THRILLING DETECTIVE

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An Exciting Mystery Novel

By EDWARD CHURCHILL

DON'T MEDDLE WITH MURDER

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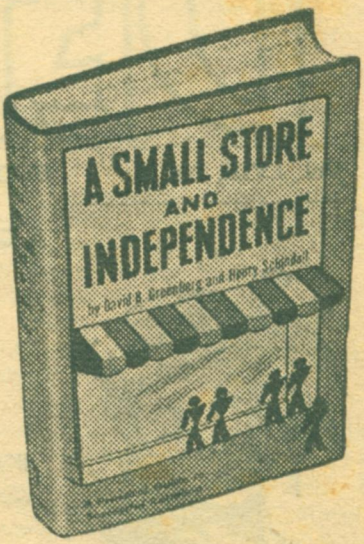

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If you have ordinary intelligence, a small amount of money, and the will to succeed, you can open and operate a small retail store *successfully*. You can have independence, peace of mind, the respect of your neighbors, a prominent place in the community, and a future that will enable you to purchase a home, educate your children, have money in the bank. Here is a book that tells you everything you need to know about how to start, the pitfalls to avoid, how to proceed, from locating a store to banking your profits!

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By EDWARD CHURCHILL

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A Johnny Castle Novelet

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Where readers, writers and the editor meet

Next Issue's Novel: DON'T FORGET YOUR GUN, by WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

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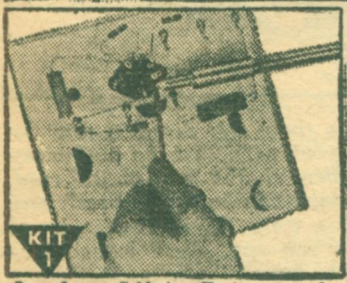

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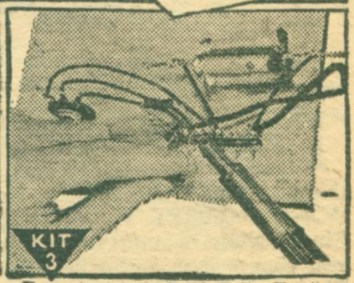

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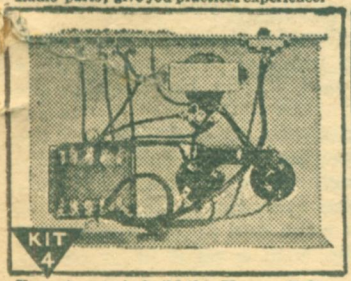

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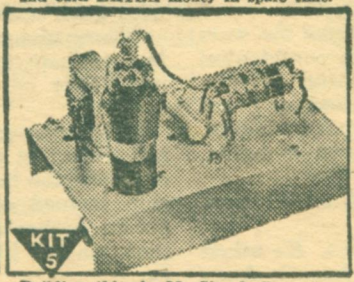

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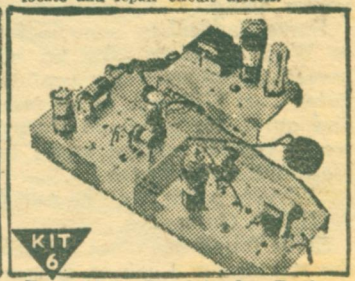

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HEADQUARTERS

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet

THE tough old harness bulls here at Headquarters don't often let excitement over a story get the better of them. But next issue's featured novel, DON'T FORGET YOUR GUN, by William Chamberlain brought forth so many chuckles and cheers that enthusiasm hit a new peak. We bring it to you with the special triumph an editor feels when a super-duper yarn comes along.

Steve Handrahan came back from the wars to Washington to take up his confidential investigating work for confidential investigator Curt Whitson. Steve yearned for peace and quiet, for good old sleepy Washington, world capitol with a small town complex. He found a madhouse.

"I'll take a cab out," he told Curt Whitson.

"Hah!" Curt said.

Steve found out what he meant. He asked the starter for a cab to Massachusetts Avenue.

"Right here, buddy," said the starter and shoved him into a cab with two other people.

"Look, chum," Steve said. "I want a cab all to my little self. I'm shy with people around."

"There was a war on lately, Bud. Or hadn't you heard?"

Steve was ashamed of himself. After all, he'd only spent his time in Australia, New Zealand, Christmas Island, Guadalcanal, Manus, The Sandwich Islands, and so forth. How should he know?

The cab went on and dropped a passenger and only Steve and the girl were left as it turned into Massachusetts Avenue.

The girl was pretty and Steve tried to make conversation with her and was having some success as their cab dropped into the wooded Rock Creek park. Then a big limousine crowded them to the side of the road.

The taxi slowed, ran into the brush and stopped against a tree. Having had a lot of experience in crack-ups, Steve leaned forward and tried to knock the front seat down with his teeth. The girl also fell forward.

Then the boys in the limousine came out with guns and got nasty.

"Come along," said a character with patent leather hair to the girl. To a lug with a moustache he said, "Take her back to the car."

This annoyed Steve no end. He and the girl were just getting on a friendly basis. To cut short the beginning of a beautiful friendship seemed uncouth. So he took hold of patent leather's wrist and pulled him in and then blasted him with a right hand on the ear.

The chauffeur of the big limousine came up with a jack handle and Steve let him have the edge of his hand across the Adam's apple and the chauffeur said "Ugh!" and lay down on the grass.

Then patent leather hair tackled Steve around the knees and they went down and rolled around on the grass. Steve was just about to knock his friend's teeth out with a handy elbow when the sky came down and scrambled his wits.

A Fine Welcome!

He woke up in a puddle. It was dark and a family of Swiss bell ringers were having a reunion inside his head. His private grem-

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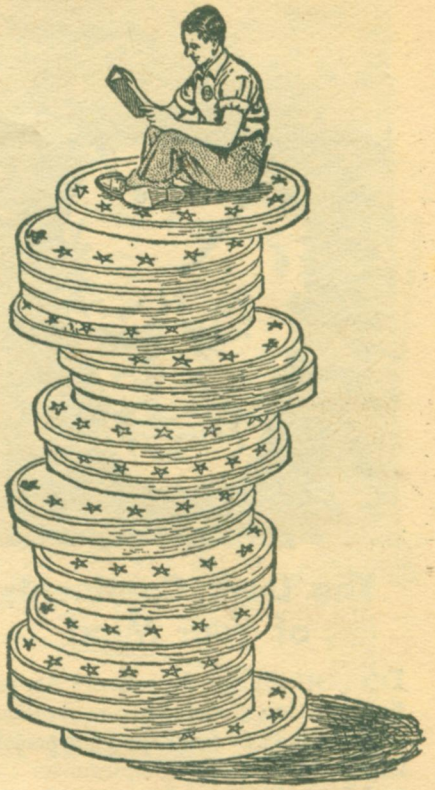
YOU LEARN WHILE YOU EARN



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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 6)

lin, a character named O'Toole who rode with him in the old B-24, was sitting around and sneering at him.

A fine welcome home, Steve thought. "We need a drink," he told O'Toole. So they got out of the park and found another taxi and went on to see Curt Whitson. Steve told his story.

"Tch! Tch!" Curt said. "Being off to war has softened you up, Steve. You'll have to get used to living dangerously again."

And while Steve was still smoking about that, Curt hastily told him who the girl was. She was working for Whitson. Her name was Jane Culver. And she was in trouble—real trouble.

Steve didn't want to live dangerously any more. He yearned for a monastery where he could look out of the windows and see the nice cows eating grass and listen to the little birds singing in the trees.

But that was not to be. Steve went out to look for Jane Culver and promptly got himself into the kind of ruckus that made the late unpleasantness in the Pacific seem like an Elk's picnic.

DON'T FORGET YOUR GUN is just about the funniest, fastest, rowdiest story you've read in a Pentagon's age. William Chamberlain is the author and the issue is the next one after this. Be on hand to enjoy it!

A Night of Terror

Companion feature is an exciting full length novelet by Talmage Powell, called BLOOD ON HER HANDS. The "her" in this case is Paula Stone, nurse on night duty at the hospital. When a patient is brought in for emergency operation, the victim of a knifing attack, Paula discovers he is the man who ruined her younger sister—and forced the girl to commit suicide.

His life is in Paula's hands. It would be so easy for her to let him die. A moment's neglect, a turned head at the wrong moment —who would know? And who could place any blame at her door?

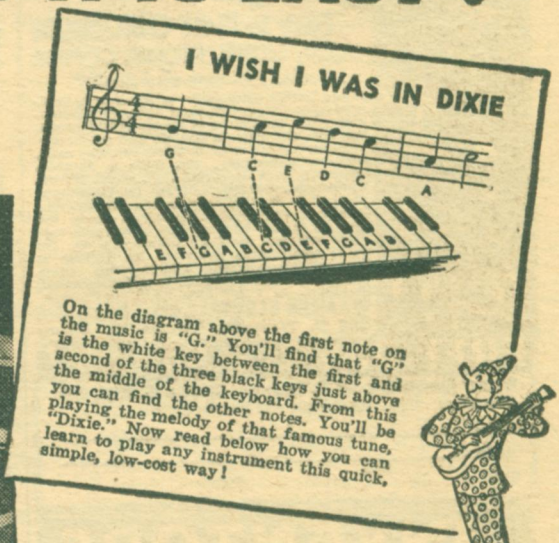
But the choice was not hers. As she stood and watched the patient, she sensed rather than saw the shadow move from behind the screen, felt the blow come down at her head . . . and knew no more.

When she regained consciousness, the patient was dead. Paula Stone knew that police questioning would bring out the old sordid story of her sister's fate. Then who would believe that she had been knocked unconscious and the patient killed—slashed to rib-

(Continued on page 10)

LOOKS EASY.....AND IT IS EASY!

—yet, it's from that famous favorite of the South, "Dixie"



On the diagram above the first note on the music is "G." You'll find that "G" is the white key between the first and second of the three black keys just above the middle of the keyboard. From this you can find the other notes. You'll be playing the melody of that famous tune, "Dixie." Now read below how you can learn to play any instrument this quick, simple, low-cost way!

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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 8)

bons? Panic seized her and in her panic only one course seemed open—flight! She ran, like a hunted, guilty thing.

There was a night of terror ahead for Paula Stone and the man she loved, young Dr. Larry Scott, who came to her aid. A night of terror and death. And for you, reading it, an hour of such exciting suspense as you've rarely known. BLOOD ON HER HANDS is guaranteed to give you a chill and a thrill!

Blackmail

Another big novelet in this same fruitful issue is THE CORPSE FROM RENO, by John L. Benton. Dave Bruce, newspaper reporter, thought he was doing no more than any other decent man when he threw the blackmailer out of his office with his slanderous story.

The man had evidence, he said, that Andrew Dutton, a millionaire, a man whose name was news, was a bigamist. He had tried to bleed Dutton, failed and now wanted to print the story in the paper. Dave wouldn't touch it. Andrew Dutton was an honest man and a good one.

Dave thought the blackmailer would come to no good end.

But he didn't expect it to happen quite so fast. Twenty minutes later the man was found in an alley with his throat cut. Who had killed him? Dutton? The police thought it likely. He was suspect No. 1, having the best motive.

Dave Bruce thought there was a terrific story in this somewhere. Especially if Dutton turned out to be innocent. Who else wanted blackmailer Jeremy Quigg dead? So, like a good reporter, Dave Bruce set out on the trail of Andrew Dutton's past. The trail took some unexpected and dangerous twists and death danced close to Bruce's perspiring brow.

But a good reporter always gets his story and so will you when you read THE CORPSE FROM RENO, by John L. Benton.

Nor is that all. Along with the featured novel DON'T FORGET YOUR GUN and the two novelets, will be the usual crisp, crackling short stories of crime and detection and

---

The April issue of the new pocket-size MYSTERY BOOK Magazine features the newest mystery novel by Frederic Brown, also William Irish, Will Cuppy and others. Get it today, 25c at all newsstands. *(Adv.)*

your favorite department, HEADQUARTERS.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

FAN MAIL, we blush to admit, is one of our favorite hobbies. Even fan letters with a squawk. The squawk shows us that friend reader is on his toes and we enjoy that. So thanks for all your letters and cards and let's see more of them. Like this:

Orchids to C. S. Montanye for his story OPALS ARE UNLUCKY in the January TD. I like Dave McClain and I get a chuckle out of Montanye's snappy style. Let's have more of him and less of the lad who make murder such a gloomy business.
—*John C. Abels, Brooklyn, N. Y.*

As somebody once remarked, Johnny, murder can often be a very funny business to everyone but the victim. But we agree. These are fiction murders, not always meant to be taken seriously, and they often may have humor.

As a farm boy who's seen a lot of these summer theatre folk come and go, THE SECOND ACT IS DEATH had a bit of personal appeal. The "local color" I hear so much about was pretty good. But tell author Ballard that even a farm boy knows the detective has got to play fair with the reader—no hiding clues! You hear? —*Walter Swenson, Ligonier, Ind.*

We hear. Did you spot the killer in that Ballard story, Walt? Anybody else?

It was a dirty trick on us way up here in Maine writing about orange groves and such in DOWN TO DANGER. Even smudging for near freezing in an orange grove sounds like good clean fun compared with shoveling a path through ten foot drifts of snow in 40 below zero temperature. Wait'll next summer and I'll send Mr. Linklater a postcard from cool, cool, Maine. —*Mrs. William C. Beard, Freeport, Me.*

We are a little baffled, but game. And we'll keep an eye out for the postcard from cool and breezy Maine about the time the humidity in New York goes up to 98.

Address it to The Editor, *Thrilling Detective,* 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N.Y. That goes for all you other folks who want to drop us a letter or postcard, too. You're all invited!

—THE EDITOR

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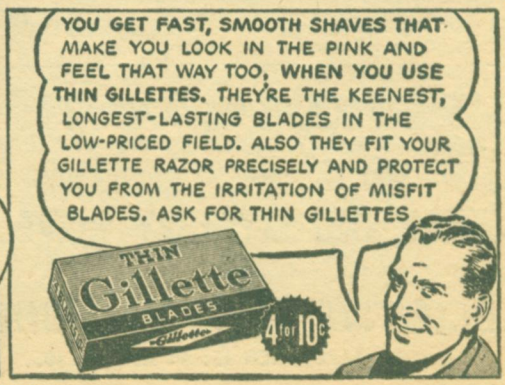
WITH HIS SHOW STORM-BOUND, MATT HALE, YOUNG OWNER OF HALE'S MAMMOTH CIRCUS EFFECTS A THRILLING RESCUE

SHOW TIME



Beryl Glover sped forward gracefully for a few yards, then with a sudden grimace of pain, fell sideways and skidded into an inert

DEATH ON SKIS

By EDWARD CHURCHILL

When terror and intrigue stalk Falcon's Lair, putting the life of heiress Janice Falconer in peril, it's up to ace sleuth Nick Blade to solve a baffling murder riddle!

CHAPTER I

The Lady Skis

THE peace, thought Janice Falconer, was strictly forced—with the issue unsettled. All was quiet, but you kept waiting for bedlam to break loose. Everyone, all about her on the snow, was having fun. But memories of last night at Falcon's Lair sent fire through her tall, long limbed body.

The issue couldn't be settled until somebody knocked the devil out of the triangle. She was one side of it. Blond Beryl Glover was the second. Cliff Todd, curly-headed

AN EXCITING COMPLETE MYSTERY NOVEL

and blue-eyed, home from the wars, was the third. Two of the triangle's sides had to come together. That meant pushing the props out from beneath Beryl and her too-rich Southern accent—for good.

Then Janice and Cliff would be together again.

Janice now could have kicked herself for asking Beryl,—a distant cousin from South Carolina, who had wandered in with a note from an aunt Janice scarcely remembered —to Falcon's Lair. At first she had felt sorry for the lispy, helpless relation who had come to California to find a career. But that was before the girl had unfurled her net to ensnare Cliff Todd.

No one, Janice swore, would ever come between Cliff and her. She'd waited and loved him too long—including four years of war. Waiting had been a nightmare while Cliff, a bombardier, was flying missions over Sicily and Italy. Then he had been shot down and her tears had flowed. She had been dry-eyed when he'd been reported dead. There were no tears left.

Then came the miraculous news that he'd been taken prisoner. Finally, they had sent him home, a jittering skeleton with a wild light in his eyes. Recovery, even now, was slow. But she had worshipped him and always would.

Last night's performance had been disgraceful. She had lost her head, had gone berserk. Beryl, the little dipsomaniac, was after Cliff.

"Hi, cousin!"

Janice turned. Beryl was coming on helpless skis across the snow. They only looked helpless, Janice knew. In spite of her small stature, Beryl Glover had the sinewy strength of a cat. Beryl had beaten Janice in a swimming race. She'd taken lean, tanned Dr. Harley Greenway, who was seeded in the Southwest States Championships, at tennis.

"You little—," Janice thought. She left the sentence unfinished as she forced her full lips into a masking smile.

"How's your hangover?" Janice asked.

"Ah think Ah'll live," Beryl answered. "Yo' medicine did wondahs, honey chile. Or, maybe it's all in mah mind."

"What mind?" asked Janice, in jolly tones.

SPARKS of hatred flashed from Beryl's blue eyes. But Beryl, a symphony of pink, white and red in her ski suit, trim and form revealing, was a good actress. Blood flooded her plump cheeks only for an instant.

"Ah'm on mah way to the ski jump," Beryl explained. "Doctah Greenway's going to show little me how to take the great bid slide. Ah'll probably be killed!" She widened her eyes in mock horror.

"Skiing'll never kill you," Janice snapped. "But your indoor sports will."

Beryl's glance wavered.

"Sometimes you scaire little me with yo' talk," she said. "Ah'm an easy frightened person."

She turned, went toward the ski jump. She spotted long, lean Dr. Greenway and made a grotesque noise.

"That's the first time that I ever heard a yodel with a Southern accent," thought Janice, bitterly.

Janice started after her, watched her trip at just the right distance, and fall into Greenway's arms. A spasm of revulsion went through Janice.

Everybody appeared to be having a good time, but Janice felt at the end of her string. Ever since she had come back from ambulance driving in France, Cliff Todd was scarred, both mentally and physically. She'd thought that asking Beryl, Cliff, Dr. Greenway and the others to Falcon's Lair for Christmas week would do something for her. It had. But not the way she'd expected.

The trees around her seemed like bleak sentinels against the sky. The snow, gold under the morning sunshine, had a harsh, blinding glare. The laughter and calls of her guests rang merrily against the steep mountains and died at her ears. The crisp air stung her nose. She wished that this day before New Year's Day had not arrived—that she could turn back and issue no invitations for a week at Falcon's Lair.

Now it was too late!

She drove her poles viciously into the crunching snow and pushed ahead toward the jump. Dr. Greenway and Beryl were rehearsing her leap. Cliff Todd, tall and blond, was standing by, nervously breaking a twig into little pieces, smiling at her pseudo fright. He studiously ignored Janice.

"It's a good thing that he wasn't around before vaudeville died," thought Janice, bitterly. "He'd have fallen for every number."

Janice was standing just inside of her door, with one hand on the bed-post, her face pallid with fear as Sheriff Payne entered the room

She looked away. Her glance caught Duncan Barr, partner of her late father. Hang white whiskers on him, Janice thought, and he'd have served well as a department store Santa Claus.

Beyond him, Johnny Fredericks, her cousin, was posing Sandra Pollard, his girl friend, who aspired to model for Powers, for one of his amateur photographic triumphs.

Janice passed them.

Janice noted that only the little French actress, Yvette Gastonne, was not present. Yvette had no interest in winter sports a mile above Southern California's sun-drenched valleys. Her idea was to sit in front of a huge log fire, sipping brandy and reading romantic novels, and she was doing just that.

Yvette's current boy friend, a Hollywood director, was busy shooting a picture and couldn't go mountaining. What was worse, he hadn't seen fit to cast Yvette in it.

Beryl was giggling her way into the start of her slide down the steep but not dangerous jump when Janice heard a low, sardonic voice at her elbow.

"You're all knotted up like an angry eel," it said. "Your fists are clenched. There's hate in your eyes."

Startled, Janice swung around. A tall, broad-shouldered man looked down at her. His ears were satyric and pointed, his hair close-clipped and silvering at the temples. His gray eyes gave an impression of hidden laughter.

"Oh!" Janice's mittened hand relaxed. "It's you, Nick." She paused. "Still snickering at the world, my lad? I wish I thought life was as funny as you do."

NICK BLADE saw the envy in her eyes. Janice never could figure out just how old Nick Blade was.

He might be in his late twenties or forty. But he fascinated her.

He bowed from his slim waist.

"The damsel was in distress," he reminded her. "She telephoned for a detective. Shortly thereafter, Nick Blade, Inc., Personal Investigations, appeared—and Janice, the heiress, lived happily ever after." His voice tightened. "What's wrong, queen?"

Janice Falconer looked around covertly.

"Something horrible has happened, Nick," she said. "Someone is trying to kill me."

Blade shook his head. "Impossible! Who could harm those raven tresses, or those somber, deep eyes? I've always been nuts about your olive complexion, queen. Who wants to murder you?"

"If I knew, you imbecile, I'd send for the police."

"And so I'm here to find out? Who's the sloe-eyed French dish with a yen for brandy curled up on the divan in the great lodge?"

"No chasing, Nick. Leave her to fifty million Frenchmen."

"I left her to my assistant, Tommy Case, which is even more dangerous."

Janice clung to him. There was a tremor in her voice.

"I got an emergency call from Los Angeles, supposedly from a physician attending Cliff Todd, sayng he had had an accident," she said. "We got up here Wednesday, the day after Christmas and Cliff wasn't due until Friday. The call came in Thursday afternoon. I got out the Prescott coupe and started down the mountain. You know how the roads are from here to Bowstring—twenty miles of twists and turns.

"When I reached the village, the brakes felt mushy. I stopped at Roy Taylor's garage."

She took a deep breath of air.

"Roy looked at the brakes. Nick, somebody had made a pinpoint hole in the brake fluid line, and more than half of it had run out."

Nick looked at her.

"Come, come, Janice, you're dreaming! Brake lines do develop pinholes."

"No. Roy put the Prescott on a hoist and showed me. The lines were all dirty except in one place, where the grime had been rubbed off. The little, tiny hole was fresh and new. Roy said that it probably had just been made."

"Any fingerprints?"

"Roy said the line had been wiped clean. If I'd gone on, the brakes would've failed and I'd probably have plunged down a precipice."

"Was Cliff in an accident?"

"No. I called him in Los Angeles from Taylor's garage."

"Did you tell him what had happened?"

"I—I didn't want to upset him. You know how nervous he is. I told him I called up to be sure he was coming."

Nick Blade rubbed his hard chin con-

templatively. He looked toward the ski slide. Beryl Glover, encouraged by the merry bystanders, was off down the slope. Janice anxiously followed his glance. Both watched the little blonde gather speed. All helplessness was gone now. She was steady on her hickories, bent low, ready for the approaching jump, her body poised professonally.

"Nice form," murmured Blade.

"A little on the dumpy side," said Janice.

"I'm talking about her jumping style."

With the grace of a bird, Beryl Glover soared from the up-bend and dropped. Her runners touched lightly. She sped forward gracefully for a few yards, and with a sudden grimace of pain, fell sidewise, and skidded into an inert heap.

Nick Blade didn't like the looks of that fall. He darted toward her, his Oxfords slipping and skidding on the hard-packed snow. He was the first to reach the Southerner. She lay, a twisted lump, her legs buckled grotesquely, like those of a bird brought down in mid-flight.

Quickly he bent, unlocked the ski fittings to release the shoes, straightened the girl's body on the snow. He took her wrist. There was still a faint pulse. Her hands were balled into fists. He bent close to her lips, inhaled deeply. Her skin was too dark beneath her rouge.

A sudden, wracking convulsion ran over her body. Then she lay still. Her eyes were open and staring, her pupils dilated. There were fine bubbles at the corners of her mouth.

"What happened?"

Nick Blade looked upward at a thin man, with a rather large head. The hair was receding from his wide, high forehead. His nose was hawk-like, his lips full and thick.

THE man caught the question in the detective's eyes.

"Doctor Greenway," he said, nervously. "Harley Greenway. Here, let me look."

Nick Blade stood up. Greenway's thin, professional hands worked expertly. Finally he said:

"Dead," he said finally.

"That is no news," replied Nick Blade. "She was practically gone when she landed. She had a convulsion—and was dead. Symptoms indicate poison."

Greenway turned black, shiny eyes on him.

"Smart, aren't you?"

"Pre-medic at Rush Medical," Blade obliged him. "I'd have got a sheepskin if the crash hadn't caught pappy. What did she die of, old man?"

Greenway bent over the body again. Closing in on all sides were members of Janice Falconer's house party, including Jance herself. Greenway paid no attention to their questions, and almost hysterical realization that Beryl Glover was dead. Finally, he straightened up, faced Blade.

"Heart disease," he said. "Plain as the nose on your face."

"Then my nose has gone into eclipse," Blade answered. "Heart disease, my silk shorts! She was poisoned—probably murdered."

Greenway paled angrily. He rose, shaking. There was a horrified, collective gasp from the stunned audience.

"A little knowledge can cause a lot of trouble," Greenway snarled. "I'm amazed at your audacity, and I challenge your stupid charge."

"Before we fight a duel, let's see what the coroner says," suggested Blade.

CHAPTER II

Doctor's Dilemma

AS THE afternoon shadows lengthened over the snow, Nick Blade was the first of the party to reach the great, sprawling lodge, which looked to him as big as a resort hotel. He wheeled his powerful low coupe along the private mountain road which wound through a couple of hundred acres of Falconer property, its graceful orphan owner in a depressed slump at his side.

"Snap out of it, queen," he said to his companion. "The photographer has his pictures and the body's on the way down the mountains for the autopsy. It's all over but a couple of small details, such as who is the murderer."

The girl looked at him with listless eyes. Her lovely face was pale, her face years older than it had been that morning.

Blade stared at the chalet.

"Holy mud!" he exclaimed. "If you took in boarders, you'd make a mint."

The lodge, three stories tall, faced a crystal blue lake, surrounded by mountains, trimmed

with pines, junipers and cedars. The retreating sun had painted the clouds with pink.

"Stop the comedy, Nick," Janice Falconer said. "Tell me what it's all about."

Blade turned a palm upward.

"If I knew, my dear, I'd be relaxing in front of the fire, telling stories."

The car rolled into a large circle at the rear of the lodge. Ahead was a rambling garage, with servants' quarters adding a second floor to part of it.

"You can park this heap in stall six," Janice said.

Blade shut off the ignition switch, and a minute later they were at the heavy pine door beneath a portico. It opened.

"Framingham Jenks!" Blade exclaimed. "You know, old man, I've always said you look exactly like a butler."

Bald Jenks pulled himself up to his full height. His austere, humorless face remained expressionless as he took Janice's sport coat and Blade's gray fedora and overcoat.

"I *am* a butler, sir," he announced solemnly.

"It's amazing," said Blade, as he escorted Janice into a vast living room. He waved his arm, turned to Jenks. "You know if this stuff had tags on it, I'd think I was in the furniture department. What's cooking?"

Janice looked ahead.

"I don't know what's cooking," she said. "But your playmate is very definitely fried."

Blade stared, also.

Two bottles stood beside one of the divans in front of the fireplace. Seated on the divan was Yvette Gastonne, a glass in one hand. Her other hand was caressing the touseled hair of flush-faced Tommy Case, who was lying on the floor, covered by a bearskin rug. He was grinning upward at the beautiful actress.

"You may kiss me now, Yvette," he was saying. Then, realizing he was observed, he turned to Janice and Blade. "Oh, hello," he said. "How'd the murder come out?"

One look at the sultry, full-lipped little screen star made Blade's pulsebeat step up a notch.

Case pouted. "Well, if you're going to be sullen about it, I withdraw the question," he said. "You've come just in time to spoil the fun. I was playing wolf."

"Thees Tommy looks for a wolf's skin," Yvette said. "But—poof! There is no wolf. He uses thee bear."

"She was about to be lost in the crush." Tommy came out from under the bearskin, grabbed a bottle and drew himself to his feet. "Have a drink," he said.

Blade picked up the second bottle, which was empty.

He discarded it, and grabbed the almost full one from Tommy Case.

"Employees of the Blade agency don't drink while on duty," he said, sternly.

HE TURNED to Jenks.

"Take this evidence and lock it up, Jenks." The butler took the bottle. "Put it in my room. It'll be safer there."

"Very good, sir."

Jenks left with the bottle.

Tommy Case came toward Blade.

"Don't be sore, boss," he said to Blade. "I've been getting information. Bottles of it."

"We'd better get upstairs," said Blade.

Janice stepped to the wall and pulled a bell cord. A pudgy, middle-aged woman soon appeared. Janice counted on her fingers.

"There'll be nine for dinner, Mrs. Jenks," she said. "Serve at eight o'clock."

"Nine as of now," said Case. "Let's hope nobody else gets bumped off. An empty chair—well, it's awfully empty, that's all. Here today, gone tonight. We live in a fast world."

Janice turned to Blade. "Your friend has a marvelous sense of humor!"

There was an annoyed cough behind them. Fat, bourbon-faced Duncan Barr, partner of Janice's dead father, came forward. He looked belligerently at Janice.

"A fine scene," he said, his voice quavering with anger. He pointed to Blade. "And what is this creature doing here?"

"I've retained him to investigate the murder, Duncan."

Duncan Barr advanced, his fists clenched.

"Dismiss him immediately! The deputy sheriffs, Phineas Payne and Homer Deeter, are adequate to handle the situation."

His withering gaze settled balefully on Blade.

Blade smiled at him.

"Consider yourself relieved of all responsibility for me," Blade said. "I don't work for you now, old man. I'm no longer chief of plant protection at Falconer-Barr Industries."

"I'll say you're not!" Barr blasted. "You gave my plants about as much protection as a ten-cent padlock."

"Getting rid of me before I had any evidence was the trick of the week," Blade said.

"I'm still wondering where those truckloads of priority materials went when they left the gates, and who ordered them."

"Shut up!" The words exploded from Barr's brick red face. "Get out of here!"

"This billing and cooing bores me," Case said.

He left the group, walked through the furniture, limping slightly, showing exaggerated care not to bump into any of it.

Janice looked at Barr.

"Understand me plainly, Duncan," she said, her voice cold. "I've engaged Mr. Blade. I'm paying him and this happens to be my home. I'm sorry you don't like my employees."

"There isn't a thing he can do about it, Janice." Blade's face was hard. "The deputies, Payne and Deeter, ordered everyone to stay close during the investigation. I'm staying—and he's staying." He smiled. "I'm going to get dressed for dinner."

Turning on his heel, Blade walked out of the living room and started for the wide stairs. Then he changed his mind, went through the reception hall and out of the front door.

The massive lodge and its surroundings fascinated him. It rested on the side of the mountain about one hundred yards from and fifty feet above the clear blue lake. The slope was terraced. Because of the slant of the mountain, the lodge had three stories in front but only one story at the rear. There was also the garage, with the servants' quarters over it, a tool shed and a nursery.

BLADE wandered into the nursery, saw a squat, round-shouldered man in overalls prying into a heavy tray with a trowel. At Blade's approach, he shot a furtive look over his shoulder, from beneath bushy eyebrows.

"What's in there?" Blade asked, pointing to the tray.

"Narcissus," the man replied. "Transplanting bulbs, gettin' 'em ready to put in the ground soon's the snow goes."

Blade introduced himself. The man said nothing. "Your name?" asked Blade.

"Sanders—Bill Sanders." The man straightened up. Blade studied his heavily stubbled features.

"I've seen you before," Blade said.

"No, you haven't."

After he worked at the lock of the boathouse for a few minutes, the door came open and Nick Blade moved cautiously inside

"You were assistant chief accountant at Falconer-Barr Industries." Blade watched the whiskered face grow pale. "Your name was Edgar Kopp." His voice hardened. "Come clean."

"Okay. I was. Indoor work got me down. Doctor ordered me into fresh air. Got this job."

"Sure," said Blade. "Good idea—coming up here where it's healthy. Did the doctor order the change of name, too?"

Sanders grew worried.

"Domestic trouble," he said. "Changed my name so she couldn't find me."

Blade surveyed the nursery. There wasn't much in it in the way of flowers. Along one side there were tools, and, a collection of traps, of all sorts. There were boxes and spring traps and mole plungers.

"You have a pretty extensive extermination department," Blade said. He looked at a shelf. There were several cans, bottles and paper boxes on it.

"Plenty of rodents up here. Keeps a man busy. Especially when they get into the buildings. They do because nobody's around but me most of the time. The Jenkses only come up when Miss Falconer does."

Blade picked up a wooden container. It was marked poison. It was a mixture of oats and raisins, the chief lethal ingredient being arsenic.

"Fumigate?" he asked.

Sanders, alias Kopp, nodded.

"Sometimes it's the only way you can get rid of the pests."

Blade looked over the rest of the labeled containers.

"Interesting," he said. "Adding machines to arsenic. By the way, Kopp, did you know that one of Miss Falconer's guests shuffled off this mortal coil?"

He watched the man go white again.

"Yes," Kopp said, "I'd heard. And it's Sanders, not Kopp."

"How'd you get the job?"

The fellow hesitated.

"Well—I—you see—when my health got so bad, I went to Mr. Barr, and he got in touch with Miss Falconer."

"For your health," Blade said.

He smiled at the puzzled Sanders.

"Be seeing you." Blade walked away.

Tommy Case, sitting on the edge of one of the twin beds, grinned at him when he entered the upstairs room. Blade returned the grin and went to the dresser. The bottle of brandy was sitting there. He pulled out the cork, sniffed and shuddered.

"Blah!" he exclaimed. "Sanders ought to use that on the rats."

"Take it easy, son," Case said.

He rose, pulled up his right trouser leg, revealing the base of an artificial limb. As the trouser went higher, aluminum framework was revealed.

"Knowing your devotion to Scotch, I took the liberty of dropping into the bar when Jenks wasn't around," he said. "The lock offered no difficulty."

Further pulls on the leg revealed the butt of a bottle of Haig and Haig.

"When that hunk of Nip shrapnel took off most of my pin at Iwo Jima, my first thought was I'd never be able to play football again," Case continued. "On second thought, I decided, who wants to play football, anyway? But, at that time, I didn't consider my new limb as a means of secret transportation. Yet, it's marvelous."

DEFTLY he removed the bottle and held it out to Blade.

"Here you are, chum. Yes, I was unhappy when I came out from under the ether, but every tragedy has its compensations. Drink to our portable bar."

Blade removed the cork and took a swig. He glanced at Case.

"What did you find out from Yvette?"

Case shrugged. "What gives in the murder?"

"It was poison, Tommy, quick acting poison. Yet, darn it, there isn't a sign of how she'd absorbed it, and a dame certainly doesn't gulp a potion when she's flying through the air on a pair of skis."

"Any poison burns in her mouth?"

"No."

"Who was with her last?"

"Greenway," Blade said. "He started her down the slide."

"That reminds me, Nick," Case said. "There was a fight last night. Ever since Cliff Todd showed up here, Beryl Glover had been making passes. Last night she got amorously stewed with Todd. She was wrestling with him in the library, just as Janice walked in."

"Beryl Glover started a fight with Todd as an innocent bystander. Janice told Beryl she was loaded and Beryl bopped her one."

Nick Blade frowned. "Skip the blow by blow account."

"Todd tried to separate 'em. The boys outside heard the beef. It took Greenway, young Fredericks, Janice's cousin, Duncan Barr and Todd to bust it up. When the belligerents had been pried apart, Janice announced: 'If you ever touch Cliff Todd again, I'll kill you.' Yvette said Janice's voice sent shudders through her."

Blade got a cigarette going.

"Not so good for my client," he said.

Tommy Case had another shot of brandy.

"But that isn't all. It seems Beryl Glover took 'em as they came. Doc Greenway fell for her, too. Got so serious it looked like a license."

"Then she went for Todd and the doctor has been jealous?"

"Perhaps murderously so. You know that old psychological twist—'If I can't have her, nobody else'll get her.' "

"A doctor ought to know better," Nick said. "He called it heart disease."

"When do you get the autopsy report?"

"Tonight."

Blade began slipping out of his clothes.

"Two suspects, two motives. Tommy, I've a hunch there's more to it than we think."

He unbuttoned his shirt, took it off, threw it on his bed. Muscles rippled over his tapering shoulders as he bent and picked up his bag.

"What're you doing tonight, Tommy?"

"Me and Yvette. Boy, oh, boy!"

Blade shook his head.

"No, Tommy. You're going to Los Angeles."

Case bolted off the bed.

"You can call it mutiny but that's out. I saw the look you gave Yvette. You can't shunt me away while you play games with that chick!"

Blade held up his hand.

"Look, Tommy. I was at the scene of the crime, so Deputy Sheriff Payne says I mustn't run away until the coroner decides on natural causes, suicide or murder. You weren't there. You can leave."

"Baloney, chum. I know your methods."

"Wait a minute. There's a lot of things we must learn about Falconer-Barr Industries. There was something mighty strange going on there. Barr fired me before I could put my finger on it. Then I come up here and find Edgar Kopp, the company's former assistant chief accountant, working as caretaker under the name of Bill Sanders.

"I want you to discover why Sanders is here? What kind of a hold has he got on Barr?"

"Okay. What's this got to do with Beryl Glover's demise?"

"I don't know. That's why I want you to go to Los Angeles. Find out about the financial condition of Falconer-Barr. See if you can put your finger on Barr's bank account. See an attorney, Mr. Fitz, of Dalyrymple, Dalyrymple, and Fitz."

"That sounds like hay fever, Nick."

"Fitz has the lowdown on Janice's father's will. Also Janice and probably Barr."

Case paused in the doorway.

"Remember, Nick," he said, viciously. "Every time Yvette kisses you, she'll really be thinking of me!"

CHAPTER III

Poison Aplenty

STRAINED and taut, the dinner finally came to an end.

Only Johnny Fredericks seemed to have any life in him. The amateur photographer had the philosophy that the world should go right along, letting the dead bury the dead. Fredericks had a jolly round face, round, brown eyes, an upturned nose and a supply of jokes.

"I've printed those pictures I took of Sandra this morning," he announced as most of the party pecked at the dessert served by Framingham Jenks.

"Do get them," urged Janice. She glanced at Blade.

"Johnny's marvelous with cameras. Carries his own developing and printing apparatus along with him."

"The pictures are lovely," Sandra said, giving Fredericks an adoring look. "I'm afraid Johnny and his camera both think I look far better than I do."

Blade shuddered at the overwhelming modesty of the assertion and decided that it probably was the truth. Sandra was pretty in a listless sort of way, with hair that was neither blond nor brown. Her eyes were a cold gray and her nose was too small for her face.

Johnny Fredericks could have her, so far as Blade was concerned. Sandra wanted a career as a model, or as an actress. If she gave them up for Johnny, Blade was sure she'd never let him forget it.

Blade looked around the table as Fredericks excused himself to get the photographs. Tall, curly-headed Cliff Todd, still war racked, was tearing a paper match folder into small bits, with hands that wouldn't stay quiet. His glance darted uneasily about the long table.

Fredericks brought the pictures and passed them around. Blade thought they were fuzzy.

Duncan Barr sat silently, staring at his empty wine glass.

"When is this Sheriff Payne going to release us?" he demanded of no one in particular.

"As soon as the coroner reports the case as heart disease," Dr. Greenway said. "The whole thing is stupid." He glared at Blade. "Caused by meddling."

Cliff Todd rose suddenly.

"I've had enough of death!" he exclaimed. "I'm getting out of here."

Janice started after him, placed her hand on his arm and whispered something. He pushed her away and stalked out of the dining room. Janice followed him, her face white and drawn.

Blade met Yvette's lavender eyes and was rewarded by a speculative twinkle.

Janice returned.

"We might as well adjourn to the living room," she said. Her hands were trembling.

There was a scraping of chairs. Blade intercepted Yvette.

"You'd look even lovelier in the moonlight," he murmured.

"Eet ees so cold," the French girl exclaimed.

"Not with me along," Blade said. "I'll borrow Janice's car. We can go down to the village. I'm sure Deputy Sheriff Payne, won't miss us. We can stop in at Chal's."

Her answer was a single turgid glance from her bright eyes.

She went up stairs for wraps while Blake sought out Janice and asked permission to use the Prescott.

"Help yourself," she said. Fear crept into her eyes. "You won't be gone long?"

"No, queen. Deputy Sheriff Payne might think I was escaping. My motive is more despicable."

Janice raised her eyebrows.

"Yvette?" she asked.

He nodded. Fredericks gave him a wink.

"We're going to Chal's," Blade said.

"While you're at the village, pick up some Healthonas for me," Janice said.

BLADE stared. "What's Healthonas?"

"Vitamin pills, silly." She laughed.

"Scotch is good enough for me," Blade answered, and made for the hall as Yvette came down the stairs.

Blade guided Yvette across the circle to Janice's coupe. Two minutes later, they were rolling onto the state highway which wound around the lake, across the dam and into the village. Yvette snuggled closer.

"You do not say much, Neek," she said.

"I'm the strong, silent type," he replied.

The car's powerful engine purred through Pine Knot. The moon splashed a sliver track across the lake. Shadowy patches of snow alternated with moon-soaked stretches.

The car crossed the dam. Blade sent it along a straightaway which crossed a meadow. A half mile from the village he braked abruptly for a turn. He felt, rather than heard, something snap. The car headed for the edge of the road. He reached for the emergency. Something underneath the car snagged in the highway. The car spun sidewise, and crashed into the bank.

Blade released his breath and looked at Yvette. Her face was white in the moonlight, her make-up a grotesque mask.

"Thees ees sometheeng new," she managed. "Usually, they run of gasoline."

"We Blades are original," he answered, and patted her knee. "Wearing high-heeled pumps? It's nearly a mile into the village."

She pointed to flat-heeled boots.

"Yvette ees always ready to walk," she said.

"You're a good sport," he told her. "Now I'll see what busted."

He climbed from the car, began exploring beneath it with a flat pocket flashlight. If he needed proof that Janice wasn't imagining things, this was it. The cotter pins on the tie rod nuts had been pulled. One nut had fallen, dropping the rod which, fortunately, had dug into the road and had prevented them from plunging into a ravine one hundred feet deep. Satisfied there was no chance for immediate repairs, he stuck his head into the coupe.

"We're going for a little stroll in the moonlight," he said.

He helped Yvette out and they started off down the highway. A half hour later they reached the village. Chal's neon sign gave them a multi-colored welcome.

They entered the place. There was a bar, tables and chairs, a juke box and a few

couples dancing. Blade placed a stool for Yvette. The bartender approached.

"Double brandy," Yvette ordered.

"Scotch and soda," said Blade. He turned to Yvette. "Excuse me," he said. He went to the telephone booth. A sailor was talking. It promised to be long-winded, so Blade went into the street.

The Village Drug Store was across the street. He went inside.

"Package of Healthonas," Blade said to the man behind the counter. "And I want to use the phone."

The clerk indicated a wall telephone. Blade looked in the book and called Roy Taylor, Janice's mechanic.

"My name's Nick Blade," he said. "Janice Falconer's car is disabled on the highway a mile west of the village. You'll have to tow."

Taylor promised to pick it up.

"I'll need a car to get back to Falcon's Lair," Blade added.

"I'll come down and get you."

Blade heard a click on the wire.

"Hello!" he called.

"I'm still on," said Taylor. "Anything else?"

"I'll be at the drug store or Chal's."

He said good-by and heard another click. He turned to find the druggist beside him, holding out a package of Healthonas. The druggist's eyes appraised him speculatively.

"You're Nick Blade?" the druggist asked. "Say, Janice Falconer's been trying to get you for the last half hour."

Blade called Falcon's Lair.

Janice was breathlessly excited.

"Nick!" she exclaimed. "Payne and Deeter are raising the merry Ned because you aren't around. And that's not all. San Benito's been calling by long distance for nearly an hour. Call Operator Two there. And, by all that's holy, hurry back!"

Again that click.

"Janice!"

"Yes, Nick?"

"I thought you'd rung off. I'll hurry."

PUZZLED, Blade held the hook down with his hand, released it. The operator answered. He asked for Operator Two at San Benito and gave his name. There was a pause on the open wire and a man's voice came on.

"Blade?"

"Right."

"This is Coroner Dale. Just finished the autopsy." Blade gripped the receiver. "It's cyanide of potassium. Enough to kill three people."

"I'm not surprised," Blade said. "Thanks."

"I've mailed you a detailed report."

"Good."

Blade hung up. He turned to the clerk.

"That's a punk line," he said.

"What do you expect, Mr. Blade, when practically every store in town is on it?"

"What!" Blade exclaimed.

"You're not in Los Angeles," the clerk said. "We've been short of help and equipment ever since the war. It's one great big party line."

Blade realized that the clicking noise was made by someone listening in.

"Thanks for everything. Charge the Healthonas to Miss Falconer." He barged out of the store.

He found Yvette sitting in front of two empty glasses at Chal's bar. Hers and his. Five men, who surrounded her, faded away at his approach.

"I should have come alone," Blade said. He beckoned to the bartender. "More Scotch."

[*Turn page*]

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The bartender brought it and Blade drank his own Scotch. He went outside. A car pulled up. A man got out.

"Taylor?" Blade asked. "Wait." Going into the bar, he got Yvette and piled into the sedan after her.

"Stopped and looked at the Prescott," said Taylor. "Somebody's been tampering with it again."

Yvette giggled. Blade looked at her. Her eyes were round and shiny, and she was swaying stiffly. She was tight.

"You theenk Yvette don't know?" she said. "Somebody is trying to keel Janice." Her lips turned upward, half-parted. "A kees?"

Blade kissed her. He felt warm all over.

"Janice is a gracious girl," he said, a moment later. "But can't we skip her right now?"

His mind was far away. Who had been listening in on the telephone conversations? So many local outlets made tracing impossible. Who could have been in the village? When he had left Falcon's Lair all were present and accounted for. He had made sure of that. No one had passed them on the road going into the village.

"By the way," he said to Yvette. He pulled the packet of Healthonas from his overcoat pocket. "Give these to Janice will you, my sweet? I might forget."

The girl slipped the package into a pocket of her fur coat.

He sat wrapped in thought. Yvette's head nodded, fell against his shoulder. She looked like a tired child. Blade smiled down at her. The car raced through the night.

CHAPTER IV

Blade Likes Flowers

WHEN the car reached Falcon's Lair, Blade paid Taylor, thanked him, awoke Yvette, assisted her to the door, and rang the bell. The great lodge was dark. After a while Jenks answered, in a bathrobe.

"You still look like a butler, Jenks," Blade whispered. "Take the wench, will you? I want to look around."

The butler gave him a sleepy nod, helped Yvette inside, and Blade started down to the lake. When he reached the boathouse, he tried the door. It was locked. He pulled a small packet from his pocket and in a minute, the door swung open.

He went inside. A sleek speedboat loomed under his flashlight. He went forward, lifted the hatch and felt the engine. It was warm. He slipped into the front cockpit, felt for the ignition. The key was there. He turned it over and stepped on the starter. The engine caught, idled. The sound was soft and throaty.

Someone had taken the speedboat to go to the village, which was less than a mile away, across the narrow part of lake. By car, the distance was more than twenty miles. Someone had left the lodge and had arrived at the village before he did. The speedboat could be idled almost silently from the boathouse. At a reasonable distance, greater power could be applied. The same procedure could be used on return.

He turned the key in the ignition switch. He climbed out of the boat, left the boathouse. Taking a circuitous route, he hiked back to the lodge, avoided it, and paused at the nursery. The nursery door was unlocked. He went inside. He turned on his flashlight. This proved to be a disastrous mistake.

He saw the spurt of ochre flame, but didn't hear the explosion of the weapon. Something else exploded inside his head first, and he pitched forward onto the wooden floor.

When he regained consciousness the light blinded him. He was surprised to find himself in his bed. His hands groped for his head, which was all ache.

"He's come to," a voice said.

It was Janice, sounding far away.

Blade blinked his eyes and focused them. Dr. Greenway was shooting a hypodermic needle full of something into his arm. Beside him stood Deputy Sheriff Phineas Payne, as usual looking much too large for his clothes. He was a big man, weighing about two hundred and fifty pounds and pushing up a couple of inches beyond six feet. His trousers fitted his thighs like sausage skins. His belt rode low on his stomach, and was pulled askew by a heavy .38 caliber Police Positive. He wore a red and black woolen shirt and a bow tie of imitation leather. His head was big, his hair was moving back, and he needed a shave. He stared at Blade from beneath drooping eyelids.

Homer Deeter, behind him, was a shrunken carbon copy of Payne. He was just under six feet and he didn't bulge so much in the middle, but otherwise the men were alike as

two cartridges.

Janice came from behind them.

"Are you all right, Nick?" she asked.

Blade nodded. The move hurt his head.

He looked at Greenway.

"How bad?"

"A scalp crease," said the physician dourly.

"You'll give us a statement?" Payne inquired.

Blade told of his visit to the nursery.

"Why'd you go there?" Payne snapped suspiciously.

"I just love rhododendrons," Blake said. "They brighten one's room so. Do something to the soul."

Payne bent over the bed. "Do you want to get locked up?"

"Because somebody shot me, or because I like rhododendrons? Look, Phineas, old boy —I've had a very active day. Would you mind rolling your hoops? I need rest."

His eye drifted to the bureau as they started to file out.

"Janice," he said. "Be a good girl and pass me that bottle of Scotch. I might have a relapse."

Greenway glared at him.

"In your condition, no!" he objected.

"Look, Doc," Blade said. "I'm going to wake up with a headache anyway. Why spoil my fun?"

JANICE passed him the bottle and he motioned her to stay. After the others had left, she came over and sat on the side of the bed. She gave him a troubled smile.

"What happened while I was away?" he asked.

"Payne and Deeter took statements. He called us into the library one by one."

"Who was on the hot spot at nine-fifty-five?" he asked.

Janice thought a moment.

"It must have been Jenks," she said. "Yes, it was Jenks. I remember, because about fifteen minutes after he went in, I turned on the ten o'clock news broadcast."

"Jenks, eh? Well, he's one man who couldn't have been in the village." He frowned. "Has Payne tagged anybody?"

"The underground says Greenway," she answered. "Payne already knew that Greenway was the last person with Beryl. Sandra Pollard spilled the story of Greenway's great love for my late lamented guest, and how she went all of a sudden for Cliff."

Blade felt his eyelids getting heavy.

"Good gosh!" he exclaimed. "And Greenway gave me a hypo! Heaven knows how far out it'll knock me!"

He reached for the bottle, took a deep pull.

"Gotta counteract it," he said. Janice seemed far away. Her voice came from a void.

"Are you all right, Nick?"

"I'm okay, queen," he said. "You run along." His tongue felt the size of a watermelon.

The light went out. The door closed. The bed started to rock. Blade reeled to his feet. He staggered into the bathroom. Then he was sick. After a while he felt better. He paced the room to shake off the effects of the narcotic. Finally, it was too much for him. He threw himself across the bed and slept. . . .

The scream was long and shrill.

It was the stricken cry of a woman.

It pierced Nick Blade's drugged brain, sent a shiver down his spine and forced him into an upright position on his bed. Still groggy from the hypodermic, he swung his feet to the floor and plunged them into his bedroom slippers. At the same time, he pulled on a bathrobe and headed for the door.

Ahead of him, in the hall, he saw a vague and shadowy figure. It was so dark in the long corridor that he could not tell whether it was that of a man or woman. He plunged after the figure in wild pursuit, sure he would nail his prey. Just as he passed a door on the right he was hit by a heavy body which drove him to the floor in spite of his frantic struggles.

At the same time he heard a stir, cries and tumult throughout the chalet.

Someone turned on the lights in the hall.

Blade realized that his tortured form was being crushed against the floor by the bulk of Deputy Sheriff Payne.

"Deeter, we've got him!" Payne yelled. "Deeter, where are you?"

"Coming, Phineas, coming."

Payne looked down at Blade.

"You're going to have a hard time explaining this."

"If you'll—get off me—I'll—start in," Blade panted.

Payne heaved his huge body upward. Blade gulped air. He saw that the deputy had his service revolver in his hand and that he was looking into the unwelcome end of it.

"This is a swell way to treat an invalid!" Blade said.

"What were you doing in this hall?" Payne demanded.

"Same thing you were—trying to catch the person who caused the scream." He pointed down the hall. "I was running toward the sound—not away from it, you fatheads. I'd have nailed whoever it was if you hadn't decided to brush up on your running tackle."

"Okay. Who screamed?"

"Miss Janice Falconer, I think. Now that the person who caused her to scream is safe and sound, the next best thing to do is to have a chat with her. She might give us some information."

The suggestion painfully pierced Payne's brain.

BY THIS time, the guests had begun to appear—Dr. Greenway, pulling his trousers over his thin pyjamaed legs; Cliff Todd, wearing an overcoat over his sleeping togs, his nervous eyes bright with alarm; Yvette, attractive even without make-up and her hair in curlers; portly Duncan Barr, encased in a bathrobe; Johnny Fredericks, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, and pale Sandra Pollard, clinging to his arm and asking questions.

Blade pushed down the crowded hall, past the bewildered guests, to Janice's suite.

"No tricks, Blade," Payne warned, from behind him. "I've got you covered."

Janice was standing like a statue with one hand on the bed-post, just inside her door. A quilted robe failed to conceal the streamlined curves of her tall body. Blade thought of marble.

"What's up, queen?" he asked.

"Somebody was in my room."

"Door locked?"

Janice pointed to the floor. A key lay on the soft rug.

"It was," she said. "Whoever it was worked the key out. Used another, I guess. Most of the keys fit most of the locks. This place wasn't built with the idea of protection from murderers."

"Who came in?"

"I don't know, Nick. I had a bad dream, one of those things that make you start and wake up. I lay still. I heard someone fumbling at my dresser. I lay very quiet for a moment, trying to see who it was. Then I cried out. Whoever it was ran into the hall. That's all I can tell you."

Blade turned to Payne. Deeter was right behind him.

"Have Deeter tell everybody to go back to bed. Tell 'em nobody's hurt and to calm down."

Payne turned, issued orders to his assistant.

"Turn on your lights," Payne told Janice. She clicked the switch.

"Now, come over to the dresser."

Janice did so.

"Anything missing, queen?"

They looked over the top. Payne saw Janice's large diamond ring, a pearl necklace, two pairs of earrings, one of emeralds, the other of rubies. In addition, there were exotic perfumes, cosmetics, and a toilet set, as well as the box of Healthonas he had given Yvette.

"Nothing's missing," Janice replied. "Whoever it was didn't touch anything, I guess. At least, nothing's been moved."

"This gets me," Payne said. "What's it all about?"

"Maybe we'd better talk it over," suggested Blade. "Janice, you get back in bed. You're shivering."

The girl complied. Blade pointed to a heavily upholstered chair. He looked at Payne.

"That ought to hold you," he said. He sat down on a chaise lounge.

He watched Payne lower himself into the protesting chair.

"You might as well let us have it," he said. "I hear you've the case all wrapped up. Why're you pinning it on Greenway?"

Payne cleared his throat. "How'd you know that?"

"It was a little bird."

"Well, Homer and I do figure he did it. It's open and shut. I asked him why he said Miss Glover died of heart disease, and he tried awful hard to cover up. First he pretended he'd made too quick an examination. Then he said he'd been attending the girl for alcoholism, and he knew she had a weak heart. But it was what he didn't tell us that clinched it."

"What was that?"

"About carryin' the torch for her. Sandra Pollard spilled the whole story. He'd been tryin' to get Miss Glover to marry him."

"Any evidence she was murdered?"

"Found a hypodermic mark on her arm."

"What did Greenway say about that?"

"Said he gave her a sedative last night after the brawl with Miss Falconer."

"Cyanide of potassium killed the girl," Blade said. "Know anything about it, Payne?"

"Why—ah—no."

"I thought not. Look here: one particle, smaller than the head of a pin, will kill. It hits you as hard as a bullet or a knife in the heart."

FOR a moment Payne's small, flesh-heavy eyes blinked. "I guess the hypodermic theory is out. But I still think Greenway did it. If cyanide works that fast, how did she get down the ski-slide?"

Blade shook his head.

"If I knew that, I'd have the murder half solved. I'll tell you frankly, Sheriff, I'm stymied. Cyanide of potassium burns the mouth and throat. There were no burns. The quantity found in Miss Glover's body kills instantly. If Greenway had managed to stick a needle into her, she'd have died in his arms."

"I still think he did it. He's carrying the torch—and she goes for this Todd fellow."

"Why not arrest him, then?"

"Who do you think did it, Blade?"

"Practically anybody in the house. We haven't dug up all the motives yet."

"Who do you think potted you in the nursery, Blade?"

"The murderer. By the way, Payne, what're you going to do about finding that gun?"

"Deeter started searchin' the place just after you got shot. Soon's daylight comes, we're goin' to have the lake dragged. That's probably where the would-be killer threw it. They always do. Wouldn't keep it on him."

Blade smiled to himself.

"I hope you find it," he said.

Payne yawned.

"I think I'll get some shut-eye," he said. "This has been a tough night."

Blade looked out the window. Dawn was paling the stars.

"I'll stay here with Miss Falconer for a while," he said.

"Very well."

Payne hoisted himself to his feet, bid them good night. He lumbered across the room, went into the hall. Then he turned back.

"When you get ready to turn in, Blade, wake Deeter," he said. "He'll patrol the hall."

"Thanks." Blade turned to Janice.

"Well," he said, "we're lucky."

Janice's eyebrows lifted.

"Why?"

"The bloodhound evidently hasn't found out that you threatened to kill Beryl Glover."

Janice's hand flew to her breast.

"I—I didn't mean it."

"I know you didn't, "Blade said. "But the mastodon hasn't any imagination. He's apt to take it literally. I'm plenty worried."

"Nick, just what did happen last night?"

He told her about the accident to the car and about someone listening in on the telephone.

"I heard that clicking, too, Nick," she said.

"Who knows about the telephone situation in the village?"

"That could be anybody. With the exception of Yvette, they've all been coming up here for years."

"How about Greenway?"

"He's been over to the village three or four times. If he used the phone at all, he'd have found out about the party line. He said something about keeping in touch with his office, and he's called several times from Falcon's Lair."

"Why did you go to the nursery, Nick?" Janice asked.

"Coroner Dale told me about the cyanide. This afternoon I'd seen a package of it there. Sanders, your caretaker, had been using it to fumigate the buildings to kill rodents."

Janice's eyes widened.

"Do you know who Sanders is?" Nick asked.

"What do you mean?"

He told her about Sanders' former job and his alias. "How'd you happen to hire him?" he asked.

"Why—Duncan Barr asked me to. Said the man had had a bit of hard luck and was a skilled gardener. I put him on." Janice sat up in bed. "Nick, did you find the cyanide?"

"I flashed my light on the spot where it had been just before the killer creased me. It was gone."

"Good heavens! How much was there?"

"Several pounds. Enough to kill everybody between here and Los Angeles."

"What're you going to do, Nick?"

"I'm going to start prowling around this morning. I have my own ideas. Particularly about the gun. Then I'm going to try to put my finger on the cyanide. I've got a busy day coming up."

"You'd better get some sleep, Nick."

He rose, stretched wearily.

"One thing's got me, queen. I can't go to sleep until I figure out how the poison got into Beryl Glover and then failed to work

right away. In the meantime, you'd better grab some shut-eye yourself."

He bade her good night, went into the hall. He heard the key turn in the lock behind him. He went to Deeter's room, woke him, and told him to watch the hall. Then he went to his own room. His mind was working in high gear and he could feel the wheels going around inside his aching skull. He took another drag from the Scotch bottle. He stretched out on the bed, asking himself the same question over and over again.

How did the murderer kill Beryl Glover?

CHAPTER V.

Twixt Cup and Lip

NICK BLADE tried, but sleep was out of the question.

Blade dragged himself off the bed, took a hot shower followed by a cold one. The icy water revived him somewhat. He dressed, slipped his overcoat over his arm and went downstairs to the breakfast room. Johnny Fredericks and Sandra Pollard were just finishing.

"Good morning, sleuth," Fredericks said. "Everything under control?"

Blade nodded.

"Quite a night, eh? How's your head?"

Blade felt the bandage. "Not so good."

Fredericks pushed back his chair, helped Sandra to her feet.

"Thought we'd get up fairly early," he said. "Luckily, all of the trouble passed us by, except for waking us twice. Had a reasonably good night's sleep, otherwise. We're going out to see what kind of effects we can get with the early morning sun."

He picked up a large photographic case and slipped the strap over his shoulder.

"I hope you recover quickly," Sandra said.

"Thanks," said Blade. They filed out. Blade found himself envying the two young people in love. Jenks came in from the butler's pantry.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "No ill effects from your injury, apparently. What would you like for breakfast?"

"Half a grapefruit, bacon, three scrambled eggs, buttered toast, and coffee." Jenks turned to go. "By the way, who's been down this morning?"

"Just Mr. Johnny and Miss Pollard, sir. The others, I fear, are a bit done in. Oh, yes—the constabulary. It seems they were going to drag the lake. Looking for the weapon, I believe, which was used to put you out of the running."

"Thanks for the information."

Jenks turned, but Blade stopped him. Jenks watched him with a mixture of admiration and alarm.

"Jenks," Blade said. "Let's play games. Let's suppose you're a killer."

"But I'm not. Really, sir."

"Now, Jenks, don't be so literal. You are in the nursery, trying to get something. Somebody interrupts you. You have a gun. You fire at the intruder. The man drops. You grab the thing you want and run from the nursery. Where do you head?"

"Why—into the house and into my room, to assume an attitude of innocence."

"So far, so good. You'd go directly?"

"I jolly well would. I'd pretend to be doing something else, of course. That is, something besides shooting people."

"Very good, Jenks. Now, what would you do with the gun?"

"I'd throw it way—quickly."

"Jenks, you'd make an excellent murderer."

"Why, thank you, sir." Jenks' eyes widened slowly and his face froze as he listened to his own voice. He spluttered: "I mean, that's a horrible thought!"

"Look out the window, Jenks. See the men in the boats. They're searching for a gun."

"Why, the joke's on them. That's very funny, isn't it, Mr. Blade, hunting for the gun so far away. Haw!" Jenks swallowed his outburst. "Beg pardon, sir. Nearly forgot myself in my amusement. I'll get your breakfast, sir."

He vanished through the swinging door. A moment later he returned with Blade's order. The detective ate, scarcely tasting it. Then he rose, pulled on his overcoat, and went outside.

The case was going to be more difficult than he imagined—more difficult than a simple search for a missing revolver. But the local police apparently did not know that. Find the gun, take the fingerprints from the butt, then match them up with the guests at Falcon's Lair, and the killer was in the net. Nothing to it. As easy as that!

But Blade's methods were more abstruse. He couldn't be sure that the man or woman who had shot at him was the same person who had killed Beryl Glover. Finding the gun

was but one item. There were others.

His steps now led down to the lake, for he wanted to make certain that he had the upper field of search to himself.

"How is it going?" he called out to the police in the boat.

"No luck yet," Payne's assistant, Deeter, shouted back. "Do you want us to row ashore for you right now?"

"Thanks, but I'll not risk getting wet when you turn over," Blade called back.

Deeter jumped back from the edge of the boat in fear. The water was ice cold. A dip might mean pneumonia.

With a grin, Blade sauntered back up the slope toward the house. He had the appearance of a man wasting time.

He lined up three imaginary paths between the nursery and the main building. One path went from the nursery to the main entrance, the second from the nursery to the service entrance, and the third from the nursery to the side entrance. He started from the nursery along the first path. So many feet had crushed the snow that there was no possibility of obtaining footprints. But these were not what he was after.

[*Turn page*]

HERE ARE those miracle-mates... *your* face, *our* blades. Yes, after four years serving our armed forces Star Double Edge Blades are ready to serve *you* again.

YOU WAITED 4 YEARS FOR A SHAVE *like this!*

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PROCESS

THE AMAZING 6NX Process gives Star Blades edges steel has never taken before! *Star Division, American Safety Razor Corp., Brooklyn 1, N. Y.*

HE WALKED back and forth between the nursery and the chalet, always altering his course slightly, always looking downward at the snow, not missing a square foot.

Once, he looked up. He saw Sanders watching him covertly from his quarters over the garage.

Realizing he had been detected at his spying, Sanders ducked back behind the curtains.

An hour passed, and then another. Blade was still walking back and forth. He had covered seventy-five feet on both sides of the line leading from the nursery to the main entrance, and was ending his shuttle to and from the service entrance when he noticed a clump of ironwood. He pawed through the naked branches and, in the heart of them, saw an indentation.

He plunged his hand into the snow, dug and groped. It came out clutching a blue-steel Colt's .32 automatic. He looked around to see that he was unobserved. Then he slipped the weapon into his overcoat pocket.

He went to the nursery. He put himself, as nearly as he could remember, in the position in which he was standing when he was shot. The bullet had creased the side of his head. He estimated the position of the person who fired at him and then did an about-face. He went to the wall. There, he found the hole which the slug had made. He checked the distance to the floor. Then he pulled out a pocket knife and probed carefully. He was rewarded by finding and cutting out a steel-jacketed bullet. It was of .32 caliber.

"Well, that's one point cleared up," he said to himself.

He pocketed the slug, left the nursery, went into the chalet through the main entrance, and into the breakfast room. It was empty. He slapped a domed bell which rested on the table.

Jenks came in.

"Anybody else down, Jenks?"

"Dr. Greenway, sir. I believe he went to the village. Special permission from Sheriff Payne."

"Very good. Another libation of coffee. Not too strong. The stuff throws me off my beam."

"Very good, sir," Jenks said. "And I have a letter for you. Came by the early post."

He went to the sideboard, returned with an envelope. Blade had it half opened when Janice entered. He rose. She greeted him with a wan smile. He held her chair. He asked:

"Get any rest?"

"About as much as the heroine in a movie serial," she answered. She busied herself tearing the waxed paper wrapping off the package of Healthonas. Blade glanced over the note from Coroner Dale which he had taken from the envelope.

He read:

> In addition to potassium cyanide, the stomach contained ferrous sulfate, fish liver oil, tuna liver oil, and a trace of liver concentrate. These were in addition to coffee, eggs and tomato juice.

The crackling of the waxed paper suddenly attracted his attention. He looked up. With sudden fear he watched Janice take the cover from the box, lift out a brown capsule the size of an olive pit and raise it toward her mouth with her left hand. Her right seized on her glass of water.

He rose half out of his chair, swung his open hand violently across the table. It struck Janice's left hand, sent the capsule whirling into space, stung her cheek, and knocked the water glass out of her hand, drenching the table. She leaped to her feet, anger flashing in her eyes.

"Nick!" she exclaimed. "Have you gone mad?"

Blade laughed. He laughed long and loud. Jenks came through the swinging door with the scotch in his hand and stiffened in amazement at the scene. Janice had seized the vase of flowers from the center of the table and had pulled it back of her head, ready to hurl it.

"No, Janice, no!" Blade shouted. "I'll explain!"

Janice lowered the vase.

"But if you make one move, Nick," she said, "I'll let you have it."

BLADE waved a napkin.

"I've made the discovery of the age," he said. "I should be shouting 'Eureka!' Instead, we'll all look for the capsule." He nodded to Janice. "Now, on all fours. Come on!"

He started searching the carpet. Janice, angry with him and confused, did likewise. Jenks forgot his butlerish dignity and joined the search.

"Please, could you seet up and bark, Neek?"

Yvette Gastonne was standing in the door-

way with amused concern.

"Such in int'resting place. So many odd theengs happen! An' wen I accept thee invitation, I theenk I'll be very much boredom."

"Good morning, Yvette," Blade said. "We're playing, 'Who'll find the Capsule?' Want to join?"

The French girl shook her head. She held up both her hands in a gesture of defense.

"No, no. Last night I play games weeth you. I almost get kill, I freeze my feet, wolves attack me in thee bar when you leave me, I get tight and pass out. I do not like your games. Thees Tommy Case—he nevair come back?"

"Stop harping on Case!" Blade sighed. "Still, they all do."

Jenks rose, donned the full mantle of his lost dignity. He held up the missing capsule.

"Here it is, sir," he said.

"Thanks, Jenks."

Blade rose and took the capsule. He pulled on his overcoat, slipped the pellet into his pocket. He picked up the package of Healthonas, deposited them in the same place.

"And now, Janice," he said, "I leave you to your vase tossing. Thank heavens you didn't heave it. It would have finished me."

"At the risk of being too, too personal, may I ask what this is all about?" demanded Janice. "Do you go around bopping people every morning?"

"Setting up exercises," Blade told her. "That's how I lost two wives. Let it be a lesson to you. And now, may I use the station wagon?"

"Of course," Janice said.

Nick Blade was already out the door.

CHAPTER VI.

All Guns Have Owners

LIKE a rocket, the station wagon, with Nick Blade at the wheel, careened around the Rim of the Universe, shot through Crystal Springs, clipped the edges of Ski Valley, roared past the Indianhead Lake turnoff, and started down the high gear road toward San Benito. Fire engines, police cars and ambulances may have made the run faster—but Blade was willing to stake his time against any of them.

On the straightaway above Indianhead Hotel, with San Benito in sight, he saw a State Highway Patrol car set across the road. He jammed into second gear, slammed on the brakes, and dragged to a stop with only ten feet to spare. Two patrolmen with drawn revolvers advanced on him.

"Stick 'em up!" came the command.

Blade obliged.

"We've had reports on you all the way from Pine Village," one of the men said. "What's the big idea of the road race?"

"I'm on my way to see Coroner Dale," he said, reaching for credentials.

"At the rate you're goin', you'll find him all right—but you won't see him," said the second policeman.

Blade explained his mission.

"That's different," said the first. "We'll get the car out of the way so you can move along. We'd convoy you, only we don't want you to run off the road."

Blade heaved a sigh of relief. The patrolmen backed their car from the highway and he roared on, with a grateful wave of his hand.

He found Coroner Dale in his office in the County Building. He presented him with the Healthona capsules, including the one he had batted from Janice's hand.

"Looks as if they have pinholes in them," he said. "Analyze one and see what you get. I'm off for Police Headquarters. Have they a lab over there?"

"Ballistics."

"Fine."

Five minutes later, Blade was firing cartridges from the blue steel thirty-two automatic into cotton batting. The best specimen bullet he placed under the comparison microscope, together with the one he had dug out of the nursery wall.

"Quite a resemblance," he told the Lab technician. "Take a look."

The man verified his observation.

"Same gun fired both bullets," he said.

Blade thanked him and went to the lobby of the building. There was a telephone pay station there. He dropped a nickel into the slot, dialed long distance and put in a collect call for Tommy Case's apartment. A minute passed and he heard Case's sleepy voice answering. The operator asked Case if he would accept the call as Blade looked at his wristwatch.

It was ten o'clock.

"Glad to see you're on the job," said Blade. "I suppose you've got a good excuse for being in bed this time in the morning?"

"Hangover," came the reply. "Boy, what a dish! Fortunes were made and lost last night!"

Blade's gorge rose at the thought of the hours he'd put in—and the damage he'd suffered.

"I suppose I have to fire you again."

"Why, Nick!" Case's voice was pained. "After all I've done for you. Why, last night—"

"You've told me about last night."

"Oh, no, I haven't. The dish I'm telling you about is confidential secretary to C. C. Graham, vice president in charge of production of Falconer-Barr. You see, I couldn't get her tight drinking iced tea, and so I was brave and faced it, consuming alcoholic beverage with utter abandon. All for you, chum."

Blade found himself smiling.

"Got the lowdown?"

"Positively."

"Seen Attorney Fitz?"

"He's buying me lunch."

"Good. Then get back up the mountain as fast as you can—after you've done one more thing. Got a pencil?"

"Yep."

"C one-twenty-three eight-seven-four B. That's the number of a Colt's automatic. Check it with the Los Angeles County sheriff's office. Find out who bought it, who it's registered to. And then come a-runnin'."

"Okay, Nick."

BLADE hung up and went to Coroner Dale's office. Dale greeted him with a grim face. In responce to Blade's interrogating look, the coroner wagged his head.

"There's enough cyanide of potassium in each one of those capsules to cause instant death," he said. "I checked about ten at random. They've all got pinpoint holes in them, and I think I have the answer. Come into my laboratory."

Dale rose from his desk and went through a doorway into a white room lined with bottles. On a tile table, near a Bunsen burner, retorts, tubes and mortars were several capsules. Beside them was a hypodermic syringe.

"See here, Blade."

Dale picked up one of the capsules in one hand. He took the syringe in the other, and fitted the needle into the tiny hole.

"That's the way I think it was done," he said.

"Thanks," said Blade. "You keep the capsules, Dale. Our friend, Phineas Payne, will probably need them. I've got to get back up the hill. . . ."

Blade found Payne and Deeter eating lunch in the breakfast room as he came into Falcon's Lair. The warmth of the room was welcome. Outside it was dank and chilling, and the feel of snow was in the air. The men eyed him glumly.

"Where've you been?" Payne asked.

"San Benito. Find the gun?"

Blade smiled as Payne shook his head.

"Well, I've got news. I know how Beryl Glover was bumped."

Payne's droopy eyelids lifted.

"Yeah?"

Blade gave the details. Payne slammed his hammy fist on the table and shoved back his chair.

"That settles Greenway's hash!" he exclaimed. "Only a doctor could dream up that one." He lumbered to his feet.

Blade realized that Payne was in his hair. He had been, ever since the sheriff had wrecked his chances of catching the killer, that morning, by sitting on him.

He looked at Payne. There was craft in the man's slitted eyes.

"Come, Deeter," Payne said. "We've things to do. I've got an idea."

Payne left the breakfast room. Deeter followed, like a hound trained to abject obedience. Framingham Jenks came in.

"Miss Falconer is in the library, sir," the butler said. "She requests you to see her as soon as convenient to you."

Blade put his napkin on the table, walked to the living room. Sitting before the fire, with a bottle of brandy beside her, Yvette was reading something about love in a book. She looked up.

"So you have been what you call socking the *femmes?*" Yvette asked. "I hear you start slugging her at breakfast. Eef I had known you were a Bluebeard, I would not go out weeth you last night. Sooch a narrow escaipe, eh?"

Blade bowed to her.

"Nevertheless, Yvette, I've always been kind to my mother, and I once raised a family of kittens."

Yvette's eyes rounded.

"Your keetens?"

"No, cat's kittens," he said. He kept on through the living room, went down a hall, and faced the library door. He raised his hand to knock. Janice's angry voice stayed it.

"Look, Cliff," she was saying furiously.

"You're not in any condition to go back to work."

Todd's voice was pitched toward hysteria.

"You've got to listen to reason, before it's too late. A man's got a right to earn a living. I had a good job in engineering at Falconer-Barr. Now, Barr won't hire me back and you won't intercede for me."

"Quiet, Cliff!" Janice pleaded. "You're all haywire."

"You and Barr are in a conspiracy, that's what you are. If you think you are going to deprive me of the right to live—well, dog eats dog, that's all."

JANICE'S voice was harsh.

"You don't make sense. What's the matter with you? You're completely different. You used to love me."

"It could be you, couldn't it? You can't treat me this way."

"You're in a swell spot to say that," Janice snapped. "How're you treating me? How about the way you make passes at any little tramp who comes along? How about the play you made for Beryl Glover? How much of that do I have to stand?"

"You were jealous of her. You hated her." His tone was accusing, insinuating.

Blade decided to break it up. He banged on the door. There was a moment of passion-charged silence.

"Who is it?" Janice's voice was unnaturally brittle.

"It's Nick, queen."

"Come in."

Blade did so. Cliff Todd gave him a strained, hard look—and gave Janice the same.

"I'm not wanted," he said. "I'll go."

He stalked out of the library.

Janice went to a desk. She put on tortoise shell glasses, looked more like a school teacher than a glamour girl, as she ruffled through a stack of bills, duns, and other papers, fighting for composure. Finally, she shoved them aside.

"It's the devil of a mess," she said. "First it was Johnny Fredericks, in his ineffective way asking me for money to start a photographic studio. I got him quieted down a couple of weeks ago. Now Cliff wants to go back to work at Falconer-Barr. On top of that, charities, taxes, bills for this place," she waved an arm in a sweeping gesture, "take everything I've got. And somebody's trying to eliminate me."

Her eyes narrowed into slits.

"If you don't tell me why you did what you did this morning, and if you don't tell me where you've been and what you've been doing," she said, "you're fired."

He'd never seen her like this before.

"But, queen!"

"No 'buts'."

"Okay. You asked for it. You killed Beryl Glover."

Janice Falconer's face went chalky. Her eyes smouldered, leaped into flame. She swung quickly and hard, as she rose from her chair in front of the bill and dun littered desk.

Her open hand smacked against Nick Blade's cheek. Then she collapsed onto a divan and began sobbing. Nick Blade dropped down beside her.

"Now we're even," he said softly, rubbing the sting from his cheek. "I'll give you the whole story."

She fought to control her sobbing, and looked at him. He told her of his trip to San Benito and what he had done there.

"This is horrible," she said, at length. Her face was white and drawn. "I didn't mean to slap you. I didn't know."

Blade put his arm around her.

"It's all right, queen. What I wanted to do was to spare you the grief of knowing that you unwittingly caused Beryl Glover's death. And now you understand why I clipped you."

Janice straightened up.

"You saved my life."

"Temporarily. But you're far from out of danger yet."

"It's ghastly. Where are those nitwits, Payne and Deeter?"

"They went by-by."

"If that lunkhead, Payne, ever finds out about me feeding Beryl poisoned vitamin tablets—"

"It won't be on the society pages, queen."

"Look, Nick! I'm going to get out of here. I'm fed up."

Her voice rose. Blade listened intently for a moment, held his finger to his lips.

"You've got to face it," he whispered. "You'll never be safe until we clean up this mess."

He rose, tiptoed to the door, pulled it open.

Cliff Todd was standing there. Red suffused his pale cheeks.

"I want to see Janice," he said stiffly.

"Come in," Blade said.

Todd ran his hand through his curly hair.

"We were supposed to drive into the village

at two," he said. "It's after that. I thought we ought to get started. Of course, if what she's doing is *very* important, we can go later."

Blade didn't like the emphasis which the young man put on "very" and he didn't like the insinuation in his tone.

"I'll be right with you," Janice said quickly. "Nick and I were just talking business. Let's go."

Todd turned and followed her from the library.

Blade looked after them through narrowed eyes.

CHAPTER VII.

Payne Makes a Pinch

EARLY the next morning, Blade sat in the breakfast room. In front of him was a plate empty save for the bones of most of a fried chicken which he had just eaten. Nearby stood Jenks.

"How are the troops deployed this morning, Jenks?" Blade asked.

"You mean the whereabouts of the guests, sir?"

"Correct."

"Miss Janice and Mr. Todd have left for the village. Miss Gastonne is in the living room reading 'The Life of Madame Pompadour' in French. Mr. Barr is dozing in his room. Dr. Greenway is working out a crossword puzzle in the library. Mr. Fredericks and Miss Pollard, now the sun has gone under, are on their way home."

"That last item is a marvelous piece of deduction, Jenks. How did you arrive at that conclusion?"

Jenks pointed out the window.

"I can see them coming down the stone Mountain trail, sir."

A buzzer sounded. Jenks went out and came back with Payne and Deeter, both of whom were greatly excited.

"The case is closed, Blade," Payne said, triumph glittering in his small eyes. "Where is he?"

"Who?" asked Blade.

"Greenway. We've got him dead to rights. I'm taking him to San Benito on a charge of suspicion of homicide."

"You might come clean with me first. After all, I gave you the tip."

Part of Payne's stomach rose toward his chest boastfully.

"Well, it's this way, Blade. Your information was rather scanty, but I acted on it. Deeter and I have just been to the village." He cleared his throat, stuck his hands beneath the edges of his vest. "We interviewed Tom Brennan, the owner of the drug-store. We asked him who bought Healthonas. He said a lot of people. Then we started naming names. And who do you think bought a package yesterday?"

"You've got me baffled," said Blade.

Payne shook his head. "This information called for deduction—a reconstruction of last night's invasion of Miss Falconer's privacy. It's as plain as an old shoe. Greenway goes to the drug-store, buys the Healthonas. He's stealing the cyanide of potassium out of the nursery when you surprise him. He shoots you. Then he beats it into the house.

"He goes to his room, carefully removes the wax paper wrapper, and injects the poison into the Healthonas. Then he closes the box and sticks the wrapper back on. He waits until the house is quiet, then sneaks to Miss Falconer's room. He works the key out of the door and uses his. I've checked that. His key fits her door and visa versa. He leaves the poisoned capsules and takes the good ones.

"I investigated that, too, just after lunch. He wasn't in his room. Hid away, in the bottom of his medicine it, was a nice, fresh new package of Healthonas, marked with the selling price and the key letters Tom Brennan uses for wholesale price. It's open and shut. That's what deduction does for you, Blade."

"I've often wondered," said Blade. He poured himself a drink. "Sounds like you've worked up a case, all right."

"Of course, Blade." He lowered his voice. "Faced with the facts, Greenway's bound to squeal. We've got ways, down at San Benito."

Blade tossed off the Scotch. "You'll find Greenway in the library," he said. "Need any help?"

Payne patted his holstered thirty-eight.

"We've gone against tougher men than him."

"Good hunting."

Blade watched them file out. A moment later he heard loud protestations. Greenway was taking it hard. He sat, staring at the wall. He heard the scuffle, the determined tread of feet. Finally the front door slammed.

He waited a while longer, and then picked up the bottle of Scotch and left the table. He looked out the window. Johnny Fredericks and Sandra Pollard were still well up the trail.

He went to Fredericks' room. The door was unlocked, and he walked in. His hands and fingers worked expertly and feverishly as he investigated the bureau, around the mattress of the double bed and under it, through the bed clothes, behind books in the bookcase, the medicine case in the bathroom, and the garments and shoes in the closet.

A door led into a second room. This was fitted out as a darkroom. A small window was covered with plywood, which he removed. He looked behind it. Then he replaced it. He looked over the developing sink, the printing pans, the enlarging camera, the japanned drying tins.

"Pretty neat," he said to himself as he surveyed the equipment. Above the sink was a row of bottles containing chemicals used in Fredericks' work. The label on one caught his eye. He read: *Potassium Ferrocyanide.* He took the bottle, shook it, replaced it.

HE LEFT the darkroom, walked into Fredericks' bedroom, and out into the hall. He was just closing the door when he looked up and saw Fredericks coming toward him.

"What's up?" the young photographer demanded.

"I'm looking for my pet boa-constrictor."

Fredericks grinned at the idea. "What made you think he'd be in my room?"

"He's a she. Very vain. Figured she'd come down to your place to pose for a picture."

Fredericks laughed.

"I know how it is with you detectives," he said. "Always on the prowl. I hope you didn't find any hidden bodies. I usually dissolve 'em in developing fluid and wash 'em down the drain, but maybe I overlooked one."

Blade shook his head.

"Didn't find a one. Life's full of disappointments. By the way, if you see Lucretia—that's the snake's name—tie a rope just above her hips and lead her home. If she starts getting affectionate, yell."

"Sounds like she's quite a twist," said Fredericks.

"People have been jailed for better puns than that."

Blade made his way up the hall. He went into Cliff Todd's room. In no time at all he found one of the things he was looking for. A hypodermic syringe lay under a pile of handkerchiefs in a bureau drawer. He didn't touch it. He just looked at it for a moment, dropped the handkerchiefs over it again, and went on with his search.

Ten minutes later he emerged from the room, moved to the end of the hall. He listened at the door of the corner room, which was opposite Fredericks'. This part of the building was only one story high, and gave out on the traffic circle. He heard robust snores. Gently, he tried the knob. The door opened slightly, and he peered in. Duncan Barr, in his shirtsleeves, was lying on one of the twin beds. His mouth was open. Sleep lay heavily upon him.

Blade looked at him enviously for a moment, then closed the door.

Next he visited Greenway's room. He made a thorough search. Apparently the physician had taken no belongings with him, believing his visit to San Benito would be of short duration.

Blade went through the room as carefully

[*Turn page*]

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign

Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

as he had investigated the other. He saved the medicine kit to the last when he peered inside, he found no hypodermic syringe. He remembered that Greenway had used one to give him a sedative the night before.

He returned to his own room, slipped into his overcoat, and ventured outside. He hurried to the boathouse and tried the door. It was unlocked. He slipped inside. He came out, returned to the chalet. He passed Sanders, who was bracing a small pine. The man did not look up.

Blade went to his room, threw himself on the bed to think.

He woke up, when somebody shook him vigorously. He opened his eyes. Tommy Case was outlined against the window.

"What do you do all day when you're on a case—sleep?" Case said.

"I wish I could," Blade said, pulling himselft to a sitting position and sliding his feet off the bed. "Let's have it."

"The F.B.I. started investigating Falconer-Barr Industries where you left off," Case told him. "The job's very nearly completed. It looks as if about two million dollars worth of strategic materials was hauled out and unloaded at over-ceiling prices."

"You got this from the dish last night?"

Case nodded.

"Every officer in the company's on the spot. They haven't been able to pin it on anyone—that is, they haven't got full evidence—because Kopp, alias Sanders, high-tailed with a lot of records."

"What's Kopp's place in the deal?"

"He agreed to scram and keep quiet for a certain price, especially when he saw that lighting out was better than going to jail. The F.B.I.'s looking for him. It seems he was pretty tractable at first, but he's putting the heat on the company—demanding enough to retire or to go to South America on."

"Barr's sore at him?"

"They're all sore. All the officers."

"How're Barr's finances?"

"His account's down into the hundreds, that is, his personal account. In short, he's broke. And that's not all. The company's heading for the rocks."

BLADE raised his eyebrows.

"How come?"

"Two things. They held fixed price contracts. They bid too low and lost money on them. Then came contract cancellations by prime contractors. They haven't enough dough to met the payroll for two weeks if the Worthington-Baylor contract is cancelled, and they expect that any day."

Blade shook his head.

"Not pretty," he said. He pulled himself off the bed, went to the mirror over the dresser and adjusted his tie. "What about the automatic?" he asked.

"Bought by and registered in the name of Duncan Barr."

Blade ran a comb through his dark, curly hair and reached for his coat.

"What did Attorney Fitz tell you about any financial arrangements between Janice and Barr?"

"When Falconer died he left a million dollars and a large block of stock in Falconer-Barr in trust for Janice. Barr was named administrator. Janice receives only the income, and she spends it right up to the hilt.

"Falconer's will still controls the situation. If anything happens to Janice, her entire estate, with the exception of one-hundred thousand dollars willed by Falconer to Johnny Fredericks in the event of her death, reverts to Barr. On the other hand, if anything happens to Barr, everything Barr possesses goes to Janice."

Blade poured himself a drink and went into the bathroom for a chaser.

"So if anything happens to Janice, Barr collects—and right now he needs to collect," he mused. "Has Janice made any kind of a will?"

"It wouldn't do her any good. She hasn't anything to leave. In substance, all her father left her was income, until Barr kicks in."

Blade rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"I think that we'd better go have a little chat with Duncan Barr," he said.

Tommy Case and Nick Blade went down to the hall to Barr's bedroom.

Blade heard Barr's snore end in a gurgle as he rapped sharply on the manufacturer's door. Barr's choleric voice came through the panel:

"Who is it?"

Blade announced Case and himself. There was a squeaking of springs, the tread of heavy feet, and the door was flung open. Barr, breathing heavily from exertion and mounting wrath, confronted them.

"What're you bothering me for?"

"We want to talk to you. There are certain matters we'd like to have cleaned up. We thought maybe you might help."

Barr's face became even more crimson.

Anger burned the sleep out of his eyes.

"Help you?" he roared. "I wouldn't!"

"I think you will," Blade said quietly. "Maybe you'd like to have us tip the G-men that your former assistant chief accountant, Bill Sanders, alias Edgar Kopp, is working as a gardener here."

Color drained from the face of the president of Falconer-Barr Industries, and belligerence went from his demeanor at the same time.

"You wouldn't do that. Oh, no, Blade!"

Blade stepped into the room. Case followed. They found easy chairs.

"You might as well relax, Barr," Blade said.

The manufacturer lowered his bulk into a chair.

"We know exactly what the score is, Barr," Blade began. He outlined the predicament of the company as Case had given it to him, and watched, with satisfaction, the mounting fear in Barr's face.

"Murder demands a motive, and you have it," he said. "Janice has money and you need it. It demands opportunity, and you've had that. A million bucks and a block of stock you could dump on the market would save the company and your neck."

Barr's body sagged in his chair.

"You've got it all wrong," he said. "I haven't a thing to do with selling strategic and allocated materials. It was Graham, Charley Graham, who handles production. He's been with us for twenty years. I've trusted him like a brother. He and Kopp worked out the system of selling them. I didn't find out about it until—"

He looked straight at Nick Blade.

"—until," he concluded, "you started checking up and tipped me off."

FOR a moment the manufacturer paused to calm himself.

"I started my own investigation, and found out what was going on. I stopped it, but it was too late. The F.B.I. had smelled a rat, and started investigating. Graham came to me and confessed. He cried like a baby. He said that if the G-men got him he'd kill himself.

"He'd been a trustworthy and loyal employe. He was an officer of the company. To protect him and save the company, I covered up. I paid off Kopp and shipped him up here."

Barr leaned forward and cradled his face in his hands.

"I'm broke, I tell you. I've got Kopp's and Graham's confessions exonorating me in a safety deposit box. If I can keep the scandal quiet until the company collects from prime contractors on contract settlement claims, Falconer-Barr will survive. We're going in for post-war products. We'll just boom."

Self-righteous anger suddenly flared in his beefy face.

"But if you think that I'd in any way harm Janice, get the police."

Blade looked at him without emotion.

"Why'd you take a pot shot at me in the nursery last night?" he asked.

Barr's mouth fell open. His hands went to the arms of his chair, as if they were to be used to lever a lunge at the detective.

"Why!" Barr gasped. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You shot at me with a thirty-two automatic registered in your name. A gun you bought."

Barr shook his head.

"I don't own any gun."

He thought a moment.

"Wait a minute!" he exclaimed. "I bought a weapon like that for Janice about five years ago, before we got into the war. She was coming up here alone a lot, and I thought she ought to have protection."

Blade turned to Case.

"Get Janice," he said.

Case went out.

"You're too smart," Barr said to Blade, when Case had left. "You're so smart you're dangerous. I guess you see now why I couldn't have you around down at the plant. And, although you did me a favor, I was sore. Most men hate to learn the truth, when the truth is bad news. This is horrible!"

Janice came in followed by Case. She looked at Barr and then at Blade.

"Queen, did Barr give you a .32 automatic about five years ago?" Blade asked.

She nodded. "To protect myself up here. I've had it in a drawer ever since. I'd almost forgotten about it. Do you want it?"

"Please get it," Blade said.

Janice went out. The men waited in nervous silence. She came back wide-eyed.

"The gun's gone."

"When did you miss it, queen?"

"Why, just now. I hadn't thought of it for months."

Blade's eyes met hers.

"Okay," he said. "Thanks a lot. That's all I wanted you for."

She rose.

"Nick'" she said, glancing at the faces of the three men. "Is Duncan in trouble? What's the matter?"

"It's nothing, my dear," Barr said.

She looked at Blade.

"Duncan has been like a father to me since my own father died," she said. "My money has been all tied up, and I'm broke most of the time, but it isn't his fault. Dad put the money in a trust, and it's lucky he did. I'd probably have spent all of it. But remember this—Duncan has been very kind."

"That's a nice reference, queen," said Blade. "You'd make a good character witness."

"Thanks." She studied him. "Why are you going on with this thing?"

"Why do you ask that?" demanded Barr.

JANICE faced the manufacturer. "Payne and Deeter arrested Dr. Greenway this afternoon on suspicion of killing Beryl Glover and shooting Nick Blade."

Bluster came back to Barr. He shook his fist at Blade.

"Why you insolent, insufferable whelp."

Blade held up a soothing hand.

"Take it easy, Barr. Case and I don't work for San Benito County. As far as we're concerned, the case is still open. We're still checking up, and we'll keep at it until we're sure we've got the killer."

Barr subsided.

"Look here," he said. "I told you I have evidence that'll clear me. Tomorrow, if you'll go down the mountain with me, I'll take you to my safety deposit box and show you. I'll take you to the plant and show you over five million dollars in contract settlement claims which the company has filed. And when I get through, I'll show you that I'm absolutely sound. The only thing I don't want to do is to have this scandal break right now. Give me thirty days grace."

Blade walked to the window facing the circle and looked out. He saw Bill Sanders, alias Edgar Kopp, crossing it toward his quarters over the garage. The man's shoulders were rounded and his head bowed against the cold winds.

He turned back, faced the manufacturer.

"Very well," he said. "We'll go down the mountain with you tomorrow."

Janice led the way out of Barr's room. Case and Blade followed, leaving Barr sitting in his chair, staring out at the increasing darkness.

Blade closed the door.

"Nick, what have you got up your sleeve?" Janice asked.

Blade grinned at her.

"Plenty," he said. "Where's Yvette?"

"She's down in the living room."

Case began humming, "Cocktails for Two."

CHAPTER VIII

Death Strikes Again

BERYL GLOVER'S body was in an undertaking establishment and Dr. Greenway was in the county jail at San Benito, so dinner turned out to be a depressing ordeal. Barr had excused himself on the grounds that he wasn't hungry. He remained in his room. Outside the huge chalet the wind was coughing through the pines, a rising dirge, and moaning around the cornices of Falcon's Lair.

Jenks served in the breakfast room, rather than in the long, austere dining room, because of the smallness of the group. Johnny Fredericks groused about the gloomy day, which had spoiled his opportunity to take pictures of Sandra at a place which was known as the Green Spot—a spring which flowed, at this time of the year, through an icy, snow-covered meadow surrounded by pines. Sandra patted his hand sympathetically.

Yvette Gastonne saw to it that she was seated beside Tommy Case. She regaled him with the exploits of Madame Pompadour.

"We French, we are all alike," she said.

Case found himself looking forward to the evening.

Janice maintained a worried, frigid silence. Blade spent most of the meal making plans for the night. Cliff Todd, more nervous than ever, ate little, toyed with his silverware. Blade caught covert glances from him several times. At meal's end, when Janice rose and suggested they go into the living room, Blade went to Todd's side.

"Come into the library," he said, in a low voice.

Todd nodded, as if he'd been expecting the summons. Blade led the way. When they

reached the library, he turned on the ex-bombardier.

"How come the hypodermic syringe?" he demanded, suddenly.

Todd stared at him for a moment, as if groping for a cover.

"Oh—that?" he faltered.

"What do you use it for?"

Todd coughed. Blade knew he was stalling for time.

"Why, I take shots of thiamine chloride with it," Todd said, finally. "Ordinarily, when I'm in the city Blalock, my physician, gives them to me. But up here, there isn't any proper doctor."

"What about Greenway?"

"I never did like him and he's not around now, fortunately. As I was saying, I give them to myself."

"Thiamine chloride. That's vitamin B-One, isn't it?"

Todd nodded.

"That's right. It's a builder-upper. It's for my nerves. They're pretty ragged. Eighteen months in a German prison camp—it wasn't nice."

"Why hide the syringe?"

Todd grinned in an embarrassed way.

"I'm—well, you know how it is—what a hypo is sometimes used for. I'm kind of self-conscious. I wouldn't want anyone to think I'm taking dope."

"I see," said Blade.

Todd cleared his throat.

"You know, I wanted to see you as much as you wanted to see me, Blade," he said. "Payne got Greenway, of course, but I don't think it's solved."

"Why not?"

"Janice and I got back from the village at dusk. I sent her into the house and stayed in the garage to check over the car. I've known about the trouble with the Prescott, of course. I must've been out there for about ten minutes. When I left, it was pretty dark.

"I don't know what drew my eyes. Maybe it was a sudden movement. Anyway, I looked up. I thought I saw a figure on the ledge just outside Duncan Barr's window. I started forward, and when I got closer, the figure wasn't in sight. I assumed whoever it was had ducked around to the side. I ran there. But there was no one."

"Thanks," said Blade. "Now, let's join the others."

He yawned. He felt as if tiny weights were pulling the lids down over his eyes. He excused himself, went to the small bar and helped himself to a slug of Scotch. The evening was young, the night was long ahead, and he had work to do.

He went into the living room.

Sandra Pollard and Janice were playing gin rummy at a table under a stand lamp in a far corner.

"Where's the rest of the gang?" he asked.

"In the playroom, Nick."

QUICKLY Blade crossed the living room and went down a flight of stairs. Johnny Fredericks and Cliff Todd were playing a game of rotation on the green baize pool table. The juke box in the far end of the room played a one-step. Case and Yvette were dancing. If, Blade thought, one could call it that. Case, in spite of his war-inflicted handicap, was improvising steps that Blade had not seen before. He was a fan of Velez and Yolanda.

Nick Blade went back upstairs to the living room, looked into the gloom. There was no light in Sanders' quarters over the garage. He went into the kitchen. Mrs. Jenks was washing dishes, and Jenks, with his coat off, was encased in a huge white apron. He was wiping the dishes.

"Beg pardon," said Blade. "Jenks, you don't look like a butler at all. My mistake."

"Thank you, sir—" Jenks began, then caught himself. He drew himself up and said, with hurt and reproof in his voice: "Even a butler, sir, has his unguarded moments."

"Have either of you seen Sanders?" Blade asked.

"Not since dinner," Mrs. Jenks said.

"How did he act then?"

"Come to think of it, he seemed to be worried. He was quite silent."

Blade left the kitchen and sought out Janice.

"Come up to your room," he said. "I want to show you something."

Janice, puzzled, went with him. He stepped inside, closed the door. Then he walked to one of the windows. He opened it, closed the heavy wooden shutters outside the glass and dropped the iron locking bar into place. He did the same at a second and a third window.

"No matter how much you like fresh air, those stay closed tonight," he said.

He picked up a heavy chair, carried it to the door.

"Come here," he said.

He showed her how to rock the chair up on two legs and jam its back up against the doorknob.

"Tonight, when you go to bed, do this," he told her.

She nodded.

"Lesson's over," he said. "You've now learned the difference between a live pigeon and a dead duck."

He went back to the living room with her. He left her to resume her interrupted game, and went to the playroom. Todd and Fredericks had abandoned their cues and had left. The lights were low. The juke box was playing a sleepy waltz. Blade finally found Case and Yvette in a corner.

"Absolutely no tact," Case said, as he straightened up. "Can't you whistle, or fire twenty-one guns?"

"I'm going to grab a wing, Tommy," Blade said. "I hate to break this up, but I wish you'd keep an eye on Janice. When she retires, beat me into consciousness."

"I had a captain like you when I was in the Marines, Blade."

"What did you do?"

"Waited until we got in civilian clothes and whaled the devil out of him."

Blade went upstairs. He walked into his room, went to the window. It had begun snowing. Large flakes danced in the light which shown from the windows. Beyond the circle lay the garage. There were still no lights in Sanders' quarters.

Sighing wearily, Blade slipped into his overcoat. He went outside the chalet, crossed the circle, blinded by snowflakes. The snow was sticking to the ground now. His footprints made a very faint impression on the cleared walk.

He groped his way to the entrance to the caretaker's rooms. He tried the door. He walked up the stairs, switched on the light. That was the last thing he remembered. A heavy blow scrambled the inside of his already injured skull, and he plunged forward, falling into a limp heap. . . .

WHEN Nick Blade's eyes opened, he felt the hammers of a thousand dwarfs beating against the inside of his skull. The light in the hall outside Sanders' room was on. Case was on his knees beside him, shaking him with one hand. In the other was a fifth of Scotch.

Blade held out a shaky hand and took it. Case had already pulled the cork. Blade's jittery hand tilted up the bottle. He hitched himself against the wall and leaned his back against it.

"I find you in the darndest places," Case said.

Blade felt the back of his head. There was a huge lump.

"Somebody built an annex on my brain," he said.

"Who?" Case asked.

"If you were any kind of a detective, you'd examine the bump on my noggin and conclude the blow came from behind. So how could I know? What brought you here? How long have I been out?"

"Not more than fifteen minutes. Janice headed for bed a little while after you broke up my bombing run down in the playroom. I went up to wake you, and you were gone. I figured you might have come over to chat with Sanders, and I found you in this disgraceful condition."

"Help me up, Tommy."

Case did so. They went to the door leading to Sanders' room. Blake knocked. There was no answer. He tried the doorknob. The place was locked. There was a heavy patented night latch on the door.

"I'll get to him later," Blade said.

He felt the ground weaving under him. Case saw his rolling gait and took his arm to steady him.

"Look, Tommy," Blade said. "I was going to stand guard in the hall tonight. I'm all in. How's about you taking your post in a military manner?"

Case nodded. "Anything you say, Nick."

"Got a gat?"

Case said he had.

"Good. Help me to bed. I'll be all right after a few hours' sleep. I'll relieve you. In the meantime, grab a chair, put it in the hall and just sit. I've got an idea there may be action. Plenty."

Case got Blade into his bed, pulled off most of his clothing, and took a .38 service revolver from his suitcase. He grinned down at his arsenal, which included fifty rounds of cartridges, tear gas bombs, an extra automatic, and a couple of knives he had taken from the Japs on Iwo Jima.

"Too bad, I didn't toss in a flame-thrower," he thought.

He carried a comfortable chair into the hall and tiptoed to the end in the darkness. He settled himself in it. He began thinking about Yvette. It would be too bad when this

case was over. But what the devil! Yvette lived in Los Angeles, didn't she? And who was afraid of a big, bad director?

He began thinking of Yvette's misty violet eyes and her warm parted lips on the lounge down there in the playroom. Pretty soon, he was wearing Antony's toga, and Yvette was Cleopatra. In a few moments, he was Napoleon, and she was Josephine, welcoming him home from his conquests. . . .

After a while this picture faded into a void.

Then he was being shaken, and he opened his eyes to the blinding glare of a flashlight. He reached for the .38 which he carried in his side pocket. He was greeted by a low, throaty chuckle followed by a whisper.

"Take it easy, pal. It's me—Johnny Fredericks."

"What's up?"

"Nothing much. Thought I heard a noise outside my window. Couldn't see anyone, it's snowing so hard. Figured I'd check up inside, and bumped onto you. You may be a hot detective, but as a night watchman, you're a flop."

Case's heavy eyelids lifted. Fredericks was wearing pyjamas, bathrobe and bedroom slippers of moccasin type.

"You'd be dead yourself, Johnny, if you'd been chasing around for two days and two nights without sleep."

"What're you on guard for, anyway?" Fredericks showed mild surprise. "Hasn't Payne cleared up the murder?"

Case yawned and stretched. "Payne thinks so. Boy, I wish I was as wide awake as you are." Case yawned again. "Johnny, why don't you sit this one out for me? I could relax in the arms of Morpheus."

"I wouldn't mind helping," Fredericks said, tepidly. "But what about Blade? Wouldn't he raise the devil?"

"Why should he? He's got Janice shut up so tight a regiment of Marines couldn't get to her."

"Well—okay."

CASE was grateful. "You're a pal, Johnny. Just lemme sleep about an hour, eh? Take this gat." He passed it over. "I don't want you to get your pants shot off. Take it easy. Don't shot 'til you see the whites of their underthings."

Fredericks eased himself into the chair Case vacated. Case went into his own room and closed the door behind him. Blade was sound asleep on the other twin, breathing heavily. He didn't budge when Case entered, and stretched out on his own bed. . . .

Nick Blade found himself being bumped into consciousness, not physically, but by sound. A prodigious thumping came to his ears, penetrated his brain. He lay still for a moment. Maybe the pounding was in his mind. Maybe it would stop.

"Go away," he mumbled.

But the sound didn't go away. His ears traced it to the bottom of his door. It was as if a playful dog was trying to get in. But Blade knew there wasn't any dog at Falcon's Lair. He rolled his aching head sidewise. He saw Tommy Case sound asleep on the other bed. That jarred him into wakefulness. He lifted his hundredweight of throbbing skull until he was vertical from the waist up, took another look at Case to be sure he wasn't seeing things.

"What the devil!" he exclaimed. He put his feet on the floor, shook his assistant. That worthy consigned him indelicately to the hereafter and then managed to pry his eyes open.

"What're you doing here?" Blade demanded.

That woke up Case. He sat up.

"Who's playing marbles in the hall?" he asked.

Blade looked out the windows. Day was announcing its arrival with a fan of light. The snow had stopped. The sky was clear, and the last stars were twinkling wanly in the lightening heavens.

Nick Blade got to his feet. He gingerly felt his bruised head.

"Let's go see," he said.

He opened the door into the hall, and Johnny Fredericks fell inward. He had a gag in his mouth. His hands were secured behind him with a two inch width of adhesive tape. His ankles were similarly bound. Blade saw a bloody bump as big as an ostrich egg on the back of his head. He rolled Fredericks over, saw fright and mute appeal in his eyes.

Case came up behind Blade and Blade turned on him, hot and furious.

"So you had to take a nap, eh? he asked. "Come on—help me get Johnny free."

He bent, untied the gag. Fredericks made a face, swabbed his lips with his tongue, swallowed a couple of times.

"Never knew a gag was so uncomfortable," he said. "But there's a first time for everything."

Blade started working on the adhesive tape which bound his wrists.

"What happened?"

Case was stripping the tape from Fredericks' ankles.

"I asked Johnny to stand guard for me," Case said. "I'd fallen asleep."

"I was sitting there, maybe for an hour," Fredericks explained. "I heard a noise at the end of the hall. I got up and started in that direction, toward Barr's room. I passed the vacant room on the right, just beyond Sandra's and the world blew into small fragments and was wafted away. I came to in this condition. I wiggled to your door and tried to make a noise like a burrowing rabbit."

"That's a nice sock on the skull," said Blade.

"I wouldn't have had this happen for the world," Case said to Blade.

Blade glared at him.

"We're not speaking," he growled. They finished removing the adhesive and pulled Fredericks to his feet. "Look. We've got to count noses. Johnny, you wake Sandra. I'll take Janice and Barr. Case, you rouse your love, Yvette. Then get Todd out. I hope to heaven nothing's busted loose."

He started down the hall, his pulse beating wildly and his head pounding doubly hard with apprehension. When he reached Janice's door, he gave the knob a vicious exploratory twist. The door was solid. He took a deep gulp of air and relaxed.

"Janice!" he called, pounding his knuckles on the panel. "Janice!"

"Yes?" came her voice.

He took another gulp of air, and exhaled it with a whoosh of relief.

"Time to get up," he commanded. "Something's happened."

"I'll be with you right away," Janice answered. Her voice was taut. "What is it?"

Blade didn't answer. He went on down the hall. He tried Duncan Barr's door. It was locked. He tried to peer through the keyhole. The key was in the lock. He began pounding. There was no answer. He remembered that Duncan Barr snored. He stopped beating the wooden panel, listened intently. There was not even the sound of breathing.

"Case!" he called.

His assistant came down the hall, a question in his eyes.

"We're going through the door," Blade said. "Come on."

The two men rammed their shoulders into the stout portal. It jarred on its hinges, lashed back. They hit it again and again, until, with a loud snap and splintering, the wood around the catch gave away. Their momentum carried them into the room.

Duncan Barr was sprawled out one of the twin beds. He was lying face upward. His mouth was open, just as it had been when Blade had looked in on him in the afternoon.

But there was a difference.

Duncan Barr wasn't snoring. He was dead.

CHAPTER IX

A Set of Footprints

IT DIDN'T make sense to Nick Blade.

There was no doubt about the cause of death being cyanide of potassium. There was an odor of bitter almonds, and corrosion of the lip, tongue, and throat. Barr's eyes were open and staring, and the pupils were dilated. There were indications that the manufacturer had frothed at the mouth.

Blade saw clearly what had happened. Barr, sleeping on his back, snoring, with his mouth open, had been very easy to poison. Enough cyanide to kill a battalion had been poured into his mouth. But how had the killer got into the room? The door had been locked, and apparently it had been impossible to get it out and open it with another key. Blade suddenly remembered that Cliff Todd had said he had seen a dim figure on the ledge around the wall. Fredericks had just said that he'd heard a noise outside his room.

Blade went to one of the windows and looked out on the circle.

About six inches of snow had fallen during the night. Clearly defined were prints of heavy work shoes showing from the entrance to the room occupied by Sanders, alias Kopp, to a point directly beneath Barr's room in the chalet, and returning again. Nowhere else was the smooth surface of the new snow broken.

Blade turned to Case.

"Get on the telephone and call Payne," he said. "Tell him about Barr and to hightail up here. You'd better ask him to bring Greenway. We'll need him."

He got his overcoat and went outside. He

carefully skirted the blunt-toed prints made by the heavy shoes, went up to Kopp's room and tried the door. It was locked. He retraced his steps, went to the kitchen. Mrs. Jenks was preparing breakfast.

"It'll soon be ready, sir," she said.

Blade grinned at her. "I wonder if you have a key to Sanders' quarters?"

Mrs. Jenks went to a cabinet and opened it. It was filled with hooks, from which labeled keys were hanging. She checked the tabs.

"That's odd," she mused, mopping her face with her apron. "The extra key's missing. Kopp had one, and there was one hanging here."

Blade thanked her and went outside again. He found an axe in the nursery and went to work on Sanders' door. The night latch finally gave.

He went through the place quickly. One thing he realized after his inspection. Kopp had departed. The only personal possessions, save for some worn out shirts and trousers hanging in the closet, were a pair of damp heavy work shoes neatly placed side by side at the foot of the bed. He picked these up, took them downstairs, fitted them into one of the prints. There could be no doubt as to whether the shoes had made the tracks across the circle. They were equipped with worn rubber heels, and the indented nail holes showed clearly in the snow. He walked along the prints, studying them. There was a slight depression in every left shoe print, as if the sole had bulged downward.

Then he continued his inspection. He noted a loose board in the closet. He pulled it up. Beneath it lay the sack of cyanide of potassium, the one he had first seen in the nursery when he had questioned Kopp.

He went outside, walked completely around the garage. The station wagon was not there.

Then he returned to the chalet. He got a foothold on the rock wall beneath Barr's windows and started climbing. Five minutes of precarious pulling, groping for hand and footholds, told him that not even a human fly could have ascended the side of the house in that manner.

He did manage to get half way up the wall.

At this point Jenks appeared below him, looked around, and then up.

"Breakfast is ready, sir," the butler solemnly announced.

"There's nothing like a little wall climbing to whip up an appetite, is there, Jenks?" Blade asked, as he lowered himself to the ground.

But he didn't go directly to breakfast. He went upstairs and quickly inspected every bed in the chalet.

Then he sought out Mrs. Jenks.

"Do you have the license number of the station wagon?" he asked.

Mrs. Jenks consulted a book and gave him the number. He asked for a cup of coffee black, got some and drank it. Then he went to the telephone and called the Los Angeles field offices of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He got the agent in charge.

"I think that you're looking for one Edgar Kopp in connection with some irregularities at Falconer-Barr Industries," Blade said. There was a pause.

PLAINLY the Federal man was interested. "What's your information?" he asked.

"Kopp, alias Bill Sanders, may be in Los Angeles. He's driving a De Soto station wagon, California license number Two C-two six-nine one. He left Big Pine Lake some time during the night."

"What's your interest in him?" the Government agent inquired.

"It might be murder." Blade gave him the telephone number. "If you pick him up, I'll be down to give you the rest of the story."

He hung up.

He found himself wondering why it was that there were footprints from the caretaker's entry way to the chalet and back, but that there were no wheel tracks made by the station wagon, and no footprints leading into the garage. Something definitely was screwy about the set-up.

He went upstairs to Barr's room. A sheet had been pulled over the body. Blade walked to the window, looked down on the narrow ledge. The snow had not clung to it, probably due to swirling eddies of wind. He studied the ledge for a while, and then returned to the hall. He looked out the hall window at the ledge there. Then he started down the hall. The door to the empty room where the killer had slugged Fredericks was ajar. A mark at the base of it caught his attention. He bent, ran a finger over it. It was sticky. He scraped off a small piece of the gummy substance and rolled it between thumb and forefinger. Higher up, he saw another mark. He didn't touch it.

Then he went downstairs to the kitchen.

"Mrs. Jenks, I would like to have a ribbon about two inches wide and about three feet long," he said.

"Very good, sir."

She disappeared into the quarters off the kitchen which she and her husband occupied. Jenks came in and lingered, masking his curiosity. Mrs. Jenks came back with some baby blue ribbon of approximately the size Blade wanted. Jenks' eyebrows went up, but Blade did not explain why he wanted the ribbon. He took it and left the room. He encountered Tommy Case coming down the stairs.

"What have you been doing?" Blade asked him.

"Taking care of Janice. It's hit her pretty hard. She was fond of the pompous old boy. She's just about all in." Case looked at the ribbon. "What's up?"

"Join me in our abode, and you'll see."

"I'll be right there."

Blade went into the room, closed the door behind him. He tied the ribbon to one of the legs of the bed just off the floor. He grasped the ribbon in one hand, climbed over it, twisted and turned.

"Not so good," he said.

He lay on the floor, started thrashing about. There was a knock on the door. Blade called:

"Come in!"

Tommy Case entered.

"What the deuce?" he demanded.

"That's settled," Blade said, as he eyed the ribbon. "What gives with Payne?"

"He and Deeter ought to be here any minute. They're bringing Greenway."

There was a knock on the door. It was Jenks. He came into the room slowly, glanced once at the ribbon and then spoke to Blade.

"Mrs. Jenks would like to see you at your convenience, Mr. Blade," he said.

"Thanks."

Blade got up from the floor and went to the kitchen.

"I've been thinking about what you asked me," Mrs. Jenks said. "Sanders was silent at dinner as I said, but he had one complaint. He was right put out. Somebody, he said, had stolen a pair of his work shoes."

Blade stroked his chin.

"Who'd steal an old pair of work shoes?" he asked.

"That's just the way I put it to Sanders, sir. I said almost exactly the same thing. I told him he'd probably misplaced them."

Blade patted her shoulder.

"You've done wonders for me," he said. "Mrs. Jenks, you'll go down in history for this. You'll be immortal."

He left the kitchen and returned to his room. Case was sampling a nice, new bottle of Scotch.

"Where'd you get that?" Blade demanded.

CASE pointed to his artificial leg.

"Portable bar," he said. "Want a slug?"

Blade reached for the bottle and gulped down a mouthful. Case took the bottle back, pulled up his trouser leg. He inserted the bottle between the aluminum braces, secured it with a part of the baby blue ribbon.

Blade walked to the window. He saw Payne's car coming along the winding road. He turned to Case.

"Okay, Tommy," he said. "Our boy friends are here. Call an executive session in the library. I want everybody present. Including the Jenkses. It's time for a showdown."

CHAPTER X

GUILTY

PALE and tense with excitement, they were all there.

Dr. Greenway, truculent and obviously miserable from his working over, scowled ferociously at Payne, at Deeter and the others. Payne groused at joining the group, claiming that he should first examine Barr's body. Blade told him Coroner Dale was on the way up, and would do that. Sandra Pollard, drawn and obviously shaken, slumped listlessly in a big armchair. Johnny Fredericks managed a grin in spite of the big bump on the back of his head, which was now covered with mercurochrome, gauze and adhesive tape.

"It's nice being here and seeing all you people," he said. "If I'd been clouted a bit harder, I'd probably be with Barr."

Janice, her face white and set, gave his misplaced humor a reproving look. Cliff Todd sat on the edge of Janice's chair, his arm resting lightly on her shoulder. Payne, his eyelids drooping over his roving, suspicious eyes, glared at first one and then the other of the assembly.

Jenks and Mrs. Jenks came in, standing rigidly.

"Relax," said Blade. "Have chairs and be comfortable."

They did so.

Case sat by Yvette Gastonne. From the glances they gave each other, Blade knew he was out in the cold. He wondered what would happen when Case tangled with Yvette's boy friend, the director.

"We're all here," he said, counting noses. "We might as well get this over with. We'll start by talking about Jimmy Fredericks."

"You make me feel very important," Fredericks said.

"You are," said Blade. "Let's begin at the beginning. Johnny, you've been dunning your cousin for money." He turned to Janice. "It's true, isn't it, that for a long time, Johnny's been trying to get you to lend him money to open a photographic studio?"

Janice nodded.

"That's true," Fredericks said.

"A hundred grand would really give you a nice photographic studio," Blade told him.

He eyed Cliff Todd.

"Cliff, you've been pretty sore," he said. "Before the war, you were an expert draftsman and engineer, drawing good money. You came home from the war pretty well shot. You applied for your old job, feeling that it should be given you immediately. Isn't that right?"

Todd nodded.

"You were wrong, Cliff. You weren't ready. You're not ready now. But when Barr refused to put you back on, and Janice wouldn't intercede for you, you were plenty bitter."

"Not bitter enough to kill."

Blade looked over the group.

"One man is missing. That's Edgar Kopp, alias Sanders. He was trying to shake down Barr, and it wasn't working. I'm hoping the Federal Bureau of Investigation'll pick him up. That'll be a long step in righting the affairs of Falconer-Barr."

He looked at Dr. Greenway.

"You bought some Healthona capsules day before yesterday in the village," he said.

"I did, and the reason was—"

Blade held up his hand to silence him.

"You were told to get them by Johnny Fredericks," he said. "Johnny said they were for his cousin, Janice. When you came back from the village, Johnny took them from you, and said he'd give them to her."

"That's right," Greenway said, with a sigh of relief.

"Johnny, you pop up more and more in this. You might as well have it. To you, the money Falconer had set aside in his will for you was an awful lot. Sandra is a demanding woman. She's wanted you to go into business for yourself. She's been harping on it until it's nearly driven you nuts.

"You came up here with murder in your heart. You'd kill your cousin for that money."

Fredericks rose to his feet.

"See here, now!"

BLADE pushed him back into his chair.

"You devised your schemes for murder. First, you put a pin hole in the brake fluid line of the Prescott and, when that didn't work, you jimmied the tierod and steering gear nuts. You very nearly got Yvette and me, but you didn't get Janice.

"At the same time, you knew that there was cyanide of potassium on the premises. There'd always been, ever since you could remember—for fumigating. You'd had experience, as a photographer, with chemicals, including the less lethal potassium ferrocyanide, and you knew your stuff.

"When the automobile failed to carry Janice to her doom, you saw that Janice was down to her last vitamin capsule. You sneaked into her room, lifted the box, got Dr. Greenway's hypodermic syringe, injected the cyanide into the capsule and replaced the box. You thought Janice would take it at breakfast, never dreaming she'd give it to Beryl as a bracer.

"You hoped the food in Janice's stomach and the slow dissolving of the shell of the capsule would delay death for a little while, without leaving any tell-tale burns. Nobody was more surprised—and scared—than you were when Beryl Glover died on the ski-slide."

Fredericks leaped to his feet again.

"This is ridiculous!" Blade shoved him back into his chair.

"Those foggy shots you made of Sandra at the ski-slide showed your nervousness. That night, when I drove into the village, you thought I was onto something. When the call came in for me from Coroner Dale at San Benito, you felt you had to know what it was all about. Had the cyanide been discovered? Dr. Greenway had insisted it was a heart attack."

Blade cleared his throat, then rubbed his chin reflectively.

"You knew that by using the speedboat you could get to the village ahead of Yvette and me, providing we weren't dead in a crackup. You knew, after coming up here since you were a kid, that most of the telephones in the village are on a party line. So you broke into a store and listened in. Then you beat it back across the lake. You now had the Healthonas which Dr. Greenway had purchased. You knew that I'd bought a box for Janice and that she'd have them in her room. Now was the time to act. You went into the nursery for more cyanide. I surprised you there. You'd already stolen Janice's thirty-two automatic. You blazed away at me to avoid the risk of discovery. You took the cyanide to your dark room, and went to work on the Healthonas."

Fredericks gave a snort of derision. "Why should I kill Janice for so little money when I could have millions?"

"I'm coming to that."

He watched Fredericks' hands clench and unclench spasmodically. He also saw that Sandra Pollard had pulled away from him slightly.

"You tried to switch the boxes of Healthonas early the next morning. One hundred deadly little capsules for the good box which I'd bought and given to Janice. You managed it, all right, but you woke Janice. You put the unpoisoned Healthonas in Greenway's medical kit. By this time you were getting mighty scared. Yesterday morning, when Janice didn't die, you were also puzzled.

"But your big break came at dusk. You knew Case and I were questioning Barr. You crawled out on the ledge and worked your way around to a window. You heard a lot of interesting things. One of them was that if Barr survived Janice, he'd get all but Falconer's legacy to you. On the other hand, if you killed Barr first, Janice would be heir to Falconer-Barr Industries and everything Barr possessed. You cursed yourself roundly for being such a fool. You were Janice's closest relative, and if you bumped Barr and then got Janice later, you wouldn't even have to start a photographic shop. You'd be on Easy Street for the rest of your life, you could do anything you wanted, including financing a career as a model for the demanding Sandra."

Blade looked at Payne. His eyelids were no longer drooping. His small eyes were round, and he looked as if he was going to pounce on Fredericks. The lines of suffering on Dr. Greenway's face were beginning to grow less. Fredericks was clasping and unclasping his hands.

"You fool!" he barked at Blade. "I was a victim myself. I was attacked by the killer."

"You also heard, while you were on the ledge, that Kopp, alias Sanders, was trying to shake down Barr. An entirely new plan broke in that warped brain of yours. Why not kill Barr and tie the crime to Kopp?"

FREDERICKS tossed in another taut interruption. "What makes you think I was on that ledge?"

Blade shot a quick, warning look at Todd. "Cliff Todd saw you."

He looked to Todd for confirmation and Todd nodded.

Blade grimly watched the shot go home.

"But, to continue. You stole the extra key to Kopp's room from the cabinet in the kitchen. It was pretty dark and it had just begun to snow. You went up there to steal the shoes, so that you could make tracks with them. You got the shoes and left. Sanders came in, found them gone, and mentioned their loss to Mrs. Jenks. Is that right, Mrs. Jenks?"

The housekeeper nodded.

"After dinner, Fredericks, you went to Kopp's room and planted the remaining cyanide under a loose board. But there was one thing you didn't know—Kopp was planning to take a powder. He was afraid for himself. He'd found a good hideout, but now the glare of publicity, due to the murder of Beryl Glover, was on Falcon's Lair and on him. He'd have to move along, and move fast. Shortly after you cached the cyanide, he took the station wagon and headed down the mountain.

"For a while, that threw me. How could he make tracks with his shoes to and from the chalet and, after that, drive away in the station wagon without leaving any tire tracks? The answer was that he'd taken out before much snow had fallen. Automatically that eliminated him.

"Now, we get back to you, Fredericks. You had the shoes, and you'd planted the cyanide. You had plenty more to do, but Tommy Case was in the hall. You found him asleep, but you weren't taking any chances.

"He might wake up, and you needed an alibi. You planned to ask him to let you take over, but that wasn't necessary. My

staunch and dutiful retainer made the suggestion himself.

"You stayed on guard for a while. Then you took the cyanide cocktail into Barr's room and dumped it down his throat."

"The door was locked from the inside," Fredericks shouted.

Blade smiled.

"There was still that ledge, reached by going out the hall window. Barr's window was up, and the screens are down this time of year. After that, you got the shoes, and lowered yourself to the circle by using a bed sheet. I have the sheet. It's pretty badly pulled out of shape. It was on your bed.

"When you reached the ground, you walked across the snow in those moccasin-type bedroom slippers of yours. You were pretty clever. You even knew that Kopp's feet were bigger than yours. You walked from the chalet to Kopp's quarters in the slippers. On reaching the entrance to Kopp's rooms, you put on his shoes and returned to a spot underneath Barr's open window. Then you walked back. You put on your moccasins, left Kopp's shoes and used only Kopp's left print to get back. The snow was hard and crusty, and the moccasin prints were just barely discernible. Your bedroom slippers were still damp when we untaped you this morning."

Red began creeping back into Fredericks' face.

"But you seem to forget I was taped and slugged on the head."

"No, we don't forget that, Fredericks. After you'd finished the job and put the sheet back on the bed, you went to the door of the empty room. You gagged yourself. You taped your ankles very neatly. Then you stuck a piece of adhesive tape on the door jamb, close to the floor. By twisting yourself around and stepping over the tape, you managed to tie your hands behind your back. The job wasn't as neat as the one you did on your ankles, naturally."

"That's impossible!"

"I tried it myself this morning, with a piece of ribbon. It worked. Then, you knocked the back of your head against the same door jamb, raising your bump."

"How can you know that?"

"You should've wiped the jamb. There was a damp spot from your broken skin and there were a couple of hairs."

Fredericks leaped to his feet.

"Why, you—" he began. Then: "Okay, I did it." He turned baleful bloodshot eyes on Janice. At the same time, he backed toward the door. The thirty-eight revolver which Case had given him came to view, in his hand. Its muzzle swung from side to side, covering everyone.

HIS voice was harsh and metallic when he spoke. "Sure, I did it," he said. "It's Janice's fault. She's always been stingy. She had everything, from the time we were kids. I had nothing. She wouldn't give me any more than just enough to live on. I was tied to her skirtstrings. Yes, I needed money. I wanted to do things for Sandra, and I wanted my own business. Some chance at independence and self-respect. But would Janice help? No! A thousand times no!" He swung toward Janice. "It's all your doing. If you'd been decent to me, this wouldn't have happened. You're as guilty of killing Barr as I am, my dear cousin.

"I haven't finished my job yet, but I'm going to, now. You've always lorded it over me, but I'm going to have the last laugh. I'm going to put you where you'll never drive another man to murder."

Tommy Case saw his hand compress the trigger. He was on a line between Fredericks and Janice. He stuck his leg into the air.

There was a roar, the sound of shattering glass, the gurgle of liquid as the Scotch in Case's artificial leg trickled downward. Yvette released a blood-curdling scream and threw herself at him.

"Tommee! Tommee! You are kill! You bleed!"

"That's not my blood, it's good liquor," he gasped.

Fredericks whirled, ran through the library doorway. Payne, his gun coming out, went in pursuit. Blade and Deeter were on his heels.

Fredericks plunged wildly down the hill, barged into the boathouse. The speedboat's engine emitted a throaty roar, and a moment later it shot from the building.

"He's getting away!" Payne shouted frantically.

"Not far," said Blade. "I left just enough gas in the lines to let him get started."

As he spoke, the engine coughed, spluttered, coughed again, and then died. The boat was no more than fifty feet from shore. Fredericks dropped behind the gunwale, the revolver pointing over the side.

"I'll kill the first man who comes after

me," he said.

Payne, Greenway, Deeter, Case and Blade lined the shore. Behind them, at a discreet distance, were the others.

"Tommy," said Blade. "The tear gas."

Case hurried back up the hill, dashed into the house, and returned in a couple of minutes while Fredericks was held at bay. He let fly with one of the bombs, lobing it neatly into the boat. It burst. Fredericks leaped up, gouging at his blinded eyes.

"Neat, what?" Case said. "Learned it in football, perfected it on Tarawa."

"There's a rowboat in the boathouse," Blade said.

They launched it. Fredericks, blinded, choking and gasping, had dropped the gun. . . .

* * * * *

"That was the devil of a waste of good liquor," Blade said to Case, after they had returned to their room to pack.

Payne and Deeter had taken Fredericks, thoroughly manacled, to their car and had started down the mountain. The F.B.I. had picked up Kopp in Los Angeles.

"If you hadn't given him the gun, he wouldn't have shot at Janice and, incidentally, wasted the Scotch."

"Okay," Case agreed. "I pulled a beautiful, beautiful bloomer. But how did I know that easy-going, fairly nice young fellow would turn out to be bad."

"Never trust anybody, Tommy. That's the first thing you learn in this racket."

"But if it hadn't been for my artificial leg, he'd have got Janice."

"I know it. Do you know what day this is?"

"Monday."

"It's New Year's Eve, you half-wit. New Year's Eve, and no Scotch."

There was a knock on the door.

Upon invitation, Framingham Jenks entered. He held a bottle in his hand. The bottle had a pre-war label on it. It was Scotch.

"Begging your pardon, sir," said Jenks. "I thought you'd like this. I did a bit of rummaging, far back in the cellar, and behold—I found a full case!" He coughed discreetly. "I'm a Bourbon man myself."

Blade picked up a bottle of Bourbon which Tommy had found somewhere and handed it to him. Jenks' big hand embraced it.

"I'm a bit done in, sir," he said to Blade. "The excitement and all. Now we can live in peace." He turned to Case. "Miss Yvette is in the library, sir. She says she's read all the interesting books." He coughed again. "She says what she's needing is a page from life."

JENKS tucked the bottle of Bourbon under his arm. Case started out the door.

"Happy New Year!" Blade called after him. He turned to Jenks. "Well, Jenks, I've closed up the murder case."

"That was excellent work, if I may be so bold to mention it, sir," he said. "A fine job of deduction. Of course, all those things Mr. Fredericks said about Miss Janice are poppycock. She's been very wonderful to him—in fact, spoiled him. If it hadn't been for her, he'd have had to get out and mucked for a living. Miss Janice is the salt of the earth, sir!"

"Where is she?" Blade asked.

"She's driving into the village with Mr. Todd," he said. "And I rather imagine they'll take the long way. They've patched up their differences, and have reached an understanding, a very close understanding."

Blade shrugged his shoulders.

"I was afraid of that," he said. He opened the Scotch.

"Here's to young love," he offered, and held up the bottle. Jenks opened the Bourbon and clinked bottles. "And here's to the New Year," he added.

They drank. Jenks' face screwed up into a knot, and he shuddered.

"The missus," he said, "is not going to be happy about this—not happy at all."

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

BLOOD ON HER HANDS

A GRIPPING COMPLETE MYSTERY NOVELET

By TALMAGE POWELL

PLUS MANY OTHER BREATH-TAKING STORIES!

As Bastion drew his automatic, Toby put one hand over his eyes, ripped the shade loose and crashed through the window

THE KNIFE AND THE LOOT

By J. LANE LINKLATER

When racketeers frame Al Farley for murder, Toby the newsboy dares a death trap to snare the true killer!

TOBY stopped yelling his papers and stared across the street at the girl. It was early evening, cold and very foggy. Toby Grogan didn't mind the weather. He was forty years old, and for thirty of those years he had been out in all kinds of weather yelling papers.

He was only five feet tall, but he could roar headlines so that people far down the street could feel the impact. His face was as weather-beaten as an old mariner's, yet his round little eyes were child-like.

For a few moments, frowning, he watched the girl. She was looking intently at the curtained front windows of Bastion's barroom. Toby Grogan knew her. Louise Farley was somebody's secretary. Neat and trim-figured, with deep brown eyes.

The girl's posture betrayed anxiety.

Grogan dropped his papers and pushed through the door into the barroom. His eyes searched through the smoke, but Louise's brother, Al, was not there. Toby went to the rear of the barroom, pushed open another door.

He looked at a small room, quietly busy. Men were sitting around tables, dealing cards. But Al Farley was not here, either.

There was still another door at the rear beyond opening upon a room that was very private indeed. Toby's child-like eyes grew strangely stern. He moved quickly toward the door, grasped the knob and pushed.

As soon as he was inside, he knew he had done a dangerous thing. He knew it from the glances that were fastened on him, especially from the black button-like gaze of Jack Bastion himself.

"He'll leave there at five to ten, like he always does," Bastion had been telling his companions. One was a woman.

Bastion stared grimly at Toby.

"You should have locked that door, Miriam," he said to the hard faced girl out of the side of his mouth.

The girl got up from the arm of a deep leather chair, strolled to the door and locked it. She was dark, fairly tall, lithe-figured. Her eyes were a brilliant black.

Sitting in the chair was Al Farley.

Farley had a bleary appearance. He was a good-looking lad, blond, soft-looking. A good fellow, to begin with. He had always been nice to Toby. But for several months he had been getting in deeper with Bastion.

No wonder his sister was worried!

LIKE a flash, Toby's eyes shifted rapidly He saw them all. Another man, smartly dressed, was standing near a table. The man pulled a newspaper sharply toward him, and covered something up. Toby saw that movement, too.

"Your manners are bad, Toby," Jack Bastion said.

Toby grinned. "I'm sorry, but I was looking for Al there. His sister wants him. She's outside."

Al Farley waked up. "Louise wants me?" There was a worried glint in his dazed eyes. "Sure, I'll see her."

"You can't, Al," Bastion said flatly. "Not yet."

"I'll take her a message," Toby offered. His voice in conversation was a low hoarse whisper, in striking contrast to the bellowing roar he used when selling papers. "You just tell me."

"But you can't go out, either, Toby," Bastion said. "Not yet."

The man at the table smiled, too. Toby didn't like the smile. A short, slight man, fast-moving, Ed Swan was Bastion's right-hand man.

Toby was edging forward into the room.

"Ed," said Bastion. "You go and tell Al's sister that he's too busy to come out now. She can go over to Willey's Cafe and wait for him. While you're on your way, tell Tollman to come in."

It didn't take any time for this to sink into Toby's mind. There was none of it that looked good. No doubt Bastion had a very good reason for having his man Tollman sent in. Tollman was a rough one, used for rough work.

Miriam had unlocked the door again, so that Ed Swan could slip out. Toby was still drifting forward. Swan was just passing through the door as Toby reached the table.

Bastion hadn't turned and couldn't see Toby now. Toby pushed away the newspaper. There had been nothing under it but a small carton, about the size of a cigar box, apparently empty, and partially wrapped. Toby noticed that Bastion's name and address was typed on the wrapping, which was stamped.

"Come and sit down, Toby," Bastion said pleasantly.

But Toby's eyes were on a tightly drawn shade in the rear wall. There was a chair near the shade. Toby leaped on it.

Bastion drew his automatic as Toby yanked at the shade. The shade ripped loose. There was the window.

Toby, one arm over his eyes, crashed through it, landed in the narrow alley beyond. He picked himself out of the shattered glass and darted away.

Toby knew the alleys and by-streets in this section like no one else. In a few minutes he was some blocks away. Carefully wiping blood from his face and hands, he slipped into a drug store phone booth.

He called Willey's Cafe and asked for Miss Louise Farley. He figured she had had just about enough time to reach there after getting the message Bastion had sent out to her.

She had, it seemed, just arrived. Her voice on the phone was a little breathless.

"Listen," Toby said, in his hoarse whisper.

"I managed to see Al a few minutes ago, in Bastion's place." Toby squirmed uncomfortably. "Now, don't get upset, see? Everything will turn out all right. But right now I think Bastion's got Al in a spot, some way."

"Oh! Then I'll go right back and walk in."

"You couldn't get in," Toby argued. "Anyhow you probably wouldn't see Al, because I guess he ain't there any more. And it might get Al tangled up with the cops."

"All right, Toby," Louise said reluctantly. "I guess you know more about this than I do. What'll I do?"

"There's a little restaurant not far from where you are now, called Mandy's," Toby said. "You go there right away. You can sit so you can't be seen from the street. It's seven forty-five now. You stay in Mandy's, eat your dinner, and take it easy. And wait for me."

"How long will you be?"

"I can't come right now. I got something to do. I'll be there by nine-thirty."

"I'll wait until then, Toby. If you aren't here by then, I'll go back to Bastion's!"

WITHIN five minutes Toby was crouched in a dank cellar underneath a building which faced a narrow street. This was Fenley Street, but it was now no longer a thoroughfare so much as an alley, and most of the doors on it were back doors.

This was a very old building, with a brownstone front which was a relic of past years. There was nothing in the cellar but refuse.

Toby had found an old box and had placed it under a very small window which was on the sidewalk level. The window glass was long since gone leaving only some wide-spaced bars.

Toby could see across the street, but there was one drawback. If anyone should walk along the sidewalk close to the building, only their moving legs would be visible.

Drifting blobs of murky fog added to Toby's difficulties.

Toby couldn't see the back door of the building opposite, but he tried. That was the rear entrance of the place where Nick Gardon lived, and Gardon, Toby knew, followed a routine. Gardon ran a gambling game not far away, and he left his quarters here every evening just in time to reach his joint at ten o'clock.

Ten o'clock was a long time off. Nothing might happen, Toby thought, for hours yet. He just wanted to be sure.

Yet something did happen. Within half an hour.

There were footsteps. There had been other footsteps, but somehow these sounded ominous. They were slowing up now.

Toby peered through the bars and cursed the darkness.

All he could see was a pair of legs from the knees down. He couldn't even distinguish the color of the trousers.

But they did a strange thing, these legs. They just stood there, facing Toby. It was as if the owner of the legs was standing still, just looking at the blank wall, close to it.

The legs were motionless for a few seconds. Then they turned and wandered away. The footsteps vanished into silence.

Toby muttered a curse. This was nothing like he had expected. It might have nothing to do with Jack Bastion at all.

He fidgeted uneasily. Nothing happened for a long time. Precious minutes were passing fast.

He waited until nine twenty-five. Still, nothing had happened. The dingy street beyond the bars was quieter than ever; quieter, foggier, darker.

Now he could wait no longer. Silently, he moved away from the window, back toward the cellar steps.

Louise Farley was sitting at a table around a bend in the little cafe. Her expression was strained.

"Hello, Toby," she said.

"I got to talk straight, Miss Farley," Toby said.

"Go ahead."

"Okay. Your brother has been going into Bastion's place regular lately. Why?"

She studied Toby a minute. "Al is not well. Something wrong with his lungs. That has kept him from doing regular work. He's dependent on me, and he didn't like that. Recently he got acquainted with Bastion, who was paying him some to help out in business deals."

"What kind of business?"

"Al never made it clear because I disapproved. But Bastion paid Al some money. I know that."

"Did Al ever mention Nick Gardon's name?"

"Gardon? Why, yes. Once or twice. Who's Gardon?"

"Gardon runs a private gambling joint. He and Bastion don't get along. Bastion has his

own game."

The girl's face was grave. "I don't understand."

"Never mind for now." Toby's whisper was hoarser than usual. He was anxious to get back to Fenley Street before five minutes to ten. "I got to ask you to wait here some more. I don't think it will be long. I got to go now."

Toby hurried back. He let himself into the cellar, picked his way toward the front.

Something came hurtling through the window bars, flicked his head and dropped to the floor.

Toby was suddenly motionless, rigid. So it looked as if he had been gone too long—a couple of minutes too long.

HE FISHED in the debris on the floor, and presently found a small article. He knew at once what it was because it was still warm, as if it had nestled close to a human body.

He carefully struck a match. The thing in his hand was a large billfold. The lettering on it said: NICK GARDON.

Toby started swiftly toward the rear, then stopped. This billfold! It wouldn't do to have it on him. He hurled it toward the front of the cellar.

In a few moments he was outside and darted around a corner toward Fenley Street. He bumped into the big figure of a man who was just turning away from a phone pole.

The man grabbed him, stared at him.

"What. the devil," he grumbled. "What's your hurry, Toby?"

Toby knew him well. He was a patrolman named Blaney.

"Back there!" Tobey croaked excitedly, and pointed. "A feller threw a rock through that jewelry store window."

But it didn't work. Blaney started off, but up from Fenley Street, out of the fog, came another weaving figure.

"Well, for gosh sakes!" Blaney muttered.

Toby swore under his breath as he looked at the white scared face of young Al Farley.

Al's eyes were stricken with shock. Words tumbled out of his trembling mouth.

"He's dead! He's dead!"

"Dead?" Blaney grabbed him. "Who's dead?"

"Nick Gardon! He's dead! I—I felt him. On the sidewalk, back there. He's dead!"

"You mugs come with me!" Blaney said grimly. "Both of you."

He took them along by the arm. It was less than half a block, and there they found Gardon lying just outside that cellar window!

Blaney released Toby's arm and turned his flashlight on the plump well-clad figure at his feet.

The handle of a large hunting knife projected from Nick Gardon's back.

A queer cry came from Al Farley. "The—the knife!" he whimpered. "It looks like mine!"

"It looks like it, huh," Blaney growled. "So it's yours! Did you kill him, and then you lose your nerve?"

"I didn't kill him! I was standing across the street there, outside his back door. He came out. I spoke to him. He walked across here. I couldn't see what happened because of the fog and darkness."

"Rats!" Blaney said. "Well, this let's me out. I'll have to call in Homicide."

Again, he took Farley and Toby by the arm and marched back to the corner. His call box was attached to the pole there. Toby was thinking fast. He didn't want to be held as a material witness. It would cramp his style. It might even land him behind bars. He remembered the empty billfold down in that cellar, with his fingerprints on it.

Well, getting away, wasn't difficult. Blaney couldn't hold both of them while he was phoning, so he released Toby.

Toby simply backed away, noiselessly, then turned and scampered into the night. One shot from Blaney's revolver followed him, but that was all.

But Toby didn't go far. It was mighty lucky, he thought, that he knew this district. Knew every house, every alley, every corner, every crevice.

He was soon back on Fenley Street, wedged behind the eaves of an old building, on the low roof, close to Gardon's house and nearly opposite the spot where Gardon lay dead.

There was hurry and bustle down there now. Cops and newspaper men, examining, searching, probing. Toby could see little more than moving shadows, but he followed their movements intently.

Of one thing he was sure. Al Farley had been beautifully framed. Jack Bastion had done that. Either Bastion or one of his crowd had killed and robbed Gardon, and figured it so that Al Farley would take the rap.

Jack Bastion would have an alibi. So would all of his gang. But young Al Farley

would have none.

Toby wondered how big the haul had been. Plenty, no doubt. Gardon ran big games, handled heavy dough. He was the kind who always carried a big roll on him.

What had happened to that stolen money?

Presently the busy men below began to drift away. Police cars vanished. The murmur of voices abated. Then they were all gone.

They'd leave a patrolman in the block, Toby thought, maybe up at the corner, near the call box. He'd have to chance that.

QUICKLY he crossed the roof and shinnied down to the ground. When he emerged into Fenley Street he was carrying a small discarded step-ladder.

He scurried across the street with it, set it up in front of the cellar window. He trod gingerly up its rungs.

Cautiously, Toby struck a match. Yes, his memory had been right. Here was a ledge in the stone front of the old building. The ledge was about three inches wide.

The match went out. Toby struck another, peered at the ledge. The dirt along it was thick and moist.

But there were marks in it. Recently made marks. Toby held the match over them until the flame burned his fingers. He started to light another.

Then he heard footsteps, hurrying.

He leaped off the ladder, sped across the street and disappeared into the passageway.

Louise Farley was still waiting in Mandy's cafe. "Something's gone wrong?" she said, as soon as she saw Toby.

Toby talked. Her eyes widened and her hand clutched at the edge of the table. The knuckles showed white.

"I must do something!" she said, and sobbed a little.

"Sure," Toby said, and tried to make his raspy voice comforting. "The way I figure it, the cops will be up at Bastion's flat pretty quick."

"You mean they'll suspect Bastion."

"I ain't saying that. But Al will be sure to tell a story that mentions Bastion, just trying to explain what he was doing, see? So I want to be in on it without Bastion being wise I'm busy."

"Can you do that?"

Toby grinned. "I know my way around. But I may get in a jam. That's where you come in."

Her eyes lighted. "I'll do anything, Toby!"

"Okay. Bastion's flat is in an old building on the street back of this one. You can look out of that window over there and see the light in his kitchen. The second floor." Toby smiled wryly. "What you do, you just listen!"

"Listen?"

"Right. Just in case. Listen hard! And if you hear me yell 'copper', just grab that phone and get the cops there fast."

"But, Toby, can you yell loud enough."

"Leave it to me," Toby whispered.

Bastion had his flat fixed up with gaudy luxury. Bastion himself was there in his living room. With him was his black-eyed little helper, Miriam, and his man, Tollman.

Toby couldn't see them, but he could hear. He had managed to reach a second-floor window, and he was now in a small parlor adjoining the living room. Just behind the door.

Soon he heard the door bell ring. A low order came from Bastion. Someone moved out to the hall, and was releasing the front door catch. Then someone else was coming up the stairs.

Toby knew the man by his voice. A headquarters man named Wilson.

"Nice to see you," Bastión said sociably. "What's on your mind?"

"It's murder, Bastion!"

"No. Anyone I know?"

"Nick Gardon."

"Whew! Poor old Nick! Anything I can do?"

"Well, maybe. It looks like a lad who's been around with you lately. Al Farley."

"Al?" Bastion said, as if he was bowled over. "No. Why, Al's a nice boy. He's been hanging around me, and I've tried to help him out. That's all there is to it, though."

"Could be," Wilson agreed. "But the yarn he tells rings you in. He says he was to stand just outside Gardon's back door. You told him, he says, that Gardon would come out, and he was to tell Gardon that Miriam was waiting for him right across the street, and for him to go on over."

"The little rat," Miriam cut in. "Why would I want to see Gardon?"

"The kid says he doesn't know. He was just doing a chore."

JACK BASTION wagged his head regretfully.

"Too bad about that kid," he muttered.

"Just trying to save his own neck by making me the goat. Me and Miriam." He was silent a moment. "Why would I do a thing like that?"

"You could be getting rid of a rival gambler," Wilson suggested mildly. "And collecting Gardon's roll at the same time."

"That ain't my way." Bastion was indignant. "Did anyone hear the shot?"

"There was no shot. It was a knife. And the knife belonged to Al Farley."

"Al's knife? Why, the poor fool. He must've been bugs."

"Well, anyhow he has no alibi. Now, do you have one? You and all your boys?"

"Alibi, huh?" Tony, listening hard, could hear Bastion chuckle. "Well, I dunno. Miriam here was down at the bar until a few minutes ago. Ed Swan is still there. Lots of witnesses to that. But about me and Tollman, I can't say. We were down at Jake's Turkish bath. I remember now. We got out of there at exactly nine-fifty."

"The murder was at exactly five to ten," said Wilson.

"Five minutes later, huh? Well, it isn't far. I guess I could have got there in five minutes. Only I didn't. So I don't know about the alibi. If I—say, wait!" Bastion's voice grew excited. "How big a knife was it?"

"At least seven inches long. A hunting knife."

"That would do it. Tollman and me stripped in that Turkish bath. Jake himself handled our clothes. Jake couldn't help knowing if we had a seven-inch knife on us, could he?"

"I guess not," Wilson conceded. "Will Jake back up your story?"

"Get Jake on the phone right now," Bastion urged. "Ask him."

Toby, close to the edge of the door, heard Wilson put in his phone call, heard him talk with Jake, and hang up.

The others in the room were very quiet.

"It looks like you're in the clear on that knife angle, Bastion," Wilson said. "Jake says you didn't have a knife."

"Of course, I could've gone over to Al's apartment and swiped the knife," Bastion said. "Only that's a mile away."

"I ain't got time for kidding," Wilson said, with dignity. "See you again some time."

Toby could hear them speed Wilson on his way. Wilson's footsteps trod heavily down the stairs. The front door slammed.

Toby moved. He thought he'd look around.

The lights were snapped on suddenly. Toby swung about. Staring at him, smiling at him, was Ed Swan. He had his gun ready.

"Nice to see you, Toby," he said. "Do the others know you're here? No, I can see they don't. Well, just open that door and go in."

Toby scowled. But he did as he was told. The others turned about quickly as the door opened.

"I just came up the back stairs and found Toby behind this door," Swan said. "I guess he was using his ears."

Toby was conscious, for a moment, only of Bastion's hard scrutiny. Then his gaze moved. There was Bastion's tough man, Tollman, a short squat powerful fellow. And Miriam, sharp and suspicious.

And Bastion himself. Bastion was on his feet now. He, too, was very slender and tall, the only tall man in his gang.

"When did you get here, Toby?" Bastion said placidly.

Toby knew what was in his mind. "About when Wilson did."

Bastion nodded doubtfully. If Toby had arrived before Wilson, he would have heard much too much.

Toby grinned. "Don't get me wrong. I'm only looking out for myself. I sure could use some dough, and you've got some extra."

"Have I?"

"Sure," Toby said. "Nick Gardon's dough. It musta been quite a roll."

"So you think one of us killed him?" Bastion said.

"Sure. But he was no pal of mine."

"You think you know just who killed him?"

Toby lost his control. He was mad. He was getting tired of fooling around. Especially with Bastion. He knew he shouldn't say it, but he did.

"Sure! You killed him!"

Bastion sighed a little. "You can't prove it?"

"I might," Toby said. "Of course, for five grand I might forget."

"You know you're not going to get any five grand, Toby," Bastion answered gently. "That's not what you're going to get at all!"

Toby knew that. Ever since Ed Swan had discovered Toby, Toby had known he was slated to be killed. They'd have alibis and excuses, and finally Bastion would end up by putting himself in the clear.

They might even claim that Toby was part

of the Gardon killing!

They were all watching Toby now, tensely quiet.

The window, not far away, was closed. Toby was leaning against a table. The ash tray on it, he noticed, was heavy. He scooped up the tray and hurled it through the window.

The crash of the glass was followed instantly by Toby's lusty roar.

"COPPER!" he yelled.

That was the signal he'd arranged with Louise Farley.

A moment later Ed Swan jammed his gun against Toby's back. Others of Bastion's mob got to their feet, wary, noiseless.

"Here?" Swan queried.

"Not here," Bastion said. "We'll take him into the bedroom. That way it'll make a better story."

Miriam stayed in the living room. Bastion, Swan and Tollman pushed Toby along a hall and into the bedroom. Someone switched on the light.

"Not likely anyone heard you yell," Bastion remarked. He was silent a moment. "The idea is, you came here to rob the joint. This room was dark. Tollman walked in and you rushed him in the dark. Tollman had to let you have it."

Tollman beamed with pleasure. "You want I should finish him?"

"Right."

Toby Grogan's squat little figure was in the middle of them. Tollman's hand came out with an automatic. Quick as a flash, Toby's hand chopped up and down, cracked against Tollman's wrist. Tollman's gun dropped. Toby scooped it up.

Now Swan was leveling his gun. Bastion, too. They were in each other's way. Toby fired rapidly and hit Swan's right arm. Swan couldn't hold on.

Holding them off, Toby backed into a door. With his left hand behind him he turned the knob and pushed the door open. He ducked through and slammed the door shut. He was in a bathroom. He fumbled a moment, found the bolt, shoved it into place.

He turned the light switch.

"We've got to get him," he heard Bastion say.

It wasn't much of a door. They were firing into it, around the bolt. Toby crouched in a corner. They could get in within five minutes. Toby wondered if Louise Farley had heard him.

In a little while the door had been nearly burned open with hot lead.

Then he heard the stairs rattle as heavy feet pounded up from the front door. Yes, Louise Farley had heard him.

He saw her when they let him out. There were three policemen. The Homicide man, Wilson, was there, too.

"Hold Your Hats, Boys!"

THAT was one of Steve Handrahan's pet expressions—and it took on more meaning for him than ever before when he lost his own hat—which was found next to a corpse! This was only one of the scrapes that Steve got into—but nothing could make him lose his sense of humor!

The moment Steve returned from the wars, and resumed his work as a confidential investigator, things started happening to him—and his troubles piled up with such amazing rapidity that they kept him in a constant dither! He was shot at, banged up, captured by gangsters, accused of crime—and that's not the half of it. For a crackerjack detective yarn, we recommend—

DON'T FORGET YOUR GUN

By WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

NEXT ISSUE'S FAST AND FURIOUS COMPLETE CRIME NOVEL

BASTION told his story confidently.

"I didn't care about Toby trying to rob me," he concluded. "But he got tough. Swiped Tollman's rod and shot Swan, like you see. That's what started it."

Wilson frowned. "Sorry, Toby. Guess you're it!"

"It ain't that way at all," Toby said. "They tried to burn me because I know Bastion killed Nick Gardon."

"You say Bastion killed Gardon?" Wilson said with great interest.

"Sure. He fixed it up to kill and rob Gardon, and frame Al Farley to take the rap. My guess is that the girl, Miriam, phoned Gardon she would be out back of his place at the time he always left to go to his gambling joint, five minutes to ten. Gardon wouldn't turn her down. Then they had Al Farley wait outside with instructions to tell Gardon to go across the street. Another thing they figured on was that the copper, Blaney, would be ringing in from the corner just then, and Blaney would be too far away to see the killing but near enough to grab Farley!"

"That's a good yarn, Toby," Wilson said. "How about proof?"

"There's proof in two places," Toby argued. "The loot, and the knife."

"I'm listening," Wilson said, still skeptical.

"Watch the U. S. mails for the loot," said Toby. "Early this evening I saw a small carton in Bastion's office. There was wrapping on it, showing it addressed to Bastion, general delivery, this city. There were stamps on it, too, but the stamps were not cancelled. So maybe the dough they took off Gardon was just shoved in that carton and dropped in the nearest mail box. They could've sealed it up in a minute."

"We can check that, easy," Wilson cut in. "What about the knife?"

"The reason Jake, at the Turkish bath, didn't see the knife was because Bastion had already ditched it in a handy place."

Wilson was listening. So were the others. Bastion's eyes flicked around. Something in his face indicated that he was sorry there were so many policemen around.

"There's a ledge in the stone wall above a cellar window on Fenley Street, above where Gardon was killed. Bastion just parked the knife up on that ledge, and the carton, too, until he was ready to use it. He put it there more than an hour before the murder."

"Maybe you saw me put it there?" Bastion scoffed.

Tony grinned. "I saw your legs. I was down in the cellar."

"You saw my legs? Did you recognize 'em?"

"No," Toby admitted. "But it had to be you or one of your gang. And you're the only one tall enough to reach that high without something to stand on. Besides, I took a look at that ledge. The marks are in the dust there. I don't think you wore gloves when you parked the knife, or when you took it down. Sure, you held it in a handkerchief after you took it down, and wiped it, but there are prints up on that ledge, Bastion. And my money says they're your prints."

Wilson was watching Bastion thoughtfully.

Bastion waved his hand.

"From now on," he said, "I ain't talking. How about calling my lawyer?"

Afterward Toby felt awkward, walking up the street with Louise Farley.

She was holding his arm, and it made him feel like a goof.

"As soon as we can get Al, we'll all go and have dinner together," she was saying. "What you've done proves we three have got to stick close. We owe you a lot, Toby."

"Aw, nix," Toby muttered. "I ain't hungry. And I already missed three editions. I got to be going. You don't owe me nothing."

"How you talk!" Louise Farley reproved him, and squeezed his arm. "From now on you're the Farley family's best friend." She laughed. "And I think you're going to be a very good influence."

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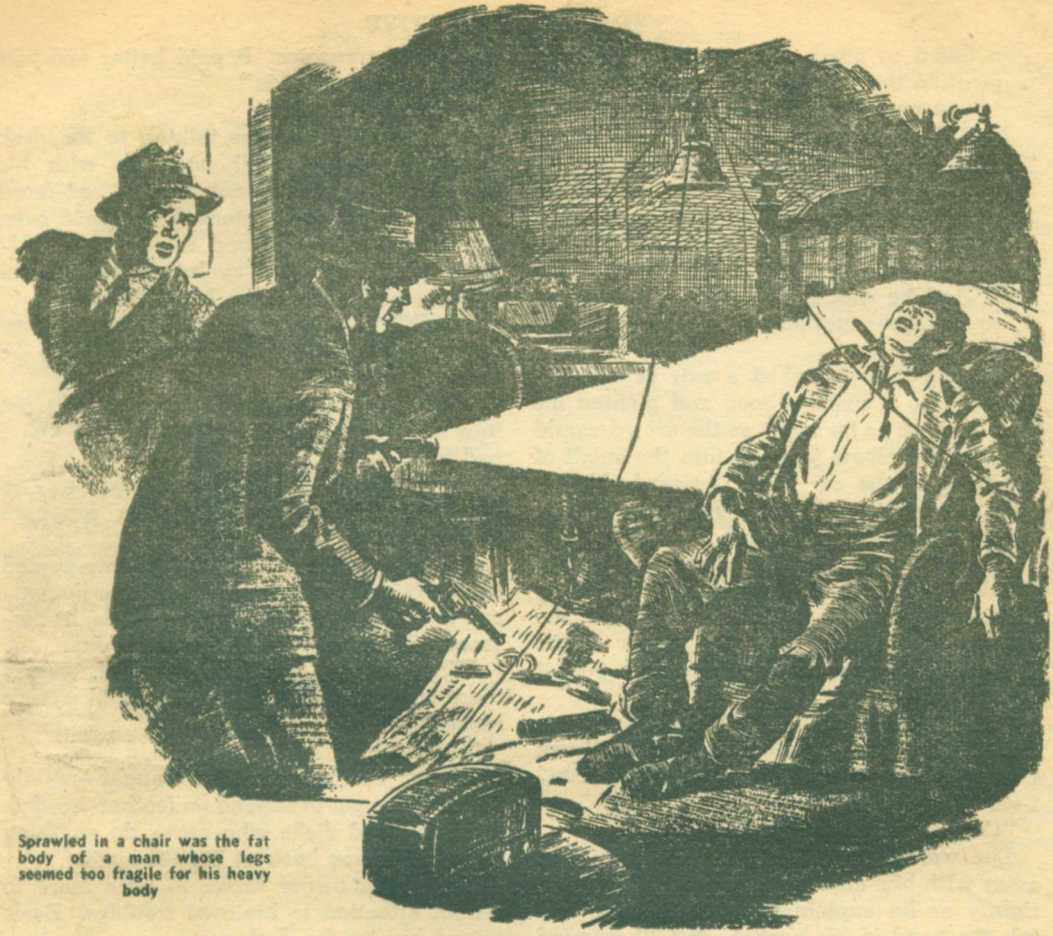
COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE CORPSE FROM RENO

A Novelet of Murder and Blackmail

By JOHN L. BENTON

PLUS MANY OTHER EXCITING MYSTERY STORIES!



Sprawled in a chair was the fat body of a man whose legs seemed too fragile for his heavy body

THE TANGLED WEB OF MURDER

By E. E. HALLERAN

To locate a killer and his crooked victim's loot, Dan McGill had to find out what stopped a clock!

FROM Detective Headquarters to the trolley loading zone was about fifty yards. Dan McGill covered the distance in nothing flat, saying "blast!" a dozen times in the tiny interval. This was a record even for Dan McGill who could utter the mild curse more times a minute than anybody on the force could curse in an hour. He swung aboard just as the door was closing, ignoring the early evening crowd which already jammed the car.

It had been a stormy session back there at headquarters. Commissioner Rowan had spared no adjectives in discussing a detective squad dumb enough to spend an entire month failing to find a conspicuous character like "Spider"Webb—and Lieutenant Beals had passed the buck to Dan McGill.

Hadn't McGill been the man who had let Webb get away in the first place? Hadn't McGill been on the assignment constantly without any trace of a lead?

No one seemed willing to remember that Webb had not even been a suspect when

Dan failed to pinch him. No one bothered to mention that most of the rest of the force had been pretty steadily on the elusive trail.

McGill uttered a final "blast" and thrust wide shoulders into the crowd, heading for an untenanted strap. Now he was off on another wild-goose chase, running down a fool rumor with no prospect of anything but more sarcasm from Lieutenant Beals at the end. And he was using a trolley instead of a squad car—another of the lieutenant's bright ideas!

The big fellow hooked a pair of oversize fingers into a swaying loop and planted his number tens as far apart as the crowd would permit. An elbow jammed into the small of his back as the car jolted forward. McGill paid no attention but then a voice rose angrily above the clatter of wheels.

He twisted his head in time to see two hands coming out of a straphanger's pocket. One hand held a brown wallet and the other held the first one. The owner of the first hand was not the owner of the pocket or the wallet.

McGill let go of the strap and thrust his own fist into the tangle. His fingers closed over the dip's wrist, their pressure authoritative.

"Cop," he said briefly. "Let loose."

The wallet owner let his excitement run away with him and the crowd closed in more tightly as he explained about how he had felt the hand in his pocket. McGill grunted mournfully and shoved his prisoner toward the exit door.

"Come along," he said to the wallet owner. "Only a block to Headquarters. You can sign the charge."

ON the sidewalk he saw that his prisoner was a man as tall as himself, a big-boned individual who might have reached McGill proportions if he had carried any beef on his gaunt frame. Dan stared at him curiously as he shoved him along, ignoring the chatter of the excited wallet owner.

"You're Lew Aiken, ain't you?" he remarked after a moment. "How come you tried your hand at the dip racket?"

The gaunt man shrugged uneasily.

"I'm Aiken," he admitted. "I've been laid up for over a month. Hocked my camera today to pay the doctor. I was still broke so I grabbed at the first chance I saw."

McGill grunted again.

"You should have stuck to pokin' cameras over hotel transoms. It paid better and you wasn't so clumsy at it."

Aiken didn't reply.

Lieutenant Beals was talking to the desk sergeant when McGill went in with his prisoner. The lieutenant was a red-faced man whose fat jowls seemed too florid even for the rest of his rotund countenance. Almost white hair and eyebrows set off the color as he glared at the big detective.

"*McGill!*" he exploded. "Can't you ever do anything right? You're supposed to be heading uptown!"

"Sorry," Dan muttered. "I practically ran into a dip job and I couldn't pass it up. I had to—"

"Sure. Sure. You'll have a good story to tell—but that ain't what you're supposed to bring in!"

The prospective robbery victim interrupted excitedly and for some moments the lieutenant had to contain his anger while he listened. Then he recognized Lew Aiken.

"How come, Lew?" he snapped. "Ain't there enough dough in the blackmail picture racket?"

"I was never in it," Aiken said calmly.

"Bolts! You just never got caught—mainly because I've got to depend on feather-headed, loose-tongued dicks who never do anything right." He was back at McGill again.

The wallet owner broke in once more to attract attention to his own troubles. Beals waved him to the desk man.

"Draw up a complaint," he directed. "Looks like it's open and shut."

Aiken shrugged.

"Like I told McGill, I've been sick and I needed more dough than I could get from a pawnshop." He hesitated for a moment, then spoke pleadingly to Beals.

"Will you do me a favor, Lieutenant? Drop around at my boarding house and speak to a man named Wells about this. We got kinda pally while I was laid up and maybe he'll put up money for my fine."

Beals scowled.

"Where's the place?"

Aiken gave the address.

"And don't let Mom Finkley stall you off. Wells makes her let him alone except to bring him grub, but he's a good lad. Bad legs or something, so he never goes out."

McGill cut in quickly.

"What kind of bad legs? What does he look like?"

Beals made an angry motion but stopped

as Aiken answered.

"Weak, I guess. Long legs that don't seem strong enough to hold up his fat body."

The lieutenant almost strangled.

"The Spider! Where in hades have you been for this past month, Aiken?"

The gaunt man frowned plaintively.

"Like I said, I was sick. What's the—"

Beals was already headed for the door.

"Take care of it, sergeant," he barked over his shoulder. "McGill! You come with me. Maybe you're dumb, but you're big. I'll need you."

Aiken's boarding house proved to be a unit in a dingy brick row. An old woman hobbled to answer the door after inspecting the visitors from a window which overlooked the front steps. Lieutenant Beals flashed his badge.

"Man calls himself Wells," he said abruptly. "Where's his room?"

The woman motioned to the battered staircase.

"Second floor back," she said tremulously. "I hope it ain't—"

"I'll bet it is!" Beals interrupted and went for the stairs.

McGill followed in silence to the upper floor. The hall was lighted dimly by a small bulb and there seemed to be no lights in any of the rooms. Beals halted before the last door toward the rear of the house, taking his gun in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

At his nod, McGill drew his own gun and reached for the doorknob. The flashlight went on as the door swung open with a creak, disclosing a sight which made both men grunt.

SPRAWLED in an easy chair was the fat body of a round man whose legs seemed too long and too fragile for his heavy body. Even in the light of the torch they could see that he was dead, the handle of a kitchen knife protruding from his bloody throat. More astonishing than the body, however, was the network of black lines which seemed to form a canopy for the scene.

"Blazes!" Beals said. "A spider-web! What the—"

McGill's own start gave way to a grin of relief. The eerie feeling left him as he realized that the web was merely a network of electric cords leading from the multiple sockets which had been fitted to the drop cord in the middle of the room. The Spider had been doing some amateur electrical work in his hideout.

Dan reached around the door jamb and punched the light switch. A central bulb flared into life and they could see the room and the body more clearly.

Beals moved across to look down at the body and at the short length of pipe which lay on the floor beside it. McGill stared around him at the surprising appointments of the place.

Spider Webb had apparently prepared himself for comfort during his hideout period. Those radiating wires carried current to a bed lamp, a desk light, an electric grill, a clock, a radio and a toaster.

"He was lucky he didn't short-circuit something with all this mess," McGill observed. "A three-way socket above the bulb and double plugs in every outlet. An insurance man would throw a fit."

"Shut up!" his superior snapped. "We got a murder on our hands. Forget the insurance!" He jerked a thumb toward the desk. "See what you can find. The murderer musta ducked out with Spider's loot but then again—"

Dan McGill searched the room, then searched it again under the prodding tongue of Lieutenant Beals. The only bit of money they turned up was a single dime in the dead man's trousers pocket. By that time Beals was sweating and cursing.

"Somebody beat us to him," he growled. "Now I've got a murder case on my hands as well as a slick bank robbery. Go find a phone and ask for a squad. Maybe you can do that without botching it up!"

McGill maintained his silence. His mind was occupied as he went through the door. The electric clock indicated seven-twenty while a glance at his watch told him that it was actually eight-twenty. How come?

He passed the apprehensive Mrs. Finkley with a vague smile, aware that Lieutenant Beals was following him down the stairs. Quite obviously the lady was going to have some explaining to do about why she had harbored a known fugitive from justice—and how come said fugitive had been bumped off so messily.

He found a telephone and delivered his message, returning to find Beals holding forth in a downstairs front room. The lieutenant was thundering at a couple of frightened-looking young men, a dazed oldster and the defiant Mrs. Finkley. The old fellow

was a doddering old codger in a faded, collarless shirt and he seemed almost on the point of collapse.

"Sergeant Callen will be along." Dan reported.

Beals nodded.

"Check the doors and windows. Maybe we can sew this thing up in a hurry."

"Spider's room too?"

"No. I looked there. Get the others."

There was only one other door. It was locked and bolted. Every window in the house was locked except the one directly over the front door. In that room a cheap suitcase lay on the bed partly packed and two bureau drawers were open.

McGill went back downstairs just as Sergeant Callen and four members of the Homicide Squad came in. Beals issued quick instructions to the photographers and fingerprint men, then motioned the sergeant to join him in the downstairs room. McGill went in behind them and reported his findings.

BEALS spoke expansively to Sergeant Callen, pretending to ignore McGill although it was evident that he had noted the report.

"Looks like the murder job's a pipe, Sergeant," he said. "Mrs. Finkley sews everything up for us. Your boys can spend their time in a search for the dough that the killer took from Webb."

He glanced at his notes and spoke on.

"Mrs. Finkley was sitting here in this room where she can see the front steps. Had been here since six-thirty. There wasn't any other way out of the house—so the killer must be somebody she saw go out or else he's still in here."

He paused to let a speculative glance travel across the faces of the three men before him. McGill saw that one of the younger ones was getting fidgety, almost as nervous as the old fellow. Beals went on in a tone that almost smirked.

"Mrs. Finkley keeps a careful watch on her lodgers, maybe because they sometimes move out owing her rent. Anyway she has a tally of every movement in and out of that door since six-thirty. First, a man named Lew Aiken went out about seven-ten. He's in a cell now for lifting a man's wallet.

"That left nobody in the house but the lady and Spider Webb, but McNulty here—" he motioned toward the larger of the young men, a black-haired youth whose badly crossed eyes were lifted toward him for the first time—"popped in about five minutes later. At seven-thirty the other two lodgers arrived. Nobody went out after seven-ten."

Sergeant Callen was an old enough hand to keep quiet and listen, but Dan McGill asked the question which Beals obviously wanted.

"So what does it get us? How do we know when the Spider was killed?"

Beals snorted in exaggerated disgust.

"The master mind don't get it. The brilliant sleuth who's always running off at the mouth can't use his eyes when the evidence is right in front of him to be seen! You were in the room, McGill. You should have seen it."

His tone changed as he explained to Callen.

"The Spider was knocked cold before he was stabbed. I reckon even McGill couldn't have missed the section of gas pipe that was on the floor beside him.

"It looks like he threw up an arm to save himself when he realized that he was about to get conked with the pipe. Anyway there's a bad bruise on his left wrist and his wrist watch is smashed. What's important is that the watch is stopped at seven-forty-seven!"

He swung abruptly to bark at the three tense lodgers.

"Figure it out, boys. One of you killed Webb at that time. Nobody else was in here because nobody else went out. The reason you didn't get away was that you had to have time to pack for a run-out. Anybody want to sing?"

The two younger men squirmed and the old fellow wet his lips with a nervous tongue.

"Maybe we won't need to look far," Beals suggested dryly. "We can see who was packin' up to leave."

Mrs. Finkley seemed to rouse herself at the suggestion.

"Every one of 'em owes me money," she stated sharply. "They better not be packin'."

McGill grinned at the way the woman was forgetting the murder. Her income was more important.

"Somebody was packed in the front room upstairs," he said. "Window part open."

The old man slumped in his chair, eyes closed.

Mrs. Finkley started to talk but Beals cut her off abruptly.

"Looks like the works," he said to Callen. "We'll take a squint at the room."

"There's another thing," McGill began. "You didn't—"

"Don't crowd your luck!" the lieutenant snapped. "Just because you noticed the packing job is no reason for me to forget the way you slipped up on that hunk of pipe. Come to think of it, maybe I oughta get you out of here before you put your usual jinx on a case that's going good."

"But I saw—"

"Rats! You're assigned—as of right now—to go down and patrol the Arena for the fights. Maybe you'll pick up another dip in the crowd. That was the best accident you've had in months. Scram!"

DAN McGILL tried again.

"Bet you five the old man didn't do it," he said. A bet usually got a rise out of Beals.

This time it didn't work. The lieutenant merely glared as he started for the stairs.

"Scram!" he repeated. "I'm nervous when you're around to make a mess of things."

Dan McGill shut his lips angrily and went out. So that was the way Beals was planning it! He could report the case as a personal triumph and then add his cute little angle when he told the yarn around headquarters. Successful case because he had been smart enough to get rid of McGill and keep the big lug from botching matters. That was going to be fun!

Dan was halfway to the subway station before his anger settled enough for his brain to work properly. Then he stopped abruptly and stared unseeingly into a darkened store window. Maybe there was more to the point he had tried to tell Beals than he had seen at first. Maybe it fitted into the rest of the facts the lieutenant had outlined.

Five minutes passed before he started walking again and then he did not walk toward the subway kiosk. That was disobedience to orders, but he didn't mind taking the gamble. Might as well risk the job entirely as to be left hanging on to the edges all the time.

Forty minutes later he strolled into detective headquarters with a grin on his broad face and a square package under his arm. The man at the switchboard looked up absently, apparently intent on some conversation he was overhearing.

"Lieutenant Beals back yet?" McGill asked.

The operator grinned wryly.

"He's on the phone now, calling in to cry the blues to the commissioner. He claims he found Spider Webb—dead—but the jack has disappeared. The commissioner is raising Cain and Beals hints that he'd have put the clamps on the whole thing if he'd had a good man with him at the kickoff."

He seemed sympathetic but McGill's grin held.

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

"In Beals' office. Why?"

The grin widened.

"Looks like I'm in luck," he said shortly and headed toward a passageway. He knocked on a heavy door and went in without waiting for an invitation. "I got it, Lieutenant," he began. "It was just like—"

He broke off in studied embarrassment as an angry police commissioner replaced the telephone and swung to face him.

"Excuse me," McGill apologized. "I was looking for Lieutenant Beals to tell him I'd found the Spider Webb loot."

Commissioner Rowan's square jaw sagged.

"But Beals just told me—"

Dan frowned.

"Yeah, I guess he's stuck. I thought maybe I could square myself with him so I took a chance on skipping the fight job and playing a hunch I had. The lieutenant didn't like it, I guess, so I went on my own. I hope you'll put in a word for me so he won't be sore."

Commissioner Rowan found his tongue.

"I'll fix anything if you've got that dough! What's the story?"

"It was that spider-web business that gave me the tip."

"Sure. But what—"

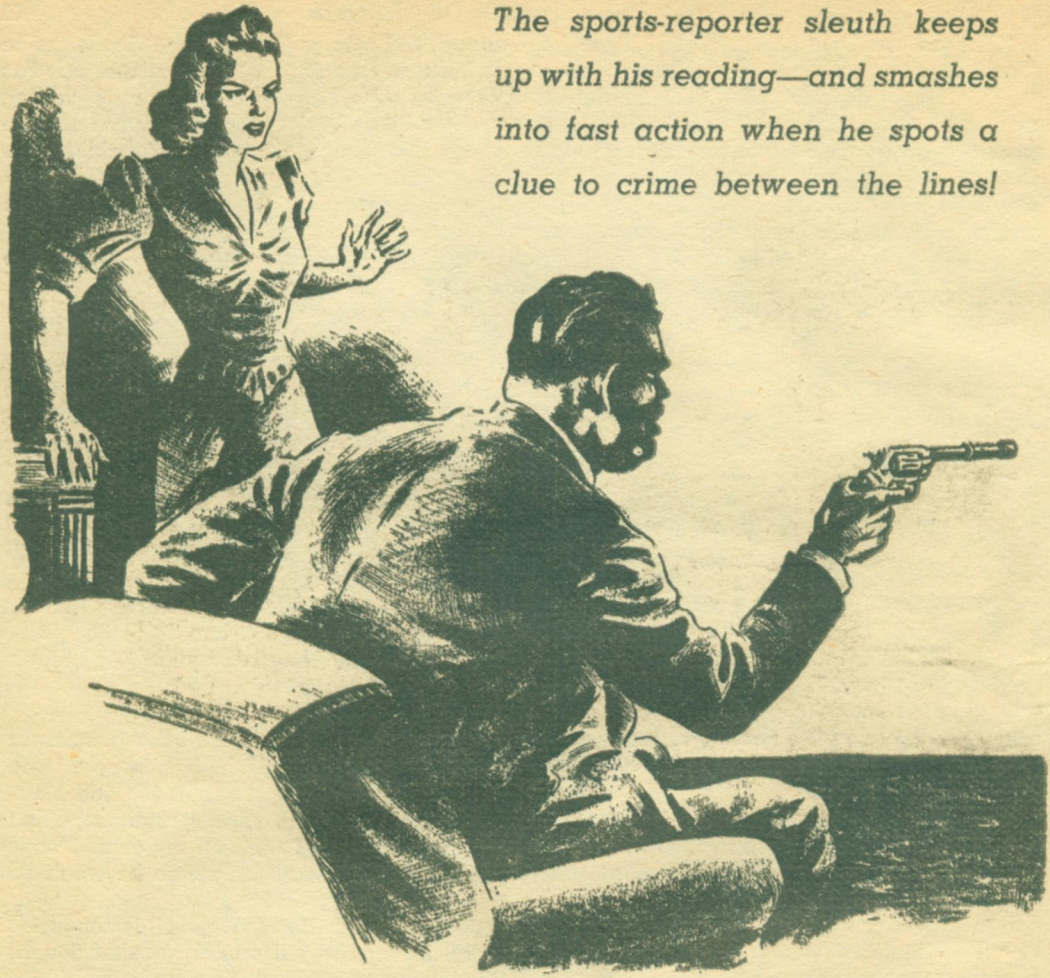
"I don't mean Spider Webb: I mean spider-web. You see, the Spider had fitted up his room with a flock of electrical gadgets, all drawing current from a drop cord in the middle of the room. There was a light bulb in the socket, but a double outlet had been plugged in above it and double plugs were in each of the main outlets, each one feeding a light or a grill of some kind.

"I figure that Spider turned the center light off and on by means of a pull chain because the wall switch would have affected all the gadgets. The killer didn't know that and when he bumped Spider off he turned off the lights at the wall switch by the door."

The commissioner looked puzzled.

"What is this, McGill? Some of that fast

(Concluded on page 97)



The sports-reporter sleuth keeps up with his reading—and smashes into fast action when he spots a clue to crime between the lines!

A Johnny Castle Novelet

DON'T MEDDLE

CHAPTER I

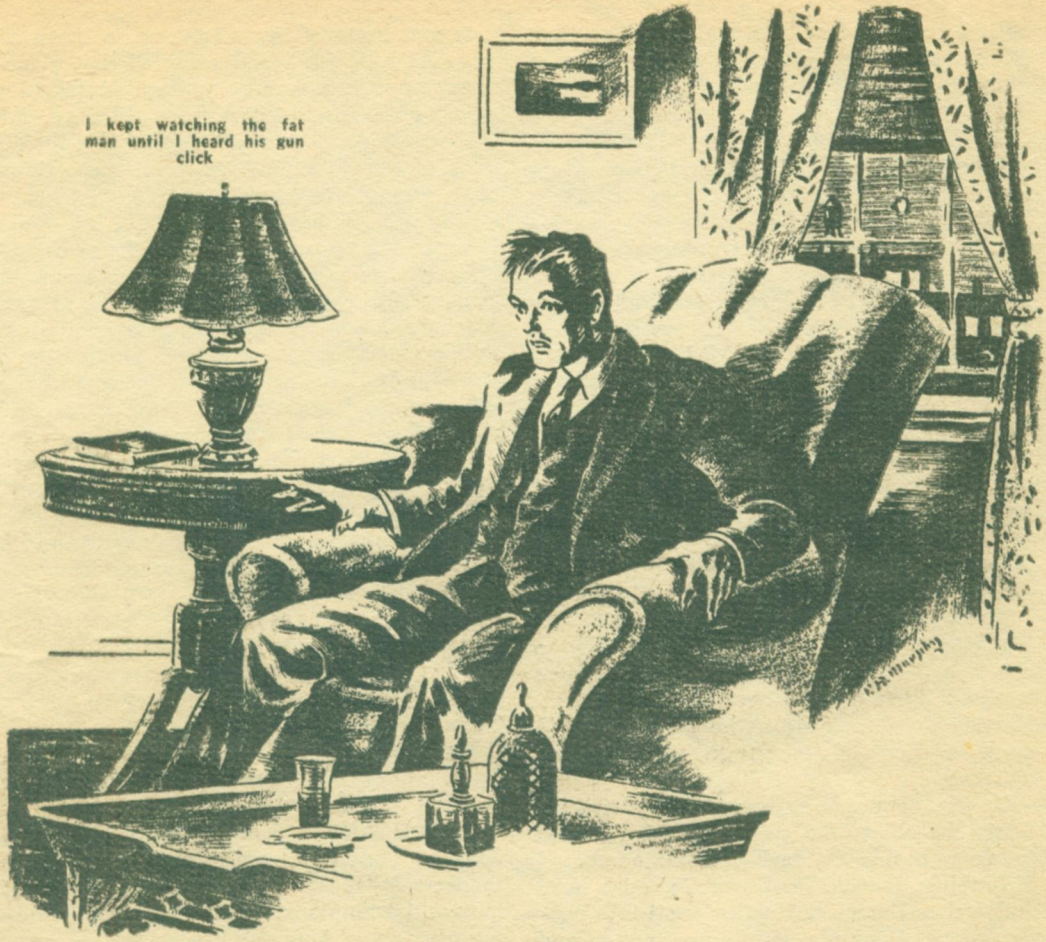
COP'S CALL

THE two cauliflowers were going at it tongs and hammer. The smaller, a lippy kid with orange-colored hair, was taking a pasting. Which annoyed my host no end. Barney Koppel, fight promoter, stationery store owner and ex-paper hanger, had gone to the trouble of inviting me down to Ziggy's gym to observe what he called "the flashiest lightweight discovery in the last sixty years—now under my exclusive management" in action.

That was the lad with the orangeade locks.

Something had slipped in the workout. A look across at Ziggy's blackavised countenance, and a big wink from the gymnasium owner's left lid, told me where the wires were crossed. Ziggy, knowing Koppel wanted to cut a hunk of publicity in the *Orbit*—the sheet for which I composed numerous sporting sonnets—had arranged to rib Barney for my benefit. The work horse, instead of taking the terrific slapping around Koppel had no doubt ordered, was tearing into "the greatest lightweight discovery in sixty years" like a Kansas tornado.

Barney, plucking out his few remaining



I kept watching the fat man until I heard his gun click

WITH MURDER

By C. S. MONTANYE

hairs, one by one, broke away from my side and jumped up into the gym ring. He took a left and a right before he got between the brawlers. He pushed his groggy find onto a stool and waved both arms in frenzied agitation.

"I've been robbed! You done that, Ziggy! You tried to make a monkey out of my boy in front of Mr. Castle! I should die like a dog in the street if I ever come back here again!"

The black-faced Ziggy, two hundred and forty pounds even, shook like a bowl of jello, all six flavors. Barney pushed his leather-swinger into a bathrobe and conducted him to a dressing room, leaving the air blue behind him.

"What a character!" Ziggy wiped mirth tears from his eyes and looked at me. "He's got a punk who can't punch harder than an Erie conductor and right away he wants a page spread in your paper, Johnny. Can I stand by and watch him get away with it?"

A pair of new future greats climbed into the ring for some exercise. I looked at my watch. Three-fifteen and a fraction. Time to get back to the *Orbit's* office and see if there were any telephone calls or mail.

Also, I remembered suddenly, the Number One gal in my life was meeting me at five at

Billy Austin's place. And Miss Libby Hart liked being kept waiting the same as a chorine likes kitchen work.

I STARTED toward the door when Barney Barney Koppel came out and grabbed my arm.

"Look, Mr. Castle! You seen what happened. Jobbed—by that fat no-good. A laughing-stock! The boy's really sensational in his own bracket. They ring a light heavy in on him. It's like wrestling with a kid—uneven, what I mean. Wait'll I break him at the Kris Kringle A. C. Tuesday night a week."

I nodded him off and was heading for an exit when I stopped.

A man came in. Just an ordinary, large-footed specimen of the breed, but familiar to me from the top of his dusty felt down to his well-polished, square-toed shoes.

Detective Larry Hartley of Homicide!

There was plenty of mayhem on tap at Ziggy's resort, but it wasn't like Hartley to check on it. Captain Fred Mullin's best man was usually reserved for special assignments. Hartley didn't see me as he pounded in. I made a show of lighting a cigarette and watched.

On the other side of the gym, Hartley gave Ziggy the office. He pulled a chair out and sat down beside the dark-complexioned load of blubber. I could see Ziggy shake his head and nod as Detective Hartley went into conversation. A couple of minutes passed and the squirrels of curiosity began to scamper around in the back of my mind.

Which was bad. A sports writer for a dignified Manhattan daily had no business mixing with what didn't concern him. Several times that had happened in the past—with results that narrowly kept me from being measured for a pair of wings. Meddling with murder and cracking into crime, while bringing me some local fame as an amateur sleuth, had neither improved my blood pressure count nor softened my arteries any.

And, more to the point, Libby had laid down her own law in a few select words. They ran something like this:

"Either you stop doubling for a Centre Street character or you get your ring back. I don't mean the one that goes on the Bell System, either."

I thought of that as I stood there, watching Hartley mumble in the gym owner's private ear.

It was none of my business; no brass off my watch. Still, I had a hunch that something important was being broiled. Hartley never made visits unless they added up. All my reportorial instincts surged to the fore.

"Here we go again!" an inner voice chortled. "Hang onto your Stetson!"

The parley didn't last long. With a grunt Hartley got up and went out. I was downstairs and was around the corner when he laid his Number Twelves on the sidewalk. Further down the street was a regulation police prowl car. A cop and another man were in it. Hartley made it three and the official heap buzzed off.

As it passed the corner my suspicions were confirmed. In the front seat I gandered another familiar face. It belonged to the head of Homicide—a cold, shrewd-eyed pan with all the animation of a marble quarry and a mouth made to order for sneers and leers.

Captain Fred Mullin, in person!

I went back to Ziggy's in a rush. If Mullin had sent Hartley to the gym, and thought enough of it to ride uptown with him, nothing less than Grade A murder must be on the book.

But Ziggy, when I asked him if he'd seen my cigarette case around, shook his head and grinned.

"You should ask Hartley things like that, Johnny. He was here a minute ago. What's the answer—mebbe you want to find out what he was quizzing me about. I seen you standing over there watching."

"Not a bad idea," I drawled. "Some time I can slip in a nice write-up about your establishment. Perhaps I can even tuck in one of those photos you had taken twenty years ago—when you were young and less repulsive."

Ziggy raised a brow. Unlike morphine he was nobody's dope. But like most of the Broadway sporting gallery he had a craving for seeing his name in print.

"No kidding, Johnny."

"Come on," I said. "What bends?"

ZIGGY studied the fistic action of the two sluggers in the ring before he put on a cagy look and lowered his voice.

"Poor Kenny Stangl," he said, from the left side of his mouth. "Picked up in an alley at six this morning—with more holes in him than a twenty-dollar suit hung in a closet full of moths! Tough, huh?"

I went back to the *Orbit* office, thought-

fully reflective. What Ziggy revealed was interesting. Kenny Stangl, one of the Rialto wolf pack, was a big shot along the lane. That is, as an ex-gunsel and a large drinker. Stangl had tangled with the police on several memorable occasions. That he always came out first best was due to a smart mouthpiece and a distressing lack of evidence. In fact, folks who had seen Kenny use a hot rod had become vague and forgetful in a witness chair.

So now he had been picked up in an alley, looking like a sieve.

I said a polite good afternoon to Beth Wheaton, prima donna of the plugs, as I braked at her switchboard.

"Any calls, darling—for me?"

Beth flicked a blue eye uninterestedly over the top of the board.

"One from somebody named Hart—a dame. She wants you to call her immediately, if not sooner. I wrote the number down somewhere. I'll look it up and see if I've misplaced it."

"Do that," I said, and wandered into Bill Jamison's domain.

Jamison was a star leg man for the *Orbit*. Bill's department was crime in all its vicissitudes, murder a specialty. Once he had dreamed of being a college professor, teaching English. Now he wrote a reasonable facsimile of the same language, with vernacular embellishments, and made Times Square his campus.

"Hi, Johnny," was his greeting. "Pull up a chair."

"Remember Kenny Stangl?" I led off with.

"Sure do," he said. "Bad news in blue serge. What's he been up to now?"

"Not up—down. In the gutter. Blasted. Rubbed. Perforated. Haven't you heard?"

Jamison looked at me with a frown.

"Is this straight? Because I haven't had a nudge on it from anybody. Not even Mullin the Great, and he's kept all his promises lately to give me ground floor space. Where'd you hear it?"

I explained. Bill looked serious. He thanked me and I went back to my desk where the phone was jingling.

"About that number, Mr. Castle," Beth Wheaton cooed. "I can't find it anywhere."

"You can draw your pay Saturday and don't come back Monday," I told her.

"But I'll keep trying and maybe some day it will show up." She broke off and came back with, "What a coincidence. The lady's on another wire now. Do you want to talk to her?"

A round of seconds and then the One and Only's fascinating tonal qualities drifted into the receiver:

"Johnny? Why didn't you call me?"

"Because a stupid, inefficient operator named Beth Wheaton—"

"Well, I like *that!*" Beth cut in indignantly.

She clicked off before I could fire another shot. "Date still on for five at Austin's?" I said to Libby.

"Yes, but couldn't you make it a little earlier? Something funny's happened and I want to ask your advice."

I told her I'd try to be on tap about half-past four and she rang off. Jamison came in looking troubled.

"I just called the good captain, Johnny," he said. "He says I'm crazy. That as far as he knows Stangl's in perfect health. How do you like it?"

I whistled. "Then it's front page stuff, sure!"

"My idea exactly." Jamison pulled on his hat. "Kenny always hangs out at the Jockey Club on Forty-eighth. I think I'll roll around. Want to come?"

"Date," I said, and he blew.

CHAPTER II

Tail

BILLY AUSTIN'S mouserie was a hole-in-the-wall where the Scotch had an accent and you could meet anyone from an exiled king to a reigning pickpocket. All I wanted to meet was Libby and for once I made a rendezvous before she did.

The tuckaway was full up. Aristocratic trap-shooters rubbed elbows with not so aristocratic craps shooters. Wall Street mingled with the underworld. That delightful camaraderie that came from cracked ice, soda and fire-water glossed the dive with the shellac of equality.

I got a beer, a handful of pretzels and a table. I was down to the last crippled cracker when I saw Libby come in. She lit the place up like a four-alarm blaze. There was music in the way she walked, Saks Fifth Avenue in her smart little dress, and a whole garden of dewy flowers in the perfume that haloed her shining dark hair.

But Mrs. Hart's daughter had a troubled look. The minute I saw the starry eyes and the expression in them, I realized that while she was serene on the surface there was agitation under her cake make-up.

"You're on time, Johnny," she said. "How wonderful!"

I pulled out a chair for her and bowed her into it. She looked back over her shoulder as she sat down. Her cherry-red lips featured a smile, but it was fixed and a little mechanical.

"What's the trouble, hon?" I asked her. "Why the backward glance and the shadows under your lashes? Lovely lashes, too. They sort of sweep your chin when you close your eyes."

"I've been followed!" Libby said, a trifle breathlessly. "By a man!"

"I can't blame him. If I saw you, didn't know you, I'd try to correct that."

"Be serious, Johnny! This is what I want to talk to you about. Something very strange is going on. Do you know Dance Bowen?"

Everybody knew who "Dance" Bowen was even if they weren't lucky enough to be on speaking terms with her. The star of a brand new musical smash entitled, "Lady in Love," Dance had hit Rainbow Road with all the scintillation of a bursting meteor. The critics loved her, the public adored her and so did Howard Gail, a retired barge owner who, through the medium of cards, horses and roulette wheels, had amassed himself a fortune.

Those in the know had the word that Gail had backed the new show, exclusively for Dance's benefit. For weeks she had been seen at all the better bistros with Gail in ardent attendance. Twice, in the past few evenings, I had lamped the lovely at a couple of spots where, if you didn't buy champagne, you were a very low and unimportant character.

All that went through my mind while I gave Lib a puzzled look.

"Enunciate," I requested.

"I've known Dance for the past month," Libby said. "She stopped in my office at Flowerland several times. I think she likes me."

"I'll lay bets on that. Go on."

"Night before last she asked me if I'd do her a favor. If I'd put a little package in the safe and keep it for her. Naturally I said I would."

"What's strange about that?"

"Nothing, except that from that moment on this man I mentioned is bobbing up all over the place. Every time I go out I see him. I sit down to have a sandwich and there he is. I get on the bus to go home and I see him."

"He's the conductor?"

The starry eyes crackled. "There he is sitting up front or in the rear." Libby leaned quickly forward. "And there he is now—the one in the brown suit who just came in, at the end of the bar!"

I looked. What I saw I didn't like. The party in the brown suit was a gaunt-faced youth with slanted eyes, a hooked, beaky nose and a mouth half normal size. His skin looked as if you could make a wallet or a belt out of it and while his brown suit was well-tailored and expensive, on him it wasn't becoming. I pegged the lad, in a second glance, as "Cracky" Morgan, a hard number around Sugar Square.

Morgan, I knew, had turned in a number of years helping the Government make auto license plates in a prison machine shop. And Morgan was one of those careless, casual lads who always wore a gun and used it as often as necessary, without a qualm.

And *he* had been following my dream girl!

"I'm scared, Johnny!" Libby said, in a half-whisper.

"I'll second the emotion."

I FINISHED the rest of my foam, told the waiter to bring Libby a dry Martini and did a little prodding.

"You think that whatever the Bowen fluff gave you is responsible for the tail?" I asked.

"What else?" Libby said.

"What did Dance Bowen say? I mean, did she give you any hint at all as to what was in the package?"

Libby shook her dark head. "No. All she said when I took it was that now Kenny Stangl would be out of luck—whatever that meant."

Something high explosive went off inside me. Stangl again! Murder in an alley and my honey chile tangled in it! Libby Hart in the picture and Cracky Morgan at the end of the bar, watching our table with slanting eyes under the brim of a low-pulled hat!

"Look, babe." I said it fast in a private voice. "Whatever you have that belongs to Miss Bowen goes back to her, and quick! Come on, we're leaving. Maybe you don't know it, but the scythe of the well known

Grim Reaper is about to take a cut at us, if we don't dodge!"

"But my Martini?"

"Dump it in your shoe," I said, "but take out the olive. It might hurt when you start running!"

"Where are you taking me?" Libby cried softly, when I got her out of Billy Austin's and into a taxi.

"Stuyvesant Theater, hackie," I told the driver, answering Libby's question at the same time.

The ark rolled off. I looked through the rear window, in time to see Morgan nose dive out of the wall-hole and toss his big frame into the next cab in line.

It didn't look good from where I sat.

Something screwy was breaking and I didn't have an angle to go on. Ziggy's confidential tip-off after Detective Hartley's visit to the gym. Jamison's phone call to my old friend and enemy, Captain Fred Mullin of the Homicide Department, and what Mullin had told him. And now Libby, with Morgan pounding along in our wake.

I didn't like that last word, either!

While I was still thinking about it our taxi slid up to the marquee of the playhouse where "Lady in Love" was strictly S.R.O. at every performance.

This was mid-week matinee day and, according to my watch, just about time for the finale and the last curtain.

I oiled the hackie and steered Libby for the stage door. Cracky's cab passed, but I didn't pay any attention to it. We went down a length of bricked-in cement and up to an open fire-proof door out of which issued voices lifted in song.

A party in suspenders, blue shirt and faded pants stopped us on the threshold.

"Miss Bowen." I gave him a glimpse of my newspaper-police pass card. "She ought to be off in a few minutes."

"She ain't working today." He said it defiantly. "Understudy. Goldielocks don't believe in no afternoon shows. Too much wear and tear on the nervous system."

"Do you know where she lives?" I asked Libby.

"I have the address she gave me, in my handbag."

"Swell. Thanks, bud," I said to the Suspenders.

There was no sign of Cracky Morgan out on the street. Still his absence didn't improve my mental agitation to any marked degree. Taxis were as plentiful, at that hour, as ants at a picnic. We hopped another and I let Libby speak her piece.

"The Armitage Arms," she directed. "I think it's on Fifty-sixth."

"Correct, lady," the driver said over his shoulder.

The address was that of one of those super-exclusive apartment houses. A tall sliver of a building set between sedate private houses. The kind of a dump that had a waiting list for its duplexes, long as a bartender's arm. It was hardly the type of place a Broadway star would be at home in. Still, with the housing problem—and Howard Gail rolling in dough like a baker's elbow—nothing was too good for the Bowen frail, the Armitage Arms, least of all.

"I don't want to be announced," I said to Libby, covering the street we'd just left with a glance that didn't find Cracky Morgan in its focus. "What's the apartment number?"

"Twelve D."

"Then right into the elevator just as if we lived here," I directed.

WE MADE it without being stopped for questioning by any of the gold-braided staff officers prowling around the lobby.

"Twelve," I told the operator, and the cage went away like Hoop Jr. with a Derby to win.

Beautiful black-and-white tiles echoed to our steps as we hunted for 12 D along a corridor where a parade could have been held. Libby, close beside me, began to ask questions.

"I don't get this, Johnny. What am I to tell her? What's the reason for all this rush? You know, maybe it's only imagination. I mean, that man following me ever since Dance gave me the package to keep for her."

"Tell her to put her shoes on and go down to the office at Flowerland and get her little bundle. You don't know it, but I have an idea it's loaded with dynamite. The kind that goes off by remote control."

"I don't understand," Libby said, wrinkling that smooth brow.

"Neither do I—exactly," I confessed. "But I do know this much. The Stangl she mentioned to you was swept up this morning in a public byway, all full of great big holes!"

Libby's eyes widened. She was about to say something else but checked it as I pressed the pearl circle of the bell of a door numbered 12 D.

No answer.

I rang again, and again. We could hear the bell giving out with a melodious tinkle somewhere inside, but nothing happened. Nothing, that is, until I happened to drop a hand to the large brass knob. Through force of habit I gave it a turn and the door obligingly opened.

"Well," I said, "this is hospitality. The latch string's always out and come right in!"

"You're not going in there, Johnny!"

"Try and stop me."

An arm around Libby's slender waist forced her unwillingly into a mirror-lined foyer where the waning afternoon shadows backed up in all four corners. I let the front door swing shut and stood there for a minute, listening.

There wasn't a sound except faraway street noises and Libby's quick breathing. I couldn't explain it, but I felt a funny tingle. Like a piece of ice sliding down my spine and sending out small shivers during its journey.

"We might as well look around." I tried to make it sound cheerful. "Maybe some day we'll be renting a hive like this for ourselves. Smart idea to get a view of what kind of furniture to buy."

"I'm staying right here," Libby interrupted decidedly. "You look at the furniture. I want to be ready to leave when the police come to arrest us for housebreaking!"

I was glad she stayed in the foyer.

Because, when I went through one gorgeously appointed room and into another that connected with it, it wasn't the furniture that caught my eye. It was what was lying full length on the floor, and that wasn't any Oriental rug.

I was in a living room. One of those Hollywood movie set places. The carpet was as soft as moss and the same color. The appointments mingled periods with question marks in a decorator's nightmare.

But all that sank in later.

What started to lift my hair, and put a dryness in the back of my throat, was the grotesque appearance of the room's occupant. He was a gent with pepper-and-salt hair, not small and not large—just an average sized fellow in a better than average set of rugged tweeds. Somebody had shot him neatly in the throat and it wasn't beef gravy running down his vest in a thin, coagulated trickle!

I stood there looking. My feet seemed frozen to the floor. After a while my hair got back in place and the slight nausea left the pit of my crawling stomach.

I took another look and recognized the man's rather blunt features. Glazed eyes with pouches under them, a nose that should have been bigger for the amount of face that went with it, and lobeless ears that grew close to his head.

Howard Gail!

CHAPTER III

Libby Opens the Safe

WHILE the dead man's identity penetrated, I saw something else. That was the gun that had done the trick. It lay on the other side of the room, bright and glinting against the mossy carpet. A funny kind of a gun—a Colt Woodsman, the type that used .22s for target practise.

It had taken some smart shooting to send Gail away with a single shot pumped into a principal artery in the larynx department. Whoever had triggered the lead knew just where to address it. Gail had probably folded up without a squawk.

My thoughts were all scrambled like a dozen eggs in a sizzling pan. Gail in his girl friend's apartment, cold as a handful of snow. From the looks of him he had been dead for hours. And Dance hadn't played a matinee that afternoon.

And Cracky Morgan had been tailing Libby while Homicide had been withholding the sudden demise of Kenny Stangl who, according to what Libby had transferred to me, cut some sort of a figure in the package my dream cake was keeping for the Bowen beauty in the safe at Flowerland. That was the hooferie where Libby smoked up publicity for all the dailies.

"Johnny!" I heard her call. "What are you doing? Where are you?"

"Don't come in here!" I said it with authority and, of course, it brought her right to the door.

Before I could block the late Mr. Gail from her view, Libby had seen, and started to make odd noises in her throat. Even the cake make-up couldn't hide the pallor spreading in her smooth cheeks. As if fascinated, her big, dark eyes, wide and horrified, riveted on what occupied the floor.

I got an arm around her and edged her toward the other room.

Just as we reached it the foyer door banged

open and in walked no less than Captain Fred Mullin with what seemed to be the entire Metropolitan Police Force at his rubber heels!

Queerly enough, Mullin, the bulldog of the department, in appearance and manner, didn't seem unduly surprised because of my presence in Dance Bowen's suite. Or the presence of the young lady my arm was around. In fact Mullin's cast-iron countenance mirrored an expression that might have been one of knowing satisfaction.

"Where's the body, Castle?" he rasped, while I caught a glimpse of Detectives Hartley, Wheeler, Mulligan and a lot of others who were gazing around the mirror-lined compartment with interested optics.

"Body?" I must have been still shaken from what I'd seen. Even to my own ears the question sounded slightly infantile.

"Didn't you phone me half an hour ago and tell me to come up here?" Mullin barked. Color, the same shade as his winter underwear, tinted his rock-pile pan. "If this is a gag, you're going to get smacked straight in the kisser! You've been in my hair too long and too often these past months. I've been waiting for a chance at you. If this is it, I'll laugh."

"I guess you mean the late Mr. Gail," I interrupted. Mullin's remarks were all that was needed to tonic me back to normality. "Walk right in. You'll find him in the second room beyond. He's waiting for you."

"C'mon," the Captain growled to his faithful followers.

He flung me a look full of scorch and stamped through the door. Libby drew an uneven breath and began to pry my arm away.

"Why didn't you tell me you had telephoned him?" she asked, her arched brows drawn together.

"I didn't, because I didn't!"

"You mean—"

Before she could finish Wheeler cat-footed back to the foyer and pointed a finger at me.

"Inside, Castle. The Captain wants to talk to you."

"Wait here and don't move an inch, whether I'm gone two minutes or ten years!" I said to Libby, and followed Wheeler back to the room where Gail had grown his wings.

MULLIN'S men were all over the place, like a flock of bees. Hartley was going through the dead man's pockets, Mulligan was measuring off distances with a pair of feet that looked like tractors. A couple of others were wandering in and out of Dance Bowen's pink-and-gold bedroom as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Every time they opened its door the memory of a subtle perfume crept out.

"Let's hear all about it, Castle," Mullin growled.

He planted his body solidly on its short, thick legs and twisted his mouth into a sneer. His cold, fishy eyes raked me over like a fork going through the remains of a spaghetti dinner.

I didn't like the glint in his gaze, the sneer, or the way he got his words out. Somehow I had the impression he believed I was on the hook, at last.

"What do you want to know?" I held my temper and gave him one of my best smiles. "You know me, Captain. Always cooperative. Always looking out for your interests. Always your little pal in any emergency. But you're slightly in error. I haven't telephoned you in over six weeks. Lucky me, eh?"

The sneer faded a trifle. "Yeah? Then who buzzed the tip-off to come up here, and said he was Castle of the *Orbit*?"

"That," I murmured, "is something your superior investigating ability will have to solve. The young lady who's with me," I went on, with patent-leather smoothness, "is Miss Hart, as you probably know. She happens to be a friend of Dance Bowen, the lady who usually lives here. We came up to call on her, after stopping at the theater and finding she hadn't been there this afternoon. The door was open and we walked right in —to this."

I tossed a nod at the still figure Hartley had finished with.

Mullin digested what I told him. He didn't believe me. I could see that. It was too lumpy for perfect palatability. He snorted like a horse in a bag of oats, wiped his hand across his chin and gave me a brand new leer.

"You dream by day as well as night. Okay. We'll talk to your girl friend in a minute. Get over there and pipe down." He asked Hartley, "How does it look, Larry?"

"Twenty-two. Through the jugular. Here's the gun." He handed Mullin the handkerchief-wrapped Woodsman. "The kind of shooter they use for paper targets. Oughtn't to be hard to trace. This fella's been cold

seven or eight hours at least."

Mullin unloaded the usual directions. He wanted the superintendent brought up, the rear-admirals we had seen prowling the lobby. He wanted the medical examiner in a hurry. He wanted his fingerprint expert. He wanted service with a large S.

After that he gave me his official attention again.

"Get that dame in here," he directed Wheeler.

"Just a minute," I put in. "If there's any questioning her, you'll do it outside. She's not like you—used to corpses all over the place."

Mullin flung me a look, shrugged, and went back to the foyer. I edged in behind him and put a finger over my mouth to let Libby know that she wasn't to talk. Being a bright little gal she caught quick.

"Castle tells me you're a friend of Miss Bowen," Mullin began, not quite as tough as he usually was. "What did you come up here to see her about?"

"That's a personal matter." I could have kissed Libby for the way she said it.

Captain Mullin grunted. "Yeah? Known her a long time?"

"Not so long."

"Ever hear her speak of a party named Stangl—Kenny Stangl?"

Libby glanced at me from the corner of one eye. "I—I don't believe I have. Why?"

If I'd been taking the questioning myself, I couldn't have handled it any better. Mullin shrugged a pair of shoulders made to order for piano moving and swung around on me.

"I want you and the lady for further questioning, later, Castle. Keep her on tap. You're not fooling me. You know something and you're going to try and play it yourself. You're going to try and be Johnny Smart, get a scoop for your rag and show me up as some kind of a dummy who couldn't find a horse in a kitchen. Okay. We'll see about that. Go on now, powder. The both of you!"

"You know my office phone number Captain," I murmured, and led Libby out to the elevator.

WE DIDN'T say anything until we got to the street. Mullin's array of prowl cars had put the usual crowd on the pavement in front of the apartment house. I snaked Libby through the throng and over to Central Park South.

"Who was he, Johnny?" she asked in a low, tight voice. "The man on the floor, I mean. You said 'Mr. Gail.' Not the one Dance was going around with?" When I nodded, her mouth opened. She had teeth like pearls. "*Who*—"

"Mopped him up? Frankly, I wouldn't know. But I do know this. A gunny named Stangl has been after your friend for something she had. The Bowen babe got scared and gave it to you to keep for her. Stangl got himself liquidated early this morning and Cracky Morgan, the boy who's been following you around, has an active interest in the affair. So," I told her, "the intelligent thing to do is for us to get over to Flowerland and into the safe. I have a hunch that the package Dance left with you will answer a lot of questions when we open it up."

"But you wouldn't do that!" Libby exclaimed.

"With murder striking all around us? That's the first thing on the docket! And to make it as speedy as possible, here comes an empty taxi. We'll take it."

Fifteen minutes later we were in Libby's office on the second floor of Flowerland. The dance pavilion had been almost exclusively taken over by the Navy. From the regions below we could hear the deadly thump of one of the three bands that played there from noon until closing without a breakoff.

I looked around the Hart sanctum. Not a bad place to grind. Big desk with some posies in a sixteen-ounce highball glass. A lovely view of the Acropolis framed on one wall, and a scattering of comfortable-looking leather chairs. But my entire attention focused on a small safe in one corner.

"Hilda's gone home," Libby said. Hilda was her slightly moronic assistant, the dame who mispelled the letters she typed. "She's shut the safe."

"Then we can't open it?"

"Don't sound so alarmed. Of course I can open it. I'm the only one with the combination. But"—she turned and faced me—"is it the right thing to do, Johnny? Shouldn't we give Dance's package to the police and not get mixed any deeper in it? We've already lied, you know."

"Ease your conscience," I told her. "We don't pull punches when murder's on the stalk. Suppose you let me handle this. After all, I draw my laundry money from a newspaper that expects loyalty from its slaves. So be a nice little gal and click off the numbers. I'll take the entire responsibility."

Libby drew a breath and moved her sweetly sloping shoulders.

"All right, master. If you say so. But when Olga comes back and asks for her package, what will I say?"

"*Who?*"

"Olga. That's Dance's real name. Olga Barron. I forgot to tell you."

Libby had pulled a chair around and seated herself in front of the safe. She began to mark off numbers from memory, talking as she twirled.

I didn't say anything. I did a lot of thinking. Olga Barron. The name stuck in my mind like a burr to a spaniel's ear. I was still chewing it mentally when the little safe's double doors swung open and Libby reached a slim, graceful hand into its interior.

I waited for it to come out with Dance Bowen's package.

It came out empty!

Libby looked up at me with a strained, blank, water-clear expression in her starry, dark eyes.

"It's gone, Johnny! I put it right here and—and it isn't here now!"

"Sit tight till you hear from me again," I said. "I'm going back to the office."

Bill Jamison had gone when I made the *Orbit's* office. His destination, I was told, was the Armitage Arms. That made it all right with me. Mullin had loosened up evidently. Or maybe Bill, with his ear to the ground, had picked up the rumble.

I went down to the newspaper morgue, the place they keep the old clippings and such. Stan Holden, who used to be in charge, was somewhere in the Pacific. A girl had taken his place. She wasn't a fireball, but she had some intelligence. Enough to get me the file of clippings I asked for.

I SAT down there and did some quick and earnest reading. I blessed my retentive memory. Because, when I finished and handed the file back, I figured I was one up on Fred Mullin. The Captain, never having been in the newspaper business, didn't know what I knew.

Which was plenty!

Back at my desk I phoned Libby, at her place. She had tried to get in touch with Hilda, to dig some kind of information on Dance Bowen's missing package, but with no luck.

"Hilda's mother told me she's gone to a party in Brooklyn," Libby said. "That's a big place, Johnny. I guess we'll have to wait until tomorrow."

"You stay in tonight," I advised. "Knit me a sports jacket, or something. But keep your doors and windows locked."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm heading home to think about it. Then I'll probably go down to Headquarters and gossip with Friend Fred. Don't worry about me. I have the faculty of taking care of myself."

She made some remark I didn't like and rang off.

I tapped out a short piece to keep the promise I had made Ziggy that morning. About his gym. Then, making sure I didn't have a shadow bobbing after me that wasn't my own, I went on home.

CHAPTER IV

JOHNNY RINGS A BELL

MY THREE rooms and bath were half a block from the Big Blaze, a rock's pitch from the well-known Winter Garden. A quiet place in a quiet foxhole. Once upon a time the building had been a livery stable and on damp days you didn't have to be told. But it had the virtue of being a central location, having a low rent and only one flight of stairs to scale.

The hall was anemically lighted by a low-powered bulb. The landlord was tight as a new girdle, but it didn't matter. Long experience put my key in the lock like it had eyes. I opened the door and walked in.

To find I had company!

He sat in my dime-sized living room, dumping cigarette ashes on my moth-eaten rug. He had helped himself to a couple of cold bottles of beer and was looking over my collection of Varga prints. I didn't mind those things so much. What I did object to was the snub-nosed automatic on the table beside him, and the fact that he still had on his felt hat.

Cracky Morgan took a long pull at the beer glass, put it down and daintily dabbed the froth from his rosebud mouth with a silk handkerchief large enough to cover a circus.

"You ought to get your front door lock fixed, Castle." His voice was low, quiet, with a faint lisp in it.

"Yeah," I said. "Seems so. Comfortable?

How about a chair for your feet or a cushion for your head?"

The slanted eyes took me in slowly but thoroughly. I didn't discount my danger. I knew what Morgan was capable of. Reaching for the snub-nose and using it would be part of his day's work.

He got up, helped himself to his gun and walked over to me. I stood perfectly still while he patted around my person with a thin, bony hand decorated with nicotine-stained fingers. He found I wasn't rodded and put his own shooter away.

"Sit down, Castle," he said. "I want to talk to you."

"Thanks for calling Homicide and telling Mullin to go up to Twelve D. It saved me a nickel."

His little mouth grinned crookedly. "That's okay. Think nothing of it. The doorman at the Stuyvesant overheard you asking the doll where Dance lived. I thought it might be a good idea to wind that up, altogether and in one piece."

"You cut Gail down?" I suggested.

"No, Castle. No mowing in that quarter. That was somebody else. Why should I shoot that bird? He never done nothing to me. I only croak crossers and the like. I know you wouldn't do nothing like that, Castle," he added softly. "That's why you're coming clean with me."

"On what score?"

"A certain little package Dance left with your babe. I happened to be tailing the Bowen number at the time and seen her flutter into Flowerland and leave it. With me that's all right. She was trying to keep Kenny away. The only trouble is I've got to get that little package, Castle. I need it—bad."

I shook my head. "No good, Morgan. I had the same idea. But when my thrill opened the strong box the package was gone, like the wind. Funny, I'd half a notion you had it."

Under droopy lids Cracky's eyes began to wear a shine. He fixed them on me and his hand played with the top button of his coat, an inch or two from the shoulder sling where he kept his cannon.

Finally he removed the hand, upended the beer bottle, swished the lather around in the glass and emptied it.

"Who got the little package, Castle?" he said.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Until the girl who closed the safe up tonight gets back on the job in the morning we won't know. She's at a party in Brooklyn. Who did get it? Not Stangl, because he was written off in an alley. Not Howard Gail. He finished on a moss-green carpet in a lovely living room. Not you, because you're here—looking. Not Miss Hart whom you've been trailing around all day, and not me. Who does that leave?"

He caught the idea, and cursed under his breath.

"The Bowen frail! She hears Stangl is off the list and goes back and gets them! I'm a dope. I should have figured that angle."

"The only difficulty," I couldn't help but put in, "is where Dance Bowen happens to be at the moment. Looks like she might have gone underground, until all this blows over."

MORGAN buttoned his coat. That made me feel somewhat better. His gaze turned speculative, before his hard face went into cementlike contours.

"Take a word, Castle. I ain't got nothing against you personal. I even read your stuff in the paper, but I don't like to be crowded when I'm doing a job. So why don't you mind your own business and keep out of what don't concern you?"

"I often wonder," I murmured.

"That's all."

He started for the door, stopping before he was half-way to it. His ears went up like a rabbit's. So did mine. From the street, through the half-open window, we both caught the same sound.

The eerie wail of a police car's siren, fading out as the vehicle ground to a stop at the curb below.

"How do I get out of here? Quick—name it!"

"Fire-escape. This way!"

I hustled him through my bedroom and through the window.

"Thanks, pal," he said. "Be seeing you."

I shut the window and was back in the living room as knuckles beat out a knock on the door. Opened, Hartley and Wheeler marched in with all the fizz and sparkle of two pall-bearers.

"The Captain wants you, Johnny." Hartley coughed. "Get your hat. We're taking you for a nice ride downtown."

Wheeler went over and peered into the beer bottles. He looked disappointed, but

didn't say anything. I did some fast thinking.

"Be right with you. I'll have to change my shirt and wash up a little. Help yourself to the smokes boys. All the popular brands scattered around."

I turned the key quietly in the bedroom door and went right on, through the same window Cracky Morgan had left by, down the same fire-escape and through a wilderness of back yards that finally tossed me out near Sixth Avenue that I can't remember is the Avenue of the Americas.

I got a cab there and a few minutes later climbed out of it at the mouth of the Stuyvesant's stage door cut-through.

It was ten minutes before curtain time. The company were all in their dressing rooms, stage hands were roaming around behind the lowered asbestos. Suspenders warmed a whittled-down chair, barring all progress without his confirming nod. He gave me recognition without moving from his seat.

"You around again? Last time you showed me a pass card. What have you got now—a clacker?"

"Something better than a badge." I opened my wallet and let him get a glimpse of the green. Thumbing out a ten-spot I folded it into a small square and held it poised between thumb and forefinger. "How much wise stuff does this buy tonight?"

"Depending," he yawned.

"Miss Brown didn't show up?" Suspenders nodded. I went on, "She must have another address other than Armitage Arms. Or wouldn't you know?"

I smoothed the ten out and made like I was putting it back with the other lettuce. Suspenders straightened, an avaricious gleam in his face.

"Not so fast, friend. Mebbe I do know. Mebbe I've taken a couple of valises up there for her, now and then. Gimme!"

He stuck out his fin. I waited until he talked and handed the dough over.

"If it's a phony number," I warned, "I'll come back with my guerrillas. We'll hammer you down so short you'll be able to hear the clocks in your socks tick."

Another cab and a trip across town.

I relaxed against the worn upholstery, trying to figure it out. I couldn't. It didn't make much sense. The rich Mr. Gail leaded in his Dance's living room. Cracky Morgan had doubtlessly taken care of the Kenny Stangl menace, but where the package Libby had taken care of fitted, and what was in it, was a puzzle you couldn't do with a pencil.

After a while the cab slowed down. We were in an uptown neighborhood, close to Harlem and not too far from the end of the Park. Not a nice neighborhood like that which Armitage Arms reared in. This was cheap and tawdry, crowded and somewhat odoriferous.

"Here's you are, Boss," the hackie informed me, pulling up before a dirty brick building whose tenants went in for lace curtains and rubber-plants.

I PAID the meter charge, added two bits for luck, and moved into the vestibule. Almost the first bell I gandered, above some tarnished mail-boxes, bore a significant name:

Barron

I pressed the bell.

She opened the door and stood peering at me, lamplight behind her in a golden haze.

Her eyes were a warm green jade, her hair was a smooth, taffy colored miracle of the hairdressing art. Her lips were like two red, ripe cherries and if it hadn't been for a certain brittle quality in her oval face, she could have passed anywhere as an unsophisticated and charming schoolgirl.

But that look was the giveaway.

"Miss Barron?" I began. "Or should I say Bowen?"

"You can say either, handsome." The fruity mouth curved in a saucy smile. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Plenty. Suppose I come in and talk about it."

"I'd love you to."

She opened the door wider. I walked in.

It wasn't anything like 12 D at the Armitage. The furniture was all right—substantial and old-fashioned—but the wallpaper needed a change, the fixtures were made to order for a junk dealer and the carpet, instead of being Oriental, had a Midwest accent.

She piloted me into a big room where a turned-down radio was busy with news reports. She snapped that off and smiled at me through the light of an opalescent-shaded lamp.

She was wearing a cute little draped rayon number that did things to her streamlined

figure. In the light her skin was creamy satin, flawlessly perfect.

"I'm a friend of Libby Hart," I began. She didn't say anything and I kept going. "You gave Libby something to keep for you, in the safe at Flowerland."

The green eyes lost their warm look. They darted to me and I saw her mouth begin to tighten.

"What about it?"

"You didn't stop at the office there today? Pick the package up?"

"No." She shook her head. "Why?"

I let it hang there and went off on another angle.

"Would you mind telling me what was in that package? Or is it too personal to talk about?"

She drew a quick little breath. "It—it's a present Mr. Gail gave me, on my birthday. It's worth a lot of cash. I happened to hear that an ex-gunny named Stangl was going to get it away from me." She moved her shoulders casually. "If anyone thought I was going to stand by and let him grab he's crazy."

"But Stangl can't grab. Didn't you hear? The police found him this morning—shot up."

"Honest?" She made it sound surprised enough, but I had a feeling it wasn't any news flash. She kept on staring at me, before she said, "What did you come up here for?"

"Your package isn't in the safe any more," I told her.

That rang a bell. The hand she stretched for a cigarette stopped moving. Her head went back a few inches. The lids came down over her eyes and she seemed to freeze all over. At the same moment all the simple, naive veneer melted.

"What's this—a transaction between you and your girl friend? I didn't stop at Flowerland, and if that package is missing somebody's going to be visited by a lot of grief! You might not know it, but I can manage just that!"

She stopped as the front doorbell rang. She dropped her cigarette in an ashtray and turned her back on me. A nice back, too.

Out in the hall I heard her talking to someone. Then heavy footsteps. Then a shadow across the floor.

I looked up and thought I was seeing things.

Ziggy came into the room—all two hundred and forty pounds of him—black face, quartet of chins and jellylike paunch!

"Well, Johnny!" He sounded as surprised as I must have looked. "What are you doing here?"

I could have asked him the same question. I didn't. Because the Bowen babe spoke her piece first.

"He says my package isn't in the safe! That it's gone!"

The gym owner dropped into a chair. A big chair, made to his measure. He mopped a slight dew of perspiration from his face, pushed dank hair back and scowled.

"Gone, eh? That's funny. I thought you said the dame could be trusted." He used a wrinkled handkerchief again. "Let that ride for a minute. I want to talk to Johnny. The kid's a reporter. On the *Orbit*. He likes to mess around with crime stuff. He's got teeth. Ask Mullin if you don't believe me."

CHAPTER V

Round and Black

I WATCHED Ziggy. I had a lot of ideas, a lot of fancy notions. I let him do the talking. So did the star of "Lady in Love."

"How are you doing on the Stangl bump, Johnny?" he asked. "Learned the why and wherefore yet? Let's hear what you've dug. Maybe I can fill in the chinks."

He grinned at the girl. I felt uncomfortable, suddenly nervous, and a little empty inside. It didn't add up right. Nothing about it had any appeal—the whale in the chair, the beautiful blonde, the sad wallpaper, or the room that seemed to get smaller and smaller.

"It's not hard to figure," I said mechanically. "Gail gave Miss Bowen a present. Stangl wanted it. But he didn't get it. He got some slugs instead."

"Bright lad. Why?"

"That's one of the chinks."

Ziggy laughed. "Read it this way, Johnny. Gail gave the girl here the present because he thought she was all for him. He never dreamed she might like a big roughneck like me. When he did find out he got awful sore. He wanted the present back, on account of it being worth important coin."

"Indian-giver!" Dance Bowen said in a harsh aside.

"Naturally, she wouldn't consider that. So what does Gail do? He gets one of his old

office boys and sicks him on her. Party named Stangl. But Kenny never gets to first base, no less a fingerhold on the package."

Ziggy shook with inner laughter. Dance's green eyes flashed. Oddly, I found I was perspiring, too.

"And Gail," I heard myself saying, "got killed, too! Why?"

"Maybe because he was a little het up on account of Stangl," the man in the chair chuckled. "Maybe he was threatening to crack down on Dance. You know how lugs are when they get sore and lose their tempers. They don't know what they're doing. Yeah, that's the way it must have been. Howie Gail blew his top and got himself eradicated."

"But in Miss Bowen's apartment!" I protested.

Ziggy shrugged. "One place is as good as another. That's the way it must have been." He smiled blandly. "All on account of me, a fat boy without much education who stole Dance here right out of his favorite limousine. One for Winchell, Johnny. Right?"

"You didn't pop Gail?" I told him.

"Me? Heck, no. That's out of my department." He laughed again and turned to the girl. "Look, honey. Bring me a drink and my kit."

Dance went into the kitchen. I heard the refrigerator open and close. Then the gurgle of a bottle. Then the hiss of carbonated water.

She came back with an ice-filled glass and what looked like a shoe box. Ziggy balanced it on his knees. He had no lap. When he sat down that crawled up to his chest. He took a long cut at the glass, swallowing half of what was in it in one prodigious gulp.

After that he opened the box. He took out a .38 Smith and Wesson. He broke it at the breach, looked at the chambers, blew up the barrel. I noticed the gun had a reamed tip.

Ziggy reached in the box again. He took out a small cylinder about four and a half inches long. It was pock-marked with holes. Steel wool protruded from some of them. Ziggy fitted the cylinder over the end of the gun. He screwed it in place and looked at me.

"A silencer, Johnny. The kind used on fellas who know too much. Nosy fellas who stick their schnozzles into what don't concern them. Like you, for instance."

It was queer. I was sweating quarts, but felt as if I were packed in dry ice. I couldn't move. It was like being nailed down. My shoes were full of iron weights and I couldn't lift my arms. A sort of paralysis had crept over me.

But I could still talk, and did.

"Wait a minute, Ziggy! Why knock me? After the nice piece I wrote about you tonight! What will murdering me get you? I'm no dick or private eye. Your affairs are none of my business."

"You know too much. You're not safe!"

I LOOKED at Dance Bowen. She rested against a table. The ash on her cigarette was a gray curve. I wondered why it didn't fall—the way I was soon to drop.

"Are you going to stand there and let him blast me?" I asked, almost indignantly. Or maybe it was hysterically.

The gorgeous shoulders moved in a shrug.

"You can't stop Zig, when he makes up his mind." She didn't smile or register any emotion. It was a plain statement of a plain fact. "He's like that."

The chill left me and fever set in. The burning heat of blood that lashed through me in pounding waves of fear. There was a cushion beside me. I kept worrying the fringe on it. I kept watching the fat man with the dark face, until I heard his gun click and saw the round O of the cylinder point in my direction.

And then the bell rang!

Ziggy ripped out a curse and spoke without turning his head.

"See who it is. Don't let anybody in!"

I pegged the cushion at him as Dance Bowen started to leave the room. It was literally a soft touch. The down sailed through the air and spoiled Ziggy's aim. The gun coughed like an asthma sufferer but its lead went wild.

I tangled the next instant.

It was like fighting with a feather bed. I buffed him in the face, missing his jaw, but reaching his cheek. My knuckles must have gone in an inch or two. No good. And he was trying to get the gun in firing level. I gave that my attention, making a frenzied grab for his pistol wrist before the hooded rod could cough a second time.

The chair went over and so did we. I landed on top. Ziggy was a dictator when upright. On his back he was only a porpoise, out of salt water and gasping for air. I almost had the gun when a foot banged against my wrist and almost broke it.

"Leave him alone, pal!" The voice was familiar. "I'll take care of this sick moose!"

I rolled off Ziggy. In the lamplight Cracky Morgan, gun in hand, was covering the man on the floor!

Dance Bowen crouched near a table. Her green eyes were wide and full of fire but she just crouched there. Morgan kicked the fat man in the ribs and picked up the .38. He grinned.

"A muffler." He looked at the silencer before he shoved the gun in his pocket. "I used 'em once—until I saw one kick back on a buddy and almost blow his fingers off. Get up, Ziggy. You know why I'm here. That was *my* stuff in the first place—what Gail robbed me of and sent Kenny out to gather after he'd given it to the girl! I've come for it, and I want it!"

Ziggy climbed to his feet. He was shaken, but he wasn't through. He licked his lips and pressed a finger over the place on his face where I'd knuckled him.

"Okay, Cracky," he mumbled. "Okay, boy. You don't have to kick my ribs in to get it. It's right here. I didn't know it was yours in the first place."

He began to open a drawer in the table close to where Dance stood. It was done so smoothly I didn't have a chance to speak. I didn't have a chance to do anything but look.

The drawer came open and the gun Ziggy snatched began to belch bullets. Morgan ducked and used his own rod. There must have been at least a half-dozen shots exchanged. The room was full of whizzing lead. The girl with the green eyes dropped to the floor and crawled for the couch.

I met her behind it and we drew in there while the guns roared.

Ziggy went out first.

He screamed and grabbed for his throat. His hand moved away, red and sticky. He looked at it, amazed. Just one look, because the next second he began to buckle at the knees and go down. It was like the fall of a building in slow motion.

Fascinated, I saw the gym owner thump on the floor and almost bounce when he hit it. Then I looked in Cracky Morgan's direction. He was all through, too. He was up against the surbase, threshing around and clawing at the wallpaper.

Another spasm or two and he relaxed and rolled over on his face.

I was shaking like a line of wash when I crawled out from behind the sofa. I remember I had a hand around Dance's arm and it was like cool velvet.

JUST about then, through the confusion of police whistles screeching from open windows, the front door of the apartment was kicked open and Larry Hartley with the cop from the corner clumped in, guns drawn.

"Believe it or not," I said to Hartley, "I'm glad to see you. I've got a present for you—the party who twenty-twoed Howard Gail at the Armitage Arms. She's yours—take her and keep her!"

The funny thing was that Dance Bowen—or Olga Barron—only smiled when Hartley reached for her.

Next morning I sat in one of the comfortable chairs in Libby's office at Flowerland and thought what a swell place the world was.

"So Dance made a complete confession," Mrs. Hart's only child stated, looking up from the *Orbit* and Bill Jamison's able handling of the fracas on the fringe of Harlem. "She killed Gail because he threatened to close her show, throw her out and show her up for what she was. 'Is', might be a better word. But, you, Johnny. How did you know?"

"I've got a memory like a money lender." I said, as I leaned back in the chair and admired the way the sun gilded her black hair. "When you said 'Olga Barron' you set off a spark. Some years past. Chicago. When I was covering the White Sox. A lady by that name had been mixed up in a shooting brawl. Let off. Not enough evidence. Same old story."

"But—"

"The morgue at the office came up with the full particulars. She was Olga Barron then. Had a night-club act. Fancy shooting. With a target, twenty-two gun. Made a specialty of clipping the spots out of cards and stuff like that. Why couldn't she pierce a jugular vein, if necessary? Catch?"

Libby smiled. It had all the sunshine of the universe in it and it did things to my heart and imagination.

"But what about the package? Johnny, I simply can't figure what became of it!"

"Good morning," said a voice from the doorway.

In came Hilda, the demon typist of middle Manhattan. In addition to being dumb she

(Concluded on page 96)

The fire razed the clapboard structure

The Brothers Are Burning

By ROGER FULLER

Detective Sergeant McCreary pokes around the wreckage of a fraternity house and comes up with a tough killer!

DETECTIVE-SERGEANT McCREARY clumped into the pint-sized press room and scowled at me.

"If I don't get stuck with the craziest cases," McCreary moaned. "Now they made a fireman outta me."

"I don't see any rubber boots," I volunteered. "But you'd sure look like the devil trying to get those two hundred and forty pounds up a ladder."

He looked at me reproachfully, his fat face unamused.

"You always take things literal," he complained. "Besides it's two-thirty-one. But

what I mean is, the Captain give me the job of looking into the fire they had out at the college yesterday."

"I covered it," I told McCreary. "It was a son-of-gun."

I had gone out on the third alarm and by that time the fraternity house was a gutted wreck. It had been the biggest fire of the year and the worst, for one of the frat brothers had been burned to death.

"Yeah," said McCreary. "Heard it went fast. What was the dizzy name of the house?"

"Psi Chi Alpha," I said.

"Yeah, that's the name," he agreed. "What's it mean?"

I started to explain and then gave up. My years of acquaintance with McCreary had taught me that it would be a pretty hopeless task to explain to him the meaning of Greek letter fraternity designations.

"It's a sort of club name," I said, compromising. "Like the Elks and the Moose."

McCreary sighed as he heaved his bulk out of the chair in the squad room.

"Yeah," he said, without much conviction. "Well, Elks or Moose or Phizzy Chy Alto, I gotta go out there and poke around. And while I'm out there, something hot will break and that lad Blake will get all the credit for a good pinch. You want to go along with me?"

I rammed my hat down on my head. It promised to be a dull day and there hadn't been any unusual leads for me to follow up after my original story on the fire. But I thought I would trail along for luck. The facts, as I had gathered them, seemed simple enough.

Fire had broken out in the basement garage of the Psi Chi Alpha house and had swept through the old building to the roof before the first apparatus got there. Because it was a Sunday afternoon, about five o'clock, the house had been empty except for two of the brothers who had just come in from the show.

One of them had gotten out by jumping from a second floor window. The other, a boy named Joseph Pendergast, hadn't been so lucky. They had found him in his third floor room, dead by suffocation.

"What does the Captain think happened?" I asked McCreary when we were in the detective's bumbling little car, ricocheting our way out to the university. "I thought it had been written off by the fire department as due to a short circuit in the wiring of that car in the garage."

McCREARY shook his head dolefully.

"That's what I thought, too," he lamented. "But one of the bright young boys on the fire department has got other ideas."

"Incendiary?" I asked. "You hinting at arson?"

He looked at me out of the corner of his eyes, and scowled.

"Did I say so?" he asked in a bored, painful tone. "Don't you go calling up your paper, starting a big fuss about this until we can poke around awhile. Ten to one there ain't anything to it. Besides, I ain't supposed to be giving out information to you, even if you are a friend of mine."

Which meant, I knew by now, that it had been an incendiary fire and I was in on the ground floor on another story, thanks to Detective-sergeant Patrick Edward McCreary.

I kept my mouth shut, as experience had taught me, for the rest of the trip to the university. The beautiful mossy buildings on the hill west of town seemed as placid and serene as ever. The clock in old West Tower bonged two as we turned into the main drive curving up through the campus. McCreary grunted and turned to me.

"You know this place," he said. "Suppose you steer me right. I'll end up in the botanatical gardens if I don't get some directions."

I steered him away from the "botanatical gardens" and off on a side road that led to Fraternity Row. The Psi Chi Alpha house, or what was left of it, was the third building on the lane that housed the more select brothers of the university's elite.

The house which a few short hours before had been a graceful, white clapboard building, was now a gutted, gruesome hulk, with its smoke stained windows giving the appearance of a many-eyed ghost. Its halls and rooms would never ring again with the cheerful laughter of light-hearted youth.

The yard was littered with odd bits of furniture, sodden clothes, books and papers which the firemen had thrown out the windows, before the fire had blasted them out into the yard. Several youths were prying through the fire-blackened mess in a vain search to recover some of their belongings.

McCreary stopped the car at the curb and wheezed his way out from behind the wheel. He gave one brief glance at the charred house and then trudged over the lawn toward the rear of the ruined building. I fol-

(Turn to page 80)

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lowed in his wake, aware of the curious eyes that were on us.

Looking neither to the right or left, McCreary led the way to a ramp in the back of the building. This concrete driveway led into the cellar of the fraternity house, which had been converted into a garage. Stepping over several burned timbers and other bits of wreckage, we pushed our way into the garage, with its overpowering stench of charred wood and water.

A uniformed policeman detached himself from the shadows and approached us truculently. Then he recognized us and smiled.

"Hi yuh, Sarg," he said. He nodded and grunted at me. "I'm glad you got here. I been standing around for a couple of hours, keeping them college lads out like the lieutenant said. Not even a place to sit down here, neither."

"Yeah," said McCreary without a trace of sympathy. "Anybody touched this car, Grogan?"

"Nobody but that investigator from the fire department," the cop answered. "He was the last one to be within six feet of the buggy. But what's so important about a burned up car is somethin' I can't see."

"That's why you'll always be poundin' 'em out in Siberia," McCreary patiently explained. "C'mon, Bob, let's have a look."

We picked our way through the debris to the side of the burned-out car. At one time it had been a beautiful piece of high priced machinery. Long and low, with unmistakable lines of being custom made, the coupe was now a complete, blackened wreck.

It had been entirely consumed by the fire, except for the metal framework. The upholstery was gone, the paint blistered and peeled, the tires burned to the rim and even the plastic steering wheel was charred by the flames.

McCreary cursorily scanned the wreck. Then he walked to the hood which had been raised, exposing the ruined engine. He used his flashlight briefly, grunted, and turned away.

"Them firemen take any pitchers?" he asked the uniformed patrolmen.

"A dozen of 'em," Grogan replied. "They got pictures of that car from every angle. You'd have thought it was some gal with swell gams posin', the way they wasted flashlight bulbs."

"Okay," McCreary said. "Ain't any use

(Turn to page 82)

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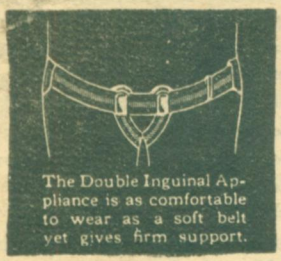

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watchin' this heap any longer. Lets go outside."

WE FOLLOWED the plodding feet of the miasmic stench of the garage into the fresh air. The greenery was refreshing.

"What's the angle?" I asked McCreary.

He sighed ponderously.

"Just checkin' on the report the fire department investigator turned in," he said. "Simple, ain't it? This fire was supposed to have started because a short circuit happened in that car. It was the only one in the garage. So the fire department investigator finds out that it couldn't have been no short circuit because the wiring on the car is still okay. Some of the wires melted, maybe, but there wasn't none rubbing or anything like there should have been to cause a short circuit."

He paused to light a cigarette, strictly against regulations.

"So it wasn't no short circuit so what was it?" he said. "It's just a case of some mug puttin' a match where it would do the most good in that heap. And that somebody ain't no smart torch, either. If he hadda been, he would have messed up the wirin' and nobody would ever have been the wiser."

He started off again, this time headed toward the nearest group of college men who were still forlornly poking through the matted, drenched stuff on the lawn.

"Which one of you boys, owned that heap in the garage?" He asked with his usual direct approach.

One of the young men detached himself from the knot of students and approached. He was a tall, wide-shouldered boy with a crop of light, curly hair and a confident expression.

"I did," he said. "Name's Val Prince."

McCreary stared at him without any expression.

"Your heap insured?" he asked casually.

Prince nodded.

"Need dough?" asked McCreary rudely. "Do you need dough real bad?"

Prince flushed and his hands clenched. Then he relaxed with a short laugh.

"If you're thinking I set fire to my own car for the insurance, Inspector, you're all wet." He said. "In the first place, I don't need money that badly. In the second place, that car wasn't paid for. The finance company will get all the insurance money."

McCreary kept his bright little eyes fixed

on Prince and the boy met the detective's gaze without flinching.

"Your old man is Prince of the L and S, isn't he?" he demanded.

The student nodded, flushing again. I recognized him then as Val Prince, heir to millions, son of the railroad king Luther Prince. To me then, it was about as likely to think of this boy burning his car for the insurance money as it would the Maharajah of Sepore faking a sprained ankle for a ten buck settlement from an insurance racket.

McCreary looked at young Prince for a moment longer, grunted again, and shifted his eyes.

"Who's boss of this here outfit?" he asked. "Who can answer some questions for me?"

Val Prince jerked his head in the direction of a brown-haired young man standing nearby.

"Mel Amidee is president of this chapter," he said, in his pleasant voice. "Maybe he can tell you what you want to know."

He called to the fellow and Amidee came over to us. He wore horn-rimmed glasses that gave him a studious look but there was none of the bookworm about him. He was about Prince's size and I recalled watching him tote the ball for the university the previous Fall, when he was playing in the backfield.

[*Turn page*]

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"Name's McCreary," my friend said, offering a big hand. "Headquarters. I got some routine questions I gotta bother you with. Where can we go and talk where we can sit down?"

"There's the Campus Shop," Amidee suggested. "We could get a booth there."

"No good," McCreary said. "Too many people. Might as well sit in my car. C'mon."

He started out and then turned to shoot a glance at Prince.

"You might as well come, too," he said.

The four of us crowded into McCreary's ancient sedan. We had hardly gotten settled when Amidee broke out impatiently.

"What's this all about, Inspector?" he blustered.

"Sergeant," McCreary corrected. "And as to what it's all about. There was a lad named Pendergast who died in that fire last night. You remember about that?"

Amidee flushed, as Prince had earlier.

"Of course," he said. "It's—it's awful. But poor old Joe is gone now and—well, I thought the firemen said it was a short circuit or something that started the fire."

"Yeah," McCreary growled. He exhaled a cloud of poisonous smoke and glared at Amidee. "Well, the firemen changed their mind, it seems. Looks like now they think that short circuit was started by a match."

BOTH Amidee and Prince uttered a stifled exclamation.

"You mean—" Prince began.

"Yeah," said my friend. "Exactly. So it amounts to murder, and I got some questions to ask."

"B—but, who in the world would want to kill Joe?" Amidee gasped. "He was one of the most popular fellows on the campus. He didn't have an enemy in the world. Isn't that right, Val?"

He turned to his fraternity brother for confirmation. Prince deliberately averted his gaze. McCreary watched the two carefully.

"He didn't, did he?" Amidee persisted. Prince squirmed uncomfortably and kept silent.

"Well," interjected McCreary bluntly, "did he?"

Prince made a couple of false starts before he was able to answer.

"No-o-o," he said unconvincingly. "Well, if this is murder I guess I ought to tell you everything. It doesn't mean a thing, but—"

"Go ahead, I'll be the one to decide

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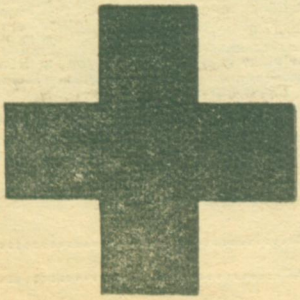

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whether or not it means anything." McCreary said firmly.

"Well," Prince said slowly. "There was a dance Saturday night and Joe took a girl named—no, there isn't any use mixing her up in it."

"What's her name? McCreary asked adamantly. "In a murder, we have to know these little things."

"Ann Dailey," Prince said hesitantly. "She's a co-ed. She lives in Bleecker Hall."

McCreary made a note in the disreputable black notebook he always carries.

"Go ahead," he commanded.

"Well, Ann has been going around with Jake Bruff," Prince resumed, "and Joe—"

"Good Lord, Val!" Amidee burst out. "What's the idea of bringing that up? You don't think that Jake would do anything like—"

"I'm not accusing Jake of anything," Val Prince interrupted angrily. "You said Joe didn't have an enemy in the world and I'm just saying that he and Jake did have a row Saturday night and the whole campus knows about it. Joe knocked Jake down in front of a couple dozen people. How long do you think we could keep that a secret?"

"They shook hands afterward," Amidee said, hotly. "It seems to me you're pretty eager to throw suspicion on Jake."

"Why, you—" Val gritted between clenched teeth. He swung a fist at Amidee. McCreary reached across the back of the front seat and caught Prince by the shoulder, pulling him back.

"Take it easy," he cautioned. "Nobody's accusing anybody of anything. We're just askin' some routine questions. So this Jake and the boy who was killed had a fight. Okay. What else can either of you birds offer that might help us?"

There was a silence as the fraternity brothers sat, sullen and resentful, in the rear seat of the battered sedan.

"Okay," said McCreary with a sigh. "I'll ask some questions. Prince, when did you put your car in the garage yesterday?"

The light-haired boy wrinkled his brow in thought.

"It must have been about three-thirty, yesterday afternoon," he said. "I drove home after last night's dance—I only live about fifty miles from here—and spent the night there. I got up at about noon, had dinner with the family, and drove back to the university.

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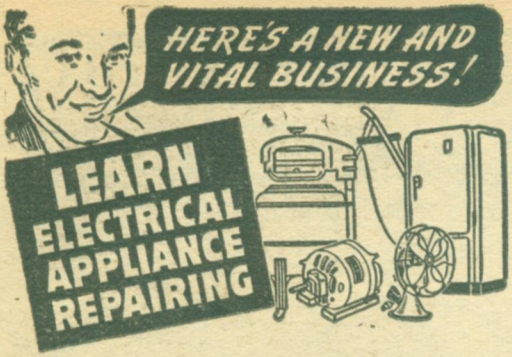

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McCreary digested this information silently, making squiggles in his notebook.

"Car run all right?" he asked.

"Perfectly," Prince said. "I just had a motor overhaul job done."

"See anybody in the garage when you ran your car in?" my friend wanted to know. Prince thought that one over.

"I—I don't know," he confessed. "I would say no but, well, it might be imagination, but thinking back on it, I did think I saw somebody in the cellar, near the oil burner. It was pretty dark, I started to say something and then thought it was my imagination. Either that or it was Roscoe, our dog."

THE FAT detective's eyes gleamed with interest.

"Dog?" asked McCreary.

"We have a big police dog named Roscoe," Amidee explained. "He got out all right. The garage doors were left open and if he was in the cellar he must have bolted when the fire started. Anyway, he was outside when I got here."

"I like dogs," McCreary stated. "This here Roscoe a gentle dog?"

"He's all right, if he knows you." Prince said.

"Um, hmm," said the detective. He turned to Amidee. "And what were you doing yesterday?"

"I got up about nine o'clock," the chapter president recited, "had breakfast, read the papers and then went up to my room to do some studying and take care of some fraternity business. After dinner—we have only two meals served on Sunday—I went down to the post office to mail some letters and hung around the Campus Shop for awhile. Then I went to the movies. That was about four o'clock. It wasn't until I got out of the movies that I heard about the fire."

"You weren't in the cellar all day, then," McCreary said.

"I don't think so," Amidee said. "Let me think a moment. No, I was down there

Saturday afternoon, I remember, but I wasn't down there yesterday."

"Okay," said McCreary, closing his notebook with a snap. "I guess that's about all. You boys think of anything more before I start talkin' to the rest of the fellows."

The two young men were silent for a moment. Prince opened his mouth and closed it again without speaking.

"Yes?" McCreary inquired, mildly.

"It's—nothing," Prince said.

"Spill it," McCreary ordered.

"It's only—well, after that crack Mel made when I mentioned the scrap Jake and Joe had, I'd better shut up," Prince said.

"I don't think you'd better," the detective said.

"Well, then," Prince said, "there's a freshman named Ed Kronan."

"Oh, my foot," Amidee groaned.

"And this kid," Prince went on stubbornly, "was what you'd call a legacy to this chapter."

"Legacy?" McCreary asked. "What's that?"

"Well," Prince explained, "in the event a man's father or brother or uncle or some

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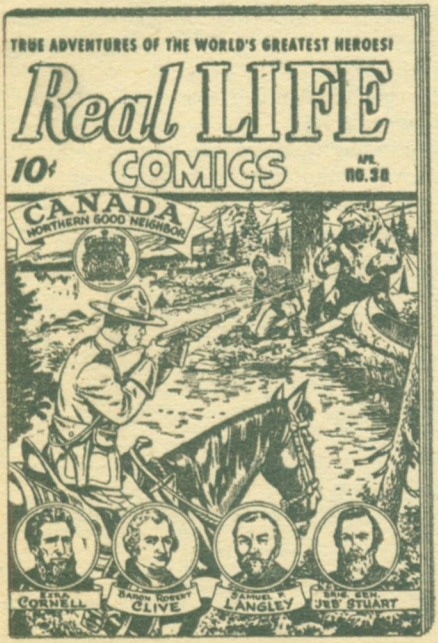

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other close relative has been a member of this fraternity, we're more or less bound to pledge him, unless we find mighty good reason for turning him down."

McCreary nodded impressively, as though he knew exactly what Prince was talking about.

"So," the young man went on, "we had to pledge Kronan, even though none of us thought he was so hot. And then, we got word that Kronan wasn't a man we wanted at all, so we had to ask him to turn in his pin."

McCreary scratched his head.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "You mean you asked this lad Kronan to join your club and then you told him you didn't want him to belong, after all. Is that right?"

"That about covers it," Prince said.

"Well," asked McCreary, "what was it so bad you found out about this Kronan?"

Prince looked doubtfully at Amidee. The chapter president shrugged his shoulders, as though saying that seeing Prince had gone this far, he might as well go all the way.

"We found out that Kronan had done time," Prince blurted. "He'd been in jail."

McCreary clucked his tongue.

"Awful," he said sarcastically. "Terrible! Why, I put better lads in the jug than you'll ever—never mind. And what was this Kronan put away for, do you know?"

Suddenly Prince and Amidee were staring at each other, rising excitement showing in their faces.

"By gosh!" Amidee exploded. "It was for that, wasn't it?"

"For what?" McCreary asked patiently.

"Arson!" the two college students burst out simultaneously.

McCreary mopped his face with a handkerchief.

"That," he said, "does it!"

"It must be him," Prince said excitedly. "He probably was plenty sore at us for giving him the brush-off and he sneaked into the garage yesterday afternoon and set fire to the place!"

"Hmmm," said McCreary. "Could be. We'll have to talk to him. Where does he hang out?"

They gave us Kronan's address and McCreary marked it down.

"Might as well run right over there," the detective said to me. He turned to the other two.

"Much obliged. You'll keep this under your hat, won't you?"

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ASSURING McCreary of their silence they climbed out of the car. McCreary started up the engine and we buzzed around to the dormitory where Ed Kronan lived, after having been denied the sacred confines of the Psi Chi Alpha house. It was a large building and if its inmates knew that they were living outside the pale of high society, they did not indicate it by the noise that came from the rooms.

Downstairs, there was a large living room, filled with an assortment of students. They greeted us with stares.

"Looking for Ed Kronan," McCreary announced. "Is he in?"

There was a whoop of voices, echoing up the corridors as the cry for Ed Kronan resounded through the dormitory. It was answered at length and, within a minute or so, Kronan walked into the room. McCreary led him outside, with me trailing along.

This Kronan was a slightly-built youngster with a rabbity face emphasized by slightly protruding teeth. McCreary was strangely gentle with him.

"Just some routine questions," he said. "I understand you got a whatcha-callit bid from a fraternity here."

Kronan nodded.

"I didn't want it," he said. "My uncle made me accept it. I don't care anything about fraternities. But my uncle's paying my tuition and I took the bid to please him. Then, later, they took back my pin. It was all right with me."

McCreary watched the lad's face closely.

"They took it back because you done time," he said. "Is that right?"

Kronan's face stiffened a trifle, but his eyes were steady.

"I guess you'd call it doing time," he said, with the least accent on the word 'you'.

"What happened?" McCreary wanted to know.

Kronan's shoulders were hunched in a shrug.

"I worked all one summer for an old man on a farm," he said. "When it came time to pay me off he tried to stall about my owing him for a lot of things that I never got. I went to town and had too many drinks of applejack.

"That night, the old man's wheat field burned up and he accused me. I didn't remember whether I did it or not. The judge

[*Turn page*]

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thought I did, anyway, and I got thirty days. For arson."

Suddenly his face blanched.

"Say," he half whispered, "is this in connection with—it must be!"

"Yeah, son," said McCreary. "It's about the fire in the fraternity house where you don't live because they gave you the brush-off. Well, I'll probably be seeing you."

He turned and lumbered away. I had a last glimpse of Kronan, white-faced, staring after him.

"I guess that's it, huh?" I asked. McCreary only grunted. He drove to a drug store on the edge of the campus and made some calls. Then he clambered back into the car.

"Now we'll see this Ann Dailey," he said.

Ann turned out to be an extremely pretty girl with an extremely thick Southern accent and an extremely empty head, Goodness yes, ole Jake and poor ole Joe had had a fuss over her and wasn't it a creepin' cryin' shame about poor ole Joe and she thought he was the sweetest thing and she'd been cryin', she 'clared, ever since she heard the news but there really hadn't been one teeny li'l thing about that fuss Saturday night because my goodness didn't Jake and Joe shake hands after and didn't they all three have Pepsi in the same booth at the Campus Shop after the dance?

McCreary broke away as soon as he could and we went back to the car, the fat detective mopping his brow again.

"Deliver me," he said, "from gals born in New Jersey who think they come from some plantation somewheres. Let's go see this Li'l ole Jake boy."

Jake Bruff was a thick-set individual with a crop of black hair that grew into a low-hanging widow's peak. His attitude went with his name. He was surly, uncooperative, uncommunicative. I disliked him on sight.

"Now look, son," McCreary said after his temper began to wear thin from repeated efforts to get more than a monosyllable out of Bruff. "This here's a serious case. There's a man dead and the whole college knows you and him had a fight Saturday night. Now, you got to admit that looks bad for you, don't it?"

"I don't see why," Bruff replied. "We had a fight and he gave me a licking. Does that mean I burned up the Psi Chi house, just to get even? If I wanted to get back at Joe,

if I wanted to knock him off, I'd use a gun on him. I wouldn't set fire to a fraternity house and maybe kill half a dozen boys I know that might be in it. It doesn't make sense."

McCREARY was silent for a minute, thinking this over.

"Maybe it doesn't, but if you knew Joe Pendergast was alone in that house, you might try it." The detective said calmly.

Jake Bruff laughed contemptuously.

"Why didn't I wait till Joe was alone, then?" he asked. "There was another member of the frat in there too, you know. Walter Coffee was in there. He's the one that jumped out the window."

McCreary snapped his thick fingers.

"That's right!" he exclaimed. "There was another one. Where is this bird, Coffee?"

"Last I heard, he was in the infirmary with a busted leg," Bruff said sarcastically. "I guess he's still there. He couldn't run far."

We got back into the ancient car and went to the infirmary and Coffee's bedside. McCreary was silent and I didn't probe him.

"Joe and I had come in from the movies," Coffee told us. He was a sandy-haired kid with freckles.

"What time was this?" McCreary wanted to know.

"Well, the afternoon show always breaks at quarter of five," Coffee said. "Then there's a half hour intermission for the supper show. We came right back to the frat house so it must have been about five or ten of five when we arrived."

"Go ahead," McCreary encouraged.

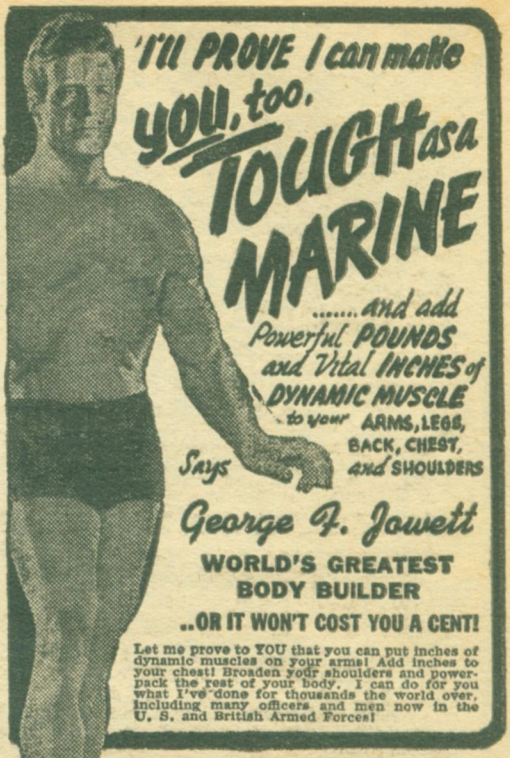
"Well," said Coffee, "Joe went up to his room and I went into mine. Joe must have decided to take a nap. I was doing some studying when I smelled smoke. I opened the door and the fire was coming up the steps and running down the hall toward me. I yelled for Joe but he didn't answer. I guess the smoke had him by then. The fire got closer and I had to go out the window."

"Did you see the dog, Roscoe?" McCreary asked.

No, Coffee had not seen Roscoe. Nor had he heard Roscoe bark until later, when he was lying on the lawn with a broken leg.

McCreary looked at me and quirked an eyebrow. I knew the signal. I left the hospital room and waited in the hall. I stood there

[*Turn page*]



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for about ten minutes before the fat detective came out. He was humming off key.

"Got to make some more telephone calls," he said, as he trudged down the corridor.

"How does it look?" I ventured. He grunted and jammed himself into a telephone booth. I heard the ping of nickels as he talked long and earnestly with several different parties. When he came out, sweat was rolling down his face. He mopped up his face. Then smiled contentedly.

"Our pal Kronan tried a run-out." He said easily.

"A run-out!" I exclaimed. "You mean he tried to get away?"

McCreary nodded. He did not seem particularly elated.

"Yeah," he said. "I put a tail on the kid. Ten minutes after we were gone, he high-tailed it for town. They picked him up at the railroad station, waiting for the New York express to come through."

"Then he's the one!" I said.

McCreary hunched his broad shoulders.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe not."

"But he was running away," I protested. "That's a tip-off."

"Don't mean he was running away from this rap," McCreary argued. "How'd you react if you were a lad with an arson rap against you. You'd know you'd be sure to be suspected when a fraternity house that you were kicked out of burns down?

"Even with an alibi, you could depend on the cops picking you up. Maybe you've got some new friends at the college who don't know you've got a record as a torch. Maybe I'd run too, in that case, but that wouldn't mean I was guilty."

"If it isn't Kronan, then who is it?" I asked.

"I'll let you know in a couple of minutes," he said enigmatically. "Let's go back to that Phizzy Chy Alto place. I want to talk to some lads some more."

He parked the car at the curb and sat there. It seemed as though he were thinking aloud.

"Thing in a case like this is to find a motive," he said. "If it ain't an accident, somebody had a reason to burn the joint down. Okay, so Kronan wanted to burn it down because he got a brush-off and anyways he's an old hand at the torch. But when I talk to Kronan it seems like he was more at home in that madhouse among people that seemed to like him all right, than

he would be here in this rarified frat air.

"Says he only took the invite because of his uncle. We checked and found out that was straight stuff. His uncle is a big shot on the board of trustees of this college. So unless he's a better actor and a better liar than I think he is, I cross him off as far as the motive goes. And he ain't no crazy firebug."

HE TAPPED a thick finger on the steering wheel as though to signify that Ed Kronan was no longer a suspect.

"Then there's Jake Bruff," he said. "Jake and this lad that's dead have a fight and Jake gets the worst of it. But 'you-all' Annie says they made up after it and had banana splits or something after the dance. And Jake says he'd use a gun if he wanted to knock off Joe and somehow I think he would. Besides, Jake says he wouldn't take a chance on hurting others besides Joe, and that sounds sensible."

He tapped off Jake.

"So who have we got?" he asked me. "We have a lad who doesn't care how many others get burned up so long as he gets Joe. Would Val Prince do that to collect his insurance on his car, even if he gets it? Hardly seems possible, a young man like Prince, with all that dough, would risk a murder rap for a couple of hundred bucks' worth of insurance."

He tapped another finger.

"Coffee says he and Joe were at the movies and came back after the first show was over. That was just before the fire started," he went on. "Coffee didn't hear that dog, Roscoe; or didn't see him."

"What's Roscoe got to do with this anyway?" I asked.

McCreary turned his little eyes on me in a way that made me feel like a cretin.

"This dog, according to Prince, is all right if he knows you," he reminded me. "Meaning that if you're a stranger, he probably takes a chunk out of you or at least barks plenty. But he don't bark at nobody in the cellar just before the fire. No stranger came in there and lit that torch. This Roscoe always hangs around the place but he don't bark when he should. Which means he knows the lad in the garage."

"That could be any of these fellows," I said.

"Sure," McCreary agreed. "But why should any of these boys go down in the

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cellar and set the house on fire? It ain't that cold. You got to have a reason for arson. And if it ain't revenge, it's money."

I thought that over and I couldn't find an answer.

"Coffee and this Joe had come back to the house when the first show broke," McCreary went on. "That show broke about four-forty-five. The next show started at five-fifteen. We checked. The fire started right after they got back to the house. Now, nobody in this town goes to a show when it's more than half over because it ain't continuous.

"If he don't make the afternoon show, he waits till the five o'clock show. You can be sure he waits for the five-fifteen show if he's trying to set up an alibi. He couldn't walk up with the show nearly over and try to get a ticket. He'd be too conspicuous."

He lit another cigar and puffed with relish.

"No sir," he said. "If that lad planned on settin' a little fire, he'd time it so he could set the torch, walk right out the garage entrance, go to the movies and be there when the fire was discovered.

"Of course, he'd rather wait until the house was empty but it couldn't be called his fault if two people coming back from the afternoon show walked in the front door while he was walkin' out the back."

"But who—" I began, trying to remember the stories we'd heard.

"Who?" he grunted. "It's someone who knows Roscoe awful well and seein' he don't know Joe is comin' in the front door it can't be a lad who wants to get back at Joe. No,

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this person's motive is money. And it's about time we went up there and told him the show was over."

Dusk was gathering as McCreary lumbered across the lawn toward two tall figures who stood next to the ruined front steps of the gutted fraternity house. I recognized them as Val Prince and Mel Amidee. They turned at our approach and walked forward to greet us. There were shadows of wonder on the faces of both of them.

McCreary stood in his ready for action pose, balanced on his toes, hands hanging loosely at his sides, for all his bulk a creature who could fling himself like a panther upon any prey that tried to make a dash for it.

"It's no good," he told them speaking around his cigar. "I had trouble runnin' down the motive for awhile and then there was Kronan and Bruff that sort of mixed things up, but I got it straight now."

He laid a hand on Amidee's sleeve. I gaped in bewilderment.

"You don't want to make any trouble, do you?" he asked hopefully. "You don't want to get tough, do you, Amidee?"

The chapter president's head went back, as though he had been struck on the chin.

"You did right good," McCreary said in a conversational tone. "You made only one little slip and that sunk you. That's pretty good for an amateur. You said you went to the movies at four o'clock. Now, who the devil would go to the movies at four o'clock when they're over at four-forty-five and they ain't continuous? Waste of money and, besides, you can't get a ticket then. The box office is closed at three, I found out."

AMIDEE was shaking as though struck by a chill.

"You didn't go to the movies at four, son," McCreary said wearily. "You went some time about five, after you set that fire. Just about the time Coffee and Pendergast were coming in the front door."

He watched Amidee with the stare of a hard-eyed hound.

"I couldn't dope out just why you wanted to burn the place down," he admitted. "Then I got talking to Coffee and I asked him who was treasurer of this bunch and I found out you was, along with bein' president.

"I had the bureau check and the bank let us in on some figures and—well, you got yourself into a mess, didn't you? A mess you was hopin' the property insurance would get you out of, huh?"

He clucked his tongue.

"You was pretty cute, though," he said. "Protestin' like that when Prince here kept playin' right down your alley without meanin' to, givin' me suspects to work on. Or maybe you thought that without any suspects we'd write off the case and the club here could collect the insurance and you'd be able to fix up your books. Was that it?"

[*Turn page*]

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An anguished cry came from Amidee as he swayed.

"I didn't mean—I didn't mean to hurt anybody!" he screamed. "I thought the house was empty! The servants were gone. I saw Prince leave. I—I didn't know—I'm no murderer!"

"I wouldn't know about that," McCreary said tiredly. "That's up to the courts. All I got to do is bring you in, son. So let's get goin'."

DON'T MEDDLE WITH MURDER

(Concluded from page 76)

was tired. She yawned a couple of times while she hung up her hat, fluffed out some near-blond hair and opened her handbag.

"You're fifteen minutes late," Libby informed her.

"Yeah. I know. Ma had to drag me off the sheets. No more parties in the middle of the week. They're turrible. . . By the way, Miss Hart. I made a mistake yesterday. I took your package out of the safe instead of mine. Mine, with the six bucks worth of costume jewelry, I was supposed to wear last night."

She handed over a small, brown paper-wrapped box.

"Give!" I said.

Libby slapped my hand and opened it herself.

In a nest of cotton twenty-six gleaming black pearls were strung together on platinum wire, with a diamond catch.

"Pearls!" Libby breathed.

"Cracky lifted them somewhere," I said. "Gail bought them, but never paid Morgan for them. Bad business, making a purchase and forgetting to settle. Get your hat, honey. We'll take these down to Captain Mullin, before anybody else gets ideas."

Libby nodded. "What a pleasure," she said softly, "to go out with you, Johnny, unfollowed!"

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THE TANGLED WEB OF MURDER

(Concluded from page 61)

talk you're so fond of?"

McGill looked pained.

"I'm telling you how come the murderer shut off the electric clock when he left Spider's room. The clock wouldn't have been turned off if the pull chain had been used, but it went blooey when the current was shut off at the wall switch. The clock started again when I turned on the lights but it was just an hour slow."

The older man jumped up excitedly.

"I get it! Then the killer left the room just an hour before you went in. Is that it?"

"Right. He busted his own alibi. He had cracked Spider's watch with the hands set at seven-forty-seven. The electric clock proves that he left the room about seven-ten. Everybody in the house had an alibi—or at least is known to have been outside at that time—except the landlady and a man named Aiken."

"Isn't Aiken the pickpocket you arrested a while ago?"

"Sure. That was his alibi. He hustled down here and got himself pinched about half-past seven so he'd have a perfect alibi for seven-forty-seven."

"Can you prove that?"

McGill grinned.

"I gambled on it. I figured that if Aiken killed Webb he did it for the money. He had to get the dough out of the house and into a safe place where it would keep until he did a stretch for picking pockets. He didn't have much time in which to do his act and get down town, so I had a hunch that he used his camera as a hiding place.

"He told me that he hocked it tonight, so I went around to the hock shop and talked nice to them. The camera was there—full of folding money instead of film packs. It's all here in the package."

Commissioner Rowan chuckled as he reached for the bundle.

"Nice going, McGill. Lieutenant Beals will be plenty relieved when he hears about this."

Dan smothered a grin.

"I ain't so sure," he murmured.

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By WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

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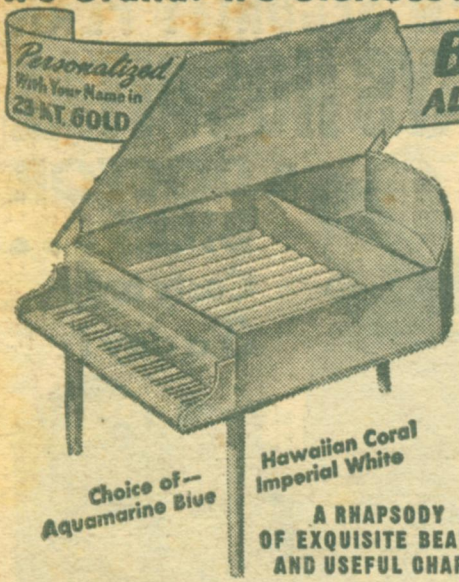

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You'll say it's the loveliest of post-war plastic thrills! This skillfully crafted, authentic reproduction of a Baby Grand Piano—scaled down to delicate miniature proportions, with its clever keyboard that actually *Glows in the Dark*, plus your name embossed in 23-Kt. GOLD on its graceful top to identify it as *personally yours*. And it's as *dutiful* as it is *beautiful*. Yes, its ornamental grace and charm is only part of the joy of pleasurable, treasurable ownership . . . for when the top opens you have a truly smart Cigarette Box, a luxurious Jewel Case, a delightful Cosmetic Case, or a grand Candy and Nut Dish. But whatever use you find for your Baby Grand, we know you'll agree it's the loveliest of lovely household accessories . . . so smart, so decorative, so charming—you'll be equally delighted to *give* it or *receive* it as a grand gift.

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR PIANO

IMPERIAL INDUSTRIES, Dept. Z16,
618 So. Dearborn St., Chicago 5, Ill.

Please rush Glow-In-The-Dark, Personalized Miniature Baby Grands checked off below. If not delighted, I may return in 5 days for refund.

1 for $1.95 2 for $3.50 3 for $5.00

Name Wanted in Gold _____ (If more than one, please print on separate sheet of paper)

Color and Quantity Wanted: Coral _____ Blue _____ White _____

CHECK ONE

☐ I am enclosing $_____ payment in full. Ship Postpaid.

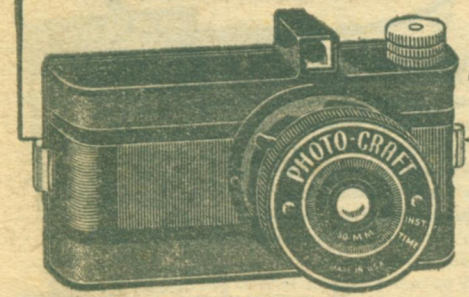
☐ Ship C.O.D. To assure my acceptance of Baby Grands personalized especially for me, I am enclosing a good-faith deposit of $_____ and will pay postman the balance of $_____ plus postage.

Name _____ (Please Print Clearly)

Address _____

City _____ Zone _____ State _____

COMPLETE 5-PIECE CANDID CAMERA OUTFIT



Includes all This!

- ★ GENUINE PHOTOCRAFT CANDID Type CAMERA
- ★ CARRYING CASE with Your Name in 23-Kt. GOLD
- ★ 3 ROLLS of No. 127 FILM

ALL YOURS FOR ONLY $3.98 POST PAID

CARRYING CASE With Handy Shoulder Strap INCLUDED

THREE ROLLS OF FILM INCLUDED

Personalized **WITH YOUR NAME IN 23-Kt. Gold**

LOOK AT THESE FEATURES

- ★ Genuine Simpson Ground and Pitch Polished Lens
- ★ Takes 16 Pictures on Any Standard No. 127 Film
- ★ Will Take Pictures in Full Color
- ★ Has "Bullseye" Level View Finder
- ★ Easy, Simple, Foolproof Operation

PICTURES YOU TAKE TODAY WITH THIS BIG 3-IN-1 OUTFIT WILL BE THE TREASURES OF TOMORROW

. . . For while time stands still for no one, the memories of happy times can be preserved by Photocraft. Your Photocraft candid camera outfit comes to you ready to go to work—with a handy shoulder strap carrying case Personalized with the name of your choice in 23-Kt. GOLD, *and* enough film for 48 exposures — for only $3.98 postpaid! Your Photocraft will also take full color pictures when loaded with Colorchrome film. So whether for a gift or for yourself, order *your* Complete 5-piece Photocraft Outfit *now!* Our guarantee is your assurance of satisfaction.

RUSH THIS COUPON NOW

Sold On A "Examine At Our Risk" GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION

Yes, if you don't feel that Photocraft is everything you expected, you may return it in 10 days for a complete refund.

IMPERIAL INDUSTRIES—Dept. PC229
618 So. Dearborn St., Chicago 5, Ill.

Rush my Photocraft Candid Camera Outfit at $3.98 with Personalized Carrying Case and 3 rolls of No. 127 Film. My money will be refunded if returned in 10 days.

Name Wanted in Gold _____ (Please Print)

CHECK ONE

☐ I'm enclosing $3.98 in full payment. Please send my Photocraft Outfit Postpaid.

☐ Send my Photocraft C.O.D. I am enclosing $1.00 deposit because I want my Carrying Case Personalized in GOLD. I'll pay postman balance of $2.98 plus postage.

☐ Send my Photocraft C.O.D. without name on Carrying Case. I will pay postman $3.98 plus postage.

Name _____ (Please Print Clearly)

Address _____

City _____ Zone _____ State _____