—you'd better go. I'm sorry I brought you into this, into our lives."

Ladd stood up stiffly. His hand jerked down toward her bent head, the soft, black hair, but didn't touch it.

"I'm not sorry," he said.

Before he left he went into the other room and memorized the number printed in the little white circle at the base of the telephone.

She glanced up as he passed through the kitchen on his way out. Her lips worked, producing only a husky, "Thanks!"

A SMILE, thin as a pencil mark, traced across Inspector La Mont's cold face. His fine, pale hands were spread, tapering, palm down, on his desk.

"Could I trade a worn-out lieutenant and one grade-C sergeant for your services, Chamberlin?"

Lieutenant Dan Corey of homicide and Sergeant Rowe, at opposite ends of the desk, laughed politely.

"Chamberlin," the inspector went on, "your stuff is good. In one day you've produced as much as my boys have gotten in six months. I'm thinking of all the taxpayers' money we could save."

"The girl wanted to talk," Ladd explained hastily.

Sergeant Rowe dropped a hand on Ladd's shoulder. "Never make excuses for being good, Laddie. You got to brag in this business."

The inspector nodded in agreement. "I would like to see one of my men get as much out of a girl in one evening. I'm thinking this department needs more youth, more—a—"

"Glamor is the word!" drawled Lieutenant Corey, a tall, slouching blonde.

"Glamor then!" snapped La Mont. "The fact is, Chamberlin, that the girl's story checks, right down the line. There was a Ryan Detective Agency that went out of business a year ago. There was also a Private Home Employment Agency that folded up about two hours before our boys moved in."

"Two hours?" Ladd felt unhappy constriction at his waist. "You mean the girl warned them?"

"I didn't say so."

"Would that make you unhappy, Laddie?" Sergeant Rowe asked.

"It would make me wrong, all wrong."

La Mont broke in. His voice was smooth as ice. "Keep feeling right about her, Chamberlin. It will help your work. We've also checked that Will Renner, the girl's brother. Her story straight on that score. He's a no-account, a drunken deadbeat. Every patrolman in town knows Renner. He favors no particular gutters."

"To finance a sop like that she would need money," Ladd defended.

"She's working with money," La Mont reminded him. "So you stay with her. Make love to her, if you have to."

Ladd grimaced. "This is a nasty business you're in."

"We deal with nasty people."

On the way out Sergeant Rowe's big feet shuffled along beside Ladd's through the gloomy outer corridor of City Hall. "La Mont likes you, Laddie. It might be a job. When you tabbed that Private Home Employment Agency, La Mont was like a goose with a golden egg. He thinks that agency was the contact end of the arson business. By planting domestic help in private homes they could gather information on prospective customers. In fact, it has opened up a whole new angle of this thing—theft."

"Theft?"

"Sure. A fire is a beautiful setting for robbery. A planted house servant gets wind of a big cache of cash or other valuables. From there on he may handle the job himself, but more likely he calls in the fire specialist. While no one is home they left everything in sight that would be inflammable, then light up the house, and the owner thinks his valuables have burned up!"

"It sounds good," Ladd admitted.

"It is good! Most of those houselifters get caught somehow with the stolen goods, but if nobody knows the goods were stolen, the boys ride along as free as air. This thing has so many angles we haven't begun to figure them all. Business competitors is another."

They went out swinging doors. The steep steps of city hall fanned out before them. A lone cab was parked down at the front curb.

"Come down here, Rowe," Ladd said. "I want you to meet someone."

There was a girl sitting in the back of the cab. She rolled down the glass, smiled. "Miss Renner, this is Sergeant Rowe—"

Rowe paled, hunched up as if Ladd had suddenly kicked him in the chest. "Laddie, you damn fool!"

Rowe's big hand spaded Ladd into the cab and then his head came up cautiously, surveying the street. Ladd saw him strike off at an angle, behind the cab, cutting through traffic, crossing the street. There was a long black sedan

parked over there, facing the other way.

Rowe was in the middle of the street, moving fast, when the sedan broke from the curb, sliced traffic in a wild, screaming arc, and then raced back. Rowe was alone in a broad arena of open street.

He crouched, weaving desperately, as the thing skidded, straightened, and then hurtled down on him. Eva Renner screamed. Ladd flung out a futile hand. At the last instant Rowe leaped, the sedan lurched, missed, whipped his coat tails with the wind of its passage.

Rowe sprawled. A big truck braked, slid along a collapsing accordion of space—and stopped.

Ladd let his breath out when Rowe came up, seemingly right out of the wheels of the truck. Rowe waved back the terrified driver ahead and ran back to the cab. The black sedan had vanished.

ROWE SLID into the seat beside Eva Renner.

"Shall we follow them?" Ladd gasped. Rowe's grin was a little pasty. "Where?" he asked, waving a hand at the flow of traffic.

"It looked like they tried to kill you!" Eva Renner whispered.

"Who?" Rowe inquired coldly.

The girl turned to Ladd. "We must have been followed here. They must know everything about me!"

Rowe switched the subject. "Would you explain this little party, Laddie?"

"Well Rowe, I've been talking to Eva—Miss Renner—and I've convinced her the police aren't all so bad. She's come to witness against the gang. Show her your badge, Rowe; she wants to be sure."

Rowe groaned, flipped his lapel, revealing a flash of silver on the back. "Aren't you a little late getting here?" he asked the girl angrily.

Eva stared at her black gloved hands. "I didn't know I was involved in—in such a terrible thing!"

Rowe was sarcastic. "I suppose, Laddie, you've given her a play-by-play report of the whole business?"

"No, I just gave her an idea that she was in a spot and it was time to talk."

"Did you have any contact with Hanover?" Rowe asked the girl sharply.

"Hanover?" Her mind didn't seem to connect.

Rowe pursued another angle. "Where did you get those envelopes you delivered?"

"Oh!" The girl stiffened. "They came to my post office box. I went to the box every day. Usually on the day an envelope came I would get a phone call at home telling me where and when to deliver it."

"Any names?"

"No. They would give me a very general description of the man. Then I would go to the place of delivery, which was always a cocktail bar, and watch for a cue. The cue was—"

"Smoke rings?" Ladd cut in.

"Yes, and a certain number of words of conversation on the subject of smoke and fire."

Ladd was surprised. "Did I actually hit the right number of words?"

"I'm not sure. I was excited. I may have miscounted."

Rowe groaned. "Wonder what weird mind thought that up?"

"Not mine!" Eva's chin was up, defending herself.

Rowe's ugly face relaxed a little. "Do you think you would recognize any faces?"

"I might."

"Good. Come inside and have a look at our album."

CHAPTER FOUR

Go Soak Your Dead...

THEY WERE easy on her at headquarters, even though she identified none of the photographs or spotlighted faces. Then they put her in Ladd's custody—and for a week he wasn't mad at anybody.

Then, late on a Saturday evening, Ladd was reporting to Rowe at headquarters when a call came in on a fire. He went along in a fast patrol car, holding his breath as they whistled through the foggy streets.

"It's a gun shop," Rowe told him. "Those things are bad. They go up like firecrackers."

Rowe's driver was pumping the siren and it picked up the wail of other sirens. They all came together, baying on a single note, like wolves on a scent. Smoke rolled out first to meet them, racing the fog. Then a swift, skidding turn brought them into the glow. White glaring floodlights contested the black pall veined with red fire. Live snakes of hose darted along the street. The big red trucks kept roaring in, wheeling into position, black and white men spilling from their flanks, running.

Rowe and Ladd had to get

out a block away. Policemen had their hands full, backing the crowd, warning: "Gunpowder in there! May explode!"

Rowe hit the crowd like a fullback, working his shoulders. Ladd ran into his swath. They broke the line. Rowe was recognized and they ran down until the heat came against their faces like raw desert wind. Fifty feet past the gun shop police were clubbing, beating the crowd back. It was a crazy crowd, each face a leering flame.

The fire was at the back of the shop, working toward the front.

"Wait'll the ammunition starts to pop!" Rowe muttered.

They stayed close to the protection of a big truck until a muffled explosion sounded above the roar of flame. Sharp gold knives of fire shot across the street on the force of the outbursts. Windows rattled in a chain of sould along the street, like a dwindling clap of thunder. Then the night went to pieces. Boxes of shells went off like machine gun bursts. The air was full of whistling bullets. A truck headlight splintered at Ladd's elbow. In the street before him a fireman buckled, went down.

The direction of that deadly hail was confusing. Ladd crouched, saw Rowe lying flat on the ground. Rowe's hand shot out to his ankle, tripped him. Ladd toppled to hands and knees and Rowe kicked the stiffened arm, flattening him. A bullet rang harshly against the truck fender, whined off at an angle.

"Crawl!" Rowe hissed. "Get under the truck! This is murder!"

They both turned, wriggled frantically between the wheels. Ladd felt chipped cement needle his face from another richochet. Rowe gave a crazy jerk beside him, swore. "Got my leg!"

They went the whole length of the truck, worming, chafing ripping their clothes. At the end they broke for the crowd which had milled into a riot. Ladd broke the way this time, along a cement wall. Rowe was limping, but he kept going.

A block away they caught a roving patrol car with two men inside. "Around the block! Other side of the fire!" Rowe roared, piling into the back seat after Ladd. Rowe "There's a gunman over there!"

While the car threaded traffic, Rowe switched on an overhead light, looked at the long red groove on his hairy calf.

The blood was just finding the surface. He began to wrap it with a strip of shirt.

"How did you know it was murder?" Ladd panted.

"That fireman. The way he fell. There's a lot of impact in a bullet. He was hit in the left side. The crowd was on that side, not the gunshop. Someone was shooting from over there, shooting from his pockets... Laddie, when bullets are flying you want to get down!"

"I know," Ladd grumbled. "I was like that in the army. I don't react promptly to fear. Always late. Just a little late."

Rowe regarded him with close interest, then went back to his leg. "The fire was a plant, it looks like. The explosion that set off those loose cartridges probably was timed for about fifteen minutes after the first outbreak. By that that time the trucks and the racket and the excitement would be there—to cover up a murder. Whoever did the shooting would have the same caliber bullets as those going off inside. It was a neat trick. Those boys have thought of all the twists."

Ladd's tongue felt dead. "Who do you think they were after, Rowe?"

Rowe's eyes slanted up, steel blue knives. "You, Laddie. It strikes me that murder, in this case, would be for you."

THE OLD deadly indecision was coming back. It had been like this in the war. A man would get into a tight spot and freeze. Somehow when the test of life and death came he would break the ice.

This was the old freeze again. The enemy had gotten Ladd's range. He had to keep drinking to melt that cold slush in his veins and it was a bad habit. He kept winding up at the same cocktail bar, as if this new life of his centered around it. When he wasn't with Eva Renner in person, her image could always be found up there in the mirror above the bar.

On Monday morning, on his way to the bar, Ladd collided with a happy drunkard. A red face leered into his, mouthing apologies.

He walked on to the bar, ordered a beer. His winking friend, the bartender, and a customer were discussing the good and bad of heavy drinking.

"I tell 'em when they ought to go home," the bartender whined, "but they won't listen to me."

"Seeing 'em get like that, I suppose you never drink yourself," the customer said.

"Oh sure. I drink if a man wants me to. Some people try to warm me up, get me exchanging drinks."

"How can you take it all day long and stay on your feet, keep your head clear?"

That ugly wink again, "Tricks o' the trade."

"I know one of the tricks," Ladd remarked. "Knew an army lieutenant once who was a bartender."

Ladd felt a twinge of homesickness for comradeship of the army. He tried to recall that particular lieutenant's odd, mournful face, but it kept getting mixed up with Eva Renner's. He couldn't get Eva off his mind.

Was it really terror in Eva's eyes or something deeper, something unhealthy and vicious? If a man could only be sure of the girl's story. Had she really hooked up with that gang thinking it was only a detective agency? That explanation sounded reasonable. A woman had to eat, make a living for herself and her no-good brother—there had to be bread and butter.

Suddenly he forgot his beer, forgot even to pay for it. His mind had finally caught hold, forced some action—fired him out the door like a bullet from a gun and now he was on the target.

He walked rapidly out of the business district down a side street. He timed himself by his wrist watch. Within a block of an old frame house he stopped and then struck off at a right angle, timing himself again. For a whole afternoon he walked a weird criss-cross pattern of streets. The center of that pattern was a house.

He hit the police headquarters at dusk. "Rowe's eating dinner," the desk sergeant informed him.

"Where can I find him in a hurry?"

"In case of fire he's at Charlie's Diner."

Ladd squinted. "In case of fire?"

"Sure. Rowe never misses a fire. He's our little fireboy."

LADD WAS out on the street again, a weak, sagging sickness in his knees. The elements of this thing were coming at him too fast. He leaned against a lamppost, got himself straightened out, then walked down to Charlie's Diner and

found the detective in an end booth.

Rowe's big, ugly face was six inches above a thick steak. Ladd sat down. Rowe's blue-grey eyes shifted upward; he crowded a mouthful of food into the sack of a flabby wrinkled cheek. "I told you to keep under cover, Laddie."

Ladd's eyes slanted off into the distance. "Rowe, I don't think the girl belongs to the arson gang."

Rowe bolted the food. "Why?"

"Because the weak spot in a gang like that would always be at the payoff end. Take that man Hanover for instance. What would have happened if he had refused to do business with them?"

"Not much."

"Exactly. He couldn't do them much harm because no deal had been made and the arson had not yet been committed. But some time a Hanover might come along with an honest streak up his spine and he might play it clever. He might pretend to do business with the gang, pay the first installment, and then set the law on the trail of that installment. The police might have been there at P. O. Box four-eight-one-five waiting for the girl to get the payoff. Then they would either nab the girl or follow her. If they followed her, the gang's scouts would be watching, would take warning and leave her strictly alone. If the police nabbed the girl, they might have ways of making her talk, but she couldn't talk very well if she didn't know the kind of business she was in. In other words the link between the payoff and the gang was a false link; if the police grabbed it they still would not have the chain!"

Rowe's eyes bulged to match his loaded cheeks. "Laddie, if I had your brain I would be a good copper."

"Do you think I'm right?" Ladd's eyes were bright, almost feverish. "Do you think that puts Eva out of it?" Rowe shrugged, wiped his hands and mouth on a napkin. "Could be."

"Rowe, do you carry a gun?"

"Rowe's eyes tightened. "Did you think I wouldn't, Laddie?"

"Can I see it?"

"Sure." A big right hand slid under the detective's plain grey coat. It came up with a small, black automatic.

Ladd felt of it gently. He had nursed many of these ba-

bies during the war. He held it down in his lap, turned it over a couple of times.

"Looks good, don't it?" Rowe said.

"Looks hard, cold, and unnecessary."

"I hope you live to bear that out," Rowe muttered. "You can have one if you like."

"You keep it. I just wanted to be sure you had one. We're going to pick up the man tonight."

"What man?"

"The firemaker. The arsonist. The one at the dirty end."

Rowe was choking over his coffee cup. "Are you telling me you know who it is?"

"I know," Ladd said quietly.

"Laddie, I—" Rowe's tongue fumbled around his cheeks. He stood up stiffly. "Come on!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Little Late Laddie

THEY WENT down in Rowe's black and white car, left it a few blocks away, walked in. Rowe still limped from the bullet wound in his leg. The street lights were scattered, dull, staining the night a sickly yellow.

Ladd talked rapidly. "Rowe, when I was first hired to find that girl again I went back to that cocktail bar and all of a sudden there she was. What was she doing back there? After she delivered that money she had no excuse to haunt the bar; it was the last place in the world for her to be seen again. She told me she came back to be sure I hadn't been hurt; she was afraid, but how did she know I would be back at that bar? She didn't even bother to ask the bartender if he knew me; she just sat there and waited, as if I was bound to turn up. Rowe, I think she knew I was going to turn up. I think she had an inside tip."

"An inside tip?" Rowe's limping feet did a one-two halt. He swung stiffly. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that somebody at police headquarters knew who the girl was and phoned her, told her to meet me at that bar. She told her story without much prompting from me, as if she had been warned to tell it straight and save her own neck. I hope that was it."

"Laddie, are you making accusations?"

"I guess so. Let me finish." Ladd's tongue was dry, the taste of it was bad. "Rowe, I think that whole gang folded up too fast after I appeared at

headquarters. Sure, they may have seen me talking to the girl again; she may even have told them what I said to her; but there wasn't enough threat in me to explode the whole gang overnight. I think the leaders also were warned by an insider."

"Laddie," Rowe said hoarsely, "there were only four insiders. There was Inspector La Mont, Dan Corey of homicide. Fred Reiser, the insurance man, and me, your pal, Ted Rowe."

"That covers the field," Ladd said coldy. "Rowe, didn't it ever occur to anybody that there must be some sort of payoff inside the department to keep this arson thing from being discovered? Sure, arson is hard to trace, but I don't see how the gang could do a hundred per cent perfect job every time. Suppose some detective did get wind of arson, found a clue. Suppose he traced the man who was setting those fires and that man made him an offer. Suppose that detective was an ordinarily straight man, but he had seen every other cop around him collecting a few extra tips on the job? Suppose the detective got a little cynical and decided to collect his own share—"

"I'm still supposin'," Rowe muttered.

"Well then, suppose one of those big fires gets out of hand and kills a poor, helpless family and this detective becomes very angry with himself and the whole business and he goes to the gang and tells them there will be no more payoff and no more arson, to get the hell out of town and stay out! Right then, of course, that detective would be marked for murder. There would be another fire, the Hanover factory for instance. The detective would become violently angry and go to the gang and tell them this was their last chance to get out. He would go to them but he would not come away alive. A carefully selected brick would strike the back of his head and he would be carted to the scene of the fire where a whole wall of bricks would be pushed over on him, as if he died by accident in line of duty. You see, Rowe, this detective would be a member of the arson detail—"

"You mean Dempster!" Rowe said.

"Yes, I mean Dempster. I think that is how and why he was murdered."

"But you claim the gang was

warned after you brought your fairy story to headquarters. Dempster was already dead."

"Dempster had a partner." Ladd's voice was deathly thin.

Rowe shifted his shoulders, walked stiffly ahead.

"You see, Rowe, the whole arson detail would have to be in on it to make a thing like that effective. You and Dempster were the arson detail. . . . There was one thing that finally tied it up for me, Rowe. That was that last fire in the rifle shop. You said that fire was set to cover up a gun killing. You said the bullets were aimed at me, Rowe, but how would anyone know in advance that I would be at that fire? I don't belong to the arson squad—Rowe, the only man in the police department who was always sure to be at a fire was you. Those bullets were for you, Rowe! You were marked for murder from the time I took Eva Renner to headquarters and those men who had trailed us in that black sedan saw you come down the steps to meet her. That rundown with the sedan was a threat, they didn't want to kill you openly like that. They postponed murder to a time of their own choosing. They're your sworn enemies, Rowe! They'll get you or you'll get them."

THEY WALKED fifty yards, feet thumping in rhythm, before Rowe spoke. His voice was gentle, like a lullaby. "Laddie, I got a gun! Don't you know I got a gun?"

Ladd let a little distance drift between their bodies, distance for open, swirling action.

"You're not a murderer, Rowe. I'm staking my life on my judgment of men. I know people. It's the only thing I do know, my only gift. I'm not making any offers or bargains. I just say that I'm going after the head of that gang and you're going along because they killed your partner, Dempster, and you are, after all, the law. I'm so sure of you that I'm walking ahead of you from now on. I'm taking the lead."

It was a terrible, sweating exertion to do it, step ahead like that, not looking back, with only a thread of conscience back there between a man and his gun. If he had misjudged the thickness of that thread—

He turned into a driveway. They went around the house and up the back stairs.

Eva Renner leaped to her

feet, whirled, when they came in. "It's you! Oh, Ladd, it's you!"

The men stood uncertainly. "Whom did you expect?" Ladd said.

She didn't answer directly. Her eyes fluttered desperately from man to man. "I—I can't stand this any longer! I've got to get away. Ladd, help me get away!"

"Come down on the front porch. We'll talk there," Ladd said harshly. "Leave the light on."

There were five chairs down there. Ladd selected three, spaced about ten feet apart. Eva sat in the middle. The lower house was dark. Street lights were so distant that the three sat in separate invisible pouches of dark.

"We'll wait here for our man. It may be a long wait," Ladd said.

"Laddie, you're a smart, smart boy. How did you figure it?" Rowe muttered.

"I should have caught on the other night, the first time I came to this place. I heard the neighbor upstairs tell Eva that her brother had been gone only about fifteen minutes when we arrived, that he had gone out after being waked up from a nap by a phone call —gone out because there was nothing to drink in the house. A few minutes after that Will Renner came back, drunk, and passed out at my feet, limp as a rag. I've been doing some checking on distances today and there's no liquor store or cocktail bar within fifteen minutes' range of this house, let alone the drinking time it takes for a man to get as tight as that. In other words, Will Renner was not drunk, he was faking drunkeness because he wanted me to see what kind of a man he was. Renner had been warned by telephone just as his sister had been warned. Somewhere out on the street he saw me with Eva and knew the stage was set for his act."

"Ladd!" Eva Renner gasped.

"Shut up! There were other things. I handled Renner a little, after he passed out. There was no whisky smell about him, not the kind of breath you would get from a souse like that."

"Not drunk?" Eva persisted. "Ladd, he must have been—"

"Shut up!" Ladd repeated. "Today I hit on something that gave me the cue to Renner's act. He was a terrific bread eater, his sister said. I knew an old bartender's trick

—lining the stomach with rye bread to sop up the alcohol so it doesn't permeate the system and the brain. Will Renner used the trick in his impersonation of a drunkard."

"Impersonation?" Eva cried.

"Will Renner gave himself a reputation as drunkard around town and it had to be authentic. He really had to be seen in the bars gulping it down. When he wanted an alibi he had to be seen in a drunken stupor, sitting on curbs, decorating lampposts. In between lampposts Renner would be racing off to his night's work and back again."

The girl refused to be hushed. "Laddie—Ladd, do you mean Will was in this—this thing? It was Will! Will all the time—Will?"

Ladd's voice was down in his throat, sore and tight. "Renner picked his sister for the payoff job so he could always have an eye on her, watch for slips. If she was tagged he would still be in the clear because he was well-known to the police as a chronic drunk."

"Ladd, I didn't know! I had no idea it was Will—my brother!"

She was weeping. He couldn't tell if it was shock or fright. It occurred to Ladd that Ted Rowe, sitting quietly over there, should know whether the girl was really a full-fledged member of the gang. Rowe had been in contact with the inside, with Will Renner. Rowe would know.

Ladd's mind had been automatically recording the sound of quick male footsteps a half block down the street. Now he caught the sudden change in their rhythm—shuffling, weaving, erratic—imitation of a drunkard!

"Quiet!" he said.

THE MAN seemed to float along now, a grey-black illusion of night. In front of the house he stopped. Ladd was crouched deep in his chair.

A sound broke the tension, a ringing, metallic scurry of sound across the cement of the front walk. The man stiffened, seemed to bend down and then he was leaping away, running.

Ladd was always late in action. It took him a long moment to gather himself. He vaulted the railing, sprawled on the grass. "Come on, Rowe! This is it!"

He came up low, toes digging sod, and shot out to the walk in full stride. Their thudding steps—his own and those of the man he pursued—were faint light toe sounds; two

phantom men racing wildly along a dark, paved tunnel.

Ladd's eyes could just make out the rushing shape ahead. He gained about fifty feet in two blocks. The man was only thirty feet away when he seemed to vanish from the walk. Ladd slid to a halt at the corner of a thick hedge, hesitated. Steps thudded across a porch, a door slammed.

Ladd waited for Rowe to come up, limping, panting. Metal gleamed in Rowe's hand.

"He's in that house."

"That would be the headquarters," Rowe muttered. "Makes his fire bombs in there. I better take him now, from the front. With one gun against him he'll get out of there quick if he has time to think. Here Laddie, you take this flashlight. Hold it away at the side of your body. Don't try any fancy work. Don't ever try any fancy work, Laddie!"

Ladd stayed back. He saw Rowe reach the porch, start up the steps.

Rowe shouted, "Renner! This is Rowe, coming in. We got to talk, Renner!"

The whole house upheaved, thundered, burst like a split tomato, red flame spilling from the seams. Rowe staggered back from the explosion, toppled to the grass. The house walls shuddered, sagged against the miraculous fury of the fire. Along a ragged fringe of blazing light at the rear of the house a grey shape shot out of black space, down low by the foundation, slid along the grass, gliding like a snake. Ladd ran after it. His hand squeezed the flashlight and a thin spray of light shot out ahead of him. The thing on the grass squirmed in the light, turned. A black arm came up, ending in a stump of gleaming steel. Fire—a thousand red splinters of fire spurted at Ladd. He seemed to go down at the knees even before the bullet jarred into his shoulder, crushing the bone.

The flashlight spun out of his paralyzed grip, rolled out in front of him. That black arm out there and the steel stump were aiming again, straight over the flashlight—

The dark legs of Sergeant Rowe leaped out into the white swath of light.

"Rowe! Rowe, your gun!" Ladd shouted.

He could see Rowe's hand working at the gun but nothing happened. The man on the grass raised his arm, fired.

Rowe was folding up. The gun finally answered to the pressure of his hand. Flame an-

swered flame and the head of the farther man snapped back. The body of Will Renner stiffined, spread itself flat.

The gun dangled from Rowe's limp fingers. Slowly he fell on his face. His body relaxed, draped out over the ground.

Ladd dragged himself over, biting down the agony in his shoulder. He tugged at Rowe, rolled the body over, face upward. "Rowe," he gasped. "Rowe, was the girl in it too? The girl, Rowe? What about her?"

Rowe was dead. Ladd gently let the head down.

"Ladd!"

He swung painfully and the girl was there. She came to him, kneeled down.

Ladd's brain swung dizzily trying to gather up the ends. His good left hand felt under Rowe's lapels. There was no detective badge. Ladd talked it out with himself. *He tossed his badge out there on the sidewalk to give the guy a warning, give him a chance. He didn't want to capture Renner because Renner would tell how Rowe himself was tied into it; but he wouldn't shoot the man down in cold blood. Rowe had his code, for both sides. He could break all the codes but his own—*

Eva Renner was working at Ladd's shoulder. She turned him gently, got his head in her lap.

Ladd's tongue was loose, babbling. "I killed Rowe! I emptied two chambers of his gun in case my hunch about him was wrong. I didn't warn—"

He groaned. Tangents of his mind kept shooting off like skyrockets into darkness, exploding. "I was—late. Little later. Rowe had to—Little Late Laddie—"

"Shhh!"

The last skyrocket took him all the way with it, brought him back with a wail like a siren. That siren sounded real.

His eyes opened on a very real face. "Damn it, I'll never be sure. I'll never know—about you—now." He tried to laugh and it choked up like mud in his throat. "What a couple! I can't trust you. You can't count on—never quite there! Little Late Laddie. Got no spark. No spark!"

The whisper in his ear was strong, alive. "Oh, Ladd! Laddie, you have. You have it now!"

She pressed his head against her heart and he could hear it beating.

Murder would have been justifiable homicide in the case of...

THE HOOKED CROOK

by JIM HARMON

"I'VE got a monkey on my back, and I can tell you who put it there."

I listened to the young voice and the old words on the telephone, and I said, "Tell it to the police. I'm a private investigator."

"You square! The cops wouldn't let me live long enough to tell anyone," the girl's voice said.

Looking at the words "RELLEK ECYRB" before me, I recognized their mystic significance. They were my name

—Bryce Keller—m i r r o r e d through my office door. It was the name on the license that obligated me to aid the police even when I didn't get paid for it, even when they didn't want my help. "All right. Where are you? I suppose you got my name out of the phone book. How soon can you come to this address?"

"I can't leave here. I'm paralyzed!"

I thought for a moment she was only terrified but then I realized that hadn't been how she had used the word.

"Look, tell me where you're at, and call somebody there to help you."

"You l o u s y fuggheaded *square,*" the girl moaned. "I can't call attention to myself and live over it. You're too dumb to help me." But she gave me the address.

I was braking my Lincoln in at the curb of an all-night drug store minutes later. I pushed through the revolving door into the unhealthy cool of the interior. There were three phone booths across the aisle from a Kleenex display. I hurried along the row and spotted a brunet head inside the second one. Taking a chance, I pulled back the door. The girl fell into my arms. I caught her and knew that she was dead.

Her teen-age face would have been pretty if it hadn't been for the blue lips and absolutely black lines under her eyes. She would have been a pleasant full-breasted armful in her tight red sweater if her body hadn't started to cool. I caught her under the arms and laughed. I sat her back inside and grinned. "Anybody watching will expect me to apologize for being clumsy, Baby, but since no one can hear me I think I'll just tell you I'll get him for you. Wait—m a y b e they'll think you're my girl and I'm waiting for you to finish calling your mother."

I reached out and patted her cooling cheek and moved my hand enough to spread her drooping eyelid. I smiled broadly. The dialated pupil told me what I had suspected. She had died of a hot shot—an overdose of narcotics. I closed the door politely and stopped grinning. Where were they?

She knew she had been followed and couldn't cause a disturbance even when the overdose had started to work. A bullet would have been even faster. I looked around.

You can't judge character by appearances—all the books tell you that. But somehow when

you see a bunch of young punks in a gang all wearing bop clothes and sporting shaggy hair and unwashed faces, you know they aren't the type you would hire for a baby sitter. I walked straight towards them.

The one in the green jacket saw me coming in the fountain mirror. He nudged Red-jacket sitting beside him. Red-jacket passed the word to Purple-jacket and Pink-shirt. They all watched me come.

I stopped behind them. "I've got the goods on you punks," I said. If they went regularly to Sunday school, that wasn't going to bother them.

Green-jacket swiveled around and slashed open my front with a switch blade. Fortunately, it was just the front of my shirt, not my skin. I caught the arm on its downswing and pulled him off the stool to catch him in the middle on my knee. He howled. Red-jacket caught me in the side with a well-placed kick and I let go of the first one. He hit me in the face with his fist but that didn't bother me. I drove a right into Red-jacket's jaw and he slid across the counter, falling on the other side in a tangle of arms and legs. I caught Purple-jacket across the cheek as he started forward, knocking him off the stool. Turning back to Green-jacket, I put him out on his feet with a right cross. Behind me there was a crash and tinkle of glass. Pink-shirt had carelessly forgotten his switch-blade. He held a jagged piece of Coke glass in his hand and grinned at me with dancing eyes. I put two fingers in those eyes and he dropped the glass.

A knife buried itself in my shoulder and gave me its message of sickening pain. It had been thrown so it hadn't gone in deep; no one but an expert can throw a knife so it really sticks. I jerked the thing loose and spun on my heel. Purple-jacket lay on the floor grinning at the blood on his knife in my hand. But Red-jacket was clammering over the bar and aiming the arc of his knife at my chest. Two blades clanged as I caught his thrust with the knife I held. I twisted and his knife spun through the air like a living silver bird. He stood up on the bar and kicked the knife out of my hand. Catching his ankle I pulled him screaming down to me. Purple-jacket moved forward with a vacant but somehow determined expression on his face. I hit him over the head with Red-jacket.

Suddenly I was aware of two

more red-jackets moving towards me. They must have been waiting outside in a car and saw what was happening. I paid too much attention to them. Two strong young arms in pink came around my chest and pinned my arms. That was bad. I knew I couldn't handle six of them and had been a split second away from snatching my .45 out of its shoulder holster. The arms were strong and wirey and young. And I was getting closer to forty than thirty. I could have shaken them loose in a few minutes but time had all run out for me.

One of the new red-jackets whipped off his beaded leather belt and lashed me across the eyes with it. The second had been standing on tip-toe the second before and I felt his drop-kick into my groin. Physical Education was just as important as academic training, any member of the school board could tell you that. It prepared youngsters for things in later life much better than an equal period spent on astronomy or latin. Personally, I was studying the stars and practising my command of language under my breath.

The young hoods tossed me on the floor and began to stomp my brains and guts out. It must have made them mad that my face didn't register pain or fear. I was too tired to make my face into the right positions. After that plastic surgery by the Army medics, involuntary registering of emotion was a thing of the past for me. Well, maybe. I could manage just one expression. I smiled sweetly. A leather heel tried to wipe it off but I kept it there. The kids kept on with their fun. No one in the store offered to help me. The punks must have been well known around there.

After awhile, I dimly heard one of them say, "Hey, look at him. He must be one of them freaks that *likes* being beat up. We're just doing him a favor. Let's scram."

Evidently, I thought contentedly, they aren't going to murder me in front of so many witnesses.

THE first thing I saw when I came to was the black grip of a revolver. My reflexes took over and I snatched it faster than I would have thought possible. I found myself pointing it at the fresh-scrubbed face of a young policeman who was bending over me. I felt myself blush which is about the only involuntary

expression of emotion I can make. I handed him back his gun, grip first. He slid it into its holster, glaring at me icily.

"I wonder," he said in a high voice, "if honest men grab revolvers the first thing on regaining consciousness?"

"They do," I told him, "if they were trying to defend themselves from a hell of a beating before they passed out. But I might wonder too if I was as fresh out of Police Academy as you."

He glared harder. "I'll have to have some identification from you."

I looked about at the people gathered solicitously around me, the ones who had watched my beating without a *tsk-tsk*. "That's brilliant," I said. "Do you think those punks left me with my billfold?" Pressing into my thigh I felt the familiar outline of my wallet.

Abruptly, I caught sight of something. The brunet head was still in the phone booth. In the excitement no one had noticed her or thought of her staying there so long or perhaps realized it was the same brunet. I had lied about my identification thinking the body must have been found, but this way it was even better. I could get out of there without being connected with the dead girl at all.

"What did these kids look like?" the young cop was asking.

I screwed up my face. "Look, I'm a bloody mess. I'm going to a hospital. I'll answer your questions later when I file charges. My name's Mike Sickle and I live at the Signet Hotel."

I got to my feet. Every aching inch.

"I'll call an ambulance," the policeman offered.

"Okay, and you pay for it. My car's outside. I'll drive over myself."

"You're in no condition to drive. I'll take you in your car."

"Hell, aren't you going to question these people? I want my money back and to see those punks in jail."

He was a little confused. "Well...okay. You sure you can make it?"

I was sure. A more experienced cop would have rapped his stick on the pavement for help or called in, but with the younger man I had gotten away with it. Slipping under the wheel gingerly, I automatic transmissioned away. I knew where I was going.

BORIS WERNER was a detective sergeant in Police Intelligence and a good friend of mine. He didn't look either intelligent or friendly when he opened the door for me at one in the morning. He pried his eyes halfway open. "Hullo, Bryce."

I stepped inside. "Hello, Boris. Sorry to get you out of bed."

He stumbled along the hall towards the living room. "'S all right. Had to get up to answer the doorbell anyway."

He was joking. Werner never let himself get that unconscious when he was sound asleep, but he always acted as if he would need an adding machine for two and two.

We sat down in easy chairs and Boris blinked at me over a smoldering cigaret. "Which done it to you? Dope pushers or delinquents?" He knew it was one or the other or I wouldn't have come to see him.

"I think they probably were both."

"Got anything special on them that you think I could spot them from?"

I shook my ringing head. "Nothing. I thought I might be able to find them in your private files."

"Hell, they have a lot more pictures down at the station than I have. But I guess if you wanted to go to the station, you'd have gone. They are over there, behind the draperies."

I crossed the room and pulled back the maroon drapes hiding several green filing cabinets sat in a recess. I knew it was highly unlikely that I could find what I wanted in such a small sample of the punks and pushers infesting the city. But fifteen minutes later I found what I was looking for.

It was a picture of Pinkshirt, the kid that had held my arms while his friends worked me over. He was Thomas Richfield Fenton, Jr. Thomas Richfield Fenton, Sr. was the man who most likely would be our next United States Senator come the nominations and elections.

I shoved the card back into its drawer before Boris could see which one I had picked. He was a good cop who could be broke like a toothpick. I would snap a little harder, maybe, like a match, but I was too mad to stop.

I hammered the brass knocker on the door of Fenton's townhouse briskly. But something interrupted the staccato —something that sounded

ominously like gun shots. The first one was distinct followed seconds later by a second and third sounding blurred and several seconds apart. I opened the door and ran down the hall to the stairs. The sounds had come from above.

On the second landing, I bumped into a girl. She was blonde and nineteen with a pouting, sensuous mouth—which is a good way to be. But I didn't have time for her or her electric blue robe. She followed me up the stairs.

The fumes of nitrate hung before the door at the head of the stairs. It was locked. I banged my fist against it. "Open up! Open up if you can!"

A young man suddenly appeared beside the girl. He had on a white shirt now but I recognized him as Pink-shirt: Thomas Richfield Fenton, Jr. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

He didn't seem to recognize me but my face had changed some under the puffing bruises.

Young Fenton tried the door and found it locked as I had. "Dad, what was that noise? Dad?"

I pushed him aside and aimed a kick at the door. The lock was torn out of the frame and the door swung open.

We could all see the well-known face of Thomas Richfield Fenton, Sr. as he sat slumped in a chair with blood trickling down his forehead and a smoking .32 laying on the desk before him. The girl screamed.

"Stay back," I told them. "Keep the servants away from here and call the police. I'm a detective. I'm going to check this room over."

It checked out. There was only one door and the two windows were locked. This was the third floor. I even hammered on the walls and floor and even the ceiling for secret panels, feeling foolish and of course finding none.

Giving a last look at the man who now would never be a U. S. Senator, I stepped out into the hall.

Young Fenton's voice carried up to me. "...The man who killed him is still upstairs, Officer."

How had I ever forgotten for an instant that Fenton was only a cheap little hood no matter who his father had been? I didn't know the rest of the house so I went back inside the room.

I unlatched one of the windows and opened the panels

out. Swinging my legs over the sill, I hung by my hands. That left about fifteen feet from my shoe-leather to the ground. In the darkness of early morning I couldn't see the ground. If concrete was below me I would probably break both legs. I prayed and let go.

Space rushed by me and suddenly pain shot up my legs. It must be a concrete drive, I thought. But I lurched against the house and discovered I was actually standing on damp, grassy lawn. I didn't stay standing long. I broke into a dead run.

FLIPPING the cabbie one of the several two-dollar bills I always carried, I slammed the car door behind me and went up Werner's walk as the taxi buzzed off into the morning. (PP.) Boris opened the door almost before I finished knocking. "I've been expecting you."

I followed him on into the living room. He had put on a dressing gown. He lit up a cigar and seated himself. "Police calls. They got your name off the registration of your Lincoln. Why did you kill old Fenton? Did he take a shot at you with that .32?"

"He took a shot at himself if anybody."

Werner shook his head, as if he was thinking of something else. "Not in the center of the forehead. You could physically shoot yourself there but nobody does. All suicides are egotists and they don't want to spoil their looks. That's why they shoot themselves through the mouth very often."

"Police manual?" I asked.

"Private theory. There was only one shot from that gun of Fenton's. Did you use his own gun on him?"

"You know I didn't do it," I said wearily. "But the gun must have been the one if a shot was fired from it. I checked the room all over for hidden exits and I didn't find any bulletholes—except the one in the corpse."

Werner crushed out his cigar and stood up. His pleasantly ugly face scowled. "Why should I know you didn't kill him? You kill plenty of people. Can you still count the number on your fingers or do you have to take your shoes off these days? So far you copped justifiable homicide or Code 197 but you aren't going to stop there. You have a taste for killing—it's quicker and easier than a trial or a capture. Damn it, Bryce, I don't like killers! I've been a cop for seventeen years and I've

never had to kill a man—not one. Dirty gunmen hired by the Mafia or clean gunmen out of a TV horse opera, they are all the same breed. Immature! They think they can play God and they can't wait for the slow movements of God and Justice. *When are you going to grow up, Bryce?* Dropping out of a second floor window instead of filing a crime report with the patrolmen like a second-rate Doug Fairbanks. When are you growing up, Bryce?"

I kept sitting and tried to keep my breathing and my voice at an even level. "That's logical, Boris. Very logical. But you can't live by the police manual all the time, you dumb copper. There are big, bad people out there who aren't as logical as you. They don't want to take time for capture or trials either. They would rather take a chance on getting their insides blown out. So far, they've all lost the chance with me, but I know my time will come one of these days. I guess I don't expect to live long enough to get very mature, but in the meantime, I'll take as many scum with me that *make* me take them along!"

After a time, Boris said, "I guess we both feel better now. Scotch?"

I nodded.

He tonged ice cubes into glasses. "Why did you break the lock on the door?"

"Because Fenton was inside all locked up with the gun. I didn't shoot him. He must have done it himself."

Boris poured. "I don't think so—not from the position of the wound, like I said. Besides I've met Fenton. He had his life planned out for the next forty years. I think he was planning on being president. He wouldn't ditch that plan."

I accepted the drink. "Not even if he found out his son was using dope?" I explained about the girl in the drug store and the young hoods including Fenton, Jr. who were on her trail before she died.

"That wouldn't make old Fenton take the pipe," Werner said. "He would probably turn his son in for the cure and try to make himself look a martyr, figuring against the effect of bad publicity later on."

"Fenton sounds like a real sweet guy to hear you talk." I tossed off the drink.

"No. He wasn't sweet or real or a guy. He was just a machine—a political machine, you might say. By the way, the Fenton children say that you broke into that room *before* the

shooting."

I dropped the glass. It rolled across the thick carpet. "Yeah. Fenton, Jr. doesn't know how much I learned about the dope ring from the girl. He wants to protect his source. Or his wholesaler as the case may be. I wonder if he killed the old man because he found out and was going to turn the boy in like you said?"

"That's not what's bothering me right now," Boris said. "That girl hated both the father and son. Why should she lie about you?"

"I'd better find out. Before morning so they can't revoke my license." I stood up.

"If that story sticks, you had better worry about them revoking your birth certificate."

I had the taxi driver keep the cab idling in front of police headquarters. I knew the Fenton girl would have to go there to answer questions and I knew anyone of her social standing would not ride home in a squad car. When I saw the blonde hair and the trim figure, I urged the cabbie forward. Opening the door for her as she came to the curb, I said, "Hop in." I motioned the way with my .45.

The girl was too frightened not to obey and not frightened enough to scream for the station-housefull of police. I reached past her to close the door, brushing against her and enjoying every split-second of it. I leaned back and noticed she was breathing even harder than I was, but it was with anger. The sleepy cabbie hadn't kept track of the action without a program.

"So why did you lie about me shooting up your father after I broke in the door?" I asked.

"First of all," she said very evenly, "Fenton was not my father. He adopted me to look good on his record. Secondly, I lied because Junior said I wouldn't get a red cent if I didn't. I worked for that money, putting up with those two creeps all these years."

I had seen girls like this before. They come from "bad" families and they live with the implied threat of living up to a bad heredity and out of spite for the accusation, they do turn "bad". She was playing the part of a bad girl, even using language obviously not normal to her with the background old Fenton must have seen that she got.

"In case you didn't catch the name of the man who you ac-

cused of murder, it's Bryce Keller. What's your first name?"

"Lois," she said with that pouting mouth of hers.

"Okay, Lois, how can 'Junior' keep you from getting your part of your late foster father's estate? He must have left you something in his will."

"Sure, but I won't have anything until I get that. Junior could get money from the rest of his family to fight the will in court."

I exhaled. "Lois, there are plenty of top lawyers who would take your case for a cut out of the award the court would make you. Put it up to a jury and they would be prejudiced in favor of the adopted child who was trying to be done out of her share of her kindly old father's fortune."

Her lower lip trembled. "I—I never thought of that."

"Now that you have, will you tell the truth about the shooting taking place before I went into the room?"

The cab turned a corner and she swayed against me, letting me smell the perfume that was much too sophistocated for her years. "Yes. I couldn't have lied you into the chair when it came right down to it anyway. But—I just happened to think! Who did kill the old man—*and how?* He would never have marred that noble brow himself."

My breath escaped into a laugh. "That's more or less what a friend of mine said earlier in the evening—or morning, I guess it is. As for how Fenton was killed, that's simple. But I still don't know whether it was you or your step brother who did it. I expect to find out pretty soon, though. The headlights that I've been watching in the mirror are getting closer."

I opened the partition and pointed out the car following us.

"Yeah, Buddy, I been seeing them," the driver answered. "They cops?"

"No. They," I said, "are a bunch of killers who are after this girl and myself. They probably wouldn't mind killing you to wipe out a witness, too."

"Get out!" he screamed. "You get out of my cab!" He reached for the emergency brake and I knocked his hand away with my .45.

"Drive, you crum bum! It's all our necks."

He tried to put his foot through the floor.

I was breathing hard again. "You'd have let us back there

to die, wouldn't you, Pal? That's why I like dogs better than people."

"The police," he whimpered. "I can call the police on my radio-phone."

Reaching over, I yanked free the microphone. "No cops. Not yet. They couldn't get here in time anyway. That's a hot-rod and they are catching up with us fast."

We were coming to a clear stretch before the mid-town bridge when the hot-rod pulled alongside. Inside, I could see the leering face of "Junior" Fenton and two indistinguishable companions.

"They're trying to force us into the rail!" Lois screamed.

I shoved the driver aside and grabbed the steering wheel, arched across the back of the seat. "That stripped down jalopy can't force this big hack anyplace!" I twisted the wheel sharply.

The two cars came together with a screeching grind. One of the cab's hub caps became a spinning silver disc in the glare of our headlamps. The blackened white tunnel of the bridge was opening up before us. A bullet thundered and made a spider web come alive in the left front window. I twisted the wheel harder.

There was a lurching disorientation of time and space as the cab up-ended and rolled on its side with a thunderstorm of crumpling metal.

Lois was crumpled against me but she didn't feel metalic or broken up. The driver was whimpering for the police. I shook awareness back into my head and opened the door in the ceiling-side. A bullet affectionately snipped off a lock of my hair as I stuck my head outside.

I crouched down and found that I still was holding my Colt. I came up fast and firing. In that second I got a look at the hot-rod bent and twisted grotesquely with tongues of flame spitting from it. I noted the location of the flame-streaks and ducked back.

The hack was one of the old sky-view jobs. I climbed over the stunned form of Lois and tugged the roof section back. I walked through the opening by keeping stooped. Holding my breath, I eased around the car. I made my way past the engine block and got ready to leap from behind the fenders.

"Hey, what you doing with my headlights?" the cab driver yelled.

I jumped and fired from memory of where I had seen

the gun flashes among the wreckage of the jalopy. I was rewarded by two howls of pain, but a second later I added my own cry as a slug burned its way across my thigh. I fell back behind the car.

"Hey, you, don't get my cab shot up any worse."

I crawled over and drove my right into the cabbie's face through the shattered windshield.

Silence.

"I'll get you, Copper. I'll get you," a strained voice called out.

Lois climbed through the sky-view opening. "That's Junior." She half raised to yell out, "Junior, give up, you little punk! Do you want to get killed?"

A gun cleared its throat in the early morning.

Lois fell over against me, blood spilling out of her ripe, red mouth. "I worked for that money—living with those... those creeps for all those years —and now I won't get to...to spend any of it."

I laid her down on the ground to bleed her life away.

Hot pain beat a rhythm against my brain, but I remembered things Boris Werner had said to me. I wouldn't kill him without giving him a chance to quit. "Junior, toss out that gun. You have a better chance with a jury for your old man's murder than you do with me."

"I didn't kill him," a voice echoed back out of the fog. "Lois must have done it."

I looked at the dying girl. Getting shot this time didn't clear her of the other killing.

"Or he done it himself," the voice went on hysterically. "How could anybody kill him in a room with the door and windows locked?"

My fingers tightened on my gun. "That does it, Punk! I was the first person in that room after the shooting and I opened the windows to leave by them while you were gone. You couldn't have known they were locked unless you were the murderer."

A few shots rang out wildly, but then the voice said calmly, "All right. I'm throwing out my gun."

The gun clattered on the pavement and a lean young figure came from behind the wreck of the hot-rod. My finger itched on the trigger. The scum had even tried to blame his sister after putting her on the long, steep road to death.

I walked around the cab towards him. He kept his eyes on the ground. As I came

abreast of him, I saw something gleam in the headlights of the over-turned cab. It was a hypodermic needle in his upraised right hand—six inches of deadly steel needle—and it was being driven towards my heart. I couldn't bring my gun up in time to fire and I knew shooting him wouldn't stop the lunge of the needle into my chest. I dropped the .45 and grabbed that wrist of his with both hands.

The surprise of his move caught me off balance and caused me to fall backwards, helping to draw the steel needle down to my heart. But I threw myself sideways and twisted.

The hypo needle plunged into Fenton's own shoulder and the convulsive grip he had on it caused him to thumb down the plunger. He was a dead man. The needle contained nothing—nothing but air. He had injected an air bubble into his bloodstream, and the moment later when it reached his heart he died on his feet and fell out of my hands to the cold, damp concrete.

THE lab boys had cleaned up and left when I went through the Fenton house with Boris Werner the following day.

"It's lucky for you, Boy, that Lois lived long enough to alibi you," Boris said.

"And it's too bad 'Junior' died so quick, because of Lois. I don't blame him much for the old man."

Boris nodded. "Politics costs a lot of money. Old Fenton got his peddling dope, and he didn't mind letting his son help him run the business. I wonder how many kids like that girl in the drug store they gave a fatal hot-shot to when they ran out of money and got desperate?"

"Enough, I suppose. Young Fenton must have got desperate himself when the old man threatened to cut off his personal supply of dope or something for bungling the job and letting the girl contact me."

"All right, all right." Werner stopped in his tracks. "I'm not going any further until you tell me how the old man got killed in a sealed room. I'm just a poor dumb cop, remember."

I shrugged and turned to the door of the master bedroom in front of which we stood. It was a mate with the study room door. "That's the simplest part. Don't try to make a complicated mystery out of this. I believe I told you that I heard

what sounded like three shots from that room. Well, there couldn't have been three shots fired. There was only one bullet missing from the gun, and even if there had been a second gun I searched the room thoroughly and found no bullet-holes. So two of those 'shots' weren't really shots." I half-turned the key on the inside of the door and slammed it hard. The sound echoed over the house. The key clicked in the lock.

"Young Fenton had to try slamming the door to get the key to turn in the lock twice. I hit it first time. The same thing happens to people accidently all the time and they get locked into closets or out of their house on the porch."

Werner stared a moment and started walking for the stairs. I followed.

"Old man Fenton got hooked on his own poison," I commented.

"Huh? You mean he was a user?"

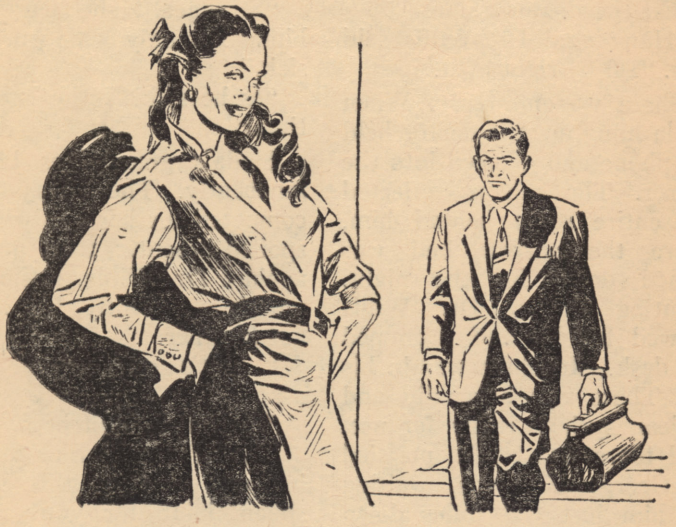
I shook my head. "Not of dope. He was addicted to *power*. He couldn't ease up on it at all. Not even on his son. He died of an overdose of power—a hot-shot like the one that killed Kathy Mills, my momentary client of the phone booth."

"If you really had murdered old Fenton," Boris said thoughtfully, "I think it still would have been justifiable homicide."

THE END

There was nothing in her voice to suggest that she had phoned him for any but professional reasons, yet the doctor knew she was...

BAD MEDICINE



by LAWRENCE P. SPINGARN

"YOU'D BETTER hurry! He's having another attack."

It would not be George's last attack, Dr. Willis guessed, but there was an anxious, pleading note in Stella's voice—as if she cared to save her husband. Dr. Willis listened patiently to Stella. He could visualize her standing at the pay phone in the cafe below the apartment where George might be lying sick in bed. Her voice was properly guarded. There was nothing in her voice to suggest

that she had phoned him for any but professional reasons, yet the doctor, shaping his answer, recalled the last time he had driven out to George's Cafe. Stella had lied that night: George had gone to the hospital. And Stella had received the doctor alone.

"Hang on," Dr. Willis said now. "I'll be right over."

There was no reply. When Stella hung up, the doctor held the phone and glanced into the mirror. The mirror reflected the entire room behind him, where the narrow bed was turned down for the night. Wanting Stella, Dr. Willis chewed his lip and drummed the desk. Morphine was in his kit. There was adrenalin and a clean syringe ready for use. And there was Stella, married to George Kalavros, waiting for him just five miles down the highway. He replaced the phone and prepared for the emergency. It was past ten o'clock as he drove away from his house.

Like many immigrant Greeks, George ran a cafe, but there were no lights showing and no cars outside as Dr. Willis parked beside the two-story building. He went to the side door and rapped gently. He heard steps coming down the stairs. As Stella opened the door, light from the hallway above crowned her dusky red hair that framed her white face and bare neck. She wore a green robe and satin slippers, but she did not stand aside as Dr. Willis entered.

"Stranger!" she reproached him. "You only come when he's sick."

"Is he sick? Is he here this time?"

Stella's green eyes blinked innocently. The sultry smile competed for her lips with the spoiled pout. She pressed against Dr. Willis, raising her mouth expectantly, but he did not kiss her.

"What's eating you?" she asked.

"He's sick, isn't he?"

"And *I'm* sick! Sick of waiting out here at this greasy spoon joint for you! Know something? It's been three weeks....."

Dr. Willis glanced at the hall light, then at Stella. The light did not flatter her. The bulb made her cheeks seem to sag. Her throat was in shadow, but not the deep white cleft of flesh above the green robe. When he pulled her arms from his shoulders, she tottered against the wall.

"Keep quiet!" he said nerv-

ously. "I've got to look at George."

Stella did not follow him upstairs. As he entered the bedroom, Dr. Willis saw the stricken man propped against the pillows. George's iron-grey, curly hair hung over a face streaked by sweat. The veins stood out in his neck. He was gripping the bedclothes in pain, but Dr. Willis did not come any nearer.

"Stella!" George called without opening his eyes.

"Your wife's downstairs," Dr. Willis answered.

HE HAD arrived just in time. If he gave George the needle at once, he could save him. But if he didn't use the needle? What then? Stella was waiting downstairs. Every minute counted against George and for Stella. If George died from the attack, Stella would co-operate. Stella would tell the coroner that Dr. Willis had reached George too late.

"Doctor!" George shrieked without warning, clutching his chest and falling to one side.

"It's all over," Dr. Willis said quietly from the doorway of the downstairs parlor.

He had addressed Stella, but did not walk toward the couch at once. Stella was lying on the couch. Her legs were drawn up invitingly. The robe had parted and fallen away from Stella's pink garters and black stockings. As she turned toward him, her face wore a drowsy look. Coming closer, Dr. Willis smelled the perfume and the odor of coffee brewing in the next room. When Stella rolled over, there was a bright, eager smile on her lips.

"Sit here," she urged Dr. Willis. "Is it—finished?"

He sat down next to her. He did not resist when she lifted his hand and lowered it to the dark curve of her knee. She squeezed his fingers, her mouth tensed and greedy.

"Good!" Stella said. "Christ! I waited on him hand and foot. For days I didn't get out. And you didn't come...."

Her mouth relaxed. Shutting her eyes, she lifted the doctor's hand again and pulled him toward her. Their mouths were nearly touching. Her lips curled contentedly.

"George was good to me—in his will. With the insurance and what I get when this joint is sold, we'll be set. Won't we?"

The doctor smiled too, but his eyes were hooded and calculating.

"Stella," he advised her. "The attack is over. George is sleeping. He'll pull through again. . . ."

Her eyes flared open. She moved like a serpent, sliding back and sitting up very fast. Her titian hair writhed across her neck, fell against her mouth

"No! Sleeping? You said—"

She gripped Dr. Willis and stared at him angrily. When he did not answer, she shoved him away and flung herself down on the cushion, covering her face. He waited until her sobs stopped before taking her wrist at the pulse. She sniffed a few times, then wiped her eyes with her free hand, tossed her head, looked at him.

"Okay!" she said hoarsely. "He'll pull through. That leaves us just where we were before. Don't it?"

Dr. Willis gave her a cigarette, snapped on his lighter. As Stella sat up to smoke, she pulled her robe together but stretched out one leg and glanced at it in child-like admiration. Her tongue pushed coyly from between her lips. She cocked her head. The cigarette fell to the floor and her back stiffened as the doctor bowed his neck She watched him kissing her knee as if she felt no sensation. She smiled coolly, pulling the robe higher.

"That's better, darling. I was getting worried. . . . ."

Dr. Willis retrieved the cigarette, puffed on it, gave it back to Stella. She flicked ashes on the floor. She tucked her chin into the pouch of fat beneath it. A crafty green light shone in her eyes as the clock struck eleven times, but she did not look at the doctor.

"You say he's sleeping. Okay—but isn't there something you could give him now? To finish him?"

Her tongue reappeared. She kicked the leg of the couch. her spine arched and her eyes alert for his reaction. Looking at the profile of her breasts against the robe, Dr. Willis swallowed drily before answering.

"Sure. There's a pill for everything these days. There's a bottle in my bag."

"Get the bottle," Stella said, and held her breath. When he touched her hand, she would not raise her eyes.

"Get the bottle!" Stella repeated. "If you're scared, I'll give him the pill. Can I put it in his coffee?"

"Yes," Dr. Willis said, sigh-

ing and drawing away. "Wake him and give him coffee. He ought to wake soon, anyway."

DR. WILLIS watched as Stella got up to fetch the coffee pot and cups from the kitchen. She poured three cups with a steady hand. When he gave her the small white pill, she stared at it a moment before dropping it into George's cup. The pill dissolved in a hiss of fine bubbles. Stella shuddered, bent down abruptly, pressed her mouth against his. Holding Stella, Dr. Willis felt her cold trembling.

"Wish me luck," she said, turning and picking up George's cup.

"Stella!"

She stood very straight, the robe clinging to her ripe form. She had taken a few steps forward, but did not turn around.

"Stella. You know what this means? I could go to jail for life!"

"I'm doing this. He just won't wake up. Nobody'll know."

"*I'll* know," Dr. Willis said. Stella held still a moment, then let out her breath.

"Sure, you'll know. What you don't know is how I've stood George this long. He disgusts me. The way he eats, the way he talks. And tight! He wouldn't spend a penny on my clothes. I work a twelve hour shift—for what? Household money!"

Dr. Willis did not answer. Stella walked toward the stairs, hesitated, faced him smiling. The light played over her coppery hair. A soft glow touched her cheeks.

"I won't be long. Will, darling? Put out the lamp. There's enough light from the stairs."

When Stella had gone upstairs, Dr. Willis moved quickly. Another small white pill sank to the bottom of Stella's coffee cup with a faint, ominous hiss. The doctor obeyed Stella by putting out the lamp. He was smiling as Stella came downstairs.

"Darling! It's all over. . . ."

She stood outlined in the doorway. She had taken off the green robe. She was holding it in front of her modestly, but as she ambled toward Dr. Willis Stella dropped the robe and stepped on it with pointed heels. She kept coming, lifting her knees in a kind of pride.

"Darling!" she repeated, thrusting against him, fingering his ears and breathing sharply.

"Drink your coffee, Stella. It's getting cold."

She quivered in anticipation. She tugged playfully at his thick hair.

"Don't be nervous, darling. It's no good when you're nervous."

When he kept silent, she lowered herself into his lap and arched her plump back against the table. She crossed her heavy legs in the black stockings and reached for her cup. Her hand was shaking. She made a face as she drank the coffee.

"George woke up easy," she boasted. "He wanted the coffee all right. We can start relaxing now."

Dr. Willis was studying her face. She caught his look, put down her cup, and slid her naked arms across his shoulders. Roguish dimples pinched her full cheeks.

"A few minutes more, darling. I can hardly wait."

Shadows made her eyes look shut. When her head drooped suddenly, the doctor steadied her. She shifted her legs and laughed drowsily.

"Sleepy," she complained. "Awful sleepy...."

Dr. Willis nodded, set his mouth.

"I know, Stella. It's the pill. The same pill you gave George."

"Huh? What?"

He lifted her chin with rough fingers.

"The pill," he told her again. "You'll sleep for eight hours and then feel fine. It's a sleeping-pill, Stella. That's all it is."

Stella gazed at him stupidly. There was not even strength for hate in her eyes. When her chin dropped from his hand and sank inert against his shoulder, Dr. Willis lifted her in his arms. He carried her to the couch, dropped her unceremoniously, and turned her upon her stomach. As she began to snore, he covered her with the robe she had abandoned. Switching on the lamp, he packed his medical kit and sat again at the table to write out a prescription for the sick man upstairs. It was midnight when he left by the side door and drove home from George's Cafe for the last time.

THE END

Out of his own murderous past it rose, the miasma of greed and hate...and loveliness...that poised Mace Fee squarely between the death house—and a killer's bullets!

FRY BY NIGHT

by V. E. THIESSEN

IT BEGAN with a sound, a faint sliding of feet in the deep pile of the rug, and a touch, the sharp bright pain of a knife point thrust against the back of his neck. Ayre became a statue, while gooseflesh jumped up on his neck and pushed against the knife. A little pulse jumped unbidden in his throat, and while he still stared at the canvas in front of him, he no longer was conscious of it. The paint brush in his hand twitched. He froze, and listened, taut with fear.

Outside the rain dripped gently down the glass studio panes. It had been raining all day.

The whisper behind him was soft without softness: "Don't move. Don't breathe."

He tried not to breathe. He had not heard the man come into his studio.

"Look at the picture, Ayre. Maybe you'll never see a woman like that again. Was it fun, painting her like that?"

Ayre said hoarsely, "I always paint like that. I add the clothes later."

"And not much clothes either. That's why you can almost see through that gauze you dress them in. That's why you're the Great Ayre, the Super Petty, the Ultra Varga. Did she pose like that, Ayre?"

His throat was thick, hot. He said, "She wore a bathing suit. She hasn't seen the picture, doesn't know I painted it that way."

The knife kissed his neck in a new brightness of pain. He thought, *Am I to die over her, over Melanie?*

He said, passionate with truth, "I never touched her. She wouldn't—wouldn't let me put a finger on her. It was just a job—she needed money."

"I know—I believe you. Now take your brush, Ayre, and touch the lady's hip, right there on the canvas in front of you."

Ayre thrust a trembling brush against the warm flesh tone.

"Remember the birthmark there, right where a bathing suit would cover it."

He remembered. Another woman's name came unbidden into his thoughts, formed voiceless syllables in his mind: *Patti Louise. . . .*

"You're trembling, Ayre. I see you know that birthmark. Paint it on the lady."

He painted. He remembered. He trembled, but he painted.

The voice said, remorseless, "Now the face."

"I can't do her face from memory," Ayre said in a blind agony.

"I don't want that. Just put a mask in front, any kind of mask so that her face is hidden."

Ayre painted. He could not understand this, could not see where this led. The knife was a scalding burn behind him.

"Who was she, Ayre—the girl who wouldn't pose nude? Who was the girl that could resist the great Ayre? Whose face is it that we're covering up on this painting?"

He said throatily, "Melanie Trent. She's just a cigarette

girl. Works at Moretti's Club Forty-nine." He painted swiftly, crudely. His hands had only a fumbling half skill.

He thought, if only she had stayed a few minutes longer. If only she hadn't hurried to get to Moretti's. She had walked out not thirty seconds ago: she was still outside, probably getting into the car that had come for her. If there were some way he could scream for help before she left....

The knife twitched, left him no desire to risk screaming. He finished the mask. It was a horrible job, not like the lacquer smoothness of an Ayre painting, not like the smooth curve of her thigh around the birthmark.

The whisper taunted, "Is that the best you can do?"

He fumbled at it, trying to smooth the wet paint. He had laid the pigment on too thick —there was little he could do.

He said hoarsely, "I'll have to scrape it off and start over."

"It will do. Do you ever pray?"

The coldness in his stomach came up into his heart. He spoke and no sound came out. He tried again, whispered, "Pray?" The rain was a dripping frame for his fear.

"You painted the birthmark too well, Ayre. Pray quickly."

Desperate with panic, he whirled tautly, blindly. The knife thrust as he moved, slashed deep across his neck. He felt the weakness of vertigo, reached both hands for his killer. Recognition stirred in his eyes as he groped forward.

The knife burned into the front of him, once—then again —twice. The weakness stopped him. His killer's face was a blur. Still groping with his hands he crumpled on cardboard knees.

It ended with a sound, the soft closing of the door as his killer went out, and the touch of the carpet on his cheek.

You couldn't die like this, he thought. *Not with Melanie still out there, not with help so close....* He tried to drag himself to the window. The window blurred and he struggled again and was beside it.

He raised his hand in a last desperate effort and pushed his fist against the glass. The glass broke, tinkling, and he opened his mouth to cry, "Melanie!" The sound was soft and unintelligible, little more than a burbling of blood. Then he was quiet.

The rain ran quietly down the pane, over the shirred edges of broken glass and dropped

on his face. The drip went on quietly, endlessly, as if it would never stop.

AS HE slid the Chevrolet up the drive to Ayre's place Mace Fee tightened his big hands on the wheel. He stared at his hands, in a way that had become almost habit in these last few weeks. He had killed with those hands, easily, quickly, without intending to. The windshield wipers cut wedges of vision ahead. It made him sick, looking at the place, staring through the slanting monotony of rain, at all that pile of poor architecture and good money that Ayre had stacked up. It made him sicker, thinking of the women who had paid for it, the trail of disillusionment, seduction and adultery that culminated in this expensive studio. He stared at the building, his face lit with distaste, his hands worrying the steering wheel. The very architecture was like Ayre, like one of his glamor girls. Too expensive, too smooth, too regal to be anything but evil.

The devil of it is, Mace thought wryly, the guy can paint.

Not that Mace himself was a painter or a critic. But you don't get to be an architect without being able to do some art work, without knowing good painting. You don't get to be an architect without having a feel for buildings, and this building made him sick with its sleek aroma of evil—it made him almost as sick as thinking of Patti Louise did.

He drew his brows together. Melanie was in there with that Ayre. Of course it was business, and Melanie could use honest money. But if that damned Ayre laid a hand on her—his knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

Mace reached out and touched the horn once, briefly. Perhaps she would hear it and come out. He didn't want to walk up to the door, didn't want to put his hands on the bell of that place.

A new sound cut across the pattering of the rain and the *swish-swish* of the wipers. He listened, his ears tensing, animal-like, as he did so. He had unusual hearing. He heard a door opening and closing inside the building and he looked at the entrance to the studio. It opened to a gash of light and Melanie stood there, looking for him. Apparently it had been the door just beyond the entrance that he had heard.

He had parked as close to the studio as he could. She saw

him and came running through the rain. He could see the green of her suit through the grey of the rain, could see the flash of slim, nylon-clad ankles above tiny green lizard shoes. A warmth flowed through him as he leaned across the car and opened the door.

She came inside in a flash of wetness, closing the door behind her. She looked at him, and there was a wet shine on her cheeks, her eyelashes were brilliant with moisture. Her face glistened, and she smiled.

She said, "Hi, chum. Guess the rain makes me quite a mess."

He turned off the windshield wipers and reached for her, pulling her across the seat of the car. He could feel the wet wool at the back of her coat, could smell the rain on her cheeks. He pulled her closer. Rain ran down the car windows, down the windshield where the wipers had stopped. No one could see in.

He heard her murmur, "Ummm!" and he could see one tiny green-shod foot turned toward him. He kissed her again.

He echoed her greeting and smiled at her, "Hi, chum."

He had drawn his face back slightly, but they were still so close that his nose almost touched hers. Time stood still for them as they smiled at each other. The rain was their guardian.

A new sound came through the rain. Mace started, his big hands loosening their hold on her shoulders.

"What's that?"

"What?"

"That sound—something like breaking glass."

She said, "I know you can hear like you have electronic ears, I know that. But this time you're imagining things."

"No. We're close to Ayre's place. Sounded like a glass breaking, and something burbling." He listened again, his ears flattening against his head.

She said again, "It's nothing—" and then watching him: "or is it—maybe I'm wrong. Do you hear it again?"

"No! I guess it's nothing important. You'll be late if we don't hurry." He reached out and turned the key, turned the windshield wiper on. He pressed the starter and the motor caught. The windshield wipers cut wedges out of the rain. He backed out of the drive and turned the car, heading out toward Bill Moretti's Club Forty-nine.

MORETTI'S Club Forty-nine was on the edge of town, just a block outside the city limits, a block beyond the edge of the city law. Here there was space enough to set the club back on the lot. The building was two-storied, a rambling old edifice that was brown and English and surprisingly genteel in appearance. Once it had been a rich man's residence, before the bad years of the depression. This afternoon there were only a few cars occupying the acre of gravel beside the building.

A long walk covered with a striped canvas awning led out to the edge of the graveled area, and back against the building, above the awning a red neon light announced: CLUB FORTY-NINE. Below the red sign a red champagne glass and the outline of a woman's figure strained in an exotic dance pose. The sign felt out of place on the old brown building. Mace thought. It was like a dirty word written on a priest's collar.

Mace pulled the car to a stop just by the awning. The rain was beginning to slacken now. He turned toward Melanie. She had fixed her face with a woman's skill, a woman's tools. She was a sophisticated lady now, not a lady of the rain.

Mace looked at the building, at the sign. He said, "I hate having you work here. But it's not for long now. Soon you'll be able to quit."

"The architect business is really doing better, isn't it?"

He nodded. "The first apartment building will be finished next week. We pour the footings for the second tomorrow. I'm coming back, Melanie, back into the big time."

She said fiercely, "Of course you're coming back. That's why we don't need to wait. Let's get married now, right away! Our marriage will be right."

He stared at his hands. Memory ran through him, memory of his other marriage, the one that wasn't right.

She watched him a moment, then suddenly, with a woman's penetration, said, "You've seen her again, haven't you?"

He stared at his hands, flexed the big fingers in unease. "I saw her on the street yesterday."

Melanie's small voice was passionate with hatred. "I don't mind her taking all your money, and setting you back in your career, since you're going to make a big success any-

way. I don't mind her divorcing you—thank heaven she did!" Her voice sharpened abruptly: "But why did she have to make you feel like this? Why is it that you're afraid when you see her? What are you afraid of?"

Mace said gently, "I don't know, sweet. I just don't know." He stared at his hands again.

She said, her voice a hiss of hatred, "Patti Louise— She's going up too, maybe to Hollywood. And she doesn't care how!" Melanie held the door open. "Coming in?"

Mace nodded, "Yeah. I'll have a quick one while you dress. Then you can sell me a pack of fags, and I'll run home and work over those new blueprints."

They smiled at each other. They slipped sideways between them. Mace felt the soft squeeze of her hand just before she disengaged it and turned toward the dressing room.

He turned the other way, toward the archway under the neon letters: BAR.

It was early for the bar. A solitary man sat at one of the plastic-topped stools and swirled a drink in his right hand. Far down the bar the bartender leaned on his elbows. The drinker lifted his eyes and stared into the mammoth mirror as Mace came in. Their eyes met. The man looked down at his drink. He had a round moon face, and a body that went straight down without a waist. He wore grey flannels, and the lapels were hand picked.

Mace thought, *what the devil. It's been a while....* and slid onto the seat beside him.

"Hello, Brevis," he said.

The moon-faced man stared into his drink with no response. Behind the bar the bartender got off his elbows and came over.

"What'll you have?"

Mace said, "Scotch, straight, and whatever Brevis wants."

Monty Brevis shook his head briefly, saying no. He didn't look at either of them.

"Just scotch then," Mace ordered. "Make it a double."

The bartender drifted down the bar and did things with a bottle. Mace turned toward the other man. "Damn it, Brevis, why hold grudges? You've got Patti back on the stage, back into show business, you're getting the agent's cut. Let's shake hands and be civilized."

The moon face swiveled toward him. One eyebrow lift-

ed very cynically. "Really—very touching." Brevis took another drink. "Two reasons why I won't be civilized. Want to hear them?"

Mace nodded.

The eyebrows arched cynically again. The eyes in that moon face were cruel. "If I got civilized I'd never know when you might go pagan. I'd never know when you might forget and wrap those big hands around my throat and kill me, the way you did that other guy."

MACE felt the blood rush out of his face. His lips felt tight and palely stiff. He stared at the other man. He laced his fingers around the edge of the bar, and held on, hard.

Brevis said, "The other reason is that I hate you like poison, for what you did to Patti-Louise."

Mace almost gagged. *Patti Louise!* What he had done to Patti Louise? The man was blind—and almost insane.

Brevis lowered his voice into an intense whisper as the bartender turned to them.

"You understand that I hate your guts. I'd do anything to hurt you, anything to put you behind bars, back where that first murder would have put you if the fools hadn't acquitted you."

It was too much. The red haze of anger washed over Mace. He clenched a fist, and lashed it against the side of Monty Brevis' head. The blow knocked Monty off the stool and onto the floor. He lay there, motionless, a drum-shaped man in grey flannels.

The bartender put both hands on the bar and stared. "What in hell?"

"I guess I forgot myself," Mace said. He stared at his hands for a moment, then reached out and took the scotch from between the bartender's palms. He tossed it off and threw a bill on the bar. As he turned and went out he could feel the bartender's thoughts following him. The bartender would be thinking, *That's Mace Fee, the one they acquitted of murder. Lost his head again—maybe they were wrong about him—maybe it wasn't self defense. Maybe those big hands will kill again....*

Mace went out, shoving through the mass of empty tables, looking for Melanie.

He was lucky. She was dressed in her abreviated costume, just coming onto the

floor. She saw his face and hurried.

"Mace! What is it? What's wrong?"

He held onto her arms, some sense coming back into him from the touch. He shook his head, as though he were clearing a mist from his eyes.

He said, "I lost my temper in there. Tried to make friends with Brevis. He threw that old burglar killing up to me, and I lost my head and hit him."

She said g e n t l y, "Now, Mace. You've got to forget that, get over it. The man was a burglar, and he would have killed you if you had let him go. You know he shot at you once. You know you couldn't have done anything else but hold onto him."

He looked at his hands. "Sure," he said. "Sure, I hung onto him. I was protecting myself, and Patti was in the house. I was afraid for her. I just hung onto his throat. I didn't mean to kill the guy."

She said gently, "I know. The courts cleared you. The courts didn't believe that ugly story. The jury found he was a burglar, not her lover. The jury said you killed in self defense. Forget the talk, Mace. You might be jealous, but you couldn't be a jealous murderer."

She reached out and shook his arm gently. "Brevis was asking for it—"

She made him smile. She could always make him smile back at her. He turned toward the juke box and studied the titles.

"Five minutes before you have to report, an hour before the crowd and orchestra get here. How about a dance?"

"Right. But turn on the radio—get an orchestra. I'm sick of those juke box tunes."

He switched on the radio that stood beside the juke box. There was music, suddenly interrupted by a special newscast.

"Flash! The murdered body of society painter Louis Ayre was found in his home a few minutes ago. He had been stabbed three times by an unknown assailant. He had a brush near his hand, and had been working on his latest painting."

Mace stared at Melanie. Horror washed over them, drawing them together. Melanie said, "A picture! A picture —oh, golly, a picture!"

He watched her, not hearing, remembering the sound of broken glass. Had that been the

murderer, breaking something?

Melanie said, "Oh, well I wear almost the same kind of thing here." She looked down at her long legs, limned under the short skirt.

"What?" He did not understand.

"Ayre was painting me just before I left. But it was a bathing suit picture, some kind of cheesecake. They'll probably question me, but it will be all right."

"Bathing suit, huh?" He frowned at her. "Well, the devil with it. Let's dance." He moved the knobs on the radio and music came out.

They moved together in the few moments left before they parted, dancing as one, alone together in the corner of the room.

CHAPTER TWO

Death Mark

DRIVING back to his bachelor quarters, Mace felt some of the tension going out of him. By the time he had pulled open the door of his apartment he was even thinking about the roof trusses for the new apartment. Then he opened the door, and perfume drifted out and wrapped its tendrils around him—Chanel No. 5, Patti's perfume.

He stepped back, leaving the door open, and stared. He sniffed once, to be sure he had not mistaken the scent. He closed his hand over his keys, feeling the metal bite into his palm, and thrust the clenched fist into his pocket. He trembled for an instant, animal like, and his nostrils flared as the perfume touched old memories, old scars. He strode into the apartment quickly, jerkily.

She was sitting on the divan, legs crossed, the skirt hitched up almost enough to show the tops of her sheer nylons. She was looking at him out of wide-spaced eyes. He stared back, scowled at her.

"All right. You walked in! You can just turn around and walk back out!"

She let her blonde head relax against the divan and a slow smile played over her lips. She said, "You didn't always feel that way about me."

"I do now. What do you want? Spit it out and then leave me alone."

"I want your help, Mace."

He stared at her. "That's a laugh. You don't need my help. I can't get you a screen test. I haven't any money left. Why come to me? What do

you expect me to do for you?"

Her eyes had a wide and innocent look. When she looked that way she was as deadly as a cobra. It had cost him plenty to learn about that. She had that innocence on full force now.

She looked down shyly, as if she were ashamed that things hadn't worked out. The gesture said as plain as words, *After all—we were married once.*

Mace watched her. He groped a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, shook one out of the package, and lit it. He wondered what there was about wide-set eyes and honey hair that made them look so deceptively honest. He blew out a gust of smoke, studying her before he spoke.

"It's a good act, Patti. But I know you. I know every beautiful, lying bone in your body. Now, cut the act and tell me what you want."

She looked crushed. She let him look at that hurt expression for an instant. Then she came to the point.

"Bill Moretti has some pictures I have to get back. He's asking five thousand for them and I have to have them. I want you to get them for me."

Mace laughed ruefully. "I haven't got five thousand bucks. If I had you wouldn't get it. You signed settlement papers, and that's that."

She looked hurt again. She shook her honey blonde head at him, wide eyed and injured. "I'll give you the money. All you do is pay him and pick up the pictures."

Mace drew deeply on his cigarette. If she was willing to pay that kind of money for pictures, she must be in a jam, but good. He gave her a nasty smile.

"Have you tried asking for them back? I don't mean just with words. Have you been out with Moretti? As I recall you can be mighty eloquent when you turn loose on a man."

She jerked forward. "Don't be a fool."

But he had scored. So she had tried that, and it hadn't worked. He said, "All right, Patti. The show is over. Get someone else to wash your dirty linen."

Her eyes glittered. "I wouldn't be hasty, Mace, if I were you."

He didn't like that. A vague unease touched him. "What do you mean?"

"You know Ayre is dead. You know that cigarette girl he pays to pose for him?"

He stubbed his smoke out in an ashtray. He said harshly, "Go on!"

"You're sweet on her. You wouldn't want me to go to the police and tell about her and Ayre."

Mace put his hands out in front of him. "Damn you!" he said. He moved toward her, hands out, fingers spread. He saw the fear come into her eyes, the memory that those hands could be strangler's hands. He put his hands down on her shoudlers and sank his fingers into the soft flesh.

"There never was a thing between Melanie and that louse, Ayre."

Patti Louise shrank away from him. "No!" Panic was still in her eyes. "I didn't mean anything. Of course there wasn't." She paused, realizing he was not going to choke her. "But it isn't what went on that counts. It's what I can make the police believe. And even if they won't b e l i e v e me, what about the papers? You wouldn't want that kind of publicity for Melanie, would you?"

His fingers tightened on her shoulders. Her face swam in and out of a red mist. She wouldn't do that, couldn't do that.... The trouble was that he knew better. She could and would.

He felt her wince, was conscious of the cruelty of his grip. He turned her loose and said, "Maybe I'll do it, maybe not. I'd have to be sure this was on the level. The pictures are of you, I suppose."

"Just me."

He stared at her. He said slowly, "That means that they must be damaging. I suppose it's a matter of clothing, is that it?"

"They are rather revealing."

"And how would Moretti get pictures like that? You wouldn't go with him, except maybe to try to get the pictures back."

Patti said, "He got them from Ayre."

He began to understand. "Ayre was painting you? No, that's not right, you are talking about photographs."

"I didn't have time to go over there and pose every day. I had a bit on a TV show, was angling for my movie screen test. Ayre wanted my picture for his portrait show and I thought the publicity would help me. So I let him take photographs."

"You thought that being painted as one of Ayre's nudes would be good publicity?"

"He was going to do me clothed. But he always paints the figure first, then adds the clothes. A lot of artists do that."

Mace said hotly, "And he was a devil with women. I'd guess you felt his charm. That business of adding clothes later is a laugh. He just collected women."

She dropped her eyes. "Anyhow, the photographs could ruin me. Ayre owed Moretti money, he'd lost gambling—Moretti settled for the pictures. Now I've had my screen test, and the contract is coming up. I have to get those pictures. If they get out the studio will tear up my contract."

"Get your agent to do it. Get Monty Brevis to do your dirty work for his percentage."

She shook her head. "You know how Monty is. He'd raise the roof if he saw those paintings. He'd go clear out of his head. You know how he hates anything, anybody that interferes in my success. If he knew Moretti was blackmailing me for the pictures he'd try to do something to Moretti. You know what would happen."

Mace nodded. "I know—Brevis would wind up on a slab. Moretti's no man to fool with."

"But Moretti will deal with you, Mace." She came close, tugged at his lapels. "He'll be afraid to fool with you."

He shook her off savagely. "Because I'm an acquitted murderer, is that what you mean? He'll be afraid of these hands?"

She cringed away from him. He said hotly, "All right. It seems fairly clean-cut and I'll do it. But you put your filthy tongue to one word about Melanie and I'll whip you till you carry the marks to your grave. Where's the money?"

"Here." She opened her purse and handed him a sheaf of bills. They were hundreds, new, clipped together with a rubber band.

"Moretti will take hundreds?"

"Why not? I can't afford to squawk, even if I had marked the bills."

"All right," Mace said savagely. "Now, get out of here. I'll bring you the pictures when I get them." He threw the door open,

She went out, easily, confidently. At the door she turned once more and gave him that wide-eyed look. "Good night, Mace."

He slammed the door after her. He walked back to the

center of the room and lit another cigarette, thinking savagely. Long after she left the scent of her perfume lingered in the house.

The trouble was that Moretti might have a duplicate set of negatives. He wondered if she had thought of that, and had just decided to dump that problem on him with the rest of it. He figured there would be just one way to play it with a tough like Moretti. He would have to be harder and smarter —that meant he was going to get the devil knocked out of himself. He could see only one answer that would end Moretti's blackmail and thus end Patti's threat.

He would have to put on a tuxedo to get into the Club Forty-nine after eight o'clock. He began to dress, swiftly, methodically. He tied the black tie, staring at himself in the mirror. He wondered how much blood would be on this shirt front when he came back.

When he was dressed he went out the door to his car.

HE WAS backing up the driveway when a hand tapped gently on the car window. He stopped, rolled down the glass.

A big man with a broad hardbitten face looked in at him. He said, "I'm O'Reilley, from Homicide. You Mace Fee?"

"Yeah." Mace cut the ignition. Patti couldn't have double-crossed him, couldn't have seen the police. This was routine.

"I'd like to talk to you."

"Sure. You want to come in?"

The detective nodded. His face was red, his eyebrows like tangled, rusty wire. Mace set the brake, got out and led the way back to his quarters.

He asked, "Drink?"

O'Reilley looked at him. "This is business, Mr. Fee. Murder business."

"Sorry."

"Never mind the formalities. I'd like to know what you can tell me of Ayre's death."

Mace thought swiftly. Maybe they had talked to Melanie, maybe not. His best bet lay in sticking to the truth. Then if Patti Louise didn't pitch in a bunch of lies it would be all right.

He said, "I picked a girl up at Ayre's this afternoon—about five, I should say. She had been modeling for him, professionally. She works nights at Moretti's Club Forty-

nine—sells cigarettes. I picked her up and we sat in the car a few minutes before I drove her to work. Her name is Melanie Trent."

"Mr. Ayre was still alive then, at five o'clock?"

"Of course."

"You saw him?"

"No. But Melanie had just left him. He was killed just after that. I think I may have heard it."

"What do you mean?" The detective leaned forward, his eyes prying into Mace.

"I heard something that sounded like glass breaking. Then when we got to the club we heard the murder announced over the radio. I imagine the glass was broken during the murder."

"You heard glass breaking? It was raining, and yet you heard the sound?"

"I've got ears like a beagle," Mace explained. "I was parked quite close, because of the rain. I didn't want Melanie to get wet coming to the car."

O'Reilley frowned. Mace could not tell whether he accepted the fact.

O'Reilley asked, "Now, Mr. Fee, one more question." He paused, fired the question: "Does this girl Melanie have a birthmark on her left hip?"

"How the devil should I know?" Mace shot back angrily, and then the meaning of the words soaked in. A birthmark on her left hip! That was his ex-wife. That was the blonde more dangerous than a cobra. Patti Louise had a birthmark on her hip.

O'Reilley slid photographs at him. The photograph showed an easel and an artist's canvas. The print was a glossy, eight by ten. The partially draped nude on the canvas was quite clear.

"Ayre dropped a brush from his hand before he died, and this canvas was uncovered. He must have been working on it when he was killed. Notice the birthmark on the hip?"

Mace noticed. He felt the blood rush into his face. No wonder Patti Louise was so anxious to get those photos back. He wondered if she had been in the house, had stabbed Ayre.

He said, "I notice the birthmark."

"Could you tell me if that was the picture Melanie was modeling for?"

Mace looked up and shook his head to say no. "There's only one woman I know who would have a birthmark like that, in just that place. My ex-

wife, Patti Louise."

"The one on television now?"

Mace said wearily, "Yeah. The one on television."

"And Ayre was painting her?"

Mace shook his head. "No, I didn't say that. I don't know one damned thing about that canvas, or whom. Ayre was painting this afternoon besides Melanie. But I know that mark, and I told you about it."

O'Reilley's eyes searched his face. He sighed, seemed to relax.

"All right, lad. I'm happy to hear you're level with us. It makes me think maybe it's all true. I don't mind telling you that it would have been rough if you hadn't told me about that mark."

"You already knew?"

"Yeah, lad. We checked the baths, the masseurs. We found the masseur that works on Patti Louise. It's a good thing you came clean."

Mace's eyes began to widen, "And if I hadn't—you thought—"

"Yeah. We thought maybe you'd killed him. We know you got a temper. We know you were tried once. Sure, that was self defense, but you know how cops have to think. We figured you saw the painting, jumped to a conclusion, and stabbed him in a fit of anger. It could have happened that way."

"And you don't think so now?"

"I don't know. But I'll wait and think about it some more. See you again." The big detective got up, nodded and left.

It was all right, Mace thought. It was all right when O'Reilley began to call him "lad". And it wasn't as if it had been based on evidence. It was just an idea, a cop's idea. It wasn't the cops he had to worry about. It was Moretti.

He walked thoughtfully out the door to his car. It was after midnight now. He started the motor and headed out toward Club Forty-nine. The five thousand dollars made a lump in his pocket that gouged him every time he turned a corner.

CHAPTER THREE
"Nice Try, Sucker!"

HE DROVE swiftly, competently, with an automatic part of his mind, thinking about the painting Ayre had been working on, trying to figure out what it meant, what it could mean. He had the sort of visual memory com-

mon to good architects, and he could call every detail of the painting into his mind as he pondered.

And then, suddenly, his hands clamped down on the wheel. He ran a stop sign, and brakes screeched at him. A voice swore at him angrily, but he went on, ignoring this, even the automatic part of his mind numbed by the thing he remembered.

He remembered the feet of the woman in the painting. The birthmark might have been Patti Louise's, but the feet were not. The feet were too small, too delicate. There was only one woman with feet like that—Melanie.

He thought, *And now I'm getting mixed up with Moretti to protect her. How many times can a man play the fool?*

He saw a stop sign this time, just in time, and fought the car to a halt with a savage pleasure.

It doesn't have to mean anything, he told himself. Artists copy features from different models. Look at that birthmark. It doesn't have to mean anything. But he couldn't forget the picture.

He was glad when he got to the Club Forty-nine. He parked the car behind a Cadillac with a low license plate and walked up under the long striped awning. Now the doorman was at the entrance, a pump, smooth man in a fine tuxedo. They rolled out the plush for him. The Club Forty-nine was in full swing, and another sucker was always welcome.

He went in and, turning to the smooth man in the tuxedo, murmured, "I want to see Bill Moretti."

"Mr. Moretti isn't seeing anyone tonight."

"He'll see me. Tell him it's about five thousand bucks and some pretty pictures. He'll understand."

The smooth face nodded. "If you'll take that table in the corner, I'll check and let you know."

He suffered himself to be led to the table. He waited. It was between floor shows a few persons were dancing on the small platform, but most of the couples were huddled together, drinking and laughing. A plain door at the end of the room was closed, but Mace knew that there was more to the club beyond that door, that the dice tables and the wheel were there, and that probably the guy in the Cadillac with the low license was in there too,

playing the games, and probably winning. Moretti knew the right people, how to butter them up. It kept them operating.

The voice came over his shoulder, and made him turn. The voice had a smile in it, just for him.

"Cigarette?"

He turned to see Melanie smiling at him. She stood on those tiny feet like a ballet dancer, as graceful as anyone he had ever seen.

He said coldly, "Nothing, miss," and saw her face go pale as if he had struck her. He saw the hurt in her eyes, the attempt to understand.

She said, very softly, "What is it, Mace? What's wrong?"

He said, "No cigarettes. Please don't bother me."

She couldn't fail to understand that. She turned from him like a puppy that had been struck. He saw her move to the next table, heard her, "Cigarettes, please." If he had not known her well he would have heard the tiny crack in her voice.

Remorse made him cringe. He got up, ready to hurry after her, to apologize and make things all right again. To hell with what he had come here to do.

The smooth man came back. "Mr. Moretti will see you now."

Mace thought bitterly, *Let it go. If this fouls up it will be better if she hates me.* He followed the man through a doorway and up a short flight of stairs.

Moretti's room was big, it had been two rooms before a partition had been taken out. It was all thick carpet and wall-to-wall draperies of Chinese silk. There was an acre of desk on two acres of carpet, and there was Moretti, away from the desk, standing in the corner, puffing on a fine cigar.

He came forward. "Hello, Mace." He held out a manicured hand. He was careful of his speech, careful of his manners, as if he did not want anyone to remember his beginnings on the wrong side of town. He was a big man now, as far as money and political power went. Crudities were beneath him.

Mace studied him. Moretti was a short man with a quick way of moving and dark eyes that looked through you. His eyes were expressive—they could flash controlled anger that never came out in his voice. Centuries earlier he might have been a Medici,

dark and calculating and poisonous.

Mace said, "I'll make it short and sweet. Patti Louise will pay the five thousand for the photographs, including all negatives and prints of any kind whatsoever."

Moretti took the cigar out of his mouth. "That is satisfactory. Do you have the money?"

Mace flicked his eyes at the big man who had guided him here. He did not speak.

"All right, Vic, leave us alone," Moretti told the man. "Better stand by outside." The smooth-faced man bobbed his head like a seal and went out.

MORETTI stared at Mace from those dark eyes. He was short, with no waist and broad shoulders. He had the body of a blacksmith, a hod carrier, but his eyes were dark as a medieval death potion. He told Mace, "Sit down," indicated a chair, and eased himself behind his big desk.

He laced manicured fingers on his chest. "You have the money?"

Mace reached into his pocket. He saw the sudden sparkle in Moretti's eyes, the tension that relaxed when his hand came out with the banded bills. He threw the bills on the desk to Moretti.

"Count them."

Moretti riffled them with a practiced hand. He said, "All hundreds, I see. I'll take your count." He unlocked a drawer to his desk threw an envelope across the desk. Mace drew photographs out of the envelope and glanced at them. There were four negatives, four prints.

He asked, "Is this all?"

"That's all. I'm surprised to see you playing errand boy. But there are no more negatives. I'm not exactly a normal blackmailer."

Mace leaned across the desk. He put one hand on the desk, pointed the other at Moretti. He said, "You've heard of me, Moretti. I want you to know what will happen if more negatives turn up."

He saw Moretti's hand moving toward a push button. He kicked off with his legs, diving toward Moretti across the desk, his free hand thrusting at Moretti's throat, pushing him away from the button. The plunge knocked Moretti sprawling. Mace teetered on the desk, followed Moretti to the floor. He had both hands on Moretti's throat, his weight across his body. He held onto

the throat and shook Moretti softly, doglike. He stared into Moretti's eyes a moment. He could have killed him then. But he got up, and walked around the table. He watched Moretti sit up, put one hand to his throat. He watched the anger boiling like hot wine in Moretti's eyes.

Moretti took a gun out from under his coat. He smiled at Mace, and there was no humor in the smile.

Mace said, "Two things, Moretti. I didn't have to let go of your throat. You know that."

Moretti watched him out of snake's eyes. The gun watched him. He could see the struggle, passion against the mind of a schemer, the mind of a man who could kill, but never took a chance he didn't have to.

Mace said, "Another thing. People know I came here. I'm betting you won't kill me here, won't kill me at all. I'm betting you'll understand me, that I just wanted to tell you in my way that there had better be no more negatives." He saw Moretti's cold mind fight the anger in his eyes.

Mace said, "I understand, all right." He eased into his chair, pushed the button.

Mace heard footsteps sliding in the carpet. Hands caught his arms with amazing strength and locked them behind him. He struggled once, testing his captor. The big, seal-sleek man behind him had the strength of a gorilla.

Moretti said, "Hold him there." He took a glove out of his desk, a soft leather dress glove. He slipped it on his right hand and smiled at Mace. He took a roll of nickels out of his desk and rolled them, catching them in his gloved hand. He got up and came around the desk. The man behind Mace tightened his grip.

Moretti hissed. "You'll touch me, will you?" He clubbed the leather fist full of nickels into Mace's jaw.

Lights danced, pain flashed. Moretti hit him again, the sound a sodden, sickening one in that softly draped room. Pain was all through Mace's head, he felt the blood run from his nose.

It lasted five minutes while Moretti's eyes cooled down, and at the last Moretti seemed to have no heart in hitting him.

Moretti said, "Let him go."

The hands released their grip. Mace began to crumple. The hands behind caught him and held him up. He stared at Moretti and smiled. There was

no anger in the smile. Moretti stared at him.

"By, God!" Moretti said softly, "You knew you'd get that. You expected it, didn't you?"

"I knew. And you know what I told you. I'd call it even, Moretti. call it a finished deal. Wouldn't you? There'll be no forgotten negatives or prints."

Moretti nodded. "You've got guts, so I'll tell you the rest. There are no more negatives. I told you I'm not a blackmailer. But that cheap blonde babe went out with me once, tried to play me for a sucker, then laughed at me when I showed that I liked her. She never saw me again till I made her come to me. She thought I'd forgotten, but I hadn't. I had to make her pay for it, the way it would hurt her most, paying with money. I squeezed the pictures out of Ayre. She's paid dough for the insult and the debt is square. There are no more pictures. I'm not a blackmailer—I can't afford it. You said it yourself—we just wrapped up a deal."

A tapping sounded outside. Moretti turned, "Come in." The sleek man moved swiftly and opened the door.

Detective O'Reilley came in. He was in uniform. He noticed Mace's face. O'Reilley's eyes shone.

Moretti frowned, "What have I done now?"

O'Reilley said, "It's not you, it's Fee here." He decided to ignore Mace's appearance, turned to Mace. "You're under arrest, and what you say may be used against you. You know the charge."

Mace stared at him. His lips formed the word soundlessly: "Murder!"

"That's right. We found the bloody knife in your apartment. Come along now. I won't ask Mr. Moretti what he's been doing to you."

Mace moved. Some dim instinct, some fear as old as time made him move sharply, quickly. O'Reilley wasn't expecting trouble so soon. The bloody face had distracted him. Mace chopped his hand into the policeman's neck, a judo blow he had learned in the Marines. The Irishman fell. Mace started for the door. Moretti's henchman blocked him.

Moretti said. "Let him go. In some ways this guy is a lot like me. Let him go. I'll handle the copper."

Mace fled from the room on legs that were swift with fear. As he came out into the big

room he saw faces turn toward him, eyes widen, mouths open, as the patrons saw his hamburgered face, the b l o o d i e d white of his stiff shirt.

He saw M e l a n i e, plowed through the tables toward her. He caught her arm, said swiftly, "I knocked out a cop up there. When he comes to, get him, take him to your place and keep him there. Tell him I'll call him there and give him the murderer and the proof."

She said, "I'll have him there!" She didn't ask any questions, didn't hang back. He liked that. He whirled and raced out to his car. He had been a fool not to let her know what he was doing. She was the one thing right in a topsy-turvy world.

He gunned the car out of the parking area, the tires kicking gravel with the screeching arc of his turn. He got out on the road and let her run. If he was right, he had an appointment with a killer.

HE PULLED up in front of the swank a p a r t m e n t building that was his destination. He went in and looked at the row of brass plates and pearl push buttons. He found the one marked MONTY BREVIS, pushed it and went up. The apartment was 21-A, on the second floor. He saw a light come on inside and make a line at the bottom of the door.

When the door cracked he put his shoulder against it and went in. Brevis was in his pajamas, had obviously been sleeping. He dug at his eyes with his fists, and blinked at Mace.

Mace put a hand against him, pushed him until he fell back into the bed that had been folded out of the sofa. Brevis sat on the bed, breathing hard, staring at him, trying to wake up and understand. Hatred crept into his eyes.

Mace said, "I brought you some pictures," and threw the photographs on the bed. He watched Brevis open the envelope, pull out the negatives and prints of Patti Louise.

He picked up Brevis' phone and dialed. He hoped Melanie was home, had gotten O'Reilley there by now. She answered.

He said, "Put O'Reilley on." He waited until O'Reilley said, "Yeah!" He thought, *It's going to work—maybe.*

He shot a glance at Brevis. He said, for Brevis' benefit, "I'm sorry he isn't there." He hung up the phone, but he hung it carefully, so that it balanced, not quite breaking

contact, so that the line was open.

He said, "See those pictures, Brevis. Those are the pictures that told me you killed Ayre."

Brevis smiled. Mace thought suddenly, Something is wrong. Something has gone sour. Brevis leaned back, put a hand under his pillow and brought out a gun. He pointed it at Mace, got up and slid around him. He picked up the telephone and cradled it, so that the connection was broken.

He said, "Nice try, sucker."

Mace felt his ears lay back, animal like, listening to the tone of Brevis' voice, listening to the sound of the room, listening to danger. He heard the hammer of a gun click back.

He was listening for something else too. He heard a faint sound and said, "Damn you, Brevis," goading him.

Brevis snarled, "It's going to be a pleasure, a real pleasure to shoot you. The police are already after you. You forced your way here and tried to kill me, with your hands. I had to shoot you to stop you. It's almost as good as watching you hang."

Mace watched the gun come up. He cried, swiftly, violently, "Wait, listen! Don't do anything! Don't move, just listen!"

Brevis said, "You're screaming, you yellow dog, and I love it. Here comes the slug."

Mace cried, "The pictures. Have you seen the pictures!"

The cry made Brevis pause.

Mace said, "They show why you killed Ayre, don't they? You found out that Patti was having an affair with him. You always loved her, got your job to be near her—you hate me because I m a r r i e d her. You hated Ayre so you killed him, and planted the knife on me. You thought the p a i n t i n g would hang me, and be a lesson to Patti. You're mad, Brevis, as mad as any loon in the asylum."

Brevis said, "I don't know about the last, but the rest of it is true. I hate your guts, Mace." His face twisted and his finger tightened.

Mace flung himself sidewise. The gun swung too, barked once as the window to the apartment shattered open, and a policeman fired through it. Brevis clutched an arm. His gun dropped, and he held his arm. Blood dripped from the arm onto the rug. The door opened, and a second officer walked in.

He c l a s p e d handcuffs on

Brevis and turned to Mace. He said, "You're the luckiest man in the world. If we'd busted in one minute sooner we'd have you instead of him. We saw O'Reilley go into Club Forty-nine, saw you come out. We didn't see O'Reilley, weren't sure of the pitch, so we tailed you. If we hadn't heard you yelling *Wait, listen*! we'd have busted in and taken you to the hangman. Luck, boy, you've got luck!"

Mace said, "Another thing. you mean it. I figured O'Reilley might not be alone. I figured if I couldn't get him to listen on a phone that I might get you guys to listen outside. I yelled at you."

"How did you know we were there?"

Mace said, "I listened for you. I heard you come up outside. I got ears like a dog."

He smiled, gestured at the photo on the bed. "Maybe you'd take those photos to Patti Louise. And now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to see a girl. I've got to let her know that everything worked out all right."

The officer's mouth stood open. Mace said, "She's really quite a girl. You hit it better than you knew. I'm a lucky man!"

THE END

It seemed a perfect alibi...too bloody perfect but the solution was based on...

SEEDS OF DEATH

by ARTHUR PORGES

INSPECTOR KING rolled the glass of brandy between his big palms, and said with a smile: "If you really want to know what it takes to catch a murderer, I can tell you." His three companions waited, keenly appreciative of an expert's viewpoint. "It takes luck —plenty of fool luck!" was the pearl he cast before them.

"No brains?" Will Howard murmured. "The very job for that nephew of mine."

"About a teaspoonful of brains, a dash of persistence, and luck—lots of luck," the inspector repeated.

"Give us a ferinstance," his host, Loret, said slyly, winking at the others.

"I'm going to do just that," King agreed. "But don't flatter yourself, Peter, that I don't know bait when I see it. Nevertheless it's a story that might interest all of you. I was reminded of the case by an item on the menu tonight."

Loret looked at him curiously.

"What was that, Jim?"

"Ah," the inspector reproached him. "That would be telling. You don't want the yarn spoiled right at the start, I'm sure."

There was a hasty murmur of agreement from his three friends, and then as King leaned back in the chair, cigar in hand, a hush of expectation.

"This was eight—no, nine—years ago, before I left England. I was, of course, a Scotland Yard man, but oddly enough on vacation at the time, staying in a lovely coastal town a bit off the beaten path, but well-known to bird-lovers. Famous for its variety of gulls, in particular.

"My vacation began rather badly, with steady, drizzly rain. I was tossing about that night in a strange bed, when I heard what I thought was a single faint mutter of thunder. Which was queer, since it hadn't been that kind of a storm. But there were no more such sounds, and I finally went to sleep, only to be awakened again at dawn by the clamor of screaming gulls somewhere along the beach.

"Later in the day I heard about the murder—only everybody thought it was an accident, a belief I shared too long.

"There was an elderly man who lived alone in a snug little cove with a private beach: a dream spot, it was. During the night a huge rock had fallen from the cliff above, smashing him and the house to flinders. A boulder the size of a cottage. Its impact undoubtedly accounted for the 'thunder' I'd heard in the small hours. Some boys had discovered the tragedy about eleven that morning.

"I wasn't much interested at first. Rocks do fall from cliffs, and the locals didn't need any suggestions from me, anyhow. But then I began to speculate a bit, although still not dreaming of murder. People told me with many wise shakes of their heads that the old man had been optimistic about that huge mass poised over his house. A friend of his, however, an expert engineer, had examined

the rock carefully, and advised him that although a deep, narrow crack separated the main bulk of it from the cliff proper, the thing had surely been like that for decades. Nothing short of an explosive charge or a big temblor could possibly bring it down, he'd assured him. Since that was no sort of earthquake region, the victim had little reason to worry. The fact is there was only one decent place for the house in that tiny cove, and he didn't want to give it up.

"Out of idle curiosity, I studied the fallen rock and the gap it left in the cliff above. I'm no geologist, but it was obvious that the engineer's view was correct. Only the lower part of the cliff-side surface was fresh; apparently a new fracture had occurred near the base of the rock, although just how such a split could produce an outward thrust to topple the immense weight wasn't clear to me by any physics principles *I'd* met. Not that I understand the subject.

"That same day, as I strolled along the beach, casually pondering the problem, I met an old friend, Francis Raymond, a big, white-maned chap who knows every bird that flies in or through England, and maybe some that walk, too. He was quite intrigued over the immense number of excited gulls that had been noticed at the scene of the accident, first by the boys, and then by the local police.

" 'Is it possible,' I remember asking him, 'that insects or worms were exposed when the rock broke away?' But he scoffed at the notion. It would take a lot more food than that to keep a couple of hundred gulls busy several hours; for no doubt they'd been there since dawn.

"I WHISTLED at the figure he mentioned; but he soon convinced me, with his b i n o c u l a r s, that the little islands off the coast were alive with thousands of seabirds, and that the first comers had spotted at least a hundred scrabbling hopefully about in the sand with little success.

"Well, what do gulls get excited about?" I persisted.

" 'Only food,' he told me in that dry way of his. 'They're always hungry, and never particular.' "

"Then I asked him if he'd actually found anything on the beach to account for their interest, but he reminded me that the officious local police had

kept everybody away from the place until the body was recovered, a job that took time, since heavy machinery was needed to shift the big rock When he'd checked later, the gulls were pretty well dispersed, and no food in sight. Very likely most of it had been gobbled up between dawn and the boys' appearance at the spot.

"'It's quite a windfall for Joel,' he said. 'The old man's nephew.'

"That was the first I'd heard about the victim's being well off. Now say that I have a policeman's mind if you like, but it always makes a difference when a man leaves money. There's a powerful motive, you see, even in a few thousand pounds.

"But there still wasn't anything to take hold of. How, for example, could the murderer make the rock fall without using explosives. And none had been used, or I'd have spotted the traces quickly enough. Neither were there the kind of marks any long, heavy lever would have left; and a pry bar narrow enough to go into the only crack would need the muscles of a gorilla to do the job. To make matters even worse, a few discreet inquiries (they had to be very discreet; I was around unofficially, and the locals don't like interference, as they call if from the Yard) established beyond question that the nephew had been a hundred miles away that night, somewhere in London.

"It seemed a perfect alibi —too bloody perfect. The boy seldom left the area for long, and in fact had gone to London just the week before. Why this odd coincidence of being away just when the rock tumbled down on his uncle?

"I decided to look the area over again, with an eye to the puzzle of the gulls. Once more it was luck that made me search under a few of the smaller stones that had been moved aside to facilitate work on the big one. Beneath several I found pulpy, white matter that didn't seem to belong: a gooey stuff obviously o r g a n i c in nature. I managed to scrape up a good two ounces. If it was something cast up by the sea that morning of the old man's death, then the gulls were accounted for, and the connection I sought intuitively didn't exist. So I hunted up Raymond again; he's an all-round naturalist, not just a bird man. He said that the material didn't come from the sea. Where it did originate, neither of us

could guess.

"I'm a stubborn man, and luck was still with me, so I went whole hog and took my messy sample down to the Yard. Fine busman's holiday I was having! Well, it didn't take the laboratory people long to come up with the answer. You'll never guess what it was. Rice! Nothing but rice!

"That deflated me. I was ready to give up. All that work to find out that gulls like rice. But then I still wanted to check up on the nephew, Joel Hoffman. It wasn't hard to find out he was in mighty low water financially; owed a pot of money which his piddling salary as a grocery clerk could never pay. The old story, of course: gambling, women, and liquor. His uncle was quite unhappy with the lad, and people said he'd talked about cutting him out of the will. What more could a nosy detective ask by way of motive. Not that the boy looked like a murderer; quite a clean-cut fellow, but with one little flaw we got used to in London after the war. A sulky sort of attitude that youth should have all the gravy while the old sods step aside. What use has an old man for money: *I* can really enjoy the stuff—that's the idea.

BUT THE boy was a hundred miles away when the rock fell, so once more I went sniffing about, pestering the seismologist at the nearby college of science. Had there been a quake—even a tiny temblor—that night? No. I checked up on the Royal Navy. Any firing at sea? A salvo of big guns, you know, can loosen plenty of rock. Another blank.

"Now get this: the blind, fool luck of the whole business. I know almost nothing about science except what little applies to finger-printing, ballistics, and other practical police techniques. Yet the night my vacation ended, when I was frustrated with a case that wasn't even my business, and bored silly, and it was raining again, as it had for days, I found the key at my feet.

"I'd been pawing through some old magazines on a shelf in my diggings, when it happened. Every mental reconstruction of the crime led to the same impasse. *If* the nephew could make that rock fall within twelve or so hours after he left the area, he could certainly count on killing his uncle, for the old man seldom left the house, especially in bad weather. The most he'd do on sunny days was lie on the

porch, still under the rock, you see. Besides, the murderer could count on rain that night at least, and maybe on several more, England's climate being what it is. But the difficulty was still there. *Could* he make the rock fall after he was gone, and without leaving a mark on it? If so, how?

"Well, I was turning the puzzle over in my mind, and rummaging on the shelf for a magazine, when this science news, an early Penguin Book, fell at my feet. Mind you, I repeat, science bores me. I don't get it: and the equations that run through so much of it make my head spin. But I riffled the pages idly, and somehow—don't ask me why—my eye fell upon a phrase to the effect that dried peas moistened and sealed in a glass container will swell and shatter the thing completely. For a moment it didn't register, then I grabbed the booklet in a death grip and read the whole article—a short one—on germination of seeds. Written by one of your chaps, too, a young American botanist. And funny thing, while I was reading, I suddenly remembered, now that I didn't need it, so to speak, a tricky little Forester item—a Hornblower yarn—about a ship full of wet rice coming apart at the seams. You see the fool luck of it?

"But still I couldn't believe what was written there, so I talked to a top biologist in London. And he told me that if enough dry rice was poured into such a crack as I described, and water added, the swelling grain would slowly, gently, but irresistably topple a boulder of several tons' weight—and without leaving a scratch, naturally. As he explained it, I could see the murderer filling that deep, narrow crevice behind the rock with handfuls of dry rice, and looking at the cloudy sky that promised rain later in the evening.

"After that it was a piece of cake, as we said in those days. We soon found out that the nephew on his first trip to London had bought two hundred-pound sacks of rice. He paid cash, and hoped to leave no trace, but oddly enough that much rice isn't sold very often in one batch to an individual even in London, and somebody remembered him well enough to give a positive identification.

"Again there was a last bit of luck, though. If he'd faced us down and denied the whole charge, we mightn't have made

it stick; a British jury is awfully hardheaded when circumstancial evidence is based on something like wet rice. But when he couldn't explain what he'd done with such a quantity of the stuff, and I put on my 'voice of doom,' the poor bugger broke. Whether he actually figured the gulls would clean up the traces of his crime, or that nobody would notice the wet grains after rain and wind had washed them into the sand, I can't say. I don't even know where he got the idea—maybe from that same book.

"But that delicious wild rice you served tonight"—with a nod to his host—"brought the whole case back as if it had just happened."

"And the solution required no brains at all," Loret said woodenly.

"Right," Inspector King agreed with perfect sincerity. "Just luck." A look of abstraction appeared on his face. "Like the man who died grinning through a horse-collar... no, not tonight; I'll tell you about that some other time."

THE END

It was a strange, hideous world Mary Abbott entered in search of her vanished dancing partner—a world created by a killer—where her warmest friend was a frozen corpse in the icebox

LADY IN FLIGHT

by RICK DANIELS

IN THE background was the measured cannonading of the surf. Fog billowing in from the sea, clung like ectoplasm around the amber street lights, investing the tiny beach town with the distorted, unreal quality of a nightmare. A crowd had gathered around her, jabbering in excited undertones at its outer edges—but quiet close in—watching her curiously.

The policeman watched her, too, but after her first hysterical outburst she was silent, her eyes on the man in the grey

hat.

"She stepped right in front of my car!" he insisted. "It was a miracle she wasn't killed!"

The policeman glanced at him. "Let me see your license, mister...What's your name, young lady?"

"Mary Abbot," she said, in a voice she didn't recognize.

"From?"

"Los Angeles." Some hidden instinct warned her not to say why she was here at Yermo Beach—not to mention Lanny Byrd.

The policeman did not pursue his questioning. He examined the identification of the man in the grey hat, glancing up at the man, then again at Mary.

"Thank you, Mr. Bowen," he said respectfully. "Now, let's talk this over quietly, young lady. You don't really think Mr. Bowen deliberately tried to run you down, now do you?"

The officer's voice showed he didn't believe it. The ghostly faces in the crowd showed disbeliefs, too. Mary Abbot looked at the man, trying to see his face, shadowed by the pulled down brim of his grey hat.

His car, a long, maroon Cadillac, still had two wheels up on the curbing where he'd swerved to hit her. Or miss her. Now he was confused, uncertain. It could have been an accident—except for that brief, fleeting glimpse of the man's eyes through the windshield as she leaped to safety.

She shuddered; only for the hidden strength in her slender dancer's legs...

"The poor child is nearly hysterical!" a woman in the crowd exclaimed. "Why don't you leave her be?"

"Got to do things accordin' to law," the officer said shortly. "You want to press charges young lady, or forget the whole business?"

Still she couldn't speak. It was the indecision, the mounting uncertainty in her mind. For there was no explanation, no plausible reason for this stranger to try to kill her. Suddenly nothing was important except to get out of this town, back to Los Angeles, back to the friendly security of her small apartment.

She pulled her light coat together at her throat. "Let—let's forget it," she whispered. "It was an accident." Then she was hurrying up the street toward the bus station.

TURNING into the dingy, badly-lit waiting room, she checked with the time-table tacked to the dirty wall. The Los Angeles bus was due at seven-ten. She had fifteen minutes to wait.

She sat down on a hard bench and determinedly compelled her mind to go back, to review all she had done today, searching for the exact moment when the world had seemed to blur, to become suddenly an insane phantasm.

It was after she reached Yermo Beach, she was sure. That was about four-thirty. Before that, in Los Angeles, there'd been the search for Lanny Byrd. They had danced together before and there was a spot in a new revue for them if they could whip up some fresh routines. But Lanny wasn't home, and only after some coaxing had the landlady recalled something about Yermo Beach.

That's where he was, she was sure.

He wasn't registered at either of the two beach hotels, Mary discovered, but he came into the lobby of the second one while she was sitting there thinking out her next move.

That had been somewhere around five o'clock.

He was in shorts and a bathrobe and he had on a white hat with a floppy brim, and dark glasses. His face covered with sun oil, was startled, vacillating as he looked down at her.

He said, "I'm James Randolph—y o u ' r e mistaken—" and then, as if realizing the utter futility of trying to deceive someone who knew him so well, he pulled away and strode across the lobby and upstairs.

It was so silly! As if she were interested in what name he had used on the hotel register for his week-end romance! It was the job that interested her—and what was she going to do? She didn't know. Lanny would be even more careful to avoid her now.

It was at dinner that she first saw the man in the grey hat. Or perhaps that was the first time he impressed himself on her mind. There was no reason why he should have, even then. He wasn't doing anything, wasn't looking at her. It was simply that she had noticed him.

Later, as she wandered the length of Yermo Beach's main street waiting for the bus, she saw the man in the grey hat again. Several times. The grey

hat was all she noticed, although there was nothing unusual about it. Each time she was upset, without knowing why.

Then, as she had stepped off the curb the car had come hurtling at her. The headlights were out. It came with a sudden rush, making a shallow curve toward the sidewalk. Pure instinct sent her leaping backwards on to the curb. And, as if seeing he had miscalculated, the driver twisted the wheel of the car, deepening the arc of his curve so that the inner wheels leaped the curbing. Half on, half off the sidewalk, he hadn't been able to get back to the street before a light standard forced him to brake the car to a screeching halt.

She might have screamed—she didn't remember. Hysteria dilated the moment out of all proportion and it had seemed then that the light of murder shone, for a fleeting instant, in the man's eyes.

Mr. Bowen, the officer had called him. A stranger. No one she knew. No one who knew her. Fantastic...

And yet why was her instinct warning her to secretiveness?

The bus trundled through Yermo Beach's main street and stopped before the depot. Mary found a seat beside a sleeping sailor and almost collapsed into it. No one paid any attention to her. Almost everyone was asleep. It was real and familiar. A nervous laugh trembled on her lips.

She fought for control...

The driver got back in and seemed to throw her a curious glance. Her imagination again, she thought.

And then from the bus window, she saw the grey-hatted man again. He was peering up as if looking for someone. Mary's window pulled past him and, as he saw her a thoughtful look passed over his face.

The conscious expression of one whose mind held thoughts of murder?

Mary pressed the back of her hand against her mouth to hold down a scream. It was no coincidence that the man was there. He was looking for her. He wanted her dead. And he wouldn't give up! Whatever his reason, he had made one desperate attempt to kill her and, intuitively, she knew for sure he'd try again.

That was why her instinct had told her to withhold anything that would aid him in following her. But that long Cad-

illac could easily beat the lumbering bus into Los Angeles. He'd be at the terminal waiting for her—ready to pounce.

The bus plunged on through the darkness and the creeping terror in her mind grew stronger until suddenly it produced, crystal clear, the crying desire to get off the bus. At once. Now. Almost she realized it she was stumbling frantically up the aisle to the front.

"Where is the next stop?"

The driver was watching her intently in the rear-view mirror. Too intently. "I stop at Dumont's Cafe at the crossroads. If there's anyone to get on."

"I want to get off."

He was too ready with an answer. "If you're sick, I can stop a few minutes."

"No!" Mary's voice almost went out of control. "I'm all right. Let me out at the cafe."

She stood in the aisle behind him until he snapped on the bus lights and drew up in front of a low, rambling building. Neon tubing ran across the face of the building and halfway down the ends. A large rectangular sign which read DUMONT'S blinked alternately: DINE—DANCE.

"You're sure you want to get off here. I could wait a few minutes—"

She didn't answer. She climbed down to the pavement and ran around behind the bus. She ran into the cafe, letting the screen door bang behind her.

A FAT, PERSPIRING man came out of the back room. He said boredly, "Name it."

"Coffee."

The bus had not yet driven on. The fat waiter drew her coffee, pushed the sugar container up close and then returned to the kitchen. Mary glanced briefly around the big room. Against three walls, even in front of the windows, were booths. A square pillar in the center of the room had a juke box backed against it. The space around this was obviously used for dancing. The cafe was deserted.

Mary hadn't expected to find it so empty. The bus rumbled into motion and faded gradually into the night. The fat waiter came back in. He dropped a coin in the juke box and then wedged himself into a phone booth in the corner.

The juke box was deafening. Mary wondered how he could phone in that racket. He came

out, red-faced and perspiring, just as the record played itself out.

"More coffee?" he asked hospitably.

"Yes, please."

"Stranger around here, ain't-cha?" He said it very politely, as if letting her know he was curious but not probing.

"Yes." Mary hesitated briefly. "Do you suppose there'll be anyone in tonight who will give me a ride to Los Angeles?"

The waiter stared at her. He had his big head tilted back and a little to the side, so he looked down at her from the corners of his eyes. The muscles of his face had gone lax. He didn't answer her.

Mary flushed. "I know I just got off the Los Angeles bus, but I had to. I—I get bus sick. I couldn't stand it another second."

"Sure," the waiter said tonelessly. "Sure, I know. I betcha there'll be lots of L.A. traffic. Take it easy, I'll getcha a ride. Be better if I asked anyhow. Safer." He looked at her intently.

"Thank you," Mary said. But she didn't like it. He was too solicitous. He kept glancing at her the way the bus driver had, until Mary thought nervously: *What's he staring at? Do I look that queer?*

She got up and went into the rest room and looked at herself in the mirror. She did look odd—it was startling how she had changed in such a brief time. Her face was white and pinched, an almost sunken look lived around her eyes, contrasting sharply with her usual clean, healthy loveliness, but it was nothing a stranger could notice. She combed her brow curly hair with a hand that trembled.

What's happening to me? she thought wildly. *Why does everyone seem so—so sinister?*

She heard the sound of cars outside and shortly the slamming of the screen door, then the voices. She relaxed a little. Surely it was somebody going to Los Angeles.

The fat waiter was taking an order from an overcrowded booth against the far wall. Going back behind the counter he shrugged at her to indicate there was no ride in that bunch. At the same time he nodded toward a man sitting alone at the counter. Mary hadn't noticed him till then.

She looked at him carefully first. He was tall, with a slightly round-shouldered look and rough dark hair that he seemed to have combed with his fin-

gers. He looked all right but then the man Bowen had looked perfectly normal and respectable, too.

She needed a ride. She had to ask someone.

It was not until she was standing behind the man that she saw he was watching her intently in the mirror back of the counter. As their gazes locked, he started guiltily. She would have wheeled away if he hadn't smiled at that second.

"Hullo!" he said.

Mary smile back, timidly. "I just wondered if you were driving into Los Angeles? I'll be happy to give you a lift. As soon as I have some coffee."

She knew he was lying. Until she asked him he hadn't intended going to Los Angeles. He had made that up on the spur of the moment and he didn't lie smoothly.

She kept the smile on her face and nodded. "Take your time," she managed.

Then she broke away. Another car had driven into the parking space at the end of the cafe and as quickly as she dared she moved over to the door and slipped out into the warm night. The surf still beat in the distance but there was no fog here.

She had to talk to the people in this latest car before they went into the cafe. Perhaps they would drive her into Los Angeles without delay. Without giving the stoop-shouldered man a chance to do anything. Instinctively, she knew she couldn't trust him.

Whom could she trust? Not the driver of the bus. Not the waiter. And now, not the man in the cafe. The impact of the truth nearly made her falter. Maybe the man Bowen wasn't insane. Maybe *she* was! She almost didn't know now.

NO ONE had gotten out of the car. The lone occupant raised his head from the wheel at her approach. The window was rolled down, and as the DINE-DANCE sign blinked she saw the man's face, pinkish in the reflected light.

It was Lanny Byrd! And there was something wrong with him. Something horribly wrong. His face wasn't pink—it was shockingly white.

Then she saw the blood all down his shirt front. The scream didn't get out of her throat except as a gasp.

He said, "Mary—"

"Lanny—what's w r o n g?" she cried. "What's happen-

ing?"

He said drunkenly, "Sorry I snubbed you...startled me... I—" He choked frantically and then as if realizing he was going, brought his last words out in a little scream. "The refrigerator, Mary! It's in the refrigerator—"

She knew instantly that he was dead. She had never before been close to a dying person, but she knew. The night seemed to be closing in around her, smothering her in its hot, airless folds. She ran away from the car toward the lights of the cafe. The darkness was full of terror for her.

The black-haired man was just coming out of the cafe. He smiled at her again, the same brilliant smile, but it held no reassurance for her this time.

"All ready?" he asked.

He took her arm, and was steering her to his car. She didn't want to go but she was too numb to resist. Another car had swept into the parking space, with a woman driving. Mary's mind telegraphed the urge to run to the woman, but her legs didn't respond. Insanely, the thought came to her that she would never dance again. Her legs would never dance again...

The dark-haired man helped her into his car. She fainted the moment she sat down.

When she came out of it they were driving swiftly through the night. They had almost reached Long Beach, she thought, or perhaps they were beyond it. She wasn't sure.

"You're exhausted," the black-haired man was saying in a comforting tone. "I'm going to take you to a physician in Los Angeles. I'm a doctor myself, but you need a specialist."

His voice lulled her, relaxing the taut, weary nerves in her body. Maybe she had been wrong about him. How could it be otherwise? She had never laid eyes on him before this evening.

"I'd say you were a sick girl, Miss Abbot," he said. "The symptoms—"

Mary sat upright. "How did you know my name?"

"Why—you told me," he said, uncertainly. "Back at the cafe." He was lying again and still very badly. She hadn't told him her name. He'd known all along. "Don't you remember?"

"Let me out," she gasped. "Stop the car and let me out!"

He isn't a doctor at all. He's in league with Bowen. Just as the bus driver and the waiter—

they killed Lanny Byrd and now they'll kill me.

She flung the door open, pushing it against the force of the wind. She had one foot on the narrow running board, ready to leap, when he stepped hard on the brake.

"Don't be a fool," he cried, reaching for her.

The car skidded and he had to use both hands to control it. That gave her a chance. By the time he got it stopped she had slipped out of the car and was running madly up the highway.

She heard the clatter of his heels on the pavement, pursuing her. A car was coming up, too, and she knew that she'd be safe if she could manage to keep ahead of the man a little longer.

Just as he caught her the car screeched to a stop. A woman's voice cried out, "Leave that girl alone!"

The man's grip relaxed. Mary, turning, saw the car door swing open.

"Quick," the woman said. "Get in!" The man shouted as Mary sprang inside. The car, taking off, slammed her back in the seat, slammed the door shut after her. The woman flashed Mary an encouraging smile. "You're all right now, dear," she said. "We're safe."

Mary nodded, no strength left in her to answer.

"I thought there was something wrong back at the cafe. I saw him pushing you into the car, so on a hunch I followed. Good thing I did."

Mary looked at her thankfully, seeing she was young, well-dressed and beautiful. She wore an expensive perfume. And the car was roomy and powerful. The woman had it surging ahead now.

"I'm Elisabeth Royce," she said, her eyes on the highway. "Just relax till you get your breath back. We'll go to my place and talk it over."

MARY leaned back and closed her eyes. That was what she wanted—to talk it over. To tell some one all the wild, fantastic details of this insane night. Perhaps, distilled through the common sense of an unbiased and uninvolved mind, it would begin to make sense. Now it was such an unrelieved pattern of horror that nothing seemed rational to her.

When the car slowed down much later, Mary opened her eyes and sat up. Elisabeth Royce said, "Everybody will be in bed. We'll slip in the back

door and I'll scare up something to drink."

She helped Mary out. "Say, you have had a time! You're limp as a piece of string. Come on, let's get inside."

They went into the big, dark house, Mary waiting at the door till Elisabeth found a light switch. They were in a huge, gleaming kitchen. The white, honest background was better than a drink. It was so—so solid.

"Collapse somewhere till I find something. Scotch? Bourbon? Sherry?"

"Sherry, I think," Mary managed a wispy smile. "You've got a lovely place."

"Make yourself at home," the other girl said, smiling. "My husband keeps the good liquors upstairs and under lock and key."

Mary sat down weakly on a straight-backed chair. She didn't want the sherry. A glass of cold water would be better. Perhaps some ice cubes for her burning forehead. She got up and crossed to the huge, gleaming refrigerator.

Maybe there was a jug of ice water. She opened the door....

Her scream was the most involuntary thing she had ever done in her life. It came out of the depths of her being and her brain seemed to give way with it. She threw her hands over her eyes, trying to shut out the sight before her.... Crammed into the refrigerator in an awkward, unnatural position was the nude body of a man. In that narrow space, it seemed ill-focused, out of proportion.

But even in that moment of horror she was struck by one fact—the faint but unmistakable similarity of build and coloring the dead man bore to Lanny Byrd. And she comprehended then, mistily, some of the meaning of this hideous night. Lanny had been impersonating this man....

Elisabeth Royce came running back into the kitchen, with Bowen, still wearing his grey hat, close behind her.

"You fool!" Bowen snarled. "Why didn't you keep her out of here?"

"I didn't know she'd go near the refrigerator," Elisabeth retorted. "And who was the fool who nearly let that actor spill the whole works!"

Mary broke for the door.

All along she had known they were going to kill her. At last she knew why. She had the knowledge that the man registered as James Randolph at the

Yermo Beach hotel was really Lanny Byrd. Now she knew even more. She knew a cold-blooded murder.

She was out the back door before Bowen lunged in pursuit. But her head start was pitifully inadequate. Even as she reached the driveway leading to the street, Bowen was upon her, his fingers hard and rough on her shoulders. Somehow that cleared her mind. Against something physical, something she could see and feel, she could struggle. It was the terror of the unknown that had paralyzed her mind.

With a sudden movement she swung around, raking her fingernails down his face. For a moment she was free again. This time she gained the street before he was upon her, but there was death in the fingers that tightened on her throat. Frantically she tried to twist away. He was too powerful. In a last despairing effort she stamped down with all the strength of her strong dancer's legs. Her spike heel cut viciously into his instep. Bowen howled in pain. Hopping on one leg, he dove for her again. And at that instant a tall, stoop-shouldered figure appeared out of nowhere and came charging down the street. Timing it so Bowen was just hopping upward, he drove a tremendous blow to the other's chin.

Bowen's grey hat flew off—the man crashed to the pavement and lay still. Close behind him, Elisabeth Royce was struggling to get an automatic revolver out of her purse. With all her strength Mary shoved the woman into the black-haired man's arms.

Then she fainted.

SHE AWOKE, realizing vaguely she was in a hospital bed. But there was no one to talk to, so she tried to fill in the blank spaces of last night's fantastic happenings.

In the midst of it a voice said, "Well, how are you feeling? I'm Doctor Patterson."

It was her black-haired rescuer. "Hello," Mary said. "I feel fine. I was just about to figure out why they killed the man in the refrigerator."

"Nobody killed him. He died from a heart condition. He had discovered that his wife—that was the woman who kidnapped you—was playing around with Bowen, and they all had a big row. Randolph suffered a cardiac attack and died—but he died too soon."

It was beginning to make a little sense to Mary now.

Doctor Patterson went on, "Randolph was president of Allied Rubber—inherited the job from his father. But according to the terms of his father's will, he didn't inherit anything until his thirtieth birthday. The old man died of the same cardiac disease and knew his son had it, too. So he made provisions for the money to go to another branch of the family if his son didn't live long enough. His thirtieth birthday is tomorrow. But he died five days ago. That meant Mrs. Randolph couldn't inherit it because her husband hadn't inherited it from his father. So she and Bowen, had to keep him alive till after the twenty-second—tomorrow. They had to establish that he was alive past his thirtieth birthday."

"Then I came along and threatened their whole plot," Mary filled in. "So they had to dispose of me, too, b t Lanny objected to murdering me."

"That's right. He and Bowen had a fight and Byrd was shot in the chest, but got away. The woman followed him—he followed you. He tried every bus stop till he found you but at that point he finally died from his wounds."

"But where do you come into all this?" Mary asked.

"The waiter phoned me to come down. He thought you were crazy. It seems the cop in Yermo Beach thought that, too, so he told the driver to keep an eye on you. When you got off, the driver got worried and passed the job on to the waiter. But the waiter didn't want any part of a female maniac—"

Mary now understood why everyone had stared at her so. "What were they going to do with Randolph's body?"

"Push it into the ocean. for somebody to find when it came in with the tide. Randolph had died of cardiac trouble, so they had only to hide the exact time of his death. They thought that by keeping the body chilled, the doctor would be fooled."

"Would you have been fooled?" Mary asked.

Patterson said, "Probably. It would have been the obvious conclusion."

Thinking of her lost opportunity in the revue, Mary asked wryly, "Would you like to be my dancing partner?"

"When you've rested up we'll dance the night away. Where would you like to go?"

"Any place," she said quietly.

THE END

A blind man witnessed the murder and named the killer—all Homicide had to do was scour the city for a fine-feathered fiend—a gun-toting rooster wearing silk pajamas!

SEE NO MURDER

by FREDRIC BROWN

EVEN reading about it in the papers gave me a mild case of the willies. For some reason I had a hunch, right off, that I was going to be put on the case and that I wasn't going to like it. Of course they might have it cleaned up by the time I got back—it was the next to last day of my vacation—but I didn't think so.

I put down the paper and tried to forget what I'd read by looking at Marge. Even after four years of being married, I like to look at Marge.

But this time it didn't drive what I'd been reading out of

my head. By a roundabout way, it brought me back to it. I got to thinking how bad it would be to be blind and never able to see Marge again. The story in the paper had been about a blind man—a blind man who was the only witness to a murder.

Marge happened to look up; she asked me what I was thinking about and I told her. She was interested, so I told her the details—what there was in the paper.

"The blind man's name is Max Easter. Until three days ago he was the bookkeeper at the Springfield Chemical Works. Until three days ago he wasn't blind—and they're not sure now whether his blindness is permanent; it's from an industrial accident at the plant. Some acid splashing in his face while he was collecting time slips out in the plant. They think he'll recover, but right now he's completely blind, and with his eyes bandaged.

"So yesterday evening he was in his bedroom—he's still in bed—talking to a friend of his named Armin Robinson, who'd dropped in to see him. Their wives—Easter's and Robinson's—had gone to a movie together, downtown. The two men were alone in the house—except for whoever killed one of them.

"Armin Robinson was sitting in a chair near the bed, and the bedroom door was ajar. Max Easter was sitting up in bed and the two of them were talking. Then Easter heard the door squeak and someone step into the room. He heard Robinson move and thinks he may have stood up, but nothing was said. Then all of a sudden there was a shot and the sound of a fall, from Robinson's direction. And then the footsteps came farther into the room and Easter sat there in bed, waiting to be shot, too."

Marge said, "How awful."

I said, "Then comes the odd part. Instead of being shot, Max Easter feels something land on the bed, on the mattress. He gropes for it and he's got a gun in his hand, a revolver. Then he hears the killer move and points the gun in that direction and pulls the trigger—"

"You mean the killer gave him the gun? Tossed it on his bed, I mean? Wouldn't he have known that even a blind man can shoot at sound?"

I said, "All I know is what's in the papers, Marge. That's

the way they tell Easter's story. But it could be. Probably the killer didn't realize that the bounce of the mattress would tell Easter where the gun landed and that he'd get it in his hand that quickly, the first grab. Probably he thought he could be out of the room before Easter would find the gun."

"But why give it to him at all?"

"I don't know. But to go on with Easter's story: As he swings the gun around to aim at the sound, he hears a noise like a man's knee hitting the floor and he figures the killer has dropped down to be under the shot if he fires. So Easter lowers the gun to aim a couple of feet above the floor and pulls the trigger. Just once.

"And then, suddenly, he says, he got more scared of what he was doing than of what might happen to him, and he dropped the gun. He was shooting in the dark—literally. If he'd misjudged what had happened, he might be shooting at Armin Robinson—at anybody. He didn't even know for sure that there'd been a murder, or what had happened.

"So, anyway, he dropped the gun and it hit the edge of the bed and clunked onto the floor. So he couldn't get it back even if he changed his mind. And he just sat there sweating, while whoever it was moved around the room a while and then went out."

Marge looked thoughtful. "Moved around the room doing what, George?"

"How would Easter know? But Armin Robinson's wallet was gone, so taking it was probably one thing. And Easter's own wallet and watch were gone off the dresser, where his wife said later they'd been laying. And a small suitcase was gone."

"A suitcase? Why would he take a suitcase?"

"To put the silverware in. That was gone from downstairs and a few other minor articles a burglar might take along. Easter says the man moved around his room for what seemed a long, time but was probably only a minute or two. Then he heard him walk down the stairs and move around a while down there, and then the back door opened and closed, and the house was quiet.

He hadn't dared get up until he heard the killer leave the house. Then he groped his way to Robinson and found he was

dead. So he felt his way down the stairs to the telephone and called police. Period. End of story."

"But that's horrible," Marge said. "I mean, it leaves so many l o o s e ends, so many things you can wonder about."

"Which is just what I've been doing. Particularly, I get the picture of that blind man shooting in the dark and then g e t t i n g scared because he didn't know what he was shooting at."

"George, don't blind people get special senses? I mean, so they can tell who a person is by the way he walks—things like that?"

Very patiently I said, "Max Easter had been blind all of two days. He might have been able to tell a man's walk from a woman's—if the woman wore heels."

"I guess you're right. Even if he'd known the man—"

I said, "Even if it had been a friend of his, he wouldn't have known. At night, all cats are grey."

"All cats *be* grey."

"You're goofy," I said.

"Look it up."

Marge and I are a l w a y s quibbling over things like that. I got Bartlett's out of the bookcase and looked it up and this time she was right. I'd been wrong on the "at night" part, too; it read "When all candles be out, all cats be grey."

When I'd admitted to Marge that she was r i g h t—for a change—and we'd batted that around for a while, her mind went back to the murder again. She said, "What about the gun he left, George? Can they trace him from it? The serial number or something?"

I said, "It was Max Easter's own gun. It was in the drawer of a desk downstairs. I forgot to mention that. The killer must have rifled that desk before he came upstairs."

"Do you think, George, that it was just a burglar?"

"No," I told her.

"Neither do I. There's something about it—a false note."

"More than a false note. A whole damn discord. But I can't guess what it is."

She said, "This Max Easter. Maybe he isn't blind at all."

I snorted at that. "Woman's intuition! A guess like that is as silly—unless you've got a reason for saying it—as saying that what he shot at was a grey cat, just because I happened to mention the p r o v e r b about one."

"Maybe he did," Marge said.

That wasn't even worth answering. I picked up the paper again and turned to the sports section.

The Sunday papers, the next day, had a lot on the case, but none of it was new. No arrests had been made, and apparently no one was even under suspicion. I hoped I wouldn't get put on it. I don't know why, exactly. I just hoped so.

I WAS on it almost before I got inside the door. Before I got my raincoat off, I was told Captain Eberhart wanted me in his office, and I went in.

"Have a good vacation, George?" he asked me, but he didn't wait for my answer. He went on: "I'm putting you on that Armin Robinson murder. Have you read about it in the papers?"

"Sure," I said.

"Then you know as much about it as anybody else, except one thing. I'll tell you that, but outside of that, I want you to go on it cold, without any preconceived ideas. We haven't got anywhere and you just might hit something we missed. It's worth a try."

I nodded. "But how about lab reports, ballistics? I can tackle the people cold, but I'd like to have all the physical facts.

"Okay. The coroner's report is that Robinson died instantaneously from a bullet through his head. The bullet was in the wall about three feet behind where he'd been sitting and about five and a half feet up from the floor. Went into the wall almost straight. It all checks if he stood up when the killer came through the door and if he stood in the doorway or just inside to fire the shot and held the gun at eye level."

"Bullet matches the gun?"

"Yes, and so does the other bullet, the one Max Easter fired. And there were two empty shells in the gun. No prints on the gun beside Easter's; the killer must have worn gloves. And Mrs. Easter says a pair of white cotton work gloves is missing from the kitchen."

"Any way Max Easter could have fired both shots instead of just one?"

"Absolutely not George. He is blind—at least temporarily. The doctor treating him guarantees that. There are tests—reaction of pupils to sudden light, things like that. The only way a blind man could hit someone dead center in the forehead would be to hold the

gun against him—and there weren't any powder burns. No, Max Easter's story sounds screwy, but all the facts fit it. Even the timing. Some neighbors heard the shots, thought they were backfires and didn't investigate. But they noticed the time—they were listening to the radio and it was at the eight o'clock change of programs—two shots about five seconds apart. And Easter's phone call to us was at twelve minutes after eight by our own records. Twelve minutes just about fits what he says went on between the shooting and his getting to the phone."

"How about the alibis of the two wives?"

"Good as gold. They were together in a movie at the time of the murder. Eight o'clock was just about the time they were going in, in fact, and they saw friends in the lobby, so it's not only their own word. You can take the alibi as okay."

"All right," I said, "and what's the one thing that didn't get in the papers?"

"Lab report on the other bullet, the one Easter fired at the murderer, shows traces of organic matter."

I whistled. "Then the killer was wounded?" That ought to make it a lot easier.

Cap Eberhart said, "Maybe." He sighed. "I almost hate to tell you this, George, but if he was, he was a rooster wearing silk pajamas."

"That's fine," I told him. "My wife says Easter was shooting at a grey cat, and my wife is mostly right. About everything. But now would you mind talking sense?"

"If you can make sense out of it, swell. We dug the second bullet out of the wall near the door, about a foot and a half up. The microscopist who examined it says there are minute traces of three kinds of organic matter on it. Infinitesimal quantities—he can identify them only up to a point. But he thinks they're blood, silk and feathers. A chicken wearing silk pajamas would be one answer."

"What kind of blood?" I asked. "What kind of feathers?"

"No dice. They're minute traces, and he won't stick his neck out any farther than that, even on a guess. What's this business about a grey cat?"

I told him about our argument over the quotation and Marge's kidding remark.

I said, "Seriously, Cap, it does sound as though the killer were wounded. Just a scrape,

probably, since he went about his business afterwards. That takes care of the blood on the bullet, and the silk isn't too hard. Silk shirt, silk shorts, silk tie—anything. But the feathers are harder to figure. Only place a man's likely to wear a feather is in the band of a new hat."

Eberhart nodded. "Pajama-wearing roosters aside, that's the best suggestion we've had to date. Could be like this—the killer sees the gun swinging toward him and drops down low, throwing up his hand toward the gun. Hands don't stop bullets, but people often do that when they're going to be shot at. The bullet grazes his hand, grazes his hat band, which is silk and has a feather in it—but not hard enough to crease him or stun him—and goes in the wall. Then the killer wraps a handkerchief around his hand and goes about his business, after Easter drops the gun off the bed and he sees it he's safe."

"It could be," I said. "Anybody connected with the case wounded?"

"Not where it shows. And we haven't got enough on anybody to drag them in and strip them. In fact, dammit, we haven't even found anybody with a motive. Screwy as it seems, George, we've almost decided that it really was plain and simple robbery. Well, that's all I'm going to tell you. Go at it cold and maybe you'll get something we missed."

I put my raincoat back on and went out.

CHAPTER TWO
Murder Without Motive

THE first thing to do was the thing I hated worst—talk to the widow of the murdered man. I hoped, for both our sakes, that she'd be over the worst part of the shock and grief.

I didn't enjoy it, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been. Mrs. Armin Robinson was quiet and reserved, but she was willing to talk, and able to talk unemotionally. The emotion was there, but it was two layers down; it wasn't going to come to the surface in hysteria.

I got the matter of her alibi over first. Yes, she and Mrs. Max Easter, the blinded man's wife, had met at eight o'clock in the theater lobby. She was sure it was eight exactly, because both she and Louise Easter had commented on the fact that they were both ex-

actly on time; Louise had been there first, but had said she'd been waiting less than a minute. Louise had been talking to two friends of theirs whom she'd met—accidentally, not by appointment—in the lobby. The four women had gone in together and had stayed together in the movie. She gave me the names of the two other women, and their addresses. It sounded, as Eberhart had said, as good as gold. The theater they'd gone to was at least twenty minutes' driving time from the Easter residence, where the murder had occurred.

I asked, "Did your husband have any enemies?"

"No, definitely not. Possibly a few people may have disliked him, but no more than that."

I asked gently, "Why would some people have disliked him, Mrs. Robinson?"

"He was pretty much of an extrovert. You know, the life of the party, that sort of thing. When he had a few drinks, he may have grated on some people's nerves. But that didn't happen often. And, too, some people thought him a little too frank. But those were little things."

They certainly didn't sound like something that would lead to premeditated murder. I said, "He was a C.P.A., an auditor. Is that right?"

"Yes. and he operated independently. He was his own boss."

"Any employes?"

"Only a secretary, full time. He had a list of people he sometimes called on for help in an audit that was too big a job for one man"

"How close friends were you and your husband with the Easters?"

"Fairly close. Probably Armin and Max were closer friends than Louise and I are. Frankly, I don't like Louise too well, but I got along with her because of the friendship between my husband and hers. Not that I have anything against Louise—don't misunderstand me—it's just that we're such different types. For that matter. I don't think Armin liked Louise especially either."

"How often did you see them?"

"Sometimes oftener, but at least once a week regularly. We're—we were—members of a bridge club of four couples who took turns meeting at one another's homes."

"Who were the others?"

"The Anthonys and the Eldreds. Bill Anthony is editor of the Springfield Blade. He and his wife are away on vacation right now, in Florida. Lloyd Eldred is with the Springfield Chemical Works—the same company Max Easter works for. He's Max's immediate superior there."

"And Max Easter is bookkeeper there?"

"That's right, bookkeeper and paymaster. Lloyd Eldred is the treasurer of the company. That's probably not as much of a difference as it sounds. I think Max probably makes about five thousand a year and Lloyd about seven thousand. Springfield Chemical doesn't pay very high salaries to its officers."

"Your husband ever do any auditing for Springfield Chemical?"

"No. Kramer and Wright have done their auditing for years. I think Armin could have had the account if he'd gone after it, but he had all the business he could handle by himself."

"He was doing well, then?"

"Well enough. About ten thousand a year."

"This is an unpleasant question, Mrs. Robinson. But does anyone gain by his death?"

"Not unless you'd consider that I did. There's ten thousand in insurance and title to this house is clear. But almost no savings; we bought this house a year ago and used our savings to buy it outright. And Armin's business can't be sold—there's nothing to sell. I mean, he just sold his own services as an auditor."

"Then I wouldn't say you gained," I told her. "Ten thousand in insurance doesn't compensate for the loss of ten thousand a year in income."

"Not for the loss of a husband, Mr. Hearn."

That could have been corny except that it sounded sincere. It made me remember I wanted to get out of there, so I got down to brass tacks by asking her about Friday evening. "Had your husband planned in advance to go to the Easters'?" I asked. "Would anyone know he was going to be there?"

"No, except Louise and myself. And then, only just before he left. Here's what happened: Louise and I had made the movie date before Max's accident at the plant. About half-past six that evening, when Armin and I were just starting dinner, Louise phoned. She said she'd better not leave Max home alone; that he was feeling pretty low.

"Armin heard my end of the

phone conversation and guessed what it was about. So he came to the phone and talked to Louise and said she should keep her date for the movie—that he'd just as soon go over and sit with Max for the evening."

"When did he leave to go there?"

"About seven, because he was going by streetcar and wanted to get there by half-past seven, so Louise would have time to make the date. He told me to take our car and pick him up after the show to bring him back home."

"And he got to the Easters' by half-past seven?"

"Yes. That is, Louise said so. She says he went upstairs right away to Max's room, and that she left about ten minutes after that. She drove their car. We had two cars between the two of us, which wasn't very good planning, I guess."

I asked, "Was there anything unusual about the way your husband acted Friday evening, before he left? Or, for that matter, any time lately?"

"He'd been a bit moody and preoccupied for two or three days. I asked him several times if he was worried about something, but he insisted that he wasn't."

I tried prying a little deeper on that, but couldn't find out whether she had any guess as to what he may have been worrying about. She was sure it wasn't financial troubles.

I let it go at that and left her, telling her I might have to come back later to talk to her again. She was pleasant about that and said she understood.

I THOUGHT it over after I got in my car. The alibis of both wives sounded solid. Neither of them could have been at the theater at eight and still have killed Armin Robinson. But I didn't want to take anything for granted, so I drove to the addresses of the two other women who'd seen Louise Easter and Mrs. Robinson in the movie lobby. I talked to both of them and when I left the second, I was sure.

I got back in my car and drove out to the Springfield Chemical Works. I didn't see how Max's accident there—his blinding—could have anything to do with the murder of Robinson, but I wanted to get that angle out of the way before I went to the Easters'.

Springfield Chemical must have had an efficient office system; their office quarters were quite small for a plant that hired over a hundred men.

I asked the receptionist, who was doubling in brass on a typewriter and had a telephone switchboard in front of her, for Mr. Lloyd Eldred. She made a call and then directed me to his office.

I went in. There were two desks, but only one of them was occupied. A tall, slender, almost effeminate-looking man with rumpled curly black hair looked up from the occupied desk and said "Yes?" in a tone that meant, "I hope this won't take long; I'm awfully busy." And from all the stuff stacked on his desk, he was.

I said, "I'm George Hearn, Mr. Eldred. From Homicide." I took the chair in front of his desk.

He ran his fingers through his hair, thereby explaining why it was so rumpled. He said, "About Armin Robinson again, I suppose," and I admitted the fact.

"Well—I don't know what more I can tell you. But Armin was a friend of mine and if there is anything—"

"He was a close friend of yours?"

"Well, not exactly. We saw each other at least once a week, at a bridge club that met around at our houses. The Easters, the Anthonys, the Robinsons, and my wife and I."

I nodded. "Mrs. Robinson told me about that. Are you going to continue the club?"

"I don't know. Maybe we'll find another couple—but not until after Max Easter's eyes are all right again. Right now we'd be missing two couples—three, until the Anthonys get back from Florida."

"You think Easter's eyes will get all right again?"

"I don't see why not. The doctor says they will—he's a little puzzled that they've been bad for this long. We gave him a sample of the acid, and he says it definitely should not cause permanent injury to the eyes."

He ran his fingers through his hair again. "I hope—for selfish reasons if no others—that he's back soon. I'm swamped here trying to handle both our jobs."

"Can't your company get another man?"

"They could, I suppose, and would if I wanted them to. We discussed it, in fact. The catch is it would take weeks to break someone in to the point where they'd be a help instead of a hindrance. And the doctor says he thinks Max should be back in another week at the outside. Anyway, it won't be so bad

after Wednesday, day after tomorrow."

"Why Wednesday?" I asked him.

"Semi-monthly payroll. That's Max's main job, keeping payroll and time records. This time I'm having to do them besides my own work, so it'll be tough until the payroll's done. But if Max isn't able to be back by next payroll, we will make other arrangements. I can't work twelve hours a day indefinitely."

I nodded. Apparently the guy really was plugging, and I liked the fact that he gave it to me diplomatically instead of telling me to hurry up and get it over with.

So I asked the one routine question I had to ask about Armin Robinson—whether Lloyd Eldred knew any reason anyone would have for wanting Robinson dead—and got a flat, unequivocal no. Also a no as to whether Eldred knew what Robinson might have been worrying about for a few days before his death; Eldred hadn't noticed that he was as of the last time they'd played bridge together and that was the last time he'd seen him.

So I switched to the other matter. "Will you tell me about Max Easter's accident?"

"Max can tell you about it better than anyone else, because he was alone when it happened. All I know is that he was out in the plant—in the plating room—collecting time slips during the men's lunch hour. He takes a later lunch period himself so he can collect slips while they're off. He can go through the whole plant in an hour that way; it'd take twice as long when there's work going on."

I asked, "But didn't he tell you how it happened?"

"Oh, sure. He went in one of the little vat rooms off the plating room to get a slip off a shelf there, where the man who works that vat always leaves it. When he took down the slip pad he knocked down a jug from the shelf into the vat below it. It's a bad arrangement, having to reach across the vat to get something on the shelf, especially as that shelf is slightly above eye level. We changed the arrangement there since then."

I asked, "Was the acid that blinded him in the jug that fell, or in the vat?"

"In the vat. But landing smack in the middle of the vat, the jug splashed acid all over him."

"Any damage except to his eyes?"

"No, unless you count damage to clothes. Probably ruined the suit he was wearing. But the acid wasn't strong enough to hurt the skin."

"Does the company assume responsibility?"

"Of course. At any rate, he's on full salary and we're taking care of medical expenses."

"But if the injury is permanent?"

"It can't be—we have the assurance of the doctor who's treating him. In fact, he tends to believe that the blindness may be hysterical. You've heard of hysterical blindness, haven't you?"

I said I'd heard of it. "But for something like that there is supposed to be a deep-rooted psychic cause. Would there be in Max's case?"

I thought he hesitated slightly before he said, "Not that I know of."

I paused, trying to think of further questions, and I couldn't. From the way Lloyd Eldred looked at me, he was wondering why I'd been asking so many questions about Max's accident and about Max. I was wondering that, too. And I looked again at the piles of work on his desk and I thanked him and excused myself.

It was nearly noon. I was only ten minutes' drive from home, so I decided to have lunch with Marge. Sometimes I go home for lunch and sometimes not, depending on what part of town I happen to be in when lunch time comes around. Marge always keeps stuff on hand that she can rustle up quickly if I do get home.

CHAPTER THREE

Blind Man's Bluff

"I'M ON it," I told her, as soon as I got in. She knew what I meant—I didn't have to tell her.

While we ate I told her the little I'd learned that hadn't been in the papers. I said, "So you see it wasn't a grey cat Max Easter was shooting at in the dark. It was a rooster in silk pajamas. For once you're wrong on a hunch. And on your other wild idea, too—Easter is really blind."

She turned up her nose at me. "Bet you a dime he isn't."

I said, "That's one dime I'll collect."

"Maybe. I won't bet you on the grey cat, but it's no sillier than Captain Eberhart's rooster in pajamas. Or than your silk hatband with a feather in it."

"But if it was that, he'd have

worn it out with him. If it was a grey cat, what happened to it?"

"The killer carried it out in the suitcase he took from the closet, naturally."

I threw up my hands on that one.

Just the same, Marge had been serious in regard to her hunch that Max Easter wasn't really blind, and when Marge takes one of her hunches seriously, I do too. At least to the extent of checking as thoroughly as I can. So before I left home I phoned Cap Eberhart and got the name and address of the doctor who was treating Max Easter's eyes.

I went to see him and was lucky enough to get into his office right away. After I'd identified myself and explained what I wanted, I asked him, "How soon after the accident did you see Mr. Easter?"

"I believe I reached the plant not over twenty minutes after I was phoned. And the phone call, I was told, had been made immediately."

"Did you notice anything unusual about the condition of his eyes?"

"Nothing unusual considering the dilute acid that had been splashed into them. I'm not sure I understand your question."

I wasn't sure I understood it myself; I didn't know exactly what I was fishing for. I asked, "Was he in considerable pain?"

"Pain? Oh, no. Tetrianic acid causes temporary blindness, but without pain. It's no more painful than boric acid."

"Can you describe the effect for me, Doctor?"

"It dilutes the pupils, as does belladonna. Ultimately, it's as harmless. But in addition to dilation of the pupils, which is an immediate reaction, it causes temporary paralysis of the optic nerves and consequent temporary blindness. Normally the duration of blindness is from two to eight hours, depending on the strength of the solution."

"And the strength of the solution in this case?"

"Medium. Mr. Easter should have recovered his sight in not over six hours."

"But he didn't," I pointed out.

"He hasn't as yet. And that leads to one of two possible conclusions. One, that he is abnormal in his lack of tolerance for the substance in question. In that case, it is merely a matter of time; his eyesight will return before much longer. The

other possibility is, of course, hysterical blindness—blindness caused by self-delusion. I am almost certain this is not true in Mr. Easter's case. However, if his blindness persists more than a week, I shall recommend a psychiatrist."

I asked. "Isn't there a third possibility? Malingering?"

He smiled. "Don't forget, Mr. Hearn, that I am employed by the company and in the company's interests. He couldn't possibly pretend dilation of the pupils, which still persists. And he is not faking blindness. There are certain tests. And I am, as I said, reasonably sure it is not hysterical. I base that on the continued dilation of the pupils. Hysteria would be much more likely to continue the nerve paralysis alone."

"When did you examine him last?"

"Yesterday afternoon at four. I've been calling every day at that time."

I thanked him and left. For once, one of Marge's hunches had been wrong.

And I'd been stalling long enough on going to the Easters' house. I went there. I rang the doorbell.

A woman who turned out to be Mrs. Max Easter, Louise Easter, opened the door. I identified myself and she identified herself and she asked me in. She was a good-looking woman, even in a house dress. It would have been interesting to examine her to see if she had any bullet scrapes—but then her alibi was as good as any I've ever seen, and besides there's Margé.

Her husband, Louise Easter told me, was still in bed in his room upstairs and did I want to go up? I said I did, but that first she might as well show me around downstairs because I wanted to learn the layout of the place.

She showed me around. The drawer from which Max's gun had been taken, the cabinet where the silverware had been, the shelf in the kitchen where the cotton gloves had lain.

"Those were the only things missing?" I asked.

"Yes. From downstairs, that is. He took Max's wallet and watch from the dresser upstairs. There was about twenty dollars in the wallet, and that's all the money there happened to be in the house. And the suitcase."

"How big a suitcase was it?"

She held her hands to show me—it had been about two feet by one foot by seven inches. Bigger than he'd have needed

worn it out with him. If it was a grey cat, what happened to it?"

"The killer carried it out in the suitcase he took from the closet, naturally."

I threw up my hands on that one.

Just the same, Marge had been serious in regard to her hunch that Max Easter wasn't really blind, and when Marge takes one of her hunches seriously, I do too. At least to the extent of checking as thoroughly as I can. So before I left home I phoned Cap Eberhart and got the name and address of the doctor who was treating Max Easter's eyes.

I went to see him and was lucky enough to get into his office right away. After I'd identified myself and explained what I wanted, I asked him, "How soon after the accident did you see Mr. Easter?"

"I believe I reached the plant not over twenty minutes after I was phoned. And the phone call, I was told, had been made immediately."

"Did you notice anything unusual about the condition of his eyes?"

"Nothing unusual considering the dilute acid that had been splashed into them. I'm not sure I understand your question."

I wasn't sure I understood it myself; I didn't know exactly what I was fishing for. I asked, "Was he in considerable pain?"

"Pain? Oh, no. Tetrianic acid causes temporary blindness, but without pain. It's no more painful than boric acid."

"Can you describe the effect for me, Doctor?"

"It dilutes the pupils, as does belladonna. Ultimately, it's as harmless. But in addition to dilation of the pupils, which is an immediate reaction, it causes temporary paralysis of the optic nerves and consequent temporary blindness. Normally the duration of blindness is from two to eight hours, depending on the strength of the solution."

"And the strength of the solution in this case?"

"Medium. Mr. Easter should have recovered his sight in not over six hours."

"But he didn't," I pointed out.

"He hasn't as yet. And that leads to one of two possible conclusions. One, that he is abnormal in his lack of tolerance for the substance in question. In that case, it is merely a matter of time; his eyesight will return before much longer. The

start now, in that case."

WE WENT up the stairs. The door of one of the bedrooms was ajar, just as it must have been Friday evening. And through it I could see Max Easter, his eyes bandaged, sitting up in a bed. Just as the killer must have seen him when he'd walked up these stairs after Louise Easter had left.

I stood in the doorway where the killer must have stood, first, to fire the shot that killed Armin Robinson, before he'd stepped closer to the bed and tossed down the revolver on the mattress.

Louise Easter had preceded me into the room and said, "Max, this is Mr. Hearn from the Homicide Department," and I was acknowledging the introduction without thinking about it, because I was looking around the room, seeing the chair Armin Robinson must have been sitting on—the one next to the bed—and the hole in the plaster above and behind that chair where the bullet had been dug out of the wall. And I turned and saw the place where the other bullet had been dug out. It was about a foot and a half up from the floor and about five feet from the doorway.

The bullet that Max Easter had fired. The one that had showed minute traces of blood, silk and feathers. Not blood, sweat and tears—but blood, silk and feathers.

I visualized the line of fire—Max sitting up in bed, aiming the gun at a sound, then lowering the muzzle as he heard the killer's knee hit the floor. I tried to visualize the killer standing somewhere in that line of fire, then crouching or kneeling to get under the muzzle of the gun.

But Max Easter had said something to me and I had to think back to the sound of the words to get that he had asked me to sit down.

I said, "T h a n k s," and crossed over to sit in the chair that Robinson had sat in. I looked toward the door. No, from that angle, Robinson would not have been able to see the head of the stairs. No matter how far ajar the door had been, he couldn't have seen the killer until the man had actually stepped into the room.

I looked from Max Easter to Louise Easter and then around the room, and I realized that I hadn't said anything for some time and that Easter couldn't tell what I was doing.

I said, "I'm just looking

around, Mr. Easter, trying to visualize how things must have happened."

He smiled a bit wanly. He said, "Take your time. I've got lots of it. Louise, I'm going to get up a little while; I'm tired of the bed. Will you get my bathrobe?"

"Of course, Max, but—" She didn't go on with the protest, whatever it had been going to be. She got his bathrobe from the closet and held it while he slipped it on over his pajamas. He sat back down on the edge of the bed.

He asked, "Would you like a bottle of beer, Mr. Hearn?"

I opened my mouth to say that I would like one but that I never drank on duty. Then I realized that he wouldn't be able to get the beer, that Louise would have to go downstairs for it, and that just possibly he had that in mind—that he might want to say something to me privately.

So I said, "Sure, thanks."

But when Louise had gone downstairs to the refrigerator, I found I'd been wrong. Apparently Max Easter had nothing to say.

He stood up and said. "I think I'm going to try my wings, Mr. Hearn. Please don't help me. Louise would have insisted if she'd stayed, but I want to learn to find my way alone. I'm just going to cross the room to that other chair."

He was feeling his way across the carpet toward the other side of the room—almost exactly toward the place where the plaster had been chipped out of the wall to extract the bullet he had fired. He said, "Might as well learn to do this. For all I know—" He didn't finish the sentence, but we both knew what he'd started to say.

His hand touched the wall, then groped for the chair. He wasn't going to touch it from where he stood so I said, "To your right, about two steps."

"Thanks." He moved that way and his hand found the back of the straight chair against the wall. He turned and sat down in it, and I noticed that he sat hard, as one does when the surface one sits on is lower than one thought. As though a pillow might have been on the chair, but wasn't.

I'm not too bright, but I'm not too dumb. Pillow made me think of feathers. Blood silk and feathers. A silk-covered chair pillow.

I had something, even if I didn't know what I had.

And just maybe, too, Max Easter's sense of direction, in

walking for the chair, hadn't been as bad as it had seemed. He'd walked toward the place where the bullet had hit the wall. And if the chair were standing where he'd looked for it and if it had had a pillow on the seat the bullet would have gone through that pillow.

I didn't ask him if there'd been a silk pillow in that chair. I knew there had been.

I got a little scared.

Louise Easter was coming back up the stairs. Her heels clicked across the wood to the doorway and she came in with a tray that held three bottles and three glasses. She held the tray in front of me first and I took a glass and a bottle, but I wasn't thinking about beer.

I was thinking about blood. I knew now where the silk and feathers had come from.

I stood up and looked around me. I didn't see any blood, or anything that gave me an idea about blood, but I noticed something else unusual—the shade over the one window in the room. It was a double shade, very heavy, peculiarly constructed.

I got scareder. It must have shown in my voice when I asked about the shade.

Max answered it. He said, "Yes, I had that shade specially made, Mr. Hearn. I'm an amateur photographer, and use this room as my darkroom. Had the door fixed so it closes light-tight, too."

I counted back hours. It was almost three o'clock now; it must have been four to six hours since—

I said, "Max—" without realizing that I was calling him by his first name— "will you take off that bandage?"

I'd put down the bottle and glass without having poured myself a drink. When something's about to break I want my hands free.

Max Easter reached up uncertainly for the bandage around his head. Louise Easter said, "Max, don't! The doctor—" and then her eyes met mine and she knew there wasn't any use saying any more.

Max stood up and took the bandage off. He blinked and rubbed his eyes with uncertain hands. He said, "I can see! It blurs, but I'm beginning to—"

Then his eyes must have blurred a little less, because his look fixed on his wife's face.

And he did begin to see.

I made it as fast and as merciful—for Max Easter—as possible. I got her out of there, down to headquarters. And I took along the bottle that was

labeled Boric Acid, but that contained the tetrianic acid that had been keeping him blind.

We brought Lloyd Eldred in. He wouldn't talk until two of the boys went out to his house with a search warrant. They found the suitcase buried in his back yard and brought it in with them. Then he talked.

WINDING up something like that takes time. I didn't get home until almost eight. But I'd remembered to phone Marge to hold dinner.

I was still feeling shaky when I got there. But Marge thought talking it out would be good for me, so I talked. I told her about it:

"Lloyd Eldred and Louise Easter were planning to run away together. That was part of it. Another part of it is that Lloyd had embezzled some money from Springfield Chemical. He says about four thousand. He couldn't make it up; he'd lost it gambling. And they were due for an audit in two weeks—a routine annual audit—so he'd have had to lam anyway, even if it hadn't been for the Louise Easter part.

"But he wanted money to lam with, a stake to give them a start somewhere. He'd been putting through fake vouchers like mad and mailing checks to himself under other names. He had to have Max out of the way to do it; Max helped on the regular bookkeeping, besides his payroll work, and would have spotted it. And Wednesday of this week—day after tomorrow—is the semi-monthly payroll. And they pay the workmen, but not the white collar workers, in cash. With Max out of the way he could have got his hands on that money.

"So he rigged a little booby trap over the acid vat so that when Max pulled the pad of time slips, the jug would fall into the acid. That got rid of Max—but it wouldn't have kept him away long enough if Louise hadn't cooperated. And that was simple. He gave her some dilute tetrianic from the plant to substitute for the boric acid she cleaned his eyes with several times a day. She did it in a darkened room—I don't mean she pulled the shades down secretly, just that she told her husband it was supposed to be done that way. And she'd always do it a little before the doctor came each day so when he'd take the bandage off to check Max's eyes, they'd be about the same as they were

the first time he'd examined them."

Marge looked at me wide-eyed. "Then he wasn't really blind, George! But I just said that because—"

"Whyever you said it," I told her, "you were right. But wait; I haven't got near the payoff yet. The murder wasn't something that was planned—it just came up. You see, Armin Robinson had learned that Lloyd Eldred and Louise Easter were having a clandestine affair. He probably saw them somewhere—anyway, he learned it somehow. Of course he didn't know about the embezzlement or that they were planning to run away together. But he knew Max's wife was cheating on him—and Max was his best friend. That was what he'd been worrying about, whether to tell Max or not.

"And he'd made up his mind to tell Max that evening, when he was alone with him. Louise must have guessed it—from his attitude or the way he talked to her when he came she guessed that he knew something and was going to tell Max after she'd gone.

"Then, just as she was leaving, Lloyd Eldred came. He'd dropped around to pay a duty call on Max, and had brought him a present, something he knew Max would like and that would help him keep amused while he was blind. Something that he could play with in bed."

Marge saw it coming. The back of her hand went to her mouth. "You mean—"

"Yes," I said. "A kitten. Max is crazy about cats. They'd had one and it had been killed by a car only a week before.

"George, what *color* was it?"

I said, "Louise met him at the front door and told him Max was talking to Armin and what she thought Armin was going to say. And Lloyd told her to run along, that he'd take care of things. He didn't tell her how.

"So she left and Lloyd went on into the house. He was much more worried about it than Louise had been. He realized that if that much of the truth came out, there'd be a showdown and probably his embezzlements at the plant would come out too, and that his whole plans would be shot and that he'd have to lam without the payroll money he was waiting for and counting on.

"He put the kitten in his pocket and went to where he knew Max kept a gun and got it. And he saw the cotton gloves

and put them on. He went up the stairs on tiptoe and stood outside the door listening. And when he heard Armin say 'Max, there's something that I hate to—' he stepped into the room. And shot Armin as Armin saw him and stood up. It's a good thing Armin didn't speak his name, or he'd have shot Max too."

"But why did he toss the gun on the bed?"

"He didn't want to take it away with him. And his first thought was simply to confuse things by leaving the gun. And leaving the kitten—it just happened that he'd got it in a way that it couldn't be traced to him—and walking out. You see, it wasn't a planned murder. He was ad libbing as he went along.

"He walked nearer to the bed and tossed the gun onto it and then took the kitten out of his pocket and was holding it by the scruff of the neck to toss it after the gun. And then he saw that Max had got the gun first grab and was aiming it toward him, from only a couple of yards away. He dropped down to one knee to get under the shot if Max pulled the trigger. The muzzle of the gun went down as he dropped and Max shot. The bullet killed the cat—and buried itself in the wall after it'd gone through a silk pillow on the chair next to the wall.

"Then Max dropped the gun and it fell on the floor out of his reach—and the danger was over. Lloyd decided that his best bet was to make it look as nearly as possible like a burglary. He took the wallets and the watch and a suitcase from the closet. To make it look like a burglary, he can't leave the kitten—burglars don't leave kittens. On his way to the closet he'd dropped the dead kitten on the chair, on the pillow that the bullet went through, to have his hands free. When he got the suitcase, he put the kitten and the pillow into it together, because there was blood on the pillow.

"Meanwhile, Max hadn't moved—and he knew Max wouldn't dare to move until he heard the front door close. So he could take his time. He went downstairs and took silverware and a few other little things. And left. Period."

Marge said, "George, what color was that cat?"

"Marge," I said, I'm damned if I'm going to tell you, ever."

THE END

Sometimes a cop gets a chance to write off a case with his own blood—but he's got to be—

DEAD RIGHT

by JACK BENDER

FOR over a week now he had felt a vague uneasiness, an impression of impending disaster which puzzled him with its elusiveness. His mind refused to offer even the slightest clue on which to base an analysis, and yet he was convinced that something indicative must exist and that surely he would discover it.

Because of his profession he was not annoyed; he had learned to trust his hunches with a measure of respect, even knowing he could not hurry

them. It would come to him in time. And then, with his ability to reason or to doubt, he would be able to decide if he had any cause to worry. But for now, he had enough to think about.

He sat in a large easy chair in one corner of the living room, near the window, smoking, his eyes aimlessly studying the grey skies beyond. Sometimes this helped, he'd found—the bleak, unending vastness seemed to stimulate his intuition. For a long while he stared out through the slanting drive of the rain. He did not move until he heard someone at the door.

Rising, he punched out his cigarette in a tray. He was a tall man, given to sturdiness throughout his entire body; his hair was dark brown, but thinning, his face faintly ruddy and undistinguished. He was thirty-nine years old, and looked it. He did not look like what he was, a detective first grade, Homicide.

Standing in the doorway, his wife regarded him with annoyance for a moment. "Haven't you finished dressing yet?" she demanded. "Now you know we'll be late."

She swept into the room, wet and irritated, and set her packages on the table. "Everytime we promise to go over to Mary's you try to find some way to get out of it. If you don't like my sister, just tell me."

He said nothing. He neither liked nor disliked Mary or her husband. They didn't interest him at all. Today, particularly, he was not in the mood for their small talk.

"If you weren't going to get ready, you could have gone to the delicatessen for me. You know I like a snack before I go to bed."

"I don't," he said.

She was a big woman, a year his junior, handsome in a large and striking manner. Her broad-featured, soft-skinned face was not meant for pouting. She looked more ludicrous than hurt. "You'd think you would have saved me the trip in this rain. What a day!"

"You could have ordered the stuff. They'd have sent it over."

She snorted, which he interpreted to mean that she did not think it worth the tip to the delivery boy. He wondered vaguely what she did with their money; his salary wasn't terrific, but it was more than enough for the way they lived. He supposed that people thought she was a good wife. He knew better. He despised

her miserliness; her passion for thrift and saving embarrassed and annoyed him, but it was a subject he was content to avoid. He let her handle everything, his insurance, the growing bank account, all the family finances, while he contented himself with escaping into his job.

"I'll get dressed," he said.

She took off her dripping coat. "We should be leaving now. Mary doesn't like to hold up dinner." She took the packages out into the kitchen and he started to go in the bedroom.

"I don't suppose you took the dog out, either," she called. Her voice was harsh.

"No," he said.

Putting on his fresh white shirt he wondered if Mary's husband, John, would be there. John—civil service, like himself—was a subway guard, and sometimes worked on Sunday. If John were not there, he could possibly excuse himself immediately after dinner and get away somewhere. He went back to the closet and took his raincoat instead of the topcoat which his wife had set on the bed.

"Won't you please try to hurry!" she said. "You always dawdle so! Enough to give a body the fidgets."

"I'm coming."

"Don't forget the umbrella."

As they were going out the door, the phone rang.

She sighed heavily. "Oh, my Lord! Won't we ever get going!"

It was Lieutenant McElroy calling. The Corby case. A patrolman out in the sticks had picked up a vag, who turned out to be the missing Frank Corby. He was being brought to Headquarters now. Corby, the lieutenant said, had confessed to murder.

He was placing the phone on its cradle when his wife came in from the hallway, frowning at the additional delay.

He had told her about the case. "I'll have to go downtown. I was working on it."

"I knew it. I just knew it!" She shook her head from side to side in a familiar gesture of impatience. "You and that damn Department make me sick!"

He frowned. In the ten years of their marriage he had never lied to her about his work. "I'll drop you off at your sister's," he said. "Or better still, you take the car. I'll stop by later. This won't take very long."

They went downstairs to the garage. "Did he confess how he did it? The way he killed her, and managed to have an

alibi? You couldn't figure it out, you said."

"The lieutenant didn't say."

Riding downtown in the subway, he reviewed the Corby case, grateful that he had something new to occupy his mind. The vague uneasiness he'd known for over a week seemed stronger, but now he was suddenly eager to avoid attempts to diagnose its reasons for existence. Which was as puzzling as the mystery itself.

So he thought about the Corby thing.

It seemed Frank Corby's wife, Amanda, had fallen in front of a subway train. A week and a half ago, at one o'clock in the morning, she and her hubby had had a row; she walked out on him. About a half hour later, a subway motorman swore she fell from the platform in front of his train as he pulled into the Sammath Street station, and there wasn't time enough to get the brakes on. There'd been nobody on the platform to push her, and Corby was in the apartment of neighbors at the time. It looked like an accident, or suicide, but it smelled a little, too. Some of the Corbys' neighbors testified to the constant bickering—over money matters, mostly—that had gone on all the time; he was quite a spender. He had a double indemnity policy on his wife; her accidental death was very handy; his dropping in on his neighbors, on the pretext of apologizing, a little while after his wife had walked out, seemed too convenient an alibi for an innocent man. So the Department had given it the look-see, and Corby made it more suspicious by getting panicky and suddenly taking a powder. Until tonight, when he had come in, he had been missing.

In his own office at Headquarters, he picked up the Corby folder, then went down the hall to Lieutenant McElroy's office, where a patrolman whom he didn't recognize stood outside near the door. Inside were another patrolman and McElroy. They looked strange. Their faces wore a queer pallor and lines of nervousness had worked in under their eyes.

"Oh, it's you," McElroy said. He took a deep breath, and nodded toward the shattered window that faced the inside courtyard. He smiled grimly. "You're late," he said. "Corby went that way."

The patrolman looked silently at the broken window. The sounds of voices and activity

came up from the courtyard, five stories below.

"He was off his rocker," McElroy said. "We'd just started questioning him when he broke. He was out of that chair and through the window before we could stop him." The lieutenant snapped his fingers. "Like that."

"Did he tell you how he managed to murder his wife?"

McElroy shook his head. "We hadn't got anywhere with him on that, when.... Dammit, I wish we could have got it wrapped up. Now it's going to hang open, and we'll hear from the Commissioner, I suppose." The lieutenant snorted. "And I told my wife I'd be back in time for dinner."

Which reminded him of Mary's dinner, and he wondered if his wife had got there yet. He looked at his watch, absently noting the time. Outside the rain beat down, and the peculiar feeling of uneasiness tugged more strongly at him....

When he left Headquarters it was no longer raining. The odor of the city's clean pavements was a familiar one, which ordinarily he found pleasant, but tonight nothing pleased him. He felt queerly at odds with the world. The business of Corby bothered him, yet, when he thought about it, he knew he was being silly. He'd been a cop too long for that. It was one of those things.

A passing car startled him; he flinched. He began to tremble, and his breath refused to come, as sometimes happens in extremely cold weather. Perhaps he was ill. A cold coming on. He walked faster, hoping that the exercise would stir him from this numb-limbed, bone-chilled state. He had a fleeting sensation of panic, as if he were running from some relentless, inexplicable pursuit.

Two blocks away from Mary's house there was a corner saloon. Though he did not drink as a rule outside his home, he went in and ordered whiskey at the bar. He was tremendously annoyed to find that his hand was shaking when he raised the shot glass to his lips. He gripped it.

After three drinks he had warmed considerably and his head felt better; the prospect of dinner at Mary's did not seem such an oppressive thing.

IT WAS quite late when he got there. John and Mary seemed amiable enough, but his wife was obviously annoyed. He could not help mentioning

the Corby case. It seemed to dispel the dull flatness of the atmosphere which he had learned to recognize as an habitual aspect of their visits.

"Did you find out how he killed her?" his wife asked, strangely intent. He recognized the familiar question before he realized that she had never shown so much interest in a case before. "Well, did you?"

"Huh? Oh, no," he said. "We're still up in the air."

"Seems to me," John said, "he was pretty slick. Like I was saying, before you got here, there ain't many ways you can rig up a murder, using the subway. But—"

Mary said, "Do you have to go?" and he saw that his wife had risen and was making the motions that told them she was ready to leave. There was the usual round of small talk, and fumbling for coats and umbrellas, and then they were out in the dark hallway in their own private shell of coolness. He knew his wife was angry with him, but she didn't mention it until they got down to their car a few minutes later. "You could have called, at least," she said accusingly. When he got in behind the wheel, she made him move over. "I'd better drive. You smell like a brewery."

He had no idea how a brewery smelled. Neither, he was certain, had she. He knew perfectly well he was not drunk; he was exceedingly sober. "I'm not drunk." He did not insist.

Slumped in the seat, he kept his eyes straight ahead on the still-damp streets as his wife drove them homeward. His head began to throb, and he was suddenly afraid to look at the woman beside him.

The car jerked abruptly, its motor coughing. The motor caught and they went a few yards further before it coughed again.

His wife looked over at him. "I'll bet you didn't put any gas in the car."

It was something he'd meant to do. "Forgot all about it." Why hadn't she noticed the gauge when she'd driven over to her sister's?

He opened the car door. "Maybe I can find some place open. I'll get some gas." He discovered himself almost desperate in his desire to get away.

His wife laughed coarsely. "The bars are closed by now." She took a cigarette from her bag, lit it, and blew the smoke almost gently against the wind-

shield. "It's too far to walk," she said, "but the subway is probably running." As if in answer, they heard the rumble of an underground train and felt the street shiver slightly beneath the car.

"You can come back for the car in the morning," she said. "We'll take the subway." They got out, she sliding over to his side, nudging him through the door. She slammed it after her and he heard the tools clanking in the back seat.

"Sammath Street." His wife was reading the street sign in the faint light from a distant street lamp. "We're not too far from the station."

Sammath Street. Sammath Street. What was so familiar about that? Oh, yes, of course, the subway stop where Corby's wife had been killed.

"My umbrella," his wife said, "I left it in the back seat," and went back to the car.

"Leave it," he called. "It's not raining."

But she fumbled around for a few minutes, clanking tools. Then she slammed the door and, with the umbrella clutched in her hand, followed him to the stairs.

His headache was worse, if anything; he felt cold because the liquor-warmth had gone, and the darkness increased his inexplicable sensation of panic. His wife said nothing as he hurried toward the station.

However uncomfortable the subway had seemed on past occasions, he found its breath of fetid atmosphere a strangely comforting thing now. His lungs filled with the stale, familiar odor, he found himself breathing easier, and the dim lights were better than the treacherous darkness of the streets. He paid their fares and they went down the long flight of stairs to the platform below. The place was deserted. He saw the metal post where Corby's wife had stood, three feet from the edge, and his mind began to come to life, seeking the answer to the case.

A night like this, he thought, same time, same station, and a woman toppled to her death, all by herself, alone, her husband several blocks away, with friends, witnesses. And yet her husband said he'd murdered her. How—how—

As he leaned to peer closer at the base of the metal post where Amanda Corby had stood, the sudden explosion of pain burst across his neck and shoulder, driving him face down against the cement flooring. He did not black out com-

pletely. He could sense rather than hear his wife behind him, ready to swing a second blow. It was this intuitive warning which had pulled him out of the way already, he was sure. He scuttled sidewise, crablike, moving abruptly toward the edge of the platform, then tried to look over his shoulder as he attempted to rise.

The second blow also missed his head. She was using the jack handle from the car, he saw. It swung in a vicious arc and bit deeply into the broad part of his back as he ducked under and sought to grab her arms. The blow drove him to his knees, moaning into his wife's furious, animal-like snarls. They grappled and she stumbled over his body, then her scream—the only sharp sound of this strange combat—followed her body as it plunged down onto the tracks.

From the platform's edge he watched her, and he knew that she was badly hurt. Her leg projected at an improbable angle beneath her, blood worked in a creamy wash across her face. Reaching into his pocket he found his whistle and blew three sharp blasts.

He and the station change-clerk, who had responded to the police whistle, were waiting for the ambulance when the approaching subway train trembled the station. Fascinated, he saw his hat, lying near the edge of the platform, move quickly out toward the incoming train, and suddenly he began to see things very clearly.

"You knew how Corby killed his wife, didn't you? You figured it out at Mary's, from something John said."

His wife glared silently at him, while he got the umbrella and went over to the post where both Mr. and Mrs. Corby had stood. He looked down at the comb-like grill that made up the platform edge. Because the platform did not quite meet the side of the train, the grill moved out to cover the dangerous gap. He stood on the grill, testing the umbrella in various positions against the post, then looked at his wife for a long moment. A chill touched him, then was gone. A feeling of relief, of escape, overwhelmed him; his headache, he discovered, had disappeared.

At the far end of the station, he found an alcove with a public phone. He dialed the familiar number and said, "Sorry to get you up, McElroy, but I thought you'd be glad to know we can write off the Corby case. Yeah, I'm at the Sammath

Street Station now. The way it was, Corby killed his wife first, then left her on the edge of the platform, propped against a metal pillar with an umbrella or something. When the train comes in, there's a sort of sliding grill on the edge of the platform—it moves forward and she topples forward with it, right in the path of the train. The trains don't run very often at this time of night, so he had time to get back to his neighbors' apartment...."

She would have gone back to Mary's, he thought, *and said I had been too drunk or too quarrelsome. That would have been her place for an alibi.*

"Yeah, I know he was taking a chance, but what the hell, he'd killed her and had to fix up something. How do I know how he knew about it? Sure it will work. Somebody just tried it again."

McElroy r e a l l y popped awake, then.

"No, no, nobody killed. Everything's under control. I'm taking the prisoner down to the hospital, and we can worry about booking her in the morning."

THE END

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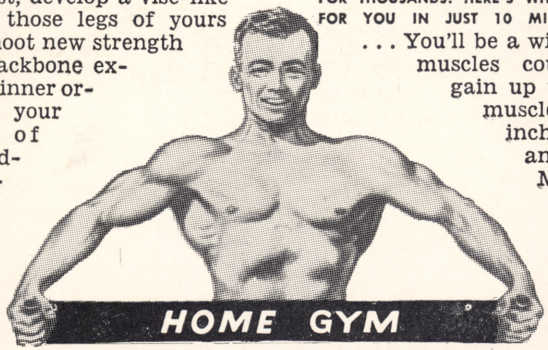

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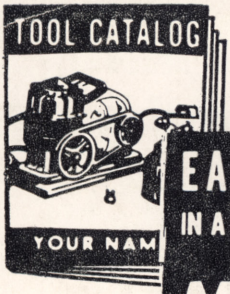

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