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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LXIV, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

August, 1949

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By H. H. STINSON

Private Eye Rocky Dillon handles an explosive mystery case when a nitro blast suddenly knocks a cold corpse, a hot blonde and a sizzling crime puzzle into his lap!

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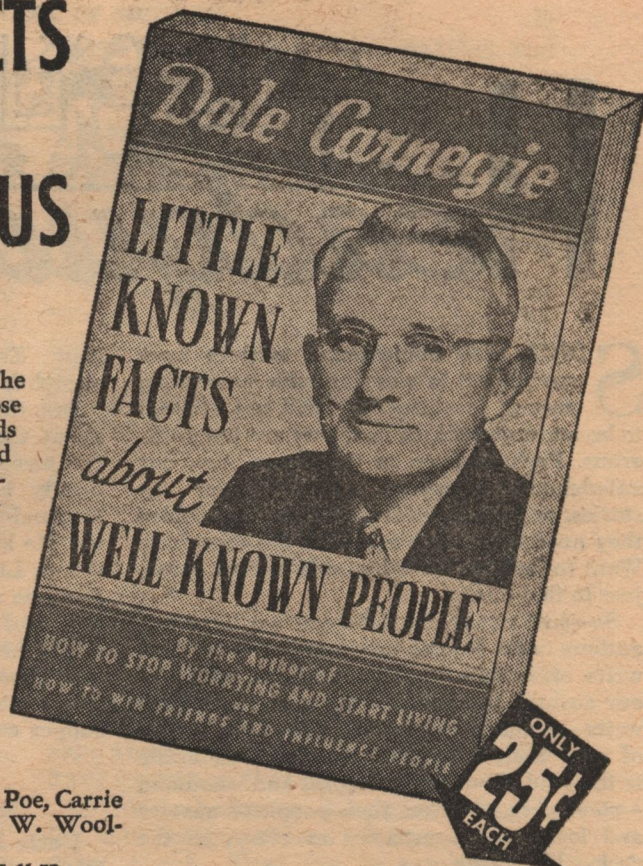
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SINCE time immemorial, writers have specialized in weaving tales concerning certain localities. We will not attempt to be more specific, as instances are too numerous. Perhaps even in the Stone Age, our antediluvian ancestors chiseled their sob stories, or serials, on huge slabs, long before they needed so much stone for the Pyramids. Want to look on the other side of each stone, just to find out?

So—just not to be different, we have our authors who know, are familiar with and write of, certain specific locations. Many of our authors live in the locales of which they write—which is true in the case of the writer of next issue's featured novelet. The locale is the wild New England coast and woodland—steeped in tradition, their people as austere and loyal, and sometimes as bitter, as the rock-ribbed hills.

The author is Edward Ronns, who gave us a storm-tossed and spray-swept little masterpiece, right here in **THRILLING DETECTIVE**, not so very long ago. We refer, of course, to that mystery of the drowned twin, "Haunt Me No More". Again the autumn winds are chill, the leaves are crisp and brown. The New England landscape beckons with—

THE DAY I DIE by Edward Ronns

For it is along this heavy-hutted New England road, driving his old jalopy, that tall and well-built Paul Mansard, Big Town detective, is ostensibly "On Vacation" from Homicide. Already it grows dark as he turns in a side road, under a swinging sign which reads: "Hamilton Inn—open since 1709." There it is already—New England tradition,

New England sternness, New England straightlaced rigidity!

But there's nothing straightlaced or rigid about the charming young lady who opens the screen door for him—even though her beauty has the outdoor freshness of New England—and some of its brooding mystery, too. He knows without being introduced that this is Lisbeth Hamilton, daughter of Uncle Joe who runs the place. It is between seasons now and there's plenty of room before the skiers begin to come. Mansard has an ale and announces to those at the bar that he wants to see Bill Stokes as soon as possible—supper can wait.

The Matriarch

Uncle Joe suggests that Lisbeth hop in the jalopy with Mansard and show him the way. William Stokes, it seems, will be camping out in that little shack on the side of the hill. Lisbeth seems only too delighted and who is Paul Mansard to object to a honey-haired and gray-eyed girl beside him on a cold, twilight drive? The young lady in question however, remarks acidly, that Mansard seems to *know* the way.

However, it is not directly to William Stokes' shack that they drive, but to the ancient and rambling home of his mother, the matriarch Mrs. Jeremy St. Cloud Stokes—she who has run the little village of Stokesbury, as her ancestors have run it, for generations untold. *Why* does this upstart New York detective dare even to presume to see her son!

Yet Mrs. Stokes knows only too well why the detective is there. There has been one known killing—possibly two. There is the legless veteran, Jeff Panko, who worked himself up to a position of village handyman,

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet

in spite of his handicap. Someone brutally ran him down in a car. Then there was Edgar Stokes, William's brother. You see, they've never found his body. Somehow or other, William is suspected of both killings. Lisbeth is engaged to William, although she fully realizes that both boys were dominated, "body and soul" by their arrogant and spiteful mother.

In spite of dire threats by the mother, Mansard and Lisbeth drive through the gathering gloom, where William Stokes camps out when he is "hunting". They find the place deserted. It is now quite dark.

Mansard and Lisbeth enter the cabin. There is the glow of embers in the fireplace, proving that it is not long since Stokes was there. Repeatedly Lisbeth calls out Stokes' name. Suddenly from out of the darkness, comes the sharp cough of a rifle and Mansard's hat is whipped from his head. Picking up the hat, the detective notices a hole drilled right through the crown. Whew—that was close!

A Perfect Target

On their way back to the tavern, Mansard and Lisbeth discuss the case.

"At least the fellow can't be much of a shot," the detective says, in a sort of whistle-through-the-graveyard tone. "There I was—a perfect target, silhouetted against the glow of the fire and still the guy misses me."

"Bill Stokes is the finest shot in three counties," the girl answers laconically.

Back in the tavern, Mansard finds the constable wants to see him. He is accused of "trespassing" on Mrs. Stokes' property. The officer goes on to explain that they all "liked" Jeff Panko and are just as anxious to see justice done as the detective is. They do not believe Edgar Stokes has been killed. Mansard is warned that every hand will be against him—every obstacle will be thrown in his way. One does not raise their hand against the gentry—

"If you all think you are going to frighten me—a New York cop—" the detective begins hotly. But in spite of his bravado, Paul Mansard is frightened—not once, but dozens of times, as he becomes engulfed in the eerie creepiness of it all. It is like a black page out of another century. You will be held spell-bound by the stealthy suspense of it all.

Let author Ronns bring you back to New

(Continued on page 95)

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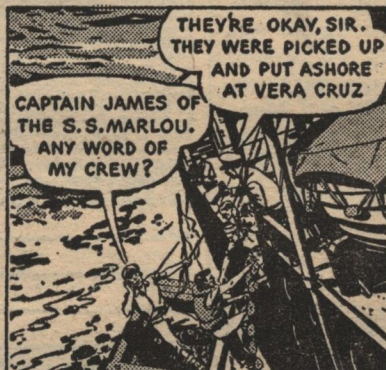
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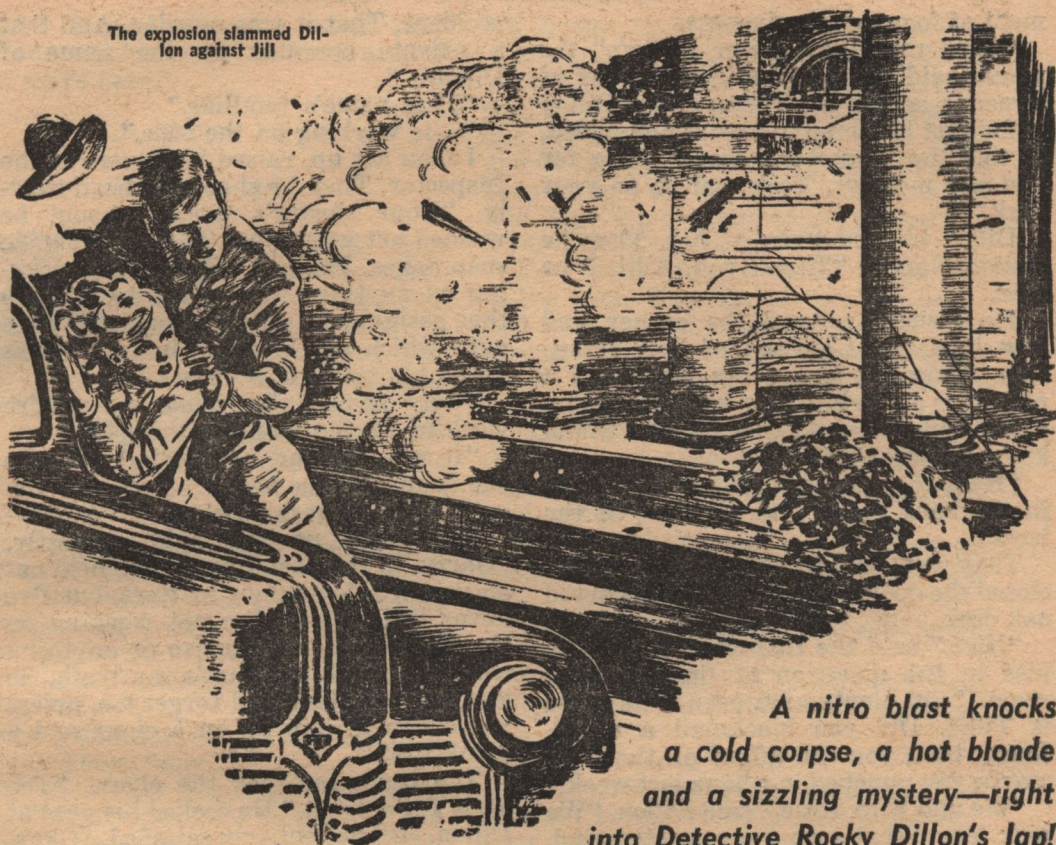
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There's a **BOOM in MURDER**

CHAPTER I

TEN FEET FROM DEATH

THE young woman who was so efficiently busy behind the desk in Rocky Dillon's reception room was as pretty a mouse as he had ever seen. Who she was and what she was doing there was a complete mystery to him.

He heeled shut the door on which was lettered, *R. X. Dillon—Investigations*, and looked the young woman over with mild astonishment. If he had needed and

could have afforded a secretary, he decided, this number would have been exactly his order. It had copper-colored hair, large gray eyes, a smile that warmed a guy like a sunlamp and a figure that even a severely-tailored suit couldn't libel.

However, Dillon didn't need a secretary and, having practically been on the wagon for two weeks, he was just about certain that he hadn't hired one in a mo-

a novelet by H. H. STINSON

ment of foggy expansiveness.

"Good morning, Mister Dillon," the mouse said respectfully. She nodded at someone across the room whom Dillon hadn't yet bothered to look at and added, "I told the Inspector I was looking for you any moment. Your mail is on your desk."

Dillon blinked twice at her. Then he smiled blandly. "Thank you, Tillie," he said.

He glanced toward the corner and saw Inspector Garrison of City Homicide. Garrison was a big man with a pink face and white hair which lent him a benevolent Santa-Claus look. Dillon knew he wasn't Santa Claus.

"Hello, Garry," said Dillon. "Let's go in the back room with the rest of the boys."

They went into the inner office. Dillon closed the door and sat down at a scarred oak desk.

"Nice," said the Inspector, wafting a kiss in the direction of the reception room. "But plenty nice, even if its name is Tillie. Did you blackmail a client, Rocky that, you can afford all that? Or maybe you punched in a bank last week."

"Me and Billy Rose," said Dillon. "We pick 'em. What's on your mastermind, Garry?"

GARRISON lowered himself to a chair, hitching up his knife-creased trousers carefully. "A guy was killed a couple nights ago."

"I've got an alibi," said Dillon. "Who was he?"

"His name was Lambert, Troy Lambert." Garrison narrowed his stare watchfully as though he expected Dillon to start jumping up and down. Dillon merely looked puzzled. Garrison said, "He got blown up in a sort of home laboratory he'd fitted up, and we've got it down as an accident. You must have read about it, all the papers had it."

"The form sheets I've been reading must have got scooped on it."

"Very funny."

"Oh, I don't know," said Dillon modestly. "I've done better."

Garrison scowled a little. "Don't give me a song-and-dance, Rocky. This morning the bureau got an anonymous phone tip that Lambert's death was not an

accident. That it was murder. And that a private operator by the name of Dillon—"

"That name's familiar."

"—is working on the case."

Dillon sat up, raised his brows at the Inspector. Then he shook his head slowly. "Your tipster's mouth should be washed out with a box of hubble-bubble soap flakes. Playboy Dillon is not working on anything, and plans to stick to that assignment until the bankroll runs out—which will be along in July unless I pick too many slow horses."

"Why should this dame say you're working on the Lambert thing?"

"It was a dame, huh? Find out who she is and I'll sue her."

"Now, look here, Rocky—"

Dillon got up and said earnestly, "Garry, in the past I may have held out on you in a few minor matters, but I've never lied to you. I'm not working on the Lambert gent's demise or anything connected with it. That's the truth. So you can run along and forget me, unless you'd like to join me in a cigar and a drink first."

The Inspector took the cigar. "Too early for a drink." He cocked his gaze at Dillon, still not entirely satisfied. "Okay, Rocky, I'll take your word. But if you're not leveling, I promise you I'll land on you like a ton of bricks."

Dillon chuckled, gesturing at the pot Garrison was growing back on his belt buckle. "Couple more pounds there, Garry, and you'll certainly make the weight."

"Aaghr," said the Inspector, mildly insulted. "I'm just a little bloated this morning." He went to the door and looked back from there with a sudden satyr's wink that didn't go with his Santa-Claus appearance. "At that, with a secretary like you've acquired, I don't blame you for not wasting time on murders."

Dillon returned the leer. "I just got tired playing solitaire up here."

When the Inspector had gone, Dillon clapped his hands three times and said, "Abracadabra!"

The beautiful number came to the door of the inner office. There was a pencil in the copper-colored hair, a note book in her hand and a slightly furious



Dillon turned from the
hole in the floor

look on her face.

"Tillie!" she said. "Tillie! The name is Jill!"

"That much is nice."

"Jill Parker."

Dillon gestured at a chair and leaned his long-boned body against the desk. His eyes, dark blue and cool, watched the girl curiously. "All right, Jillparker, give me an outline in a few thousand words of just what this is all about."

Jill Parker sat down and Dillon noted that she had very nice props to go with her other good points. "It's all very simple, Mr. Dillon," she said.

"I feel the same way about 'Mister' that you do about 'Tillie.' I'm called Rocky in my informal moments and I seem to have no other kind."

The girl smiled. "I've read lots about you, Rocky—the Masterman kidnaping, the murders in Holiday Street and so on. I think you're very smart."

"Lots of guys call it luck. I like your version better."

"You see, I've always wanted to be a detective, and I decided a couple of days ago it was time I got started. So it seemed a good move to start with the best."

Dillon grinned. "Baby, you polish a fast apple. What made you think I could use an Operatress X around here?"

She grinned back at him. "I'd wait to be promoted, Chief. I'd wait at least a couple of days. I'll start at the bottom—as your secretary."

"What gave you the idea I even need a secretary?"

SHE looked at him soberly. "The fact that I've been trying to get you by phone for two days and having no luck. Rocky, when was the last time you were in your office?"

"Three days ago. I needed a clean shirt I had in the file."

"When I got here this morning, your door was unlocked. Anyone could have come in and ransacked the place."

"They'd discover in a hurry that crime doesn't pay."

"I'll bet you miss a dozen cases a month by not having a secretary. So, as soon as I saw how things were, I decided to be your secretary and work up to junior shamus."

"Your zeal," said Dillon, "is admirable and terrific, sugar. Which is the reason I've never had a secretary. They don't feel they're earning their dough unless they keep the boss busy. I hate work. I also hate female private detectives."

"But—but why?"

"If they're homely, it's no fun to have them around. If they're pretty, they take your mind off your job. In addition, a man has to spend ninety per cent of his time seeing that they don't stub a toe or that somebody doesn't say 'boo' to them. So you're fired as of now and what are you doing for dinner tonight?"

Her eyes widened in a hurt, disappointed way. "But, Rocky," she wailed. "I've brought us a case."

"I don't want a case. I've had a case."

"But I promised Ellen Lambert we'd handle the case!"

"Ow!" said Dillon. He groaned again. "Ow! My little chick, would you by any chance be the one who phoned the cops anonymously this morning that R. X. Dillon was working on the Lambert death?"

Jill Parker nodded proudly. "Uh-huh. I'd heard you were sort of choosy about cases, and I thought the police could maybe kind of needle you into taking this one."

Dillon clapped a hand to his forehead. "Ow! You have certainly dumped me behind the eight-ball and got yourself off to a terrific start as a shamus. Where's your hat?"

"Out there."

"Slip under it. We're going places."

She looked delighted. "Out to see Ellen, huh?"

"Out to see the Inspector and get me off the hot spot you fixed up for me."

"What hot spot?"

He ticked off points on his fingers. "Garrison saw you in my office. Fiddling around with the Lambert business, he's bound to connect you with Ellen Lambert, whoever she is. He's going to be sure I lied to him. He is going to be very mad at R. X. Dillon."

"Oh, pooh," said Jill disdainfully. "What do you care? In every private detective story I've read, the private detective loves to have the cops mad at him. It's half the fun."

"Some day they'll print the sequel to the story," Dillon said grimly, "showing the private eye minus his license and doing six months on the county roads. Come on, baby."

Going down eight floors in the elevator Jill Parker looked at Dillon as though he had shattered a lot of her favorite illusions. From the lobby they emerged through a side door to the parking lot and walked toward Dillon's coupe. An attendant spotted them and hurried forward to render service. Up to now, the attendants had always generously allowed Dillon to find his own car. Maybe the explanation was that he had never appeared on the lot before with Jill Parker.

They got twenty feet from the side of the building and the attendant skidded to a stop. He bawled, "Look out!" and shot a pointing finger toward the air above them.

Dillon acted instinctively, trying to pull his head in like a turtle and yanking the girl around in front of him and holding her close so that his body shielded her.

Glass exploded nearby with a ringing, crackling sound, and slivers raked his ankles. After a little, when nothing else happened, he took his arms from around Jill Parker and turned. The fragments of a milk bottle littered the paving ten feet from the spot where the attendant's shout had frozen them.

Any skull that had stopped the bottle would have been in fragments also.

CHAPTER II

A MISSING ARM



DILLON looked up at the building. Windows were open at various floors, but no faces peered out. There was no hint of excitement anywhere.

"Geez," the parking-lot kid who had yelped the warning said. "When I seen that comin' down—"

"Did you see it start?" asked Dillon.

"Nope. I just seen it in the air, and then I waited for it to clunk you."

Dillon looked down at Jill Parker for

a moment and then, with an air of sudden decision, took her arm and steered her back toward the lobby.

"Th-thanks for protecting me like that, Chief," she said a bit breathlessly.

"That," said Dillon, recalling just how it had felt to have her in his arms, "was a pleasure, positively."

Jill colored faintly. "Now, now Chief," she said. "I didn't think you'd be the kind of a boss who went in for etchings."

"El Lobo, they call me," said Dillon cheerfully. "The Wolf of West Sixth Street. Just wait here, and don't talk to strange sailors."

He tucked himself into a lobby phone-booth and called Headquarters, got through to Homicide. A voice there said Garrison was out, nobody knew when he'd be back. Dillon hung up, rejoined Jill Parker.

"I thought you were taking me over to confess to the Inspector," she said.

"I thought I'd find out first if Garrison is in. He isn't."

"I've been thinking about that milk bottle," Jill went on. "What do you think of it?"

"You're ambitious to be a shamus—go ahead, do some deducting."

Jill pursed red lips and scowled very seriously. "Well, if it had just toppled off a windowsill, it would have fallen near the building, not twenty feet out in the lot. Therefore, it was thrown."

"I'll give you an A on that."

"Either it was tossed out intentionally at someone—probably us—or somebody was sort of careless about what to do with empties."

"Drunks get casual like that."

"Drunks throw whisky bottles," Jill pointed out.

"This could have been a drunk who hated milk. Where do we go to see your pal, Ellen Lambert?"

"Wheeh," crowned Jill. "So you're going to take the case and I'm hired!"

"Didn't I say I wasn't hiring anyone?"

"Uh-huh," Jill admitted. "But you didn't say absolutely."

"Absolutely," Dillon said. "We're going to the Lambert place because that's very probably where Garrison is right now and I want to get this deal cleaned

up quick."

Jill put on a dismal look. They went out to the parking lot again and managed to insert themselves into Dillon's coupe without any further untoward incidents. Jill told him to turn west. He turned west on Sixth and presently was out of the press of downtown traffic.

"All right, chick," he said then, "let's have some background."

"On the murder, huh?"

"On you."

"Oh, there's nothing interesting about me."

Dillon turned and gave her a look from hat to shoes.

"I'll slap your etchings down yet, Chief," she said. "Well, anyway, I was born to an ever-loving couple named Parker up in Sausalito. I went to school with a girl named Ellen Case. I learned to make squiggles and to type and became a secretary. Ellen was smarter. She married a man named Troy Lambert, president and principal stockowner of the Coast Chemical Company down here. We kept in touch, and two weeks ago I came down to visit her. We were out together at a picture show the night that Troy Lambert went down to his lab in the basement and got blown up by someone."

"The cops are satisfied it was accidental," said Dillon. "What satisfies them, satisfies Dillon."

"Do you want to know why I think it wasn't an accident?"

"No," said Dillon.

"I know you're just being coy, Chief, so I'll go ahead and tell you. Troy Lambert just wasn't the sort who'd have accidents. He was the most careful man I ever met. Why, I'll bet every time he kissed Ellen, he had a cold culture made on her beforehand."

Dillon sighed. "Okay, I'll settle for suicide then."

"Lambert had never been enough alive to want to be dead. Anyway, he was the kind who'd have left a note and a couple of graphs outlining in a scientific way why he was bumping himself off and how. Turn left on Western."

OBEDIENTLY, Dillon turned left on Western. "So far, sugar," he said, "you've just been mumbling sweet noth-

ings. Even a careful guy can have an accident and, if a guy decides to bump himself off, he's apt to be nuts enough not to do things the way he'd ordinarily do them. Try some more."

"Getting interested, huh?"

"Not me. I'm just making conversation."

"Well since it happened, I've been sleeping in the same room with Ellen and I've heard her muttering things about 'murder' in her sleep. So I pinned her down, and she agreed with me that it must have been murder. She put muscles in my idea by telling me he hadn't been working on anything explosive. He was just putting something together with a couple of other things to make a spray that would kill some nasty new little bugs in the citrus orchards. He was pretty excited about it, and Ellen feels that even if he'd had any reason for suicide, he'd have postponed it until he'd completed his experiments. He was that sort."

Dillon sighed again. "I give in. He was knocked off. I don't suppose you've got any suspects?"

"I've got loads of them. Isn't that swell?"

"It would be if the detective racket was on a piecework basis. But they only pay off on one guilty guy or gal."

"Oh, I've got one outstanding prospect—Ross Lambert, Troy's brother. He's in his twenties, a lot younger than Troy, and he is one mean little kid. At twelve he knifed a boarding-school prof. At fifteen he shot and wounded the family chauffeur in an argument over his taking a car. At sixteen he killed a woman in a hit-run accident and got sent to reform school for two years. When he got out, he was a complete bum, and Troy's been bailing him out of jams for years to protect the family name. With Troy's death, he comes into a third of the estate, the rest going to Ellen."

"Is he around?"

"Ellen says they haven't heard from him for months. Want to hear about my other prospects?"

"No."

"A Parker never takes 'no' for an answer," said Jill. "Next high on my list is a Professor Zoophbone—that's as close as I can come to the name. He's

a Czech who was head chemist at Coast Chemical until Lambert kicked him out. Ellen said he muttered revenge through a black beard. There's others at the plant that Lambert was nasty to. Edwin, the butler, didn't like Lambert and he's been whistling at his work ever since the funeral. I even include Mister Thomas Mallory, the vice president of the company, because he has iron-gray temples, very distinguished."

"Is that bad?"

Jill laughed, but there was a sound of distaste in it. "I guess I've got a neurosis," she said. "Once worked for a man who had iron-gray temples and coal-black ideas. Shall I tell you more about the case?"

"I don't seem to be able to stop you, pet."

"Well, lots of people knew that Troy Lambert worked almost every evening in his home lab—from dinner until midnight. I think the killer got into the lab and planted a bomb timed to go off at nine o'clock in the evening—that was the time of the explosion—figuring Lambert was sure to be in the lab then. The idea was that the blast would destroy any evidence, and everyone would simply assume the explosion was accidental. What the killer didn't know was that Lambert wasn't working on anything explosive."

"Who'd have had access to the lab?"

"That field is wide open. A basement window could have been forced, and Ellen tells me there was no lock, just a hook, on the lab door."

"I suppose you put on your fore-and-aft cap and got your magnifying glass and looked for clues?"

"Natch, my good fellow. But things were a mess, and I couldn't tell if a window had been forced or not. However, just a couple of nights ago, Martha—that's the housekeeper, Edwin's wife—said she went out on the back porch very late to put out milk bottles and scared a prowler away."

"It was probably the killer coming back to lock the stable after taking the horse," said Dillon. "Incidentally, you've skipped the episode of the other milk bottle this morning. Who knew you were coming down to see me?"

"Nobody but Ellen." Then she recon-



The hair at Dillon's nape stood straight out

sidered. "Well, maybe the servants. I had your number down on a pad by the phone, and your name, too."

THEY crossed Fortieth Place, drove alongside a long, high fence of filigreed iron work to which ivy clung. Jill pointed to ornate stone pillars that flanked a gap in the fence.

"That's it, Chief. Maxfield Place."

Dillon turned in between the pillars and they were in a park-like area of wide lawns, stately shrubbery and colorful flower beds. Locked gates barred off the other end of the private roadway. The houses, three to each side of the roadway, were all so large and so dignified that they reminded Dillon of six fat dowagers gossiping on the lawn at an elegant garden party.

"The Lambert hovel," said Jill, "is the Colonial place at the far end."

When Dillon got to the Colonial place and stopped, he saw that this particular dowager had had her bustle singed. The main part of the building was two-storied, with tall white pillars. There had been one-story wings to either side. Now one of the wings was a jackdaw's nest of shattered timber and glass and plaster, only partly tidied up. A blackened wall at the side of the main structure showed where the force of the blast had swept upward.

They climbed out and Dillon was just slamming the door of his coupe when there was a much louder slam inside the house. Something went *whummmp*. window glass bulged out along the lower floor and the front door hopped off its hinges, across the porch and into a bed of marigolds.

The explosion slammed Dillon against Jill, and Jill, in turn, against the side of the car. He pushed himself upright again, blinked.

"The Lamberts keep this up and they're sure as anything going to ruin that house," he said a little dazedly.

Smoke, heavy and grayish, began to belly out through the gaping doorway and windows. Beyond the pall, a woman screamed, and Jill Parker took off toward the house. Dillon caught up with her at the edge of the porch, grabbed her.

"See what I mean?" he grumbled.

"You'd go barging in there blind and stub a toe."

The woman screamed again, and Jill fumed, "That's Ellen!"

Dillon went on ahead, took a step through the doorway and fanned smoke with his hat. That didn't help much, but he could see he was in a big entrance hall from which stairs spiraled to the upper floor. To either side there were archways. Smoke was rolling out from the archway at his left.

He took a few more steps and found himself almost on top of a man who sat propped against the wall. A woman, blonde and neat-figured, knelt beside the man. The man had iron-gray temples and clipped military mustache and a good jaw. Dillon thought that ordinarily the guy could probably have posed for one of those "Men of Distinction" liquor ads. Now he was coated with plaster dust, and blood leaked down through one iron-gray patch to make a bright red trail on expensive-looking gray flannels.

Jill Parker oozed past Dillon and put her hand on the shoulder of the blonde woman.

"Ellen!" she said. "Ellen, what happened?"

The woman turned a stupefied face upward. It was a pretty face, but pallid under the bright waves of hair, and the blue eyes were wide, almost vacant with shock.

"Jill," she said shakily. "Thank God, you're here. I don't know what happened. I was talking with Mr. Mallory in the living room, and I left him, went upstairs to get some papers. Just as I was coming back, there was an explosion." She looked down at the man. "Tom—Tom, are you hurt badly?"

Mallory moved a little, muttered unintelligibly. Dillon turned and went through the fire-blackened archway. He stopped abruptly on the brink of a ten-foot chasm in what had been the floor of a lavishly-furnished living room. Remnants of an Oriental rug clung in bright-colored shreds to shattered plaster of walls and ceiling. Furniture had been tumbled about. Pictures hung crazily.

Looking down through the hole in the floor, he saw splintered joists about which gray smoke still curled slowly. Impaled on a jagged length of lumber

was an arm, still clothed in what had been the sleeve of a white jacket. There was only the arm, no more. Dillon swallowed a couple of times and turned to go back to the hall.

CHAPTER III

INTO THE RUIN



HE STOPPED when he saw a woman standing just behind him. The woman was elderly, stringy-haired, with a face as rock-ribbed as a Vermont hillside. She looked down through the smoke and put the back of one hand slowly to her mouth, made a very thin sound of shock behind it. Then she went back through the archway and Dillon followed her.

Mallory was on his feet now.

"My God, Ellen," he was saying hoarsely. "If I hadn't stepped to the archway to call you, I'd have been blown to bits!"

The elderly woman looked at Ellen Lambert and Mallory. "Edwin's dead," she said dully.

"Martha," Ellen Lambert breathed. "Oh, Martha—"

"He's dead," the lifeless voice said. "But I'm not. And I'm not stupid either."

Dillon watched a shudder ripple down the blonde woman's body, saw horror twist her face. "Martha—" she whispered. "I—"

Her hand went out toward the elderly woman, but the woman walked past it, through a doorway and out of sight toward the rear of the house.

There was silence for a moment, and then Ellen Lambert and Jill Parker and Mallory began to talk. Dillon didn't join in, partly because nobody asked him to, but principally because he figured you always learned more listening than you did shooting off your face.

Three minutes later the vanguard of a flock of law arrived in the person of two radio-car cops. They were followed in fairly rapid succession by a University detective, an ambulance crew, a deputy coroner and, eventually, Inspector Garrison. Dillon was sitting on the

bottom step of the curving stairway when the Inspector arrived.

"Hi, Garry," he said.

Garrison stopped, spraddle-legged, just inside the doorway. His pink face did a quick burn.

"You!" he said, then took a couple of fast strides and swung at Dillon.

Dillon had started to stand up, and the sock caught him in the wishbone, bounced him back against the steps. He bounced right up again and, purely as a sort of a reflex, popped his left into the Inspector's middle. The Inspector grunted and dragged out a leather-covered sap, lifted it.

"Why, Chief," Jill Parker's voice said. "I thought you said you didn't like to fight with cops."

Garrison didn't swing the sap. He and Dillon turned and looked at the undamaged archway where Jill Parker stood, registering interest.

"I still don't like to fight with cops," Dillon said. He scowled at Garrison. "Did you have to blow your top, Garry, before I could even start explaining?"

"You said you'd never even heard of the Lambert case. I don't like people lying to me."

"Jill," Dillon said, "will you tell the Inspector how I got into this?"

Jill flashed a white smile at Garrison. "Oh, I inveigled Mr. Dillon." She went on to add details.

"Okay, Jill," Dillon said when she had finished. "Back to Mrs. Lambert." And added, when she looked as though she was going to argue the decision, "You're too young to hear what I'm going to call the Inspector."

For a moment, Dillon thought he was going to have a mutiny on his hands, but Jill finally went back through the archway.

"Look, Garry," said Dillon. "I'm still not working on this. I don't give a care if they blow up all the Lamberts and their cousins."

"Then why'd you come running out here?"

"For a couple of reasons. One was that I thought I'd catch you here, explain things and clear my slate with you. The second and main reason is that one look at that mouse this morning did things to me—you know, sort of unzipped my

spine. But she has a terrific yen to play cops and robbers, and amateurs get hurt doing that. I want to make, but sure, it doesn't happen to her. As a matter of fact, I think a try was made this morning." He recounted the episode of the plunging milk bottle. "It could have been an accident, but I decided to stick around with her today just the same."

"If it was an attempt to bean her," said the Inspector, "she must know something dangerous to somebody."

DILLON outlined what Jill Parker had told him on the ride from the office.

"She suspects plenty, and somebody may think she knows more than she actually does. It might be a good idea to send out tags for the younger Lambert brother and the former head chemist. Incidentally, I picked up some odds and ends of information while I stood around here with my ears hanging out. Mallory arrived at the house at ten to confer with Ellen, who is now the main stockholder in the company. Shortly before the explosion, Ellen sent the butler, Edwin, down to a basement storeroom for a bottle of Scotch."

"Pretty early for drinking."

"Then Ellen excused herself and went upstairs to get some papers out of a wall safe in her room. While she was gone, Mallory said he recalled some other data he needed, and he started out toward the hall to call up to Ellen. Just then things went boom and he blacked out. Jill and I had just climbed out of my car in front when the blast happened. When we got inside, Ellen was downstairs again, bending over Mallory. A couple of minutes later a character named Martha, the wife—correction, widow—of the butler, showed up. She seemed pretty burned up about Ellen having sent Edwin down for the Scotch. Now you have it, at least as far as I have it."

"Thanks."

"Now how about me and the mouse running along? An afternoon at the track might get her mind off wanting to be a shamus."

"Stick around."

"Hey, now, Garry—"

"You stuck your nose into this, and you don't get it unstuck so easy."

The Inspector began to throw his brass around. He dispatched the University Division detectives to the basement with orders for the deputy coroner and the fire department salvage boys, now on the scene, not to paw around and mess things up. He stationed the radio-car cops outside to repulse the press and all other inquisitive citizens. He barged off through the undamaged archway to question people.

Dillon sat down again on the curving staircase. Presently, Jill Parker came out into the hall and sat down beside him.

"The Inspector yells so loud the vibrations probably numb his brain," she said. "I guess we'll have to do the detecting for him. Where shall we start?"

Dillon shook his head. "Nowhere, sugar. I told you I hated work."

"The unambitious type, huh?" They sat quietly for a minute. "I'm thirsty," Jill said then.

She stood up, went through a doorway at the rear of the hall and vanished. When she had been gone five minutes, sudden suspicion blossomed in Dillon's mind.

"Hmm," he muttered. "I wonder if she's—"

He didn't finish, but rose quickly and took the route out through the door at the rear of the hall. He found himself in a butler's pantry. A swinging door let him out into a big, bright kitchen. The door swung quietly. Rubber-tile flooring muffled his steps.

He stopped just inside the kitchen, watching the stringy-haired woman who stood at an open cupboard, her back to him. She reached well back into the cupboard, took out an amber-colored bottle, hefted it and shifted her grip to the neck. Swinging the bottle like a club, she moved very quietly to an enclosed porch.

Dillon hesitated a moment, then moved just as quietly after the woman. He reached the door, and she wasn't on the porch. But another door was open on a flight of steps leading downward, and Dillon took the steps, still very quietly.

There was gray gloom at the bottom, and somewhere the sound of voices echoed sepulchraly, as though people were shouting in a cavern. Dillon

stopped at the foot of the stairs and, when his eyes had adjusted themselves to the half-light, saw that he was in a basement that looked a little bit larger than Madison Square Garden. A furnace looked like an octopus with a dozen asbestos-covered tentacles. Debris was tangled high at one end of the basement. Flashlights moved and voices sounded beyond the mound of debris.

At first, Dillon couldn't see the stringy-haired woman. Then she appeared from behind the heating unit, moving across toward the wreckage. She was still carrying the amber-colored bottle by the neck.

Gauging the line of her cat-footed advance, Dillon eventually saw Jill Parker, who had tucked herself beside a fallen joist near the wreckage. Jill had her nice legs well planted, her head in a listening attitude—and the stringy-haired woman was within six feet of her, the bottle swinging free.

Dillon's hackles had never bristled before. Now the hair at his nape stood straight out. He clapped his hands hastily three times.

"Abracadabra!" he yelled.

JILL started to turn, and the stringy-haired woman did an instantaneous disappearing act behind a pile of wicker cartons.

Jill turned the rest of the way around and glowered at Dillon. At least, in the dim light, she seemed to be glowering. "What are you doing down here?" she demanded.

"What am I?" asked Dillon. "What are you?"

"I'm trying to listen in and find out what those city sleuths are finding out. I'm detecting."

"Well, quit it, and come upstairs."

"I used to call you Chief. Remember? But you fired me, and now I'm working on my own."

Dillon sighed. "I never hired you, so I couldn't have fired you. But I'm hiring you now."

She came across the basement to the foot of the stairs where he stood. She grinned at him. "Oh, wonderful, mister. Now you and I will really do some gumshoeing."

"I'm hiring you as a secretary," said Dillon. "So you better get a move on down to my office and make secretarial motions."

"I've changed my mind," Jill said. "I don't want to be a secretary. I want to be a detective, nothing less."

Dillon headed her up the steps. "I have ideas," he said in a confidential voice. "Get down to the office and sit on the phone."

"It sounds uncomfortable, but if you say so—"

"Wait for a call from me. I'm about to bust something."

"You sound as though it might be your G-string. Why can't I stick around until you pop it?"

"Is that the respect a boss gets?" They were emerging into the daylight of the porch. "This is what the football guys call a flanker play," Dillon said. "I may need somebody over near the sidelines to take a lateral pass. Get me?"

"You're not trying to bench me?" Jill

[Turn page]

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said a little suspiciously.

"Absolutely not," Dillon lied.

They went through the butler's pantry and into the entrance hallway. There was nobody there just then, but a moment later the deputy coroner and the sheriff's deputy, who had ridden with him, appeared from the butler's pantry.

"The way the cops shoo us off," the coroner's man was saying, "you'd think the fragments of that guy was platinum. Well, the devil with 'em—there might be other customers for the meat wagon. So let them call us and our basket back when they piece things together."

"You boys going back to town?" Dillon asked.

"We're not going to the Grand Canyon, pal," the deputy coroner said.

"Where we're going, brother," the sheriff's deputy said, "they call it Death Valley." He awarded himself a laugh on that. "Why?"

"This little lady's got to get down town," said Dillon. "Can you take her—under personal escort—to Room Eight-two-one, York Building?"

The deputy coroner looked Jill over. "Sure," he said cordially. "We don't get passengers like her often."

Jill tucked herself between the deputy sheriff and the deputy coroner, with a final conspiratorial wink at Dillon. Dillon winked back, and watched the two county men walk the girl past the radio cop on guard at the door. The cop made no objection about her leaving. He thought, apparently, that whatever a deputy coroner did must be official.

But, Dillon observed, the way he looked at Jill Parker indicated he didn't think she was exactly a morgue case.

CHAPTER IV

MURDER THREE



WHEN DILLON saw the morgue wagon drive off, he breathed easier. He had noted a phone in the butler's pantry and he went back to it, dialed a downtown number.

"Hi, Morrie," he said when a man's voice answered.

"Here's a job for Transcontinental-Interocean, meaning you. This is Dillon."

"I know your voice," said the man. "Am I a detective for nothing? Go ahead, Rocky—it's your nickel."

"A copper-haired babe is arriving at my office in a few minutes. Don't let anyone get to her. Don't let her leave there."

"Suppose I got to wrestle with her to keep here there?"

"That you'd probably like, Morrie."

Hanging up, he stepped to the hall where he could hear Inspector Garrison conducting a quiz program in the room beyond the undamaged archway. Dillon went through the archway into a big room, the furnishings of which had been designed to emphasize the presence of a huge concert grand. Beyond another door, he could see the rugged furniture of a den.

Ellen Lambert was sitting in a spindly, damask-upholstered chair. Her face was composed, but it was the bluish color of skim milk, and her eyes had purplish smudges under them. She looked sick, overwrought, but she was still a beautiful woman in a lush, plump fashion. Mallory looked better than he had a while before. The plaster dust had been brushed off his flannels. A strip of tape concealed the gash on his head. His military mustache was crisp and he stood solidly by one of the shattered windows, jingling keys. Cleaned up, he seemed like a nice-enough person, although strictly business.

Dillon was a little surprised to see a new addition to the cast. The newcomer stood protectively beside Ellen Lambert. He was a tall young man who had dark curly hair, very large brown eyes and the profile of one of the better-looking Roman emperors. He wore contrasting jacket and slacks, not too violently colored, and his hands were nervous.

Garrison looked at Dillon. "What'd you want, Rocky?"

"I had an idea, Garry—"

"Save it. I'm busy."

He didn't tell Dillon to get out, so Dillon stayed.

"Now, Mrs. Lambert," Garrison said. "Do you make a practice of drinking as early as ten in the morning?"

"Confound it, officer," the young man with the profile said in an angry, rather tenor voice. "She's told you why she sent

the butler down for some liquor. She'd driven to the postoffice to get an airmail letter off. She narrowly avoided an accident on the way back. She was upset. She needed a drink for her nerves."

"I'll get to you in good time, Mr. Leonard. Now how about it, Mrs. Lambert. You start drinking that early very often?"

"Of course not," Ellen Lambert said dully. "We really didn't do much drinking here at all. Sometimes we had cocktails before dinner, and occasionally my husband liked Benedictine afterward."

The Inspector jotted down a note. "You mentioned that your husband had a supply of chemicals in a small storeroom down there for use in his lab. Could the butler have gone in there by mistake?"

"I don't see how, although the liquor was kept in a storeroom next to the chemicals. But Edwin was familiar with things down there."

"I understand the housekeeper had words with you about your sending him down."

"I'd hardly call it that. She was naturally shocked and overwrought by her husband's—death."

Garrison scratched the back of his thick neck. "Mrs. Lambert," he said then, "do you know anything or suspect anything that would indicate that these two deaths were murder?"

"No, Inspector," she said in a steady voice.

GARRISON made more notes and finally looked at Mallory. "Mr. Mallory, I understand Lambert had accumulated a lot of enemies."

"I think that's a bit exaggerated, Inspector," said Mallory judicially. He put the keys in his pocket and gave his attention to Garrison. "He was sometimes hard to get along with, but I know lots of business men like that, and they haven't been murdered."

"How about this head chemist he fired?"

"Dr. Zugbohm? How'd you happen to hear about that?"

"Us cops hear things."

Mallory smiled. "They had an argument over some process. Zugbohm's excitable, but I can assure you he's harmless, sort of the absent-minded professor

type. Anyway, he was offered a better job immediately by the Alkaloid Corporation, so that he had every reason to be happy about getting let out."

"How did you get along with Lambert?"

"We had our differences, but nothing serious."

"His death puts you in line for president of the company, doesn't it?"

MALLORY'S jaw grew blunt. There was a glint of anger in his eyes.

"I don't like the implication of those last two questions, Inspector," he said.

"I'm not implying, I'm just asking."

"Well your second question is definitely embarrassing." Mallory glanced at Ellen Lambert, hesitated and then went ahead. "It's up to the board of directors to fill the office of president and, since Mrs. Lambert now controls the board, she's the only one who could answer you." Ellen Lambert made a vague gesture with her pale hands and Mallory shrugged. "If you mean, Inspector, would I gain anything financially by becoming president, I can tell you it would be precious little. The higher income tax bracket would reduce my net income to not much more than I receive now."

Garrison nodded his white thatch understandingly. "Yeah, that income tax business is tough, all right." He turned toward the dark young man. "Okay, Mr. Leonard. How come you showed up here?"

Mr. Leonard's hands were still nervous, and his voice shook a little too. "I'm a friend of Mrs. Lambert," he said, "a very good friend. I was listening to a news broadcast at my apartment this morning and heard a flash that there had been an explosion here. Naturally I rushed right over."

"Naturally," said the Inspector. "You say you're a good friend of Mrs. Lambert. Just how good a friend?"

"Now listen here, officer—"

"My husband and I have been backing Len in a little theatre," Ellen Lambert said in the dull voice, "the Mesa Players. We both thought he had exceptional ability as a producer-director."

"Umm," said Garrison noncommittally. He made a note. "Where were

were you between nine and ten, Mr. Leonard?"

"In my apartment. I was just getting up and dressing. I sleep late."

Garrison scratched his neck again. "Does anybody here happen to know the whereabouts of Ross Lambert?"

Mallory began, "Well, I—"

Ellen Lambert had begun at the same moment.

"We haven't heard from him in months," she said.

Garrison looked at Mallory. "You were saying?"

Mallory looked apologetically at Ellen Lambert. "I was flying back from the east several weeks ago and happened to pick up an Albuquerque paper en route," he said. "It had a paragraph about a Ross Lambert being sentenced to ninety days there for wrecking a saloon. But I knew Ross was a rather touchy subject with the family, so I've never mentioned seeing the story."

The Inspector shut his notebook. "Thanks, everybody. Just stick around here for a while, and then we'll go downtown and take some formal statements." He started for the hall.

"Garry—" Dillon said.

"Keep your shirt on, Rocky. I'll get to you and the girl before long." He hardheeled to the hall and out of sight.

The dark young man leaned over Ellen Lambert solicitously. "Dear Ellen," he said, "you look bushed, positively bushed. I'm going to insist that you go upstairs and rest a bit. Now come on like a good girl."

Ellen Lambert nodded and raised her blue eyes and gave the dark young man a look. It was quite a revealing look.

"All right, Len," she said, and got up. The dark young man helped her from the room.

Dillon caught the wry, eyebrow-raised glance that Mallory gave the pair, and Mallory, suddenly aware of Dillon's scrutiny, erased the look fast. He got a cigarette lit.

"Miss Parker told us about you, Mr. Dillon," he said, obviously making conversation to cover things. "She said you had quite a reputation as a very smart private detective."

Dillon shook his head. "She was ribbing you."

"You mean you're not a private detective?"

"I mean I'm not smart. If I was smart, I wouldn't be wasting a nice day hanging around here for free."

"Oh, I see." It was apparent that he didn't see, but he didn't make an argument out of it.

Dillon looked at his watch and thought that maybe if he could corner the Inspector, and get some information off his chest, he might still be able to get downtown, pick up Jill Parker and get out to the track. He stepped to the hall.

Garrison wasn't there, so Dillon went out through the butler's pantry, the kitchen and down the stairway to the basement.

HE found the Inspector by the mound of debris, talking to one of the University detectives and a little dried-up man named Ferris who looked like a high-school instructor and who was actually a police lab technician with a reputation that commanded respect from coast to coast. The lab man was of the opinion that the explosive had been nitro-glycerin. He explained at considerable length just how he had come to that conclusion. However, he said, he wouldn't commit himself until he had done some lab tests.

Somewhere close by a dog had begun to bark and was keeping it up monotonously.

"Why don't people train their hounds?" Garrison said irritably. To the little man, he said, "Suppose the stuff was soup, and it was in with the chemicals in the room next to the liquor cellar. Could it have been set off by the butler jarring the floor or the walls in the next room?"

The little man wouldn't commit himself on that, either. "Nitroglycerine is very unstable and unpredictable stuff. And there's always the possibility that the container was balanced precariously on a shelf and the slam of a door would have jarred it off to the floor. Well, I'll let you have a report as soon as possible, Inspector."

The little man went up the stairs.

Garrison produced a photograph in a small desk frame. "I found this picture of Mrs. Lambert in the den," he

said to the University Division detectives. "Take it down to the York Building where Rocky Dillon has an office on the eighth floor, and see if you can find anyone in or around the building that saw her this morning. You can take a look at the two men upstairs—Mallory and Leonard—and do the same check on them. Also call Homicide and tell them I want a check with Albuquerque on whether a Ross Lambert is in the can there. Finally, have them round up a bird named Zugbohm who works for the Alkaloid Corporation."

The University Division man got going, and Garrison looked at Dillon, wagged his head. "Rocky, this is the kind of case that's bad for a man's ulcers. Ten to one, if it is murder, we'll never solve it with all the evidence blown to bits. Well, I better give that housekeeper a going-over, and then I'll get to you," said Dillon, "but I sent the girl bye-bye."

"What? You did what? Didn't I tell you both to stick around? Rocky, I'm going to land on you like a ton of bricks!"

"And a ton of sour apples to you, Garry," said Dillon. He sounded irritable for the first time. "I didn't want a third killing around here."

"What are you talking about?"

"I told you my little mouse has a cops-and-robbers complex. Well, she ducked out from under my wing a while ago and rubber-heeled down here to do some sleuthing on her own. I tracked her and made it here just as the housekeeper was sneaking up behind her and swinging a bottle by the neck. Another few seconds and Jill would probably have been beamed. I didn't know what she'd get into next, so I sent her down to the office and phoned someone to keep an eye on her and keep her out of mischief."

Garrison's jaw had dropped slowly. "The housekeeper, huh? That sounds like the first real angle we've had. Perhaps the old lady didn't like Lambert, and she also didn't like her hubby—and she's the answer to the whole thing. I want to talk to her right now." He headed up the stairs, said over his shoulder, "Rocky, that babe of yours may be only an amateur shamus, but I must admit she keeps things stirred up."

The stringy-haired woman was still not in evidence on the porch or in the kitchen. Nor was she in a maid's room off the pantry.

"Why the devil didn't you tell me this before?" Garrison said.

"What do you think I've been trying to do for half an hour?"

They went out to the hall. The dark young man was alone there. Mallory was pacing the floor in the music room. The den was empty. Out in the hall again, the Inspector yelled for the cop on duty outside the front door. Nothing happened, and Garrison took a couple of steps toward the door. He stopped when a police whistle began to shrill loudly and continuously somewhere outside and at the rear of the house.

"Now what gives?" Garrison muttered, and changed course toward the butler's pantry. He banged doors out of his way and, with Dillon at his heels, barged through the kitchen, the porch and onto the smoothness of the lawn outside. The cop, who had been stationed at the front door, was visible at the arch of a vine-covered pergola covering a walkway to a big garage. He was still blowing the whistle and his face was crimson with the effort.

"Koznitzki!" Garrison yelled. The whistling stopped and Garrison roared, "I look for you to help me find that housekeeper, and what are you doing? Out here playing with a whistle!"

"I found her, Inspector."

"Huh?"

"I found her there." The cop pointed back into the pergola. "Somebody cracked her skull like a walnut."

"Dead?"

"I guess so."

CHAPTER V

TRAP FOR FOOLS



UICKLY, Dillon followed the Inspector into the pergola. When he looked down at the stringy-haired woman lying across the walk with her face pressed down into the gravel, he didn't have to guess. Nobody could be alive with a skull crushed like that.

"I hear a dog yowling," Koznitzki said. "I got a dog, and when it yowls like that I know something is wrong, see? So I start looking around, and—just like I say about my dog—"

"Okay, you've got a dog," said Garrison. He knelt, touched the woman's wrist. "Dead only a few minutes. Koznitzki, hop to a phone inside and get more manpower here, uniformed and plain clothes."

The cop trotted off and Garrison began to examine with surprisingly delicate fingers the crushed area of the woman's skull.

"Well, we don't have to guess about whether this is murder or not," he said. "Feels like she was socked just once with something pretty heavy and pretty big. Maybe a brick—there's plenty of those around." He looked up and down the length of the pergola into which a soft, green, peaceful light filtered through the mat of vines. Nothing, aside from the woman's body, marred the orderliness of the graveled walkway. "Well, we'll take a look for the weapon when I get enough men here."

The housekeeper lay with one arm outflung, the other close to her side, the hand jammed into the capacious pocket of an apron. Garrison eased the hand from the pocket. Along with it there spilled out a pack of cigarettes, a book of matches, hairpins, a wadded handkerchief and three green trading stamps. The hand was clenched. Garrison patiently worked the fingers loose. In the palm was a wadded paper that looked as though it had been torn from a scratch pad.

The Inspector unwadded it. "A phone number," he said, and read it off. He looked up at Dillon's exclamation. "What bit *you*?" he asked.

"That number—it's my office."

"Your office, is it? Now what do you figure she was—"

Garrison didn't finish, for the reason that he'd suddenly lost his audience. Dillon had spun and was heading for the house. Garrison scrambled up and started to follow. Then he stopped and looked back at the housekeeper's body, was torn for a moment by the fangs of indecision. Finally, apparently, he decided that the body would stay where it

was, but there was no knowing what Dillon was up to. He took off after Dillon.

When he caught up, Dillon was standing in the butler's pantry with the phone to his ear. Even the Inspector could hear the repeated, resonant tone that said a bell was ringing, unanswered, at the other end of the wire.

"My office, Garry," Dillon muttered, "and no answer." After another minute he dropped the phone into the cradle, looked at the Inspector with a troubled scowl. "I don't like it. I don't like that dead dame having my office number in her fist, and my redheaded mouse not answering down there. I'm on my way."

"Now wait, Rocky—"

"One side, pal, before you get run down."

"I'm only trying to say I'll get you downtown in half the time with my siren—as soon as I set things."

Garrison assigned Koznitzki to guard the body. He wrenched Koznitzki's partner away from a curbstome gabfest with a bevy of maids from the nearby houses and posted him at the front door. He detailed to the cop a list of things to be done when help got there. But it wasn't more than three minutes before he was climbing into the Homicide sedan with Dillon.

"Maybe it'll be my neck for leaving that body," he growled, pressing the starter, "but I just got a hunch—whatever that babe of yours turns up, Rocky trouble comes to a head."

THEY made it, siren whooping, to the York Building in exactly six and one-half minutes. There was no excitement around the building except that caused by the Inspector when he swerved his car to a halt in a crosswalk and sent two elderly ladies scurrying and clucking like angry hens. Garrison flashed his badge to commandeer an elevator and they zoomed, non-stop, to the eighth floor.

The corridor there was peaceful, untenanted.

"Morrie!" Dillon barked.

A squat man appeared at the entrance to a cross-corridor and said, "Hi, Rocky." His barrel chest and the hair that sprouted thickly from his scalp, his ears

his nostrils, the back of his hands, made him look like the result of a cross-breeding experiment between a vinegar keg and a bearskin rug. But he had an amiable smile. "Hi, kid."

"Where's the babe?"

Morrie pointed down the cross-corridor. When Dillon and the Inspector halted beside him, they saw that his pointing finger indicated a door on which was painted, *Women*.

"How long?" Dillon asked.

"Twenty-five, mebbe thirty minutes."

"You're sure she's there?"

"Well, I ain't no Peephole Tom. But I seen her go in and she ain't come out."

Dillon started toward the *Women* door and Morrie grabbed him.

"You can't go in there, pal. It says *Women*."

Dillon shook him off and opened the door. The room beyond was vacant. A warm breeze flowed in through an open window, stirring the memories of a dozen different scents of face powder. Dillon stuck his head out the open window. Eight stories below he saw the parking lot.

To his left he saw a wide stone ledge and, four feet from the window, the ironwork of the fire escape.

Back in the corridor, Dillon growled at Morrie, "You dope! She went out the window, along a ledge to the fire escape and down."

Morrie was outraged. "She looks at me, and knows I am a gent and will not follow her into no ladie's room. I figure that is a dirty trick, Rocky."

Dillon led the way to his office door which, as usual, was unlocked. Followed by Garrison and Morrie, he went through a vacant reception room and into his office.

A notepad in the center of his desk bore a penciled message.

Dear Chief—

Just got some amazing information and I must do something about it. Incidentally, there's a thug who seems to be watching the office, but I think I know how to shake him, and if he gets rough, I have a six-inch hatpin.

"Ow—a hatpin," Morrie said, reading over Dillon's shoulder. "Am I glad I did not wrestle with her!"

Inspector Garrison massaged his chin

thoughtfully. "Rocky, what d'you really know about this redheaded babe?"

DILLON made a palms-up gesture. "Not much, Garry. Except that she impressed me as a very swell but somewhat scatterbrained dish."

"Any idea what this note means?"

"I'll make a guess—she got a phone call from the housekeeper."

He lifted the notepad and studied the message again. Bringing it up from the desk changed the plane of light flowing across the surface of the paper. Dillon grunted, slanted the pad between his eyes and the window.

"Keep your fingers crossed, Garry," he muttered then taking a small cardboard bellows from a desk drawer, he puffed finely powdered graphite onto the paper. Then he blew gently at the pad until most of the powder was dislodged. But enough of it clung to indentations in the paper to outline writing behind the words of the note.

"She wrote something on the sheet above this one," said Dillon. "Can you make it out?"

They concentrated on the faint gray lines.

"It looks like an address," Dillon said. "The number is 4011, 4611 or 4811."

"The rest of it seems to be 'May'," said Garrison. "Let's go, fellow."

They started out. "Hey, Rocky," Morrie said, "anything else I can do to help you?"

"If I think of anything," Dillon said, "I'll send you word by Pony Express."

"There's a street directory in the glove compartment," the Inspector said when they were once more in the Homicide sedan.

Dillon found the small red-covered book in a tangle that included practically everything but gloves. Garrison dawdled along through traffic while Dillon leafed to the "M's".

"There's a May Street in Inglewood," said Dillon. "A May Avenue in the Hollywood Hills and—this looks like it—a May Terrace starting at 5500 West Jefferson and running south. That'd put the number somewhere in the neighborhood of the Lambert place."

"Hang on," said Garrison. The siren began to scream.

WHIPPING south to Jefferson, they turned west. Nearing the 5500 block, the Inspector slowed and cut the siren. May Terrace proved to be a quiet street where children played and houses drowsed in the sun. The numbers, 4011 and 4611, turned out to be vacant lots. They drifted on and the high, vine-covered iron fence at the side of Maxfield Place came into view.

The fence didn't quite extend to May Terrace, left enough ground for a row of small houses, flush with the sidewalk. No. 4811 was two-storied and, peculiarly enough in a time of housing shortages, the place looked unoccupied. Windows were bleary, uncurtained. The shallow front porch was dusty and littered with throwaway advertising sheets. But the sash of one of the lower windows had been raised.

Garrison parked two doors down. "If that house don't back up to the Lambert place," he said, "I got no bump of location."

They left the car and walked back, the Inspector covertly loosening the gun under his left armpit. They mounted the steps of the two-story frame.

"Don't touch the door!" Jill Parker called from inside the house. There was urgency in her voice.

Dillon didn't touch the door. Abracadabra," he growled. "I'm going to come in there and bust you in your lovely nose for playing games like this."

"Okay, Chief," said Jill. "But I won't have any kind of a nose if you come in this door. Take the window like I did."

Dillon and the Inspector went to the open window, scrambled through and found themselves in a cracker-box of a living room, uncarpeted and unfurnished. They went from the living room to a gloomy, narrow hallway.

Jill Parker grimaced at them over her shoulder and then began poking delicately with the handle end of a broom at a small bottle of cloudy fluid that perched on the frame above the door. String was wound loosely about the neck of the bottle and led to the top panel of the door where it was thumb-tacked to the wood. It was an efficient although not particularly-neat booby trap. Dislodged by the opening of the door, the bottle would have unwound itself from the string and

smashed down to the floor.

Dillon had a very good idea of what was in the bottle and, when Jill poked at it again, his spine suddenly became a length of fast-frozen icicle.

"Now just take that stick away from there very easy," he said in the coaxing voice that a mother uses to an infant teetering on a high windowsill. "Very easy, sugar, and then hold your breath."

She lowered the broom-handle and Dillon stepped over, stretched and got his fingers on the bottle. He lifted it down, unwound the string and deposited the bottle gently on the floor.

"You wouldn't know what you were fooling with, would you?" he said.

Jill nodded. "I guess it was more of that stuff that goes boom. I was going to poke it off there and catch it when it fell."

Inspector Garrison recovered some of his breath. He used it to swear in a relieved way.

"You needn't have worried," Jill said. "I played first base on our softball team. How'd you know where to find me, Chief?"

"That'll keep," Dillon said, a little grimly. The thing now is what you're doing here?"

Her gray eyes considered him seriously for a few moments. Then she shook her head regretfully. Chief, I can't tell you yet."

Garrison grabbed her arm. Sister, you better talk fast."

Dillon lifted the Inspector's fingers off the girl's arm and put his hand in their place, but more gently.

"Jill," he said, "you can quit playing cops-and-robbers. Murder isn't a game and the police know now for sure they have murder on their hands. The housekeeper was killed a little while ago."

Jill's hands went to her heart. For a moment breath fluttered in her throat. "Rocky, no!" she cried.

"Yes—so tell us what you meant in that note when you said you received amazing information."

"Rocky, I will—but not just yet."

The pink of Garrison's face deepened to a rip-tomato color. He yelled, not as loud as he could, but pretty loud: "How would you like to be thrown in a cell, young woman?"

"Take it easy, Garry," Dillon said. "We'll dope things out. Let's look around while we're here."

CHAPTER VI

WHO DID IT?



COVERING the first floor quickly, they found it consisted of the barren living room, the hall, a dining room, a kitchen, all unfurnished. The back porch was almost flush with the iron fence at the rear of Maxfield Place. Beyond the fence and the white bulk of the Lambert garage and, between garage and house, was a gate in the fence.

Uncarpeted stairs took them to a small upper hall off which were three doors. One opened onto an unfurnished bedroom, another on a bathroom. In the cabinet above the washbowl there were toilet articles, make-up, powder, a man's shaving kit.

Dillon glanced at Jill. "This is part of what you know, baby?"

She nodded, her cheeks getting a little pink. They stepped back to the hall and started toward the third door, which was closed. Dillon halted them, pointed above the door. The mate of the bottle he had lifted from above the front door was perched on the frame above this door. As before, string had been wound around the neck and thumb-tacked to the door. Dillon took it down, put it on the floor.

Inspector Garrison brought out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead, the back of his neck.

"Rocky," he said, on this case what we need is a mine-detector. Be careful moving that door—there might be another infernal machine on the other side."

"The door opens inward. You couldn't set one up inside and then get out."

Nevertheless, Dillon opened the door gingerly. Nothing happened, and they walked into a nicely, even luxuriously-furnished bedroom. The closet held a man's robe, slippers and pajamas at one end and, at the other, intimate feminine things. Embroidered on the pocket of the robe were the initials, "L J L".

"The picture," Dillon said, looking at

Jill Parker, "is beginning to come clear."

She kept her lips locked, said nothing.

"Rocky," said the Inspector, "take the young lady over to the Lambert place—and see she stays there this time. Send one of the uniformed men over here to keep an eye on the place and then I'll join you. We're going to get answers to a lot of questions now."

They went back down the stairs, Jill in the lead. She turned into the lower hall from the stairway and, at the same moment, there was the sound of quick steps. Ellen Lambert appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Jill," she said breathlessly. "Ever since you called me and told me to come over here, I've been trying to get away unobserved—"

She bit off her words when her glance ranged farther to Dillon and the Inspector.

"Jill," she cried then, "you said you'd be alone!"

Jill Parker looked a little bewildered. "Ellen, I didn't call you. You called me, and—"

"But you *did* call me!"

There was a noise in the kitchen of an elephant trying to walk on tip-toe and, after a moment, the bulk of a uniformed cop filled the doorway. His jaw dropped a little when he saw the Inspector.

"Pardon, Inspector," he said. "I didn't mean to be buttin' in, but I saw the dame make a sneak from the house to the garage and I followed her. There's a back door in the garage and she went out that and then through a gate to this joint. I didn't know she was meeting you—"

"Neither did she," said Garrison. "Now that you're here, Hoffman, stay here and keep an eye on things. Don't touch anything, especially a couple of bottles on the floor in the upper and lower halls. They're full of nitroglycerin."

"Nitroglycerin!" the cop gulped. "Hey, Inspector, can I watch from outside?"

"The stuff won't bite you."

"I sure won't bite *it*!"

THE music room was spacious, but it seemed crowded when the Inspector completed his roundup. There was

Leonard, with his Roman-coin profile and still nervous. There was Mallory, with a hint of impatience on his fine-boned face. A cop was assigned to each of them. Then there were Ellen Lambert, Jill Parker and Dillon, plus the Inspector and, a last-moment arrival, the University Division detective back to report on his errands.

The detective conferred with Garrison in a low voice, but Dillon gathered that Ross Lambert was still in the Albuquerque clink and that Dr. Zugbohm had not reported for work at the Alkaloid Corporation, having phoned that he was sick and was seeing a physician. A broadcast was out for him. The detective's voice dropped a couple of tones then and Dillon couldn't hear the rest of his report. Whatever it was, Garrison's expression said that he liked it.

The Inspector nodded finally. "Good work, boy." The University Division man went to a post by the door and Garrison said, "You start the ball rolling, Miss Parker. I want to hear everything you know about this business."

"I want to talk to Ellen first," Jill said. Her face was unhappy but stubborn.

"You'll talk to me!"

Dillon nudged the Inspector. "I've found the best method of getting along with redheads," he muttered, "is to give 'em their own way."

Garrison scowled, but he said, "All right. Make it fast, Miss Parker."

Jill took Ellen Lambert's arm, guided her to a corner and began to whisper. The blonde woman's face, already pale and harried, went slowly paper-white. She spoke several times in low monosyllables. At length she nodded.

"I know, Jill," she said half-audibly, "and—well, there's no use your trying to shield me."

Jill turned, looked at Dillon. "Rocky," she said. "I—Oh, I couldn't tell this until Ellen knew about it. She had to know it was the last thing I'd have dreamed of when I insisted on stirring things up. When I reached your office, I received a phone call from Martha, the housekeeper. She said she'd tried to speak to me in the basement, but you'd suddenly appeared and frightened her. So, when she heard you tell me to go down to the office, she waited a while and then went

out to the garage and called me on the extension there. Then she told me something I couldn't believe. It's still hard to believe."

"Try us," said the Inspector, "and see if we can."

"She accused Ellen of murdering Troy Lambert and Edwin. I told her she must be crazy, why would Ellen do that? Then she said that—that—"

"Go on, Jill," Ellen Lambert said thinly.

"She said Ellen had been having an affair with Mr. Leonard—"

"Oh, dear," said Leonard. He looked reproachfully at Ellen Lambert. "Ellen, I knew you'd let it out somehow."

Jill went on steadily. "She said Ellen and Mr. Leonard had been using that apparently-vacant house for their meetings, and she was certain that Ellen had killed Troy Lambert so she could get his estate and then marry Leonard and that Edwin had been killed because he knew about the affair. And she said Ellen would probably try to kill her next. I asked her what proof she had of wild talk like that. So she wanted to know why Ellen should have sent Edwin down to the liquor closet for a bottle of Scotch at ten in the morning, particularly when there was a nearly-full bottle in the kitchen. She said she'd brought the bottle down to the basement to show me.

"I asked her why she hadn't talked to the police, and she said she wanted money from Ellen, and I was to take that message to her. When she hung up, I sat for a few minutes wondering what to do. I wanted to talk to Ellen, but I was afraid to call her here because I didn't know who would answer."

"But Jill," Ellen Lambert said. "I don't understand. You did call me here. You told me to slip away and meet you at the place on May Terrace, and I was surprised because I didn't know how you'd found out about the house. You said you'd be alone and you had to talk to me and I was to open the front door when you knocked three times."

"One of the pair of you is lying," said Garrison, "and I think I know which one. Miss Parker, what's your version of the phone call?"

"Ellen said she had to see me quietly, and told me to come to the house at 4811

May Terrace. I wouldn't have known anything about the house if she hadn't given me the address. She told me to knock three times and she'd let me in. I took my car from the parking lot downtown, drove out and did as she told me, but nobody answered. Then I found a window unlocked and went in that way and looked around the lower floor. I was just about to go upstairs when I saw the bottle sitting over the front door. That was only a little while before you arrived there."

Garrison nodded. "Mrs. Lambert, is there anything you'd like to say about what Miss Parker has told us?"

ELLEN LAMBERT looked at Leonard. Leonard didn't meet her eyes, moved a little away from her. Her expression was suddenly bitter.

"It's partly true, Inspector," she said to Garrison. "That part about Mr. Leonard and myself. Women sometimes make fools of themselves. But I certainly didn't murder my husband. I didn't have the faintest suspicion that the butler and his wife knew about the affair, so I had no reason to kill either of them. As for sending Edwin downstairs for Scotch, there's nothing suspicious about that. How would I have known there was a bottle in the kitchen already opened? I never went into the kitchen."

"If you're entirely innocent, Mrs. Lambert," said Garrison, "and had nothing to worry about, why did you follow Miss Parker to the York building this morning and a little later try to injure or kill her and Dillon by aiming at milk bottle at them as they walked out to the parking lot?"

"You—you know about that?"

"Your picture has been identified by an elevator operator at the building as that of a woman he took to the eighth floor early this morning."

Ellen Lambert turned suddenly to Jill. "Jill," she said, "I didn't mean to hurt you this morning. I threw the bottle wide purposely. I only wanted to frighten you and Mr. Dillon into giving up the idea of investigating Troy's death. I'd followed you downtown, meaning to talk you out of stirring things up. You'd been suspicious from the beginning, but I didn't know how to handle it. After you

left this morning, I became desperate and decided I'd simply have to appeal to your friendship for me to let things drop. But I arrived there too late. You were in Mr. Dillon's office. When you and he came out of the office together, I hid in the woman's room. There was an empty milk bottle there, and when I saw you two down on the lot—it was just an impulse. I knew as soon as I'd done it that it was a silly, useless thing to do."

Jill didn't answer. She moved over to Dillon, stood close beside him.

"Mrs. Lambert," said Garrison, "I'm placing you under arrest for the murder of the housekeeper. It might be a little hard to prove in court that you killed your husband and the butler, but I don't think it will be difficult to show how you got out of the house to kill the woman and why you did it."

Jill made a faint sniffing sound beside Dillon, and he looked down at her, saw that she was trying to wink back tears. "Rocky," she said between sniffles. "I'm rotten to do a thing like this to Ellen. I hate myself for being such a Nosy Nellie. I'll wake up hating myself every morning I live."

"All right, all right," Dillon growled. "I'll fix it."

"Huh?"

"It's against my principles to wear out gray matter on a deal that doesn't net me a nickel, but I can't let you go around hating yourself. You'd be poor company." He raised his voice a little. "Garry—"

The Inspector looked as though he didn't like the interruption, but he said, "Now what?"

"If you ask me, you're on the wrong track."

"I didn't ask you."

"I'll be big and tell you anyhow. Some things point to Mrs. Lambert as the killer but more things—and the important things—point away from her. It's plausible, perhaps, that she killed her husband, but from there on the case against her falls to pieces."

Garrison frowned. "She's admitted that she tossed that milk bottle because she didn't want Lambert's death investigated. That one admission cooks her goose for me."

"I think," said Dillon, "she wasn't

worried about herself. She was worried about Leonard. She thought Leonard had killed her husband and that an investigation would turn him up. Is that right, Mrs. Lambert?"

Her "Yes" was barely audible.

Leonard made a shrill, horrified noise. "Why, I wouldn't have gotten within a mile of horrible stuff like explosives!"

CHAPTER VII

THE UNEXPECTED KILLER



HE shock in his tenor voice carried conviction, and Dillon grinned a little.

"Let's take a look, Garry, at the rest of it," he said.

"The blast this morning, for instance. If Mrs. Lambert had wanted to kill Edwin and his wife to shut them up, she'd have planned it so that they'd both have got it at the same moment. She wouldn't have left one alive to talk."

"She slipped on that," said Garrison. "Then she knocked off the housekeeper in a hurry afterward."

"The point is," Dillon said, "that her plan would have been to take care of them both at the same time and sending Edwin to the basement alone couldn't have been part of such a plan. Then there was the set-up at the house on May Terrace."

"She wanted to knock Miss Parker off," Garrison protested. "She knew the housekeeper had talked to the girl. She figured the girl, knocking on the door, would dislodge the bottle of soup."

Dillon shook his head. "It just doesn't dovetail, Garry. That stuff was set up before this thing started to bust. And your theory doesn't account for the second bottle of soup upstairs. But let's skip that for a minute. I've been wondering about those phone calls. Jill, did you recognize Ellen Lambert's voice?"

Jill nodded. "I thought I did. It was muffled, sort of whispery. I thought she was afraid she might be overheard here."

"Jill's voice sounded like that, too," Ellen Lambert said. There was a vestige of color in her cheeks now, and she was watching Dillon with something resembling hope.

"I think," Dillon said, "that neither one called the other. I think somebody phoned here to Mrs. Lambert, the idea being to arrange a meeting that would dispose of both of them. But the main idea was probably Mrs. Lambert's death. Assuming that, let's go looking for a motive. Mrs. Lambert, is there anyone who would gain by the death of your husband, followed by your death?"

"Only Ross Lambert. I was left a life estate, and when I died, everything would go to him as the only surviving direct heir."

"This begins to make sense," Dillon said. "Troy Lambert was knocked off. Then the booby traps were set in the little rendezvous on May Terrace. The one thing I can't figure is the blast in the basement this morning."

"How can you bring Ross Lambert into this, Rocky?" Garrison said. "The man has been in the clink in Albuquerque for weeks."

"A cell is a swell alibi."

"I don't get you."

"Ross would know that if Mr. and Mrs. Lambert were killed under suspicious circumstances, one after the other, he'd be the first suspect unless he had an ironclad alibi. Let's say he busted up a saloon in order to draw a short jail sentence, establishing his alibi. Meanwhile, he'd set it up with someone else to do the murders. No suspicion would attach to the accomplice because of lack of motive. Ross would have his alibi. It must have seemed like the perfect set-up."

Garrison scowled, but he wasn't unimpressed. "But who'd stick their neck out like that for him?" he said. "Or if he did find somebody that crazy, how could they have the run of the house to set things up?"

"Maybe we can figure that out," said Dillon. "Take Jill Parker here for instance."

Jill's eyes got as large as half-dollars. "Chief!" she said in a shocked incredulous voice.

Dillon looked down at her with cool blue eyes. There was faint amusement in them. "She could have known Ross," he said. "He could have agreed to marry her when he got the money. Certainly everything began to happen right after

she became a house guest here."

"Rocky," said Garrison. "I think maybe you've hit it." He shot out a hand, grabbed Jill Parker's wrist. "It adds up pretty good. She set the first blast for Lambert and the second one in the basement for Mrs. Lambert. That missed. So when you sent her out of here this morning, she phoned Mrs. Lambert to go over to the May Terrace place and hurried out there to fix things up. If Mrs. Lambert came in the back way and went up to the bedroom, she'd set one charge off. If she came around by way of the street and keyed her way into the front door, she'd set off that charge. And that business of trying to get the bottle down from over the door when we arrived, was just an act to cover up."

JILL twisted out of Garrison's grasp and fastened her grip desperately on Dillon's arm.

"But, Rocky," she wailed. "I didn't do any of those things. I've never even met Ross Lambert." Her lovely face was terrified.

Dillon laughed, patted her shoulder with his free hand. "Calm down, angel," he said. "I'm just eliminating as I go along. If you'd done it, I don't think you'd have tried so hard to get me to work on it. Also, unless you're wearing a Buck Rogers flying belt today, you couldn't have gone down to my office and got back here in time to knock off the housekeeper. I'd say that one thing alone lets you out. So who's left?"

Garrison had a let-down look. "Now don't build up to nothing again," he growled. "Who do you figure this time—this Doc Zugbohm?"

"No," said Dillon. "The phone call to Miss Parker at my office would rule Zugbohm out. It has to be someone who was around when I told the deputy coroner to take Miss Parker to my office and, therefore, knew where to call her. It could have been Leonard—but he wouldn't have arranged things at the May Terrace place to blow up Mrs. Lambert. The only one who's left is Mr. Mallory."

Eyes swung around in a hurry to the trim, distinguished face and figure of Mr. Mallory. The vice president of

Coast Chemical looked as startled and bewildered as anyone else.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

"Don't mention it," said Dillon. "Incidentally, didn't you stop over in Albuquerque on your way back from the east and set this up with Ross Lambert? We could check the date of his arrest against the date of your trip."

Anger reddened Mallory's lean cheeks. "I've been following your reasoning, Dillon, with a great deal of interest," he said. "It's been very good up to now. But it's full of holes right here."

"For instance?" asked Dillon mildly.

"For one thing you made it apparent that the housekeeper was killed to shut her mouth about her suspicions of Mrs. Lambert and Leonard. If I were a criminal it would have been to my interest to have her alive."

"Yes," said Dillon, "if you'd known that her suspicion was directed toward Mrs. Lambert. No, if you had an idea that she suspected you. What she said in the hall this morning after the explosion about her 'not being stupid' could have given you that idea."

Dillon looked at the Inspector. "Garry, the housekeeper scared off a prowler the other night. That fits in somehow—I can't figure out exactly how—with the second explosion in the basement. But Mallory could have been the prowler. He could have figured the housekeeper recognized him and her crack this morning could have made him sure. From the den, which is at the back of the house, he could have seen her go to the garage to make her phone call. He could have slipped out one of these glassless windows, slugged her and slipped back."

Mallory smiled dryly. "Thanks, Dillon, for the compliment. I haven't been that young and active for years."

"Rocky," said Garrison, "is this just one long guess of yours?"

Dillon grinned. "Sure, Garry. Sounds good though, doesn't it?"

"Well, unless you guess this one, I still have to figure your redheaded babe as the Number One suspect. You figure that someone who used a disguised voice made phone calls to Miss Parker at your office—and to Mrs. Lambert, here. But Mallory was here all the time, so how could he have called here?"

Mallory nodded. "I was about to bring that up, Inspector."

"That's tough," Dillon admitted. He rubbed the long line of his jaw, thinking about the matter. Presently he looked at Ellen Lambert. "What's the telephone set-up here, Mrs. Lambert? You have a trunk line with a lot of extensions?"

"That's right," said Ellen Lambert. "The phone box is in the butler's pantry with extensions in the den, my room upstairs, Mr. Lambert's room and the garage—"

"So," said Garrison, "Mallory couldn't have made the call to Mrs. Lambert here."

Dillon didn't quite admit defeat. "There might be a way," he said. Mallory could have dialed the operator, asked her to ring back for a trouble-check and then picked up the den extension when he figured Mrs. Lambert would be answering—" He broke off, shook his head. "No, that wouldn't work because the operator would have been listening. But there's got to be an answer."

"The answer," said Garrison, "is your redhead."

"You didn't let me finish," Ellen Lambert said. "Mr. Lambert had a private line into the den. It was entirely separate from the house phone. He used it for business calls."

"That does it," said Dillon. "Mallory, you made those calls on the business phone."

MALLORY was pale, but he was still dignified, distinguished-looking. He stood up slowly. "Inspector," he said, "this is a fantastic accusation. I'm a reputable and highly-respected business man, not capable of a thing like this. And Dillon has absolutely no proof of what he says."

"To the devil with proof," said Dillon. "All I was interested in was getting the redheaded mouse and her friend, Ellen, from behind the eight-ball." He grinned at the Inspector. "But if I were you, Garry, I'd toss Mr. Mallory in the clink, at least as a material witness, and then get busy with the Albuquerque cops. From what I've been told, this Ross Lambert is a punk and he ought to break easy."

Garrison nodded. "Keep your eye on Mallory, boys," he said to the two uniformed cops. "I'm going to get Albuquerque on the phone right now. I've worked with those lads over there and they really cooperate. And they know how to get confessions, too." He took two steps toward the den.

Mallory put up a hand. "Wait, Inspector." The smile was still on his face, but it had lost its superior quality. "I'm afraid Dillon is right about Ross Lambert. He's somewhat of a weak sister and he'll undoubtedly talk. So I'd better forestall his talking." He shook his head regretfully. "Dillon reasoned things out almost exactly. I went into it with Ross. I weighed it all before I agreed and I realized I was taking big chances. But I saw big rewards ahead—the control of a chemical company that I could have built into a colossus in the industry."

"As long as you're spilling things, Mallory," said Dillon curiously, "what about the prowler and the second explosion in the basement. Those still don't come clear for me."

"Dillon, you're a smart chap, and I like smart men. So I'll tell you. I knew that Lambert was the kind of fellow who carried the only key to his liquor cabinet. Any liquor that came out of there, he took out himself. I also knew that he was partial to Benedictine and to Scotch and that he often took a bottle into his lab after dinner. So I loaded a Scotch bottle and a Benedictine bottle with nitroglycerine and entered the basement one night and planted them."

"I thought he might bring one of the bottles up stairs and open it when he was with Mrs. Lambert, which would have taken care of them both at once. It worked out so that he took the bottle to the lab and opened it. I tried to get in the other night to get the other bottle back, but the housekeeper frightened me off. I can tell you I was very much disturbed this morning when Mrs. Lambert sent the butler downstairs for Scotch. I moved out in the hall as soon as she went upstairs, hoping that the butler wouldn't set the thing off or, if he did, that I'd be far enough away from the blast to be safe. It was a very ticklish moment."

"How about the May Terrace deal?"

said Dillon.

"Ross had found out about the affair and had told me about it. So I arranged things there several days ago."

"All right, boys," Garrison said, "put the cuffs on him."

"Just a moment, Inspector," said Mallory. "From the beginning, I've foreseen that things might go wrong. So I provided for that." His hand went to his breast pocket, came away with a slim, long cylinder of glass. The cylinder, corked at the top, held the same sort of cloudy fluid that had been in the bottles at the house on May Terrace. He held it aloft and said, "Inspector, I want all guns put on the floor at once. Otherwise, I drop this and that's the end for everybody."

"You know we'll get you, Mallory," the Inspector said sourly. But his gun thudded to the rug.

"Possibly," said Mallory. "But perhaps not. The rest of the guns, please."

DILLON shed his .38. The University Division detective dropped a shiny chromiured automatic. The two uniformed cops did the same with dull-blue Police Positives.

"Now, Miss Parker," said Mallory, "come over here to me." Jill walked over to him as though she were in a trance. He put his left arm around her shoulders, holding the glass cylinder in his right hand. He said, "Inspector, I'm going to walk out of here with Miss Parker. I'd suggest that you tell your men outside to stay well away from me and not to shoot me down. If I were to fall, Miss Parker and I would vanish in one burst of glory. You understand?"

"I understand," Garrison said.

"Come along, Miss Parker," Mallory said.

"But Mr. Mallory," Jill said, "I don't feel like it."

Mallory goggled. "You don't feel like it? How would you like it if I dropped this nitroglycerin?"

"I wouldn't like it," said Jill. "I'll bet you wouldn't like it, either. Let's see you drop it."

Somebody—it sounded like one of the cops—said, "Don't argue with the screwball, Miss. Do what he says."

"Let's see you drop it," said Jill.

Mallory firmed his jaw, raised his right hand. Dillon wanted to put his fingers in his ears. He wanted to put his head in the sand like an ostrich. He wanted to have hysterics. He wanted to be a thousand miles away from where he was. Instead, he just waited helplessly for the glass tube to start its drop toward the floor.

"You know, Mr. Mallory," Jill said, "you're being awfully silly. I'll bet you could get a good lawyer and he could prove you're nuts. Or maybe Ross Lambert won't talk. Or maybe the jury would disagree and you'd get life. I hear there are many interesting things to do at San Quentin. Now why don't you give me that thing?"

She stretched out her hand. Like a cobra, charmed by some Hindu flutist, Mallory lowered the glass tube bit by bit. It came within Jill's reach and she took it out of his fingers. She stood away from him.

Mallory rubbed one of his iron-gray temples.

"Now there's a smart girl," he said. "I've just realized that probably I am crazy." He raised his voice, shouted, "Get me a lawyer!"

He had time to say just that much before the Inspector, the University Division detective and two cops jumped him. Dillon was the only one who thought about taking the glass tube from Jill Parker. He laid it with great respect on a thickly-upholstered chair and watched the four city officers do a job. When the job was finished, Mallory could no longer have posed for a "Man of Distinction" ad.

Dillon looked at his watch. He took Jill's arm. "Angel," he said, "I think you have done our good deed for today and now we have a right to relax. By my watch we can still catch the third race at Santa Anita. Okay?"

Jill grinned. "You're the boss, aren't you?"

While everyone else was still concentrating on Mallory, they walked out and entered Dillon's coupe. Dillon rolled it away.

When they were really in high gear, going north on Western, Jill said reproachfully, "Rocky, did you really suspect me?"

"When a shamus starts figuring, he tries to figure everything."

"Well, I think you were wonderful, doping things out like that."

"And I," said Dillon, "thought you were screwy, arguing with a guy who held a mittful of nitroglycerin."

Jill brushed that off with a shrug. "I knew he wouldn't drop it. His iron-gray temples told me that. Men who look like that are vain, and vain men don't kill themselves. I knew I wasn't taking any chances."

Dillon groaned just a little bit. "When I was young like you, I had the same utter faith in my judgment."

They went another block before Jill said, "Well, on the strength of this,

Chief, do I get a job as junior shamus?"

Dillon nodded resignedly. "You'd probably haunt me to pieces if you didn't get it."

"Chief, I'm going to love working with you."

"There's just one thing I want to tell you," Dillon said. "My father, my grandfather and my great-grandfather all went iron-gray at the temples when they were thirty-five. I'm now thirty-three."

Jill laughed. "Remind me to buy you hair-dye, Chief."

They rode another block before Dillon thought of the answer to that. He said, "To the devil with the hair-dye, sugar. Working with you, I'll have pure-white hair inside of six months."



"It's Joe Hamilton and He—He's Dead! He's Been Killed! I Mean—"

BILL STOKES made a gagging sound and shuddered convulsively. His eyes were fixed on the dead man as if hypnotized. Joe Hamilton's stout body had a deflated look, and some of the roundness of his face had sagged and hollowed.

"Surprised?" Detective Paul Mansard asked grimly.

"Who—who did it?"

Paul didn't laugh. "I had the silly idea you did, William. After all, as soon as I found the body you started taking shots at me."

Bill's voice went harsh, edged with anger.

"How did this happen? You—you don't really believe I did it, do you?"

"Why not? What did Joe do—stumble on the Stokes family skeleton you're all trying to hide? Come out with it!"

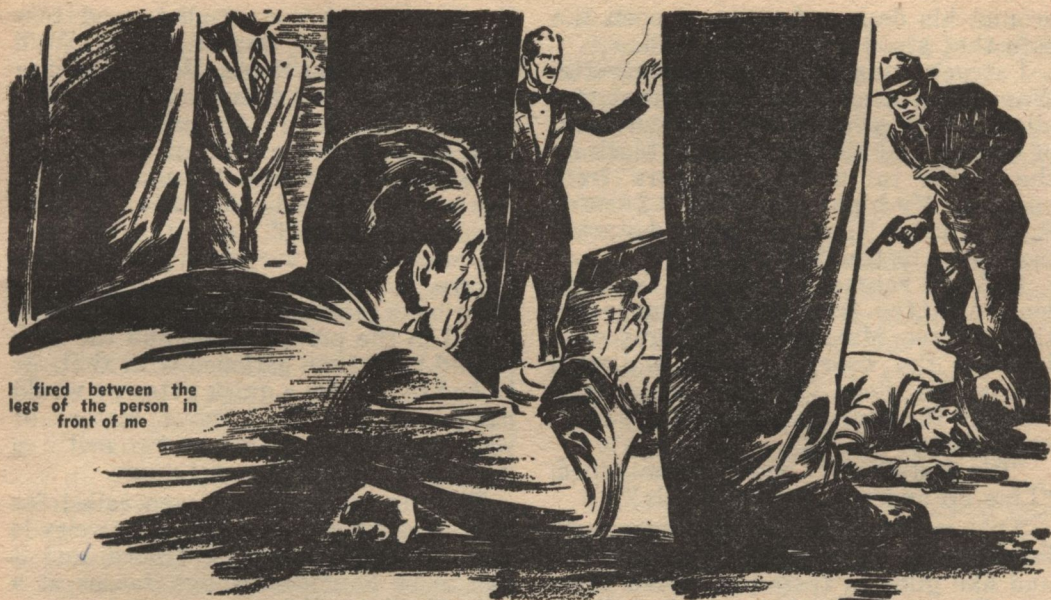
But Bill wouldn't talk. And the mystery of the Stokes family deepened until it was shrouded in impenetrable veils in—

THE DAY I DIE

A Mystery Novelet of New England

By EDWARD RONNS

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE!



Game Called

With two strikes on him, Elmer Todd had to make a fast decision—and it wasn't baseball, either!

by BENTON BRADEN

THIS was an unpretentious building, just inside the city limits. From the outside it didn't look like much, but when you got by the sharp-eyed lad at the door you found yourself in a pretty swanky gambling joint. The furnishings were costly, the clientele was above average, and at times there was high play at some of the tables.

A fellow named Nick owned the place. Everything considered, Nick was okay. He ran the place on the level, and insisted that his guests behave like ladies and gentlemen. Anyone with a head for figures could see that Nick was doing very well. Anyone could also guess that Nick had to have from ten to twenty thousand in cash in his safe at all times to provide a safe margin.

I had been hanging around the place for about a week, taking a more or less regular turn at a dice table, wagering very modest sums. I was lucky enough to be only a few bucks in the red. I was small-fry, but I was becoming enough of a regular to get a nod from Nick and his employees when I came in.

On this night, I had just left the dice table. There were small tables around the sides of the room where one could sit down and relax with a drink or a bite to eat. I parked myself at one of these tables and ordered a highball. It just happened that while I was sitting there I could look across the room and on through a door into Nick's private office.

I saw Nick go into his office. Still within my range of vision, I saw him go

around his desk and start to open the safe that stood against the wall.

I struck a match to light a cigarette. When it went out I struck another, applied it, took a few puffs. The windows, of course, had all been painted black on the inside to prevent snoopers from peeking. My highball came and I tossed it off quickly. Then I got up and started back over to the dice table.

Before I reached it, I heard the commotion at the front door. I turned in time to see Maxey, the big guy who handled the door, go down and skid across the floor. Three men came through the door fast and stepped right over Maxey.

"It's a stick-up!" one of them yelled. "Line up and watch your hands!"

This warning was hardly necessary, because the three thugs were masked and had guns in their hands and there wasn't a person in the room that didn't know what was coming. The trio worked fast and efficiently.

One of them, a big lad with unusually wide shoulders, sprinted for the door of Nick's private office. He evidently got there before Nick realized what was going on, because I saw him stop just inside the door and start giving Nick orders. The two others separated, assumed positions where they could cover the crowd in the main room.

Once they were set, they were very cool about it. They just held the crowd still for the time being. It was obvious that the big play was being made for the cash in Nick's safe. I could guess that Nick hadn't had time to close the safe before he heard the disturbance, so he wouldn't have a chance to stall for time. About all he would be able to do was to hand over the cash and like it.

MY GUESS was right. In less than a minute, Nick came out of the private office with his hands up—and empty. The big gunman's hands weren't empty, though. In his left hand he carried a big briefcase and it was bulging. He had make Nick stuff the currency in the case and hand it over. The big guy still held his gun in his right hand. He took a position abreast of his two pals. "All right," he said in a harsh voice. "Now you folks pay attention to orders.

You'll pull out your wallets and toss them on the floor, one at a time. We'll start at the right there. When it comes to a lady she will toss her bag and her rings on the floor." He pointed to the man at the extreme right of the line-up. "Let's have it, buddy! Toss your wallet down—and anybody that tries to make trouble will get it!"

I was a little surprised at this procedure. I figured that the big fellow must have taken Nick for at least fifteen grand in the private office and the mob should have been satisfied with that. It looked to me like a quick getaway would have been the smart move, instead of wasting time in picking up two or three more grand from the customers.

The big gunman had even called for the ladies' rings. Any kind of jewelry is poison because it can be traced, and it has to be handled through fences at a big discount. This was screwy.

It got even screwier in the next few seconds. The big one seemed to get mad. The man at the right had removed his wallet from a pocket and thrown it on the floor, but the big man didn't move to pick it up.

"I can see somebody is looking for trouble here!" he yelled. "Somebody is gettin' ready to make a play. Get this straight. We'll gun the whole lot of you if we have to! Watch 'em, boys! We're goin' to have to shoot our way out of here!"

The peculiar part of this was that nobody in the line-up had made a move. They were all standing there like lambs, and most of them shoved their hands high up toward the ceiling when the big guy started to blow his top. His panic seemed to spread to his two pals, because they started yelling and waving their guns in the air like they had gone crazy.

I tried to watch all three of them at the same time, because I was reasonably sure that this whole thing was an act. These mobbies were old hands, and they shouldn't have been at all upset if some nervous guest had reached for a pack of cigarettes or a handkerchief.

The gungel nearest me on the left was a thin little fellow. I could see black, gimlet eyes peering out from his mask. He suddenly stopped waving his gun. He

leveled the weapon and aimed it. He was taking a little time to make sure that the lead would go right where he intended it to go.

I didn't like that, either. I didn't like it at all. Because that little thin mobster was lining up his automatic on my heart!

It was lucky I got the idea in the first fraction of a second. It was also lucky that I had a smaller automatic ready. I had been holding my right hand shoulder high and bent over, letting the gun rest back against my right shoulder.

I jumped two feet to the right. As I did so, I brought my gun down and let go. It was a snap shot, aimed more or less by the concerted action of every muscle in my body. It was a desperation shot—and it paid off. The little man looked surprised, staggered backward and went down.

The big leader made a mistake then. He made the mistake of looking around and a little backward to see what had happened to his pal. He wasted enough time doing that to give me leeway to line up my second shot with a little more care.

I squeezed and the gun jerked in my hand. The mask on the face of the big leader jerked, too. As he fell, it looked as if he were having trouble with his mouth.

I was smarter than the big gunman. I didn't bother to take any quick looks at that moment. The instant my gun jerked in my hand, I dove to the floor. The third gunman fired at me, but he was a fraction of a second slow. Before he could let go with a second blast I had disappeared behind the line-up.

As I looked up between a couple of legs, I could see he was confused. He held his gun out ready to fire, but he couldn't spot me for a second or two. On the other hand, he stood out in my line of vision like a lighthouse. He was tall, with the build of a bed slat, but not too narrow to make a good target. I fired twice between the legs of the person who stood just in front of me.

That was enough. "Slats" fell on his face.

THERE was bedlam after that. The three mobsters didn't take any part in it. Not one of them moved. It was Nick and his employees and the customers who came to life.

I guess I was the only person in the room who wasn't yelling. I was a little dazed. What I wanted most was to get out of there and get some fresh air, but I didn't have a chance.

A couple of men grabbed me and yelled to Nick that I was the one who had shot it out with the mob. To Nick, at least, I was a hero. He had retrieved his bulging briefcase and was holding it in one hand while he pounded my back with the other.

But even a gambler with Nick's standing couldn't cover up a play like this one. There were three dead bodies on the floor and he had to call the cops. I would have faded out of there fast, but I didn't have a chance. The cops piled into the joint in a matter of minutes.

A Lieutenant Maldern took charge. While Nick was waving his arms and talking a blue streak, the lieutenant

[Turn page]

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looked at the men on the floor. He finally motioned for Nick to pipe down.

"An out-of-town mob—but I can name them," Maldern said. "This is Slat's Gobert. The big guy is Heinie Shull. The little guy is Peewee Ross."

He looked at me and screwed his eyelids thoughtfully.

"I don't see how you got away with it, sonny," he said. "This is a tough mob—as tough as they come. What's your name?"

"George Brown," I said.

"What do you do?" Maldern asked.

"Where do you work?" They were coming fast, now.

"I've been out of a job—for some time."

"How come you were packing a gun—and how did you get past the door with it?"

"Carrying a gun is sort of a habit with me," I said awkwardly. "I've been in here several times. I didn't carry my gun at first. But after they got to know me they got careless about tapping me, so I started carrying it again."

HE KEPT on quizzing me and I answered his questions. Sometimes I told him the truth, and sometimes I lied. I could see I wasn't fooling him too much. He was suspicious, and yet he was puzzled. At last he relaxed a little and smiled.

"You know why I could identify those gunmen?" he asked me. "The reason is that I've got a photographic memory. I knew I could tab you sooner or later. Your right name is Elmer Todd. You're an electrician, all right. Probably a good one, too. Because you rigged up a smart little device for starting cars without keys. It was *too* smart. When you tried to use it, it got you three years for car theft. You're out on parole right now. Right?"

"Right," I admitted.

The lieutenant looked at me for a minute, seemed to be studying me.

"I can't quite figure you out on this, Todd," he said. "You're in the clear on this, I guess. Anybody has a right to defend themselves against a stick-up job, even in a gambling house. On the other hand, you were violating your parole when you were packing a gun.

This is over my head. I'll have to pass it on to headquarters."

THAT'S what Maldern did. And I wasn't questioned any more. I don't know just what happened, but I had an idea that Nick had some friends in the high spots and that none of them craved too much publicity for the setup.

Anyway, they turned me loose in about three hours and gave me a strong hint to make tracks.

I did. It's been two years since that night and I haven't been in any kind of a joint since. I've drawn straight electrician's pay every Saturday. They'll never get a third strike on me.

I got the first strike on me when I got three years on that car job. While I was doing time I listened to a lot of smart lads. They said I had made my mistake in trying at the small-time stuff, that there was real dough in the big time.

One of those stir boys talked me into contacting "Big Heinie" when I got my parole.

Big Heinie figured I was a sucker and used me accordingly. He had me finger that gambling-joint job for the mob. It was so easy. All I had to do was scratch a little of the black paint off a window the night before the stick-up, then the next night strike two matches so the light would show through the cleared place when I saw Nick go into his private office and open the safe.

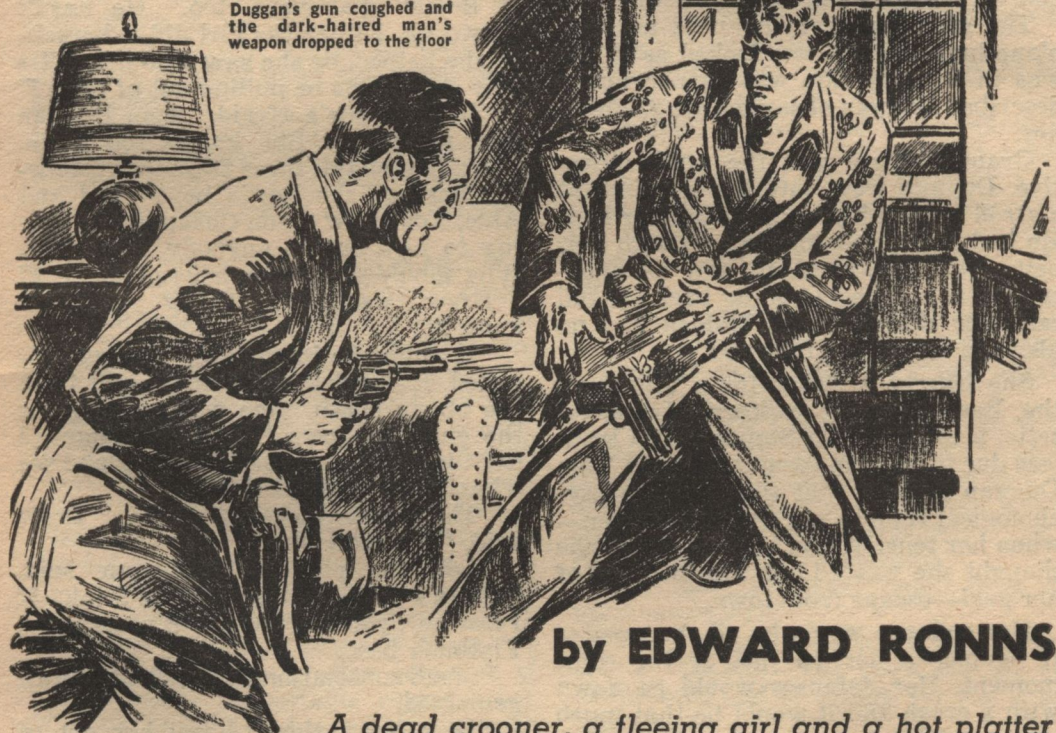
But they had me slated to be a patsy—a *dead* patsy. That three-man mob was a closed corporation. They had it all planned to knock me off right there on the job. They wouldn't have to split so much as a dime with me, and I'd never be able to talk.

That mess was the second strike on me. They'll never get a third strike on me, because I called that game right there. Not because of rain or darkness or because crime doesn't pay. Because I found out that crime *does* pay!

It paid me off with some long months behind bars, and it came mighty close to paying me off with a slug through the heart. The wise boys can shoot for that quick-and-easy money. I'm just dumb enough to be satisfied with two bucks an hour.

DON'T RUSH ME

Duggan's gun coughed and
the dark-haired man's
weapon dropped to the floor



by **EDWARD RONNS**

*A dead crooner, a fleeing girl and a hot platter
present Detective Duggan with a mystery medley!*

IT WAS easy enough for Tom Duggan to trace the girl. A neighbor of the dead man, lad named Manning Abbott who lived in the terrace apartment next door told Duggan that she was around often, acting as professional piano accompanist for Ronnie Sears. Ronnie Sears was the dead man—dead with three pills closely spaced around

his heart. He had been a crooner of a special sort, and the girl had helped him make private recordings on his own machine in his apartment.

There was a platter still on the recording machine and Duggan took it with him when he went out to find the girl. The musician's union was co-operative. The girl's name was Elise

Malden—small, dark-haired, with the face and figure of a little angel. A fair pianist. They had her address at union headquarters, a small apartment in the East Seventies. Duggan wasted no time getting over there.

This was less than two hours after the shooting, about six in the evening of a fine September day. He was lucky. Afterward he admitted that if it wasn't for this initial break, nothing would have worked out the way it did. He pulled up to the apartment just in time to see Elise Malden step out under the green canvas canopy stretched from doorway to curb and hail a cruising cab.

The girl was carrying neat tan airplane luggage, and she looked as if she was in a hurry. She was as previously described Duggan observed. He followed her.

Grand Central was the girl's objective. Duggan went into the terminal at a stroll behind her neat, twinkling legs. He had no trouble keeping up with her, being tall, lanky, blond and as unobtrusive as a collegian going back for fall semester classes. Elise Malden had no idea she was being followed.

She bought a ticket for a village in the Berkshires in western Massachusetts, a town named Stepney. The train was due to leave in twenty minutes. Tom Duggan decided that this was the psychological time to put the arm on her—when her tension was highest, when she thought she was all but within reach of her goal—escape from town.

Her collapse would be all the greater if he picked her up just at the right moment. Her defenses would go down with a crash and it would be that much easier getting her to confess to putting three pills into Ronnie Sears' heart.

He changed his mind when he saw the other two men who were following her. He hadn't noticed them before in the crowd milling through the terminal, and he probably wouldn't have noticed them at all if Elise Malden hadn't been so nervous, walking from one end of the building to the other.

WALKING behind her, the two men were near and not too far, but unmistakably keeping a close eye on her.

Two squat, ugly, hard-faced men in clothes too flashy, a little too Broadway, and hands too consistently in their top-coat pockets.

So Duggan changed his mind and risked slipping into a phone booth to call Lieutenant Drew, who was in overall charge of the case.

Drew didn't think much of it. "Bring her in," he ordered. "That's what I sent you out for. I want to talk to that young lady. She was present at the killing, according to this neighbor, Manning Abbott. Her boy friend, a lad named Cass Lennox, had an appointment with her at Sears' apartment, too. He hasn't shown up. Either the girl did it herself, or she helped, or she saw who did. Else why should she be pulling out of town?"

"Because she's afraid," Tom Duggan said patiently. "She knows too much. Look, lieutenant, these two mugs following her are the Lewis boys—Red and Alfie. You know them. Cheap hoods willing to hire out to anybody with cash. Why should they be on her tail so fast?"

Drew weakened. "How would I know?"

"It might be important," Duggan insisted. He kept his eye on the girl from the phone booth. She was waiting for the gates to open. "Look, lieutenant, I can't lose her. Let me follow her and see what cooks with all this."

"The blazes you can't lose her," Drew said. "It's too risky."

"Let me play it," Duggan said. "There's more to this than we think. If I lose her, you can put me to pounding a Flatbush beat."

"Small consolation that will be," Drew grumbled.

"Is it okay, then? I tail her out of town?"

"Go ahead. Be careful how you spend the taxpayer's money."

Tom Duggan had a compartment, there being no other accommodations available. And in the ten minutes before train time he took another chance and darted into a radio shop in the terminal for a portable record player. With that and the platter from the dead man's machine and a new toothbrush, he settled down for the night.

The Lewis boys, Red and Alfie, weren't anywhere in sight on the train,

but Duggan had no doubt they were aboard. Miss Elise Malden had a compartment of her own, at the other end of the same car with Duggan. If she were even remotely aware that Duggan was alive, she gave no sign of it. He watched her compartment door close with finality before turning in himself.

The train clicked monotonously up the Hudson River valley in the soft autumnal darkness. Restless, Duggan tried his portable record player, being extremely careful with the dead man's unfinished platter. He hadn't reminded Drew of his having the recording; it would have meant a fatal delay in returning it to headquarters. He put it on the disk, careful with it, and sat back to listen and to think.

He didn't know much about Ronnie Sears—a pretty boy with hard eyes that clashed with his pink, youthful face. Sears was known as a crooner with rather limited fan mail, because of his limited appeal. His privately manufactured records were risqué, to put it mildly—collector's items of a sort that hardly appealed to Duggan's lusty youth. They made him think of Baudelaire and his *Flowers of Evil*—something outlandish, subtly perverted, reeking somehow of vague and unnameable evils. It was no surprise to Duggan that Ronnie Sears was finally shot to death. What did surprise him, however, was that Elise Malden had had anything at all to do with him.

The needle hissed on the edge of the platter. A piano tinkled, light and airy, with an elfin touch that pleased Duggan. Elise, and touch of Debussy. He leaned back, concentrating with closed eyes. The needle hissed faintly under the tinkling of the piano. He kept the volume turned low so that the sound was inaudible in the corridor outside. Then Ronnie Sears' deep voice, full of lazy innuendo, murmured rather than sang; "*Don't rush me—take your time.*"

THE ballad went on in the direction one might expect, until the piano suddenly faltered, picked up again, then quit. Ronnie's voice ended, too. There was a moment's silence, followed by three quick staccato shots. There came a gasp, a gurgle, a thumping sound. Reg-

ular sound effects, Duggan thought sourly. The only thing lacking was the girl's scream. She didn't scream.

There was nothing else for the space of ten heartbeats. Then a faint crackle, followed by an equally faint crunch. Next came a sighing of breath and the platter went dead. The machine was still running when the police arrived. And a few minutes later the neighbor, Manning Abbott, had volunteered to Duggan the tip about the girl.

Duggan scowled at the record player. The train jolted around a curve. He took off his knitted brown Windsor tie and rumbled his blond hair in bewilderment. He played the record again, watching it with glum eyes. He took off his shirt, his shoes, his socks. He played it again. He took his gun from his belt and tucked it under the pillow and went to sleep on it, with his compartment door ajar and one eye on the girl's door down the corridor. . . .

The mountains rioted in the early September dawn, battling each other with tapestry arrays of autumn color. It was a wonderful morning. Stepney still drowsed when the train paused at the little station. Only four passengers got off in the clear, sparkling sunlight. Duggan was the first. He cast a long look at the mountains at the sleepy hamlet, at the vacant waiting room and the faded station sight. Then he looked for Elise Malden.

She was dressed in the same trim gray suit she had been wearing the night before. She looked good in the dawn light, fresh and pink and lovely, a fact which impressed Duggan considerably. He smiled at her and said, "Good morning!"

She looked coolly through him and didn't reply, but he was not discouraged. "May I help you?" he asked. "There doesn't seem to be any porter service here."

"There never is," she said, and her soft voice delighted Duggan. "I can manage alone, however. Thank you just the same."

She walked off, carrying her tan luggage, and Tom Duggan walked after her, carrying his record player and toothbrush, and behind them, visible after the train pulled out, walked the

two squat Lewis brothers, carrying nothing but heavy scowls. Duggan didn't have to turn around to know they were there.

What little there was of Stepney was left behind after less than a minute's stroll. The road curved and slanted upward through thick stands of cedar, marked by a very occasional summer camp or cottage. The air was mild and balmy, and the whole world seemed to be asleep except for the strange quartet strung out grimly along the country road.

Duggan's spine began to tingle, wondering how long it was going to last. The Lewis Brothers' footsteps crunched behind them, regularly. He fought down the temptation to turn and look at them. The girl equally ignored him, until a turn in the road brought them to a small green and white cottage set back about one hundred feet from the path. A rural mailbox had the name, *E. Malden*, painted neatly on its aluminum side.

At the mailbox the girl put down her luggage and turned to him. Her face was white. Anger and fear fought in her wide gray eyes. A wisp of dark hair escaped from under her felt hat and floated over her forehead as she said:

"Are you by any chance following me?"

"Not by chance," Duggan said. "And I'm not the only one."

She looked beyond him to the two squat men. They had paused about fifty paces behind the path to the little cottage and stood with their hands jammed in their pockets, scowling at them. Their too-sharp clothing looked oddly incongruous against the background of hills and trees.

The girl made a little frightened sound in her throat.

"Who are *they*?"

"Don't you know them?" Duggan asked.

"Of course not. No more than I know you."

"It's all right to get better acquainted with me," Duggan told her. "But not with those two *hombres*. The one on the left is Red Lewis. The uglier one is Alfie."

"But—"

"Don't you know what they want?" he asked.

Her face was pale as death. The breeze in the trees sounded louder than her whisper. "It looks as if I'm going to find out now."

The two men had evidently come to a decision. They started walking toward the mailbox by the roadside, where Duggan and the girl turned to face them. The wind played with Duggan's blond hair. He still looked like a college boy as he waited.

"Good morning," he said to the two men.

Alfie, the ugly one, said: "Beat it, yokel. Stop hanging around."

"Why?" Duggan asked.

"He asks why," Red said. "Why, he asks."

"Beat it," said Alfie, his voice whining with impatience.

"Or you get what the girl gets," added Red.

Duggan looked at Elise. "Do you know these men, Miss Malden?"

"No," she whispered. "I don't know them."

Duggan turned back to the two men. A songbird trilled sharply in the trees across the road. It was a very peaceful morning in the hills.

"Suppose you fellows take your own advice," he suggested.

Then it was no longer a peaceful morning. Alfie's right hand started out of his pocket and Duggan slashed down at his wrist with the hard edge of his palm. Alfie screamed. His brother lurched forward and into a crushing left that Duggan uncorked.

Red Lewis went staggering sideward and down. Alfie's gun fell from his pocket and Duggan kicked it aside. The taller hoodlum was making more clawing motions for his gun. Duggan swung again, missed, ducked a vicious haymaker, and uncorked the left again. He seemed to do all this without making much effort. The second man dropped his gun, too. Alfie, wringing his broken wrist, backed off down the road.

The red-haired man staggered with him, spitting curses. Duggan started for them again, and Red pulled another gun and a shot blasted through the morning air. Duggan dropped, ducking

for cover. There were three more shots, then silence. After a moment he cautiously lifted his head and got to his feet. The road was empty, except for the rapidly fading sound of footsteps. He went back to the girl.

Elise Malden's face was very pale. "What did they want?" she whispered.

Duggan rubbed his knuckles and said: "To kill you. Let's go inside and talk."

"Who are you?" she demanded. "Are you a police officer?"

"Let's go inside," Duggan said again.

A CAR was parked behind the cottage. Elise explained that it was hers, that she kept it here at her summer place because of the impossible parking conditions in New York. Tom Duggan turned away from the window and ignored her while he prowled the little house. There was a pine-paneled living room with double bunks, a screened sleeping porch, and a tiny bathroom and an equally tiny but modern kitchen.

There was a big old-fashioned field-stone fireplace flanked by books and phonograph albums in the living room. A cozy, comfortable little place. Sunlight poured endlessly through the windows. Duggan lit a cigarette and returned to the living room. Elise Malden had taken off her hat and topcoat and was staring at the dead ashes in the fireplace. She looked tiny and helpless and very lovely. Duggan was careful not to stand too near her.

"You're a detective," she said flatly. "I suppose you've come to take me back to the city."

"Why did you run away?" Duggan asked.

"Wouldn't you?"

"It depends on what I had to do with killing Ronnie Sears."

"I had nothing to do with it," she said desperately. "But I was panic-stricken because it looked as if I had set him up—"

"Like a clay pigeon in a shooting gallery," Duggan nodded. "Sure. That's the way it looks. Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Kill him. Or assist."

"No," she said. "But you won't believe me."

"Did you see who did it?"

"No. The shots came from—I don't know just where. I was playing the piano. I was a little revolted by Ronnie Sears and was going to resign that day as his accompanist. When the shots came and he fell I—I backed away into the bedroom hall. He—whoever it was—came after me, and I ran through the kitchen and down the service stairs to avoid being killed myself." She spread her hands. "That's about all there is to it. But I suppose you'll arrest me now."

Duggan said pleasantly: "Let's have breakfast first."

There was food in the icebox, and she tied a cute yellow apron around her slim waist and busied herself with forced concentration on scrambled eggs and coffee. Tom Duggan lounged in the kitchen doorway, tall and lanky and very unlike a city detective. He watched her with thoughtful eyes, the way her dark hair swung at her shoulders, the way she moved her small neat hands, her quick, sure steps. She avoided his gaze, and this troubled him. She was obviously afraid of him.

After a moment he asked if she had a telephone and she showed him where it was concealed in a living room cabinet. Duggan straddled a chair and waited until she had gone back to the kitchen before phoning New York.

He had a crisp talk with Lieutenant Drew, took some vitriolic abuse with great patience, spoke his piece, and asked for an eight-state alarm to be sent out for the Lewis boys. Then Drew relented and told him what had been unearthed during the night by his squad, and Duggan's eyes were puzzled and unhappy when he hung up.

The girl was still in the kitchen. He looked out at the road and then at the September mountains, misty across the valley. He drew a troubled breath and followed Elise onto the porch when she appeared with breakfast for two, on a tray.

"You have a boy friend," he said.

"Yes," she nodded. Her large eyes were downcast, the dark lashes a fringe over her cheeks. "He's always asking me to marry him. But I wouldn't describe him as my boy friend."

"Cass Lennox. Twenty-four, six-one, weight one ninety, dark hair, blue eyes,

scar under one eye where he was hit by a hockey puck playing for Dartmouth. Worth two million. Playboy type. Did he meet you in Ronnie Sears' apartment?" Duggan asked accusingly.

"No. He was supposed to, but he didn't show up. I told him to stay away from me. He's a pest. He annoys me. But you seem to know everything," Elsie Malden said.

"I don't know if you're in love with him or not."

"Does it matter?"

"It might."

"Cass didn't like Ronnie Sears, but he didn't kill him."

"How do you know?"

"I—"

"You didn't see the murderer, you say. It could have been Cass Lennox." Duggan tried the coffee and was agreeably surprised. She could cook. He said: "Well, are you or are you not in love with Cass Lennox?"

"No, I'm not," she said. "I told you, he merely annoys me."

"Didn't you quarrel with him over Ronnie Sears?"

"Positively not."

He felt better. "Miss Malden, perhaps you don't like my annoying you like this," he said, "but I'm only doing my job. Lots of people wanted to kill Ronnie Sears. Maybe you don't know all of his affairs, but he was a first-class cutie, a topnotch bite artist, and he was generously hated by one and all. Which leaves us a wide range of suspects."

"Bite artist?" she frowned. "He was a blackmailer?"

"He used his private recordings," Duggan nodded. "Sweet little things. Generally nasty and dirty in tone, but for certain parties he aimed at, they really hit below the belt. He collected plenty, the pretty boy did. He finally collected three slugs in his ticker. You still say you don't know who did it?"

"No, I don't."

"Not Cass Lennox."

"I simply don't know."

"Well, somebody thinks you know," Duggan said. "That's why I'm going to stick around. Somebody hired those Lewis boys to put you out of the way. Since they didn't have any luck this morning, maybe they'll try again, or

maybe the lad who hired 'em will come up to try the job in person. Putting you out of the way for keeps, I mean."

"But I really don't know anything!" she protested.

"The murderer isn't sure of that. I figure he'd like to be sure. So I'm going to stay here, and so are you, if you agree. It's up to you. Otherwise my orders are to take you back to New York."

She looked at him squarely now across the little breakfast table on the screened porch and the impact of her large gray eyes rocked Duggan figuratively back on his heels. Something terrific was happening to him.

"You mean," the girl said, "you want me to stay here and be a clay pigeon like Ronnie Sears?"

"I'll be with you," Duggan said. "We'll hope for the best."

"I don't want to go back to New York," Elise said.

"Then it's settled," Duggan nodded, and he felt quite pleased with himself.

NEVER were the Berkshires lovelier.

If Duggan felt any awkwardness in being forced to share Elise Malden's company, he didn't show it. The girl seemed to be trying hard to forget the murder. She took him on a hike over nine wooded acres she owned, including a trout brook that looked fascinating. There was a summer lake resort nearby, Elise explained, but the water was already too cold to swim in it.

They went swimming anyway, although Duggan was extremely careful to hide the record of Ronnie Sears' death behind the bookcase. He took his gun along with him, too; but nothing happened beyond the dawning conviction that he was falling in love with a first-class murder suspect. What Elise thought or felt was difficult to tell.

When it turned toward dusk, he forced his thoughts to the business on hand, and to all appearances, abruptly vanished from the neighborhood. It wouldn't do, he explained to the girl, to tip off any prospective prowlers that she had a bodyguard.

Elsie showed no nervousness when he briefly outlined his plan of operation, and he began to worry that she wasn't taking him seriously enough. During

the day she had slowly evolved into a rather gay and light-hearted person.

She teased him that she had never known a detective before, and never had heard of one who looked and behaved like Duggan. He told her that criminology was a career, for which he had struggled through to a master's degree, but he couldn't tell whether she was impressed or not.

With darkness he began to feel the discomfort of cool autumn in the mountains. The spot he had chosen for concealment was in a dense grove of junipers flanking the path that curved up from the Stepney Road. From here he could see the front porch and the lighted cottage windows, warmly yellow through the dusk, and Elise's occasional movements within the range of his vision.

He could hear her phonograph playing, a sad yet lilting number he couldn't recognize. He also heard the whistle of the evening train in the station down the valley, and he took his gun out then and kept it ready.

Nothing happened. There were no immediate results of the train's arrival. No cars came up the road, either. No one passed by on foot. Tree frogs took up a chirruping, undulant chorus, filling the moonlit night with sound. He shifted his position, found a log to sit upon, yawned, and waited, thinking very pleasant thoughts about the girl in the house he watched.

Time tiptoed by. The moon came and went. Records were changed inside the cottage, turning to the classics, then being silenced. The light in the kitchen went out, then all the lights with it. She was turning in. He wondered if he ought to prowl around in a circle to make sure everything was all right.

Tom Duggan felt annoyed at the fact that he wanted something to happen. He hoped he was going to be proved wrong, which would end his career as far as Lieutenant Drew was concerned; but at least Elise would be safe. He looked at his watch, yawned again, and decided against prowling. He was all right here, sitting on this log. . . .

SHE screamed at eleven-ten. Before the sound faded, Duggan was on the move, half crouching, gun in hand.

There was nothing to see, now that the moon was down. The cottage was dark. Nothing stirred in the night, and the girl's scream wasn't repeated. He took a step forward and a twig snapped under his weight and he cursed without sound while he headed across the open from the juniper shelter.

Something else stirred in the black shadows beside the screened porch. Duggan fought down an almost irresistible urge to call out to Elise to find out if she was all right. He jogged on, almost to the porch now, and then something in the shadows broke and ran and became a man. Duggan went after him like a shot, pocketing his gun. The man turned, wheeling with savage ferocity, and met Duggan's charge with a shocking rush of his own.

The man was big, and taller than Duggan, and much heavier. Duggan felt the wind go out of him with a painful rush as the stranger sank a fist into his middle. Duggan fell back, tripped over a root, and ducked another haymaker. He came up ready, his right flicking out, then his left.

Now the big man staggered, his breathing ragged. Tom Duggan moved in, nimble on his feet. The other man wasn't armed. He used his right on him again, felt a satisfactory crunch of knuckles on cartilage, and the man went down, sprawling on all fours on the grass and shaking his head and grunting. Duggan stood over him, breathing lightly. "Elise!"

Movement on the porch became the girl. She looked tiny and trim in a housecoat. "I'm all right," she said. "I heard him at the window. Who is it?"

The man was still on all fours, shaking his head. "Get up," Duggan said.

"I think you've broken my nose," the man said.

"Fine," Duggan said. "Let's hear what's on your mind."

The big man swayed to his feet, holding a rapidly reddening handkerchief to his face. His topcoat was Fifth Avenue. He was not one of the Lewis boys. There was alarm and dismay in Elise's voice.

"Why, Cass! What on earth—"

"I came to see you," the big man mumbled. "When I heard you had disap-

peared, I was dreadfully worried. I guessed you'd be here. I just had to find out how you are, darling. Who is this man?"

"A detective," Elise said dryly. "Mr. Duggan, Mr. Cass Lennox. Cass, I told you to stay away from me."

"What were you skulking around here for?" Duggan asked.

"She wouldn't see me. She told me she wouldn't let me in."

"Sure you didn't have homicide in mind—trying to kill Elise?"

"Trying to kill—"

"We'll find out about it," Duggan said, "soon enough."

Cass Lennox dabbed at his nose. His liquid eyes were horrified. "Why should I want to harm Elise? Why, we're going to be married—"

"That's what you say," Duggan remarked. "What happened when you showed up at Ronnie Sears' apartment yesterday? Lose your head in jealousy? Or was he putting the bite on you? Is that why you shot him?"

"But I wasn't there! I never kept my appointment with Elise! I had to drive mother out to some friends on Long Island. I was terribly late. When I returned, I found police all over the place. I didn't kill Ronnie Sears!"

"But you thought I did," Elise said coldly.

"My dear—"

"I wish you would take him away and keep him away," Elise said to Duggan. "I'd like to get some sleep tonight."

Duggan grinned. "No sooner said than done, honey," the detective said.

He was gratified that she didn't object to his using a term of endearment.

USING Elise's coupe to seek out the local law in Stepney, Tom Duggan turned Cass Lennox over to the town constable to be jailed awaiting questioning. The big man blustered and immediately put through a call to a high-powered firm of New York lawyers. Duggan wasn't worried. He spent the rest of the night on the sleeping porch, but he didn't sleep. He set up the portable phonograph and played the murdered man's unfinished recording over and over again, frowning into the dark night and muttering against the rhyth-

mic chorus of katydids and tree frogs that filled the hills.

"Don't rush me!—take your time!" The tinkle of Elise's fingers on the piano. The silence, and the hideous shots that came after. Then the puzzling crackle of paper, a crunch, and the killer's sigh, and the machine whispered emptily until the police arrived.

Duggan played it over and over again, staring into the night and thinking. Once Elise Malden came to the doorway, prepared to protest. He didn't even look at her. She went back inside without saying anything.

In the morning Duggan left his gun with the girl, together with severe instructions for her safety, then took her coupe and drove back alone to New York.

It was three in the afternoon when he arrived in Manhattan. He went first to his own rooms, picked up another gun, and then drove crosstown to the swank apartment house where Ronnie Sears had been murdered. He didn't bother to call Lieutenant Drew. Afternoon sunlight glittered in the terrace windows of the shining, modern building.

Duggan decided he preferred sunlight filtered through the green of trees on the Berkshire Hills. He went up in the hushed, scented elevator to the seventeenth floor, his face pale and a little tight with inner tension.

Ronnie Sears' apartment was at the end of the hall. A cop was still posted there, and he let Duggan in without demur. Tom Duggan stood for a moment in the silent foyer, listening and frowning at the absence of sound. Nothing had been changed since the night of the murder. The sunlight poured through the tall floor-to-ceiling windows that filled one end of the sunken living room. Beyond, he could see the stone wall and the red flagstones of the terrace.

He walked to the piano, scowling, and stood for another moment, then traced the side door to the hall, the kitchen and rear exit, the path Elise claimed to have taken in her escape from the murderer. He paused only a moment on the rear fire stairs before returning to the living room and the outer terrace.

The wind was sharp and clear, blowing from across the Hudson and Central

Park. There were several deck chairs, a modern glass and tubular chrome table, a row of potted plants. The terrace was otherwise empty.

Duggan leaned over the stone wall and glanced down at the quiet cross-town street a dizzy distance below, then turned to the left and considered the low wall separating Ronnie Sears' terrace from that of his neighbor. Duggan crossed the red flagstones on silent feet and vaulted to the adjoining terrace. At the same moment the tall windows opened outward and a man came out from the next apartment.

"Friend or foe?" he asked.

"You remember me, Mr. Abbott," Duggan said non-committally. "You tipped me off about the girl."

"Correct." Manning Abbott was wearing a silk-embroidered dressing gown that didn't hide the power of his athletic shoulders. A rather handsome man of thirty with thick dark hair and dark eyes that moved with thought and caution. A lady-killer, Duggan thought as his first impression, and then added, but no powder-puff. Abbott kept his hands in the pockets of his fancy dressing gown and said: "Have you people located that girl yet?"

"Oh, yes," Duggan said. "We're doing all right."

"You have a confession from her already?" Abbott asked.

"No. She didn't do it."

Abbott looked surprised. "It has been a shocking thing, this murder right next door to me. I must say that your department has acted with speed and efficiency. So the girl didn't do it?"

"That's right," Duggan answered.

"Then you are still in the dark about the murderer's identity?"

"No," Duggan said. "I know who he is."

"Indeed!" the dark-haired man replied. "Won't you come in, sir? It's rather windy out here."

"After you," Duggan said, and didn't smile.

together to produce an effect to delight any decorator. It was a rather effeminate apartment, in contrast to Abbott's virile, dark personality.

Tom Duggan stood in the center of the gray rug, feet slightly apart as if braced, and watched Abbott open a lacquered cigarette box, unroll a soda mint from its wrapper, and slowly chew one before turning back to him with a sigh. There was an inner explosion amounting almost to exultation inside Duggan, but nothing changed in his face. "You take those things often?" he asked.

"I have a poor stomach," Abbott smiled. "Now tell me, if you are you permitted to satisfy my curiosity—who did kill poor Mr. Sears?"

"I wouldn't waste sympathy on the corpse," Duggan said bluntly. "You know the sort of stuff he produced. He wrote his own lyrics and put into them hints and traces of social dynamite aimed at lots of people in town, and they kicked through in fine style to hush him up."

Abbott's dark brows lifted. "He was a blackmailer?"

"Out of this world," Duggan said. "One of the victims just couldn't take it any more and blew his top and killed him the other night to put an end to the torture. I imagine a lot of people have been cheering ever since. It happens, however, that the Homicide Department and society in general frowns upon any individual who takes the law into his own hands this way."

"This murderer, in particular, went too far and hired a couple of hoods to silence an innocent girl who, he feared, could identify him. That, I didn't like at all. You may be interested to know that the Lewis brothers are bungling amateurs. They failed in their job. Elise Malden is still very much alive."

There was a subtle change in Abbott's face. His features seemed to settle and harden. He took another soda mint and sighed. "Interesting," he said.

"I'm sure it is," Duggan said. "Of course, the Lewis brothers will identify the man who hired them when they are faced with a murder-accomplice rap. They'll save their own skins first. Cheap hoodlums are like that. We have more than just their testimony, however. We

MANNING ABBOTT'S apartment was even more lavish in its decor than the crooner's next door. Gray hooked rugs, tomato red couch and chairs, and aquamarine drapes worked

have a recording of the entire murder proceedings, the one that Sears was making when he was interrupted by the killer. Some sound effects of one of the killer's personal habits came through clearly. He ate soda mints. You can hear the wrapping, chewing and sighing quite without mistake."

Tension coiled in the room like a waiting snake. Abbott kept his hands in his dressing gown pockets. His voice was low. "I presume the murderer came in through the terrace windows, according to your theory," he said.

"You ought to know," Duggan said quietly, "you're the murderer. If the Lewis boys don't strap you to the chair, that recording will. You should have smashed it."

The snake of tension struck explosively. Abbott gave no warning except for a faint movement of his right hand within the silken pocket of his dressing gown. Duggan had been watching both hands, and he moved a split-second before the other man. The sharp staccato bark of Abbott's gun rapped twice, and then Duggan's gun drowned it out with a single authoritative bellow.

Glass shattered in the tall windows behind him. Abbott screamed in rage and pain. Mostly pain. He stumbled backward across the gray rug, his hands coming into sight, leaving a trail of scarlet that was darker than the tomato red of the long couch.

"More?" Duggan asked harshly.

Abbott coughed. He doubled over, his left hand clutching his right in agony. Then he brought up the gun again. He squeezed the trigger and Duggan saw the bullets thud into the floor at his feet. He shot the gun from Abbott's hand. The dark-haired man slid to his knees, coughed again, and collapsed on the gray carpet. Duggan let out a long breath, pocketed his gun, and looked around for the telephone. . . .

LIEUTENANT DREW spoke for ten minutes after Duggan identified himself with a thumbnail sketch of his activities. In the meantime, thanks to an aside, a police ambulance arrived to take Manning Abbott away. Duggan listened patiently, letting the lieutenant wear himself out. The gist of Drew's

speech was that the Lewis boys had been picked up in Boston, and he was awaiting word for the police there.

Cass Lennox had been released because of an airtight alibi furnished by his mother on Long Island. Anyway, Drew went on, they'd had the finger pointed at Abbott all along while Duggan was romancing in the New England hills, and he, Drew, had merely been waiting for Abbott to make a break. Duggan broke in at this point.

"Well, I made the break for you, Lieutenant. It's all over. In any case, the girl would've been another corpse if I hadn't followed my hunch and gone up there to stop the Lewis thugs. So—"

"Granted," Drew said. "But your procedure was irregular and contrary to rules of departmental strategy."

"Do I get a promotion?" Duggan asked blandly.

"It's under consideration," Drew grudgingly admitted.

"And a day off?"

"What for?"

"To romance in the New England hills," Duggan grinned. . . .

It was well after midnight when Duggan drove his borrowed coupe up the winding road through the moonlight to the little cottage where Elise Malden waited. The weather had turned chilly, and he could see the glow of a fire in the hearth through the windows as he got out of the car and walked up on the porch. He didn't see the girl at first. She was seated in the shadows to his left, and she spoke from the darkness as he reached for the front door.

"I'm here, Duggan," she said softly.

"I came back—" he began.

"Not merely to return my car, I trust?"

He could see her smiling at him. An impish little angel. "Well, it was a good excuse," he said.

"Don't rush me, Duggan," she warned.

"Don't," he said, "ever use that phrase again. I'm allergic to it."

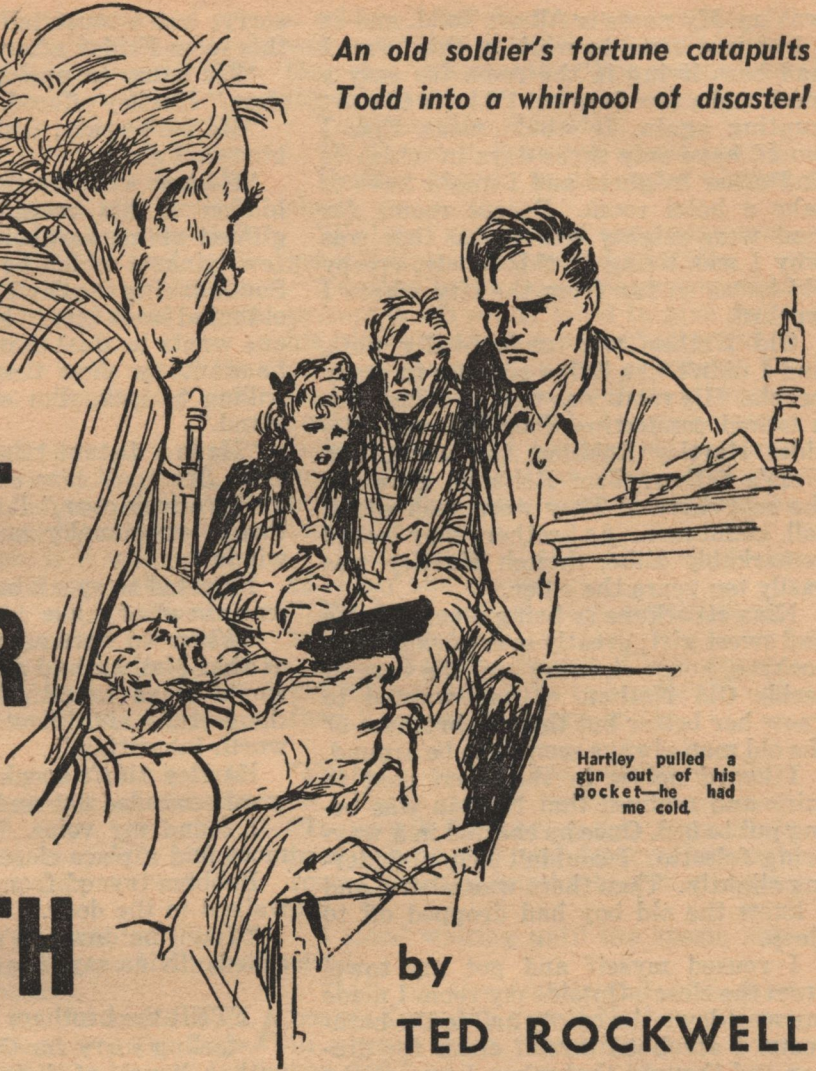
"Then I have no other defense, have I?" she asked.

"None at all," Duggan told her.

He sat down on the porch glider beside her in the shadows and began to make the most of his day off.

*An old soldier's fortune catapults
Todd into a whirlpool of disaster!*

NEXT DOOR TO DEATH



Hartley pulled a
gun out of his
pocket—he had
me cold.

by

TED ROCKWELL

THE old man must have been waiting behind the front door. Waiting for me to come home to my room from work. He must have swung for my head and missed! He was too old to be accurate so his heavy walking stick landed on my shoulder.

I let out a yelp of surprise rather than pain for the man was doddering and very feeble. Instantly Nina, the girl who took care of him, was in the hall with her blond curls flying. She was followed by Hartley Robbins, her uncle. The two of them rushed to my attacker and held him to keep him from falling on his face.

"Quiet down Nathan," Hartley told him. "We'll help you upstairs and you can rest in your room."

"He's come to steal my fortune I tell ye!" Old Nathan screamed in a thin cracked voice. He waved his stick at me.

I watched them struggle for a few seconds and when the old Civil War veteran began coughing and strangling I moved to the stairs. I took those two at a time and hurried to my room.

Once behind my closed door I flopped into the one chair the room contained. That did it, I decided. I was moving out at the end of the week when my rent

was up. My name is Albert Todd, and as I had just come to work in this town I had been living in the room for only a week and a few days but I'd have to start hunting again. It would mean that I would have only three days in which to find other lodgings and I might have to take a hotel room. Decent rooms for rent were mighty scarce and that was why I was living in this lonely, creepy old house so far from the city where I worked.

Old Nathan was undoubtedly nuts, and I didn't like living so close to crazy people. His room was next to mine with a locked connecting door between. Besides Hartley Robbins, the uncle, and Nina's father, Tom Robbins, gave me the cold shivers! They were such silent, tall, gaunt men. As brothers they looked remarkably alike, though Hartley was easily ten years the older.

Nina struck me as being a very pretty and sweet girl; greatly overworked with cooking, house cleaning and the care of feeble Old Nathan. I had wanted to know her better but the two brothers or the old man always seemed to be around.

I heard noises in the room next to mine and realized that Nathan was being put to bed. Once he cackled in a wavering falsetto. I couldn't help shuddering slightly. Then there was silence and I knew the old boy had dropped off to sleep.

I roused myself and got my towel from the closet. Outside my room I made my way down the empty hall to the bathroom. I scrubbed myself clean for dinner and thought that when I was at the dinner table I would give the family my notice. I hated to do it because during the days I had been living with them I had come to feel that they needed my rent money.

As I left the bathroom I saw Hartley and Tom Robbins standing in front of my room. I walked toward them thinking that now was my chance to tell them I was leaving.

"Good evening," Hartley said in his solemn way.

His brother, Robbins, nodded.

I opened my door. "Come in," I invited.

I hung my wet towel in the closet; turned to the brothers and blurted, "I'm

sorry, but I must tell you I'm leaving this room Friday afternoon."

"We came to apologize for Old Nathan," Hartley offered.

"He isn't crazy, just very old," Robbins said softly.

"He has what he thinks is a fortune hidden in his room," Hartley's eyes glinted at me sardonically. "He has a few trinkets which he picked up in the South during the Civil War. At times his old mind leads him to believe that everyone wants to steal them. At other times he wants to show them to all who are willing to look. I'm sure you'll understand."

"He is a distant relative of our mother's. She took care of him. After she died we took over," Robbins cleared his throat emotionally and walked to the window.

I started to speak but Hartley's voice was ahead of mine.

"When we were younger, Mother told us that Nathan had a fortune which he would leave to all of us. We've seen the fortune and know now that it isn't worth inheriting."

Hartley didn't speak emotionally. His words sounded flat and cold.

I found my voice. "I'm sorry, but I must find a place closer to the city."

Robbins turned from the window and walked to the door.

"You'll be down to dinner soon?" he asked. "Nina says the food is ready."

AFTER the brothers had gone I began feeling sorry for Old Nathan. Stuck with a bunch of distant relatives who had been sitting around waiting for him to die so they could get their greedy fingers on his 'fortune'. And now their expected wealth had turned out to be worthless. They were disillusioned and bitter. That's what must have caused the atmosphere in the house to be so unpleasant to me. Brother would I be glad to find me a new place to live!

Dinner that night started in its usual dull manner. It had always been a rather silent affair, but this time it didn't end that way.

We were finishing Nina's excellent meal while she quickly prepared a tray for old Nathan and carried it upstairs. I was working on my last three spoon-

fuls of dessert when we heard a cry from Nina above.

"Father! Uncle! Please come and help me!"

The three of us at the table sat rigidly in our chairs for a moment. Then we rose, almost all in unison. The brothers hurried away and I stood still, feeling useless. Robbins called to me as he left the room.

"Please finish your dinner! Nathan has evidently decided to give us some trouble!"

I sat down and made balls out of the crumbs left on my breadplate; my dessert forgotten.

This was a troubled house, I thought. The crazy old man should be placed in an institution. Certainly no young girl like Nina should be burdened with him. I was trying to decide if it wouldn't be better for me to pack my clothes and leave for a hotel that very night when I heard Old Nathan scream in a voice of such strength that I never suspected his old body could produce!

"I want to see him! Bring him up here!"

I started out of my chair! Could he mean me! I was standing when Robbins rushed into the room.

"He wants to talk to you!" he exclaimed. "Would you help us out and come?"

Of course I couldn't refuse, but I hated it, every inch of the way as I climbed the stairs behind Robbins.

When we entered the old man's room, the first thing I noticed was the huge, four poster, brass bed on which he lay. It was an ornate thing with great brass balls on top of each post. Hartley and Nina stood at its opposite side. Then I saw Nathan leaning his thin, bent body against a pile of soft, white pillows. The room was lighted by a reading lamp on a table beside him. By its soft illumination I could see his eyes flash toward me.

"Switch on the lights so's I can see him better," he ordered in a tremulous voice.

Robbins flicked the wall switch and the room was flooded with white light. Two bright little eyes stared at me a long time from a prune wrinkled face.

"They have told me that you've been

a soldier," the old man said at last. "I was a soldier once," he mumbled, and then in a high squeak: "You want to see my fortune?"

To humor him, I nodded.

"Well, get it from the secret place!"

Hartley moved to the open clothes closet.

"No! no! not you, let the young man get it!" Nathan screeched excitedly.

I walked to the closet wondering what prompted his senile mind to give away his hiding place to a perfect stranger. I stood uncertainly in the entrance. To one side, hanging on a clothes hanger against the closet wall, I saw the carefully brushed and spotless old soldier's uniform of Civil War days. The cap hung on the same hook. I reached to touch its visor.

"Don't touch that!" Hartley spoke suddenly and sharply.

My hand jerked back involuntarily, and I turned to face him.

"Old Nathan doesn't allow anyone but himself and Nina to handle his uniform," he smiled at me coldly.

THE old man in bed cackled horribly. "That's right"! he almost screamed. "In my will I'm leaving it to Nina. She's been a good girl and deserves my uniform!" Then he burst into a fit of coughing.

I stood waiting until the spasm subsided.

"Lift up the fourth and fifth floor boards from the door," Nathan told me in a weak voice. "And bring me what you find."

I tried the boards and found them loose. I lifted them and saw beneath a small metal lock box. I picked it up and carried it to the old soldier.

He fumbled under his pillow and brought forth a brass key. Tremblingly he unlocked the box and tipped it upside down on the bed cover between his knees. A stream of jewelry cascaded to the cloth. The old man fingered the earrings, bracelets and rings lovingly, mumbling all the time.

I was surprised because I hadn't expected to see anything of value. Though this was no fortune, I estimated its worth at about a thousand dollars. It could be a temptation for any petty

thief. Old Nathan was talking quietly.

"What do you think of them young man " he asked me and continued, not waiting for my answer. "I found these in an old mansion in the deep South. The place was burning, flames were all around me when I went in. I remember it well. . . ." His weak voice drifted off.

Suddenly he roused himself. "You wouldn't steal them from me would you?" His beady eyes squinted at me.

I shook my head.

He turned to Hartley and Robbins. "It's all I've got isn't it?" He leered at them and his face held a cunning expression.

Both men nodded and Old Nathan fell back against his pillows exhausted. "Put them away," he mumbled.

While Hartley replaced the trinkets, Nina settled the old man in his bed and covered him. When we left the room we saw that he was sound asleep. We three men stood in the hall outside for a short while. Nina hurried downstairs with Nathan's untouched tray.

Hartley began rolling one of his brown paper cigarettes. I never knew whether he rolled his own for the sake of economy or whether he preferred them. It was a habit that spoiled his otherwise neat appearance, for he always managed to spill a portion of the light colored, flaked tobacco on the front of his clothes.

"Now that he has shown you his 'fortune', his addled old mind won't think of you as a stranger come here to steal it," he told me.

"I wish you'd stay with us," Robbins almost begged. "I'm sure Nathan will never bother you again."

Not knowing what to say I'm afraid I stammered.

"Well . . . I'll think it over . . . let you know in the morning."

I said good night and hurried to my room.

THERE I took off my coat and shoes and put on my slippers. I determined to forget what I thought was an episode by losing myself in a book I'd bought that afternoon.

The book was exceptionally good and it soon absorbed all my attention. What seemed like an hour later I yawned and

glanced at my watch. It was nearly twelve o'clock! Surprised at how fast the time had passed and feeling very sleepy, I put the book away and made my preparations for bed. I was beginning to pull my shirt over my head, when someone tapped gently at my door. I hastily tucked my shirt back in and opened the door.

Nina stood staring at me with frightened blue eyes. I was so startled that for seconds I did nothing but gape at her. I came out of it with a jump.

"Won't you come in?" I invited.

She looked fearfully up and down the hall and then stepped into my room. I left the door half open but she turned and shut it.

"My father has told me you're going to leave," she said as she faced me. "Please don't! Since you have been here I haven't felt so afraid."

As I looked at her I saw that her expression was earnestly pleading.

"What have you been afraid of?" I asked.

"My uncle!" was her startling reply.

"But why?"

"I'm sure Old Nathan has something very valuable hidden in this house and that my uncle knows where it is!"

"How do you know this?" I asked.

"The old man has talked in his sleep when I've been attending him. My uncle knows this and some time ago I caught him in the room listening to Nathan. Since then my uncle has become very strange and cold to father and me."

"But why should that make you afraid?"

She moved her hands gracefully. "Don't you see? My uncle, father and I are supposed to share equally; if my uncle knows that Nathan has a real fortune—" Her voice faltered and she looked down at the floor—"I'm afraid of what might happen to father and me."

I could see that the girl was desperately scared and I felt like comforting her.

"Why don't you tell your father your suspicions?" I asked.

"I have, but he says I'm young and imaginative."

"Where do I come in. How do I keep you from being scared?"

"Uncle wouldn't be likely to do any-

thing with someone outside the family in the house," she told me.

I made up my mind quickly. "Okay, Nina, go to bed and sleep tight. I'll stick!"

Her face glowed with pleasure and she almost whispered, "Thank you!"

I opened the door for her and a grateful smile was my good night—something for me to dream about.

AFTER I had crawled under my bed-clothes it took me a half an hour or more to fall asleep. Thoughts whirled through my mind. I felt the same as her father about Nina. Too much imagination. But I couldn't blame her; cooped up in a big old house with a half-crazy old man and his jewels. Two gaunt brothers, one of them a coldly sardonic uncle. Maybe I'd regret my promise to stay, but if so, I'd find out.

I was torn from my sleep by a scream that echoed in my ears long after it had ended! I fairly jumped into my pants and was buckling my belt as I ran into the hall! A white, ghostly figure stood outside Old Nathan's bedroom door! I made a rush for it. It was Nina! She stood staring into the room with her hand held to her mouth.

"He's dead!" she exclaimed when I reached her side.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I always come to his room at about three o'clock in the morning," she whispered. "He has nightmares and wakes very early. He is afraid of the dark and likes me to come in and switch on his light and talk to him awhile."

I saw Robbins come stumbling out of his room farther down the hall, with his bathrobe flapping around his knees. Then Hartley appeared, out of breath, at the head of the stairs. He had a bedroom on the lower floor and I noticed as he came toward us that one of his bathrobe pockets bulged and sagged heavily.

"What happened?" His face twitched with excitement.

"Are you hurt Nina?" her father asked.

"Nathan has been murdered!" she told them.

"Nonsense!" Hartley exclaimed, and moved quickly ahead of us into the room.

The old man lay against his pillows with a necktie tied tightly around his neck! There was hardly any sign of a struggle.

"This is awful!" Robbins gasped.

Hartley looked grimly around the room with his hand in his bathrobe pocket. He walked to the clothes closet; hesitated a moment and then stepped in and lifted the loose floor boards. He looked up at us.

"The box is gone!"

I think we all saw it at once. The locked, keyless, connecting door to my room was ajar!

Hartley had the gun out of his pocket and was pointing it at me!

"I recognize the tie you used to choke Nathan! I remember seeing you wear it!" His voice was almost a monotone and his eyes were flat and dead in his face.

I glanced down at the old man. The tie was pulled so tightly that parts of it disappeared into the folds of his flesh! Looking at it the second time, I recognized it. It was one of my ties! An old one that I had planned on discarding. I was stunned for a moment. When I recovered myself I turned to Hartley.

"This is ridiculous!" I told him. "It's altogether too pat! Someone is trying to frame me! I suppose the next thing you'll find the box of jewelry in my room!"

NINA stepped away from me to stand beside Hartley; her father followed her. Hartley handed him the gun and walked into my room. Robbins held the gun awkwardly; pointing it at the floor. We waited perhaps a minute before Nina's uncle came back carrying the metal lock box! He put it on a chair.

"I found it hidden behind your dresser!" he said.

That fixed me, but good! I felt the sweat on my upper lip. It was getting hot, too hot for me! My tie around Old Nathan's windpipe, the locked door to my room opened, and now the box of jewels found in my room with my finger prints on it because I had carried it to the old man that night! Whoever had framed this one had done an excellent job.

"How would I open that connecting

door?" I asked, not because I wanted to know the phony answer but because I was stalling for extra time and thinking hard.

"It's easy to pick a lock of that type." Robbins spoke for the first time.

"Why wouldn't I hide that box more carefully?"

"You didn't have time," Hartley told me. "You didn't know Nina visited Nathan every morning at about three o'clock. She disturbed you. There wasn't time to shut the connecting door behind you. She screamed, and you put the box in the handiest hiding place you could find and then ran into the hall where you found Nina. You might have killed her too, but my brother and I came along and prevented that!"

I saw Nina shudder and she stared at me with eyes that were wide with fright.

"One of you has framed me and I'm going to prove it, somehow," I said doggedly.

"You'll have to prove that to the police!" Hartley turned to his brother. "Keep the gun on him while I phone for them."

He left the room and I heard him hurrying down the stairs. Robbins still held the gun pointed at the floor. Nina walked to the window and looked out with her back to us. Old Nathan lying dead on his bed must have been a distasteful sight to her.

"Robbins, you're a sucker!" I said.

His eyes flickered in surprise. I moved three steps closer to him.

"There's a real fortune in this house and Hartley knows it! That's why he killed Nathan!" I took two more steps forward and now I was quite close to him.

"Don't come any closer!" he exclaimed as he brought the gun up.

"If you don't believe me, ask your daughter," I said.

Involuntarily he turned his head to Nina at the window. That's when I jumped and let him have it on the button. I pulled my punch as much as I dared. I caught him as he fell and took the gun out of his hand. I let him slide to the floor and stepped back. Nina was on her knees beside him.

"Sorry, but I had to do it," I told her. She acted as though she hadn't heard

me. Robbins was out for only a few seconds.

"Stand against that wall." I motioned them with the gun. "And be very quiet. One peep out of you and so help me, I'll turn killer!"

I TOOK up a position so I had a view of both doors to the room. I heard Hartley coming down the hall. When he entered he looked startled but quickly regained his cold composure.

"I don't know what you expect to gain by this," he said with his mouth twisted. "The police are on their way here!"

I waved the gun at him. "Get over beside your niece and brother, and then I'll do some talking."

He walked stiffly to the position I indicated.

"Since I've been in this room I've been doing some thinking and looking, Hartley," I told him. "Nina has helped me, some with my thinking. You didn't know that she and I had a little talk last night and she was sure you knew Nathan had something of real value hidden in this house—that she was afraid of what you might do to get it!"

He flashed a hard glance at Nina.

"She has always had leanings toward the romantic," he said.

"Very little romance in what Nina suspected. Just plain cold blooded murder!" I saw his eyes flinch slightly. "You couldn't wait until Nathan died and then get only your share of the inheritance. You've been a long time figuring a way of hurrying things up and getting it all for yourself!"

"You talk like a madman, but keep on talking; the police will be here soon!"

"When Robbins and his daughter took me in as a boarder you thought you'd found yourself a fall guy. Last night you must have suggested to the old man that he show me his jewels. It would fix the motive for me to kill him! Sometime after midnight you came into this room, unlocked the connecting door to my room—any skeleton key would do it—stole one of my ties and strangled the old man in his sleep! He was too old to struggle much.

"Then you got what you came after! To make the evidence perfect you lifted

the closet floor boards and took the lock box and placed it behind my dresser. You left the connecting door ajar. Then you beat it down to your room and hid the loot! You didn't take much of a chance of waking me because you know I'm a heavy sleeper. You've seen me start off late for work at times, because I haven't heard the alarm in my clock."

Hartley shrugged and gave me a thin smile. "If you tell the police this, you'll be making yourself ridiculous. All the evidence is against you, not me!"

"Not all the evidence," I countered. Keeping the gun steadily aimed at Hartley, I walked to Old Nathan's clothes closet. "I've done some looking too. Last night, when I was in here, I marveled at how clean Nathan's Civil War uniform was. It's not so clean now!"

Hartley almost took a step forward.

"You're an incessant smoker of home made cigarettes. When you were getting what you wanted you were nervous and rolled yourself a cigarette. As usual you spilled tobacco. In fact, you spilled it on Nathan's uniform!"

HARTLEY held himself more stiffly than ever. The silence in the room made the atmosphere seem heavy.

"If what you have said were true, why would I be fool enough to light a cigarette?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe you just rolled it from nervous habit and didn't light it," I told him. I watched the three of them for seconds before continuing. "I've noticed another thing about this room and I know now where Nathan kept his real fortune!"

I expected Hartley to glance toward what I had seen but all three stared at me silently. I decided that Hartley had wonderful self-control.

"The brass ball on the left post at the head of Nathan's bed is missing!" I exclaimed.

I was watching Hartley and I saw a sudden glisten of moisture on his forehead as he looked at the bed.

"The bed post is hollow and that's where Nathan had his fortune hidden!" I told them.

I heard Nina gasp as I continued talking. "I can see that the brass balls are not the type that screw on the post. They

are fitted tightly over the posts and must be pried off. Once off it would take time to replace one. You didn't have time Hartley, so you either dropped the ball in this room or took it with you when you left!"

Hartley laughed harshly. "That brass ball has been missing for years," he said.

Both Robbins and Nina turned quickly toward him and by the expressions on their faces I knew he was lying.

"Nina, look for it in this room, will you?" I asked.

She hesitated for a moment and then moved forward and began her search by looking under the bed. She went over the room thoroughly.

"I didn't think you'd find it here," I said, when she had finished. "But I do think that when we find that brass ball we'll find whatever was hidden in the bed post and also the murderer!"

"You'd better be quick about looking for it," Hartley said. "Because the police will be here soon and end this farce!"

"I don't think I'll bother," I told him. "I think I'll tell my story to the police and let them look!"

"Then couldn't we go down to the living room and sit down while we wait?" Robbins broke in. "This is an awful strain on my daughter."

I glanced at Nina and realized what he had said was true.

"Okay," I agreed.

We made an odd and silent procession as I herded my captives downstairs. The main hall light was burning and its glow spread into the living room. I could barely make out the furniture as the two brothers and Nina entered. I fumbled for the wall switch and flipped it on. I watched Hartley as he seated himself beside a low coffee table and reached for tobacco and cigarette papers which lay on the table. He was nervous and almost knocked over a heavy metal vase which stood on its center. Nina sat in an overstuffed chair with her head thrown back and her eyes closed. I looked around for Robbins. He wasn't in the room! I cursed myself for being careless. I needed Robbins as a witness.

"Where's your brother!" I snapped to Hartley.

"I didn't notice that he'd left us," he

answered, and then he grinned at me.

KEEPING an eye on Hartley, I walked sideways through the connecting archway and into the darkened dining room. Beyond that was a swinging door leading to the kitchen.

"Robbins!" I called. There wasn't an answer.

I turned and faced Hartley. He was smoking contentedly. His nervousness had left him. All the stiff tautness had gone from his body. He appeared to be completely relaxed and happy. He and Nina were watching me carefully and Hartley smiled at me. Something in his attitude made me feel that I had missed somewhere! He acted as though he was greatly relieved. Suddenly I knew! I lowered the gun so that it pointed at the floor.

"Hartley, I apologize," I said.

"Why?" He looked surprised.

"Nina came to me and told me a story of how she was sure that you knew Nathan had something of great value hidden in this house. She said that she had caught you listening to the old man talk in his sleep. She had listened to him before and knew that he did have a real fortune. After that, she said you had acted cold and strange to her father and herself and she was afraid of you. Afraid of what you might do!

"This caused me to jump to the conclusion that you had murdered Old Nathan! I don't think so now! I think that sometime ago you found out that something wrong was being planned in this house. That would account for your coldness. Now that it has happened you've been doing a great job of covering up! You've been passing me the buck! After all, the three of you are close relatives."

Hartley had risen to his feet. "And outside of yourself, who do you now suspect of killing Nathan?" he asked.

"You know I didn't kill him," I told Hartley. I looked at Nina and hated to say what I intended. Her wide blue eyes held a deep fright as they stared back at me. "Nathan's murderer was—Nina's father!"

I saw Nina's eyes flick past me and I felt it coming! I tried to jerk aside but something heavy struck me a glancing

blow on the side of the head! As blackness swirled before my eyes, I fought to keep on my feet! Hands clutched at the gun and tore it from my grasp! I felt myself fall to my knees and then plow my nose in the rug! I was half out and I dimly heard voices and sensed fast movement around me!

It seemed like a long time before I could pull my nose out of that dusty rug and push myself to a sitting position. I shook my head and slowly things before my eyes came into focus.

HARTLEY stood a few feet away from me with the metal vase from the coffee table in his hand! He was looking down at Robbins, his brother, who lay stretched at his feet! Robbins was on his side and blood oozed from a nasty gash just above his temple! The gun was on the floor a few inches beyond his outstretched hand!

I dragged myself to my feet and glanced around for Nina. She was sitting where I had seen her last, sobbing quietly. I moved to Hartley's side. Every part of his body was shaking!

"I hope I didn't hit him too hard," he said.

"If you did there's nothing much we can do now," I told him. I put my arm around his shoulder and led him to a chair. "Let's sit down before we both fall down."

While Hartley sat and recovered his composure I recovered the gun and then seated myself opposite him.

He looked up at me. "You were right. I was trying to protect my brother," he said. "I knew he had murdered Nathan so I tried to fix things to make it look as though you had done it!" He found his makings and rolled himself a cigarette. "Months ago, when Nina found me in Nathan's room I had just gotten through helping the old man go back to sleep. I heard disturbing noises coming from his room and when I entered I had found my brother torturing Nathan to force him to disclose his secret! That shocked me greatly. From then on I made it a practice to look in Nathan's room two or three times a night. I was determined to watch my brother carefully. At about two-thirty this morning I was on my way to Nathan's room when I saw my

brother leaving it; carrying a long slender bag in his arms. I let him go by and then I went into the old man's room and found him strangled; but not with your tie! Then I hit upon a plan to throw suspicion away from my brother.

"The old fashioned key I have for our front door opened the connecting door to your room. I stole one of your ties and knotted it tightly around Nathan's throat! I went to his clothes closet to get the lock box and began to roll a cigarette. I didn't light it! I took the box and hid it behind your dresser! In other words, I framed you!"

Hartley dropped his face into the palms of his hands. I waited for him to continue. He lifted his face and looked at his brother on the floor. "But when

he attempted a double murder I couldn't stand it! I struck him!"

"And thank you Hartley," I said quietly.

The police arrived about ten minutes later and found a long slender canvas bag together with the brass ball hidden between Robbins' thick mattresses on his bed. The bag contained ninety-three thousand dollars in big bills.

Nathan's crazed old mind had hidden his fortune well but not well enough for Robbins.

I wasn't able to keep my promise to Nina and stay on as a boarder. Because after everything was over, she and her uncle sold the house and moved away. But I'm content; I have a nice room closer to the city where I work.



"Nick Ransom Talking... What's the Matter?"

THE feminine voice at the other end of the line quavered: "Nick, th-this is Candy Callahan. Oh-h-h, it's terrible! I can't go to the p-police but could you come see me right away? I n-need protection, Nick. If you don't come right away, somebody's going to murder me!"

Then there was a gasp, a muffled cry and the dull thud of something inert hitting the floor like the sound effect they use on a radio show for a body fall. After this the line went silent, dead. . . .

And it was the start of a new trail of baffling murder mystery for Hollywood Detective Nick Ransom in **PUZZLE IN PERIL**, the exciting complete novelet by Robert Leslie Bellem coming next issue. A novelet that races with action and suspense from start to finish—guaranteed to keep you guessing! Look forward to it.

The MAN Without a HEAD

"Did she have to get killed here?" he demanded. "Aren't there hundreds of other hotels?"

CHAPTER I

"WE GOT A MURDER!"

SHELTON SPOONER lounged in the chair by the window and idly turned the pages of a magazine. Across the sill, the summer sun swept the vast lawns of the Hotel Verdant, shone down on the well-oiled skins of its vacationing clientele.

The periodical in Shelton Spooner's

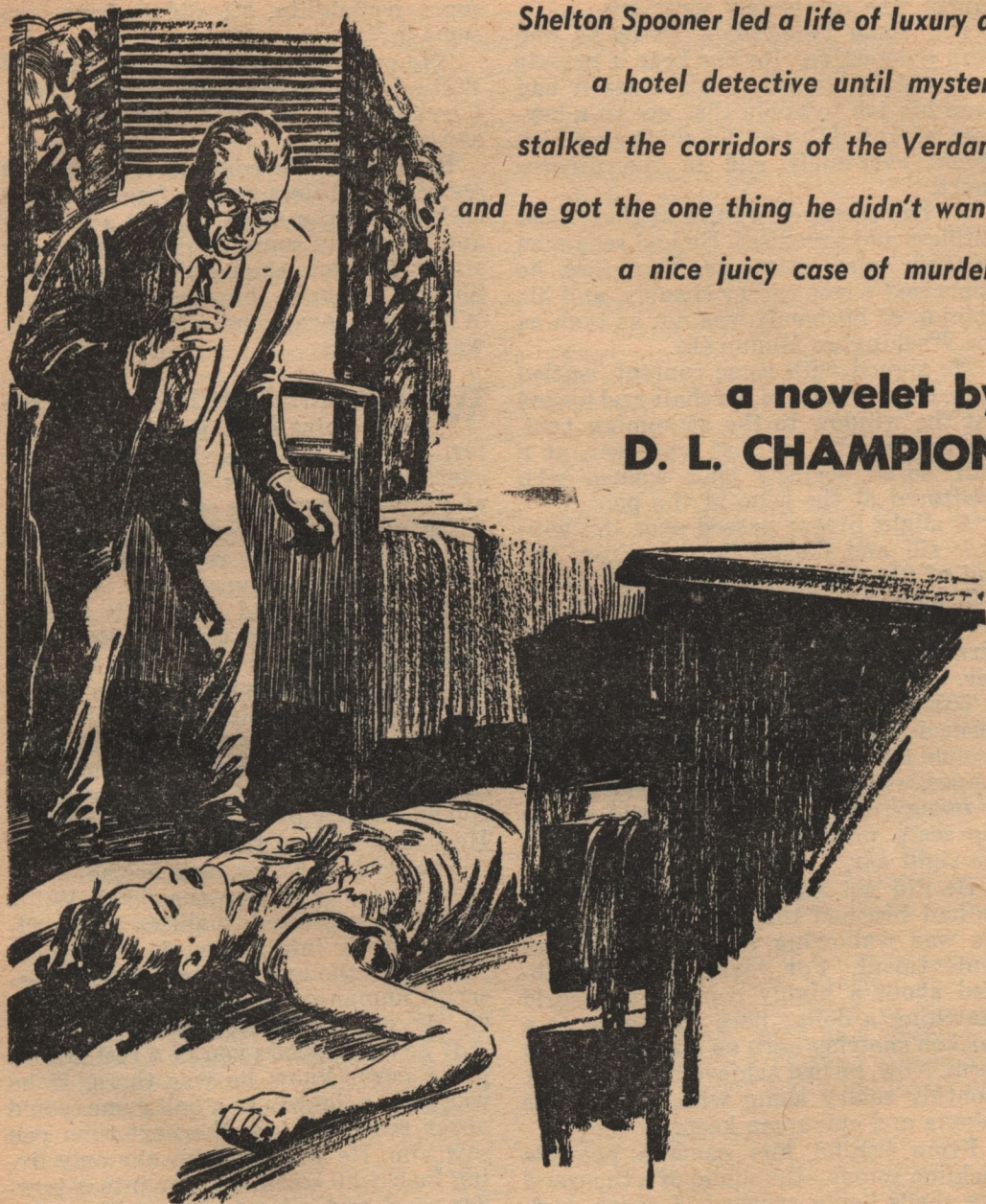


lap was printed on expensive glossy paper. The illustrations were of incredibly handsome men who, for the most part, were embracing even more incredibly beautiful women. The stories were skillfully written treatises on the subject of romantic love.

At the halfway point of one of these

*Shelton Spooner led a life of luxury as
a hotel detective until mystery
stalked the corridors of the Verdant
and he got the one thing he didn't want,
a nice juicy case of murder!*

**a novelet by
D. L. CHAMPION**



fables, Shelton Spooner scowled, uttered an incredulous snarl and tossed the magazine against the wall of his lavishly furnished cabana. In the ubiquitous matter of love there was no field of agreement at all where Shelton Spooner and the editorial board of a woman's magazine could meet.

Bitter experience had jaundiced Spooner's viewpoint. Not that he had ever married; not that a helium-brasiered Venus had ever poured ice water upon his flaming passion; nor had some unfortunate experience at the age of six made of him a woman-hater. No, Shelton Spooner's knowledge of these

things was completely vicarious.

For some twenty-odd years he had been a detective. He had been a private eye, and in almost all his cases it had been his job to apply that eye to a key-hole, gleaning the sordid evidence which would eventually end in the divorce court.

He had observed women at their most ruthless and greediest. He had seen men at their worst moments. Therefore, he appraised wives rather cheaply, and his opinion of husbands was not as high as the Washington Monument.

He sighed with some content, settled more comfortably in his chair and looked out the window to the swimming pool. He gazed, with no lust whatever, at a half dozen scantily clad women who chattered at the edge of the pool.

A slight breeze passed over the window sill and flicked the ash from the end of Shelton Spooner's cigarettes. It fell, a disintegrated gray mass, to his vest. Spooner sighed again and scratched his head in an abstracted manner.

This characteristic gesture transformed his entire appearance—by no means for the better. His worn gray toupee, which rather resembled a slightly mangy, octogenarian rat, slid across his scalp until it completely obscured his right ear.

He did not adjust it any more than he had brushed the ash from his vest. He was wallowing in vast and secure contentment. For years he had scrambled about a highly competitive world snatching a dollar here and there as a chicken snatches corn on a sub-marginal farm. Now, he had achieved a munificent monthly salary along with a luxurious cabana and epicurean keep.

From behind him came a horrible cackling sound—the sound of a thousand egg shells being crushed. A voice, high pitched and shrill, said, "Get a load of that one in the white bathing suit! Golly, if I was fifty years younger—"

Shelton Spooner turned in his chair to face Willie Lightfoot. Willie winked an ancient, lewd eye and left to Spooner's imagination the immorality he would have committed half a century ago.

"Hello, Willie," said Spooner with

some irritability. "I didn't hear you come in."

"No one ever hears me come in," said Willie Lightfoot proudly. "By Godfrey, I could sneak up on a rabbit with its ear cupped!"

He sat on the edge of the bed and opened a toothless mouth. Again a weird cackle filled the room. It was a grating and unearthly sound which would have struck fear into the heart of a stranger. Shelton Spooner, however, knew that Willie was overcome with mirth. He was laughing.

WILLIE LIGHTFOOT, not to put too fine a point upon it, was a character. No one, including Willie, knew his exact age. However, whenever the names of Baruch, Hoover, or other hoary celebrities were mentioned, Willie made it quite clear that he regarded them as young and pushing upstarts.

He was thin and bent. His clothes were unpressed and shabby. From his right ear dangled the cord of a hearing device which was as necessary to him as water wings to a dolphin.

Some seven years ago Willie had appeared out of a blizzard one morning and attached himself to Spooner's payroll at a salary of fifteen dollars a week. He had remained there ever since.

The deal, however, was neither completely charitable nor one-sided. Willie Lightfoot possessed qualities which fitted perfectly into Spooner's profession. Willie was the most unobtrusive, nondescript human organism that ever existed. No one ever noticed him.

If he sat opposite you in a restaurant, you'd never know he was there. If he was your neighbor at a ball game, you'd never recognize him the next time you saw him. He was probably the only living man who could blunder into a powder room and get out again without being observed.

He affected a pair of thick-lensed spectacles which he needed like an eagle needs a telescope. His tremendous shoes were soled and heeled with thick rubber, a fact which enabled him to move like an Indian tracker.

He was a perfect eavesdropper and an accurate eye-witness. Defendants were stricken with horror and amaze-

ment when they heard Willie's testimony concerning their most guarded secrets.

Now, Willie took a battered, evil-looking pipe from his pocket and proceeded to fill it with the cheapest tobacco ever swept from the floors of a Carolina warehouse.

"Shelton," he said, shaking his head sadly, "we was crazy to take a job like this."

Spooner scratched his toupee. This time it slid forward, obscuring the vision of his right eye.

"Willie," he said, "we've discussed this before. I hold to my original opinion that you're an old fool."

Willie Lightfoot leaned forward. He cupped a gnarled hand about his hearing device.

"Hey? How's that?"

"Don't pull that deaf act on me," said Spooner with some asperity. "You can hear like a submarine detector and you know it!"

Willie grinned, then grunted contemptuously. "Just a couple of sissy ducks. Hotel detectives in a summer resort. If we was ever introduced to Edgar Hoover, he'd refuse to shake hands with us."

Shelton Spooner pushed the toupee out of his eye. "Now, listen," he said severely. "For a guy who looks to be a hundred years old, you have an extremely juvenile mind. When we sat around in our Times Square office waiting and praying for fat matrons to engage us to prove their husbands were knocking hell out of the Seventh Commandment, a buck was mighty hard to come by. Now, we have a cinch. I'm a house detective at an eminently respectable resort hotel. There's nothing to do, and we eat with astonishing regularity. We can also put a dollar aside for a stormy day. What more do you want?"

Willie Lightfoot moved uneasily on the edge of the bed. "Godfrey," he said, "I don't like this job. And I didn't like our other job, either. Divorces! What sort of job is that for detectives?"

Spooner sighed. There were occasions when Willie, despite his shrewdness, behaved rather like a retarded child.

"Detectives," went on Willie, "should do important things."

"Such as?"

"Murders. Spy stuff. Arson. And—" Willie cocked a bright eye out the window toward the swimming pool and thought of another felony.

"You're an old goat," began Spooner, and then the telephone rang.

Willie Lightfoot reached out and picked it up. He said "Hello" into the mouthpiece. He was silent for a moment, then he said in an exaggeratedly shocked tone, "Do tell!" He was silent once more. His voice was suddenly one of outraged morality as he exclaimed, "Can such things be!" He listened again, said, "Yes, ma'am, I'll tell him. He'll attend to it right away." Then he hung up and his ghastly cackling laughter echoed through the elegant room.

"Shelton, that was Room Eight-oh-two. You know it?"

Spooner nodded. He was acquainted with 802. She was an angular school teacher possessed of gray hair and a flat chest. She had an excellently functioning larynx and a constantly moving tongue. She was nosy, garrulous and a scold.

"Well," said Willie, "she's complaining that there's a man in the next room."

Spooner shrugged. "So what? Maybe they're married."

Willie shook his hoary head emphatically. "No, sir. She's already checked that. When she heard this guy talking loud in Eight-oh-three she went downstairs and checked the register. That room is *Miss Mary Harboard*."

"So," said Spooner, "what does she want me to do?"

"Put a stop to this immorality," said Willie, "though I bet she's got her ear to the wall and is hoping for the worst right now."

Spooner reluctantly got out of his chair.

"All right," he said. "I'll look into it. I'll be right back."

As he walked toward the door, Willie clucked like an old hen. "Detectives!" he snorted. "Putting guys out of hotel rooms!" Then he went over to the window, singled out the girl in the white bathing suit and gave himself over to the study of certain aspects of anatomy.

SPOONER walked to the main building and knocked discreetly on the

door of 803. Nothing happened. He knocked again with no result. He ran his fingers through his hair. His toupee backed up until it was draped over the nape of his neck. After a thoughtful moment, he took the hotel pass-key from his pocket, inserted it in the lock.

He opened the door of 803 and stepped across the threshold. He stood there for a paralyzed instant, blinking rapidly, aware simultaneously of a vacuum at the pit of his stomach and an ice cube at the base of his spine.

He slammed the door hastily behind him. He walked across the room to a point halfway between the window and the bed. There was an expression of urgent alarm on his face as he knelt at the side of what was presumably the corpse of Miss Mary Harboard.

She was a woman of perhaps thirty—tall, slender and with a build which would have caused a gleam in Willie Lightfoot's eye. She was dressed in a white negligee, the top of which was by no means its original color.

She lay on her back and her unseeing eyes stared at the ceiling. The red slash in her white throat extended almost from ear to ear. The knife whose blade had obviously killed her lay, red-stained, on the carpet at her side.

Futilely, Shelton Spooner touched her pulse. As he had assumed, there was no answering beat. He blinked again and stood up. As he did so he noted that there was a wide smear of blood on his left hand.

He jerked a clean linen handkerchief from his hip pocket and rubbed the crimson stain off. He scratched his toupee frenziedly with both hands and gave himself over to deep thought.

Certainly no one likes trouble, but Shelton Spooner was more allergic to it than most men. He experienced no difficulty in turning down the fattest fee if he suspected a case would involve him in any personal anguish, physical or mental.

Murder was something he wanted very little of. And when that murder took place in a hotel wherein he held the job of house detective, he wanted no part of it at all.

He crossed the room and stood for a moment before the dressing-table mir-

ror. He adjusted his toupee. He examined himself to make sure he bore no bloodstains. He rubbed his hand again with his handkerchief. Then he went quietly out into the hall and rang the elevator bell.

Barry Blount, the manager of the Verdant Hotel, was a stout man and of a cherubic countenance. He was possessed of two chins and a professional smile which rarely left his lips. His job required that he combine the qualities of a host, a shepherd and an ability to collect overdue bills without ruffling the temper of his guests. In all these things he succeeded admirably.

On this particular afternoon he was studying his accountant's figures with satisfaction when Spooner came into his office and slipped into the chair on the other side of the desk. Blount greeted him heartily by name, and added:

"How's the job?"

Shelton Spooner quelled the uneasiness within him and said with the proper note of regret,

"Well, Blount, I'll tell you. It's not quite the sort of work I'm fitted for. I've a couple of cases offered me in the city."

"Don't be silly," said Blount. "This job is a cinch! Nothing ever happens at the Verdant Hotel. All you have to do is sit still and draw your pay."

"Exactly! It makes me feel guilty." It was true that Shelton Spooner felt guilty, but not for the reason he professed. "It's too quiet here, Blount. I hate to let you down, but I want to offer my resignation."

Blount shrugged his huge shoulders. "Well," he said, "if you insist. When do you want your resignation to take effect?"

"Now," said Shelton Spooner, and there was vast relief in his tone. "I can get the five-o'clock train out of here. You can get someone else easily enough."

Blount looked disapproving. "You might have given more notice," he said. "But I dare say the Verdant can get along for a day or two without a house detective. The job's only for front, anyway. Heaven knows we have no need for the law here, with our high-class clientele."

An invisible burden slid from Spooner's shoulders. He stood up saying,

"Thanks a lot, Blount. I'll get back to town right away. You can forget about the few days' salary you owe me. I—"

And at that moment, Willie Lightfoot came into the room. His face was lit up like a television studio and his eyes glittered like a heliograph.

"Shelton!" he cried. "Mr. Blount! We got a murder! We got a murder!"

CHAPTER II

A PAWN TICKET



WILLIE made the announcement with the fervor of a child who has just discovered the Big Rock Candy Mountain. Shelton Spooner wondered bitterly if Willie would next jump up and down and clap his hands.

"Yes, sir!" went on Willie, glowing like a happy headlight. "I got tired waiting for you, Shelton, so I went downstairs to Eight-oh-three. There was no answer when I knocked at the door, so exercising my authority as assistant house detective, I got a master key from the desk and let myself in. There she was on the floor. Dead! Her throat cut—from ear to ear!"

Willie Lightfoot paused for breath, beaming upon his audience, whose response was by no means as enthusiastic as his recital. The habitual rich, red color had drained from Blount's face. The cold apprehension which settled in Spooner's heart was almost canceled by the hot wrath he felt for Willie.

Blount found his voice first.

"It can't be true," he said weakly.

"True as gospel," said Willie Lightfoot. "She's dead as a dinosaur! Come on up and look."

He sounded as if he were issuing an invitation to a ball. Blount rubbed a massive hand over his face. He transferred his gaze from Willie to Spooner. Suspicion crawled into his eyes.

"Spooner, you were in that room before you came here, weren't you? You knew that woman was dead?"

Shelton Spooner glared at Willie, who met his gaze blandly. He shifted uneasily in his chair and murmured a scarcely audible "Yes."

"You dirty double-crosser," said Blount indignantly. "You find a dead woman, then try to run out on me. A fine pal you are!"

"Now, wait a minute," said Spooner defensively. "I don't mind facing trouble of my own. But I hate to get mixed up in someone else's. I'm no good to you in a case like this. I might as well get out of the way and let the local authorities handle it."

Blount appeared deaf to this argument. "A fine pal," he said again. "What kind of a detective *are* you?"

"Not that kind," said Spooner emphatically. "I'm strictly a divorce and guard-the-wedding-presents lad. Willie and I can't handle anything like this."

"By Godfrey," said Willie Lightfoot, "we certainly can!"

Spooner breathed a sigh of despair. Willie was giving him a most difficult afternoon.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Blount," said Willie. "I've started working on this case already."

"What do you mean?" Blount asked, without much hope.

Willie reached into his breast pocket and withdrew an unsealed Verdant Hotel envelope.

"In here," he said, "I have a handkerchief I found in the dead woman's room." He added impressively, "It's got blood on it!"

"Maybe," said Blount without enthusiasm, "it belongs to the corpse."

"No, sir. It's a man's handkerchief."

A thought struck Shelton Spooner like an invisible mallet. He jerked his hand to his hip pocket. It was flat and empty. A gnawing horror invaded his stomach. There was cold sweat on his forehead as he heard Blount say:

"So? There are fifty million men who own handkerchiefs."

Willie Lightfoot regarded the manager with a little pity and vast superiority.

"Sure, there are a million men with handkerchiefs," he said. "But they all got different laundry marks. We can trace this one, see? We find out who it belongs to and we got the killer."

Blount took heart. "Why, that's fine!"

Shelton Spooner groaned. He said bitterly: "Willie, you cretin, give me my

handkerchief."

Blount glanced sharply at him. "Do you mean—"

"I only mean," said Shelton Spooner wearily, "that I quite naturally examined the woman to see if she was beyond help. In that process I got blood on my hands. I wiped it off on my handkerchief. I evidently left it behind for this super-annuated Sherlock Holmes to find."

BLOUNT folded a pair of fat hands over the broad expanse of his vest. There was a thoughtful gleam in his eye. "Spooner, I'll make you a deal," he said.

Shelton Spooner shook his head. "I resigned fifteen minutes ago."

Blount said "Hah!" and managed to make quite an unpleasant sound out of it. "From the standpoint of the hotel," he went on, "it would be gratifying if we could announce that our own detective staff was working on the case as well as the authorities. Moreover, your presence could act as a buffer between the coppers and me and the guests and me. This is going to be an unpleasant period. I need you, Spooner."

Spooner squirmed in his chair. Blount went on.

"If the coppers knew that you'd found the dead woman and tried to run out on me, that you'd left a blood stained handkerchief in the room, they would quite likely toss you in a cell—at least as a material witness."

Shelton Spooner scratched his head. His agitated toupee cocked itself jauntily over his left ear. "It's hardly necessary to tell the coppers about me," he said. "None of the things I did have any bearing on the murder."

"True," said Blount. "And I should not find it necessary to tell them anything if you remain here on the job."

Spooner turned a furious gaze on Willie Lightfoot, who grinned amiably back at him. Finally, he shrugged his shoulders and said in the tone of a thoroughly beaten man:

"All right. Have the operator call the coppers, and then let's go up and take a look at the murder room."

The three of them moved out to the elevator. Blount led the way, rubbing

his hands nervously and resembling a man bearing an invisible cross. Spooner followed, his shoulders bent and reluctance riding him like a jockey. Willie Lightfoot brought up the rear. His ancient cheeks glowed like a tail-light. His eyes were bright. He looked like nothing more than a child who has just been given clear title to a soda fountain.

On his previous visit to 803 Spooner had paid no attention to detail. He had been conscious of but two facts. One was the corpse of Mary Harboard; the other was his own consuming desire to take a hasty departure from the Verdant Hotel.

Now, as he stood in the center of the room, it became obvious that the criminal had called with an additional motive to murder. The premises had been ransacked. Bureau drawers were half open, their contents in disarray.

On the table at the side of the bed lay a green leather pocketbook. It was open and its contents scattered. It had quite apparently been searched.

In addition to this fact, Spooner noted that there were two cameras upon the window sill. He needed no close examination to know that they had cost a great deal of money. Beside them were three albums designed to hold pictures. Spooner grunted. He crossed the room and opened the closet door.

Expensive clothing was draped on the hangers, though it was obvious from its rumpled condition that the killer had also conducted his search here. Beside the clothing the closet contained a great deal of expensive photographic equipment.

Shelton Spooner turned around and dropped into a chair by the window. Blount stood at the foot of the bed regarding the body of his guest with horror, not completely untempered with indignation.

He shook his head miserably and lifted his eyes to Heaven.

"Did she have to get killed here?" he demanded. "Aren't there hundreds of other hotels?"

Obtaining no reply from above, Blount centered his gaze on Spooner.

"Well," he said, "get to work."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"How do I know?" roared Blount. "Do

whatever detectives always do. Look around. Find clues. Get confessions. For my sake, do something!"

Shelton Spooner closed his eyes as if he were a man undergoing great suffering. He said, "I'm in enough trouble. I don't propose to get in any more by messing around before the coppers get here. After they've done their checking, I'll do what I can."

His tone implied that what he could do was not going to be very much.

ACROSS the room, Willie was still beaming happily. Spooner shot a venomous glance at him. He reflected that if Willie had kept his bulbous nose out of room 803, they could be safely back in town, sitting in their dingy midtown office. Never before had Shelton Spooner regarded that office with anything but distaste, but now his heart overflowed with nostalgia.

It was late afternoon when the Law arrived. It was personified by a dapper little man named Bagle, who was district attorney for the county, and a massive red-faced gentleman in a uniform which drooled with gold. This was Maynard, the police chief of the neighboring town of Dellville. Accompanying this pair were various fingerprint men and camera experts borrowed from the State Police, and half a dozen nondescript coppers of the local force.

They went into their act with bewildering efficiency. Bagle made no attempt to conceal his contempt for such free-lance detectives as Spooner and Willie Lightfoot. He barked questions at them and Blount, wrote down the answers, then ordered them all from the premises.

Spooner went back to his cabana. He felt very much relieved. He was still furious at Willie, but grateful that Blount had mentioned neither the handkerchief nor the matter of his attempted resignation. He sank down in his thickly padded chair and glared across the room at his assistant.

"Willie," he said severely, "I'd give you the beating of your life if you were twenty years younger. And," he added wryly, "if I were, too."

"Hey? How's that again?" Willie Lightfoot had draped his ancient hand

about his hearing device.

Spooner lifted his voice and repeated, "I'd give you the beating—" Then he remembered and exploded. "Stop that phony deaf act! You can hear every word. You're a meddlesome, senile idiot!"

Willie tried nobly to look contrite. "Aw, gee, Shelton, I didn't know it was your handkerchief. Anybody could have made a mistake like that." He paused and brightened. "But, by Godfrey, I bet I didn't make a mistake this time. I bet I outsmarted those uppity coppers!"

A leaden ball began to evolve in Spooner's stomach.

"Willie, what have you done now?" he queried.

Willie cackled. He thrust a hand into his pocket, took it out again holding a yellow oblong of thin cardboard.

"It's a pawn ticket."

"Where did you get it?"

"It was among that stuff on the table, the stuff which must have fallen out of her bag."

Shelton Spooner clapped his hand to his forehead and his toupee bounced like a live thing. Before he could speak, Willie went on.

"Did you notice her jewelry on the dresser? She looked like a rich dame, Shelton. And while you was peeking into the closet, I saw a bankbook in her purse. I look at it, quick like. She's got a balance of over twenty thousand dollars."

"Why are you telling me all this drivel?"

"To explain why I swiped the hock ticket."

"Well, curse you, why?"

"Because I figure it's a clue. Why should a dame with all that dough hock a portable radio for five dollars. Here, look at this."

Spooner took the ticket with trembling fingers. A glance showed him that the radio had been pawned in New York City four days ago. The amount of the pledge was five dollars.

He placed the ticket on the edge of his chair and fixed Willie with an icy gaze.

"You're still meddling," he said. "This time, you've gone too far. Do you know what the police will do to you for concealing evidence?"

"No-o," said Willie slowly. "But I guess it won't be any more'n they'll do to you for trying to resign without telling Blount about the corpse and your handkerchief and—"

"Are you threatening me?"

Willie didn't answer. He shrugged his shoulders, blinked his eyes and looked as innocent as a freshly laundered diaper.

"All right," said Spooner wearily. "Go to bed. We'll sleep on this. I'll decide what to do in the morning."

CHAPTER III

SKELETON KEYS



SHELTON SPOONER ate a leisurely, if uneasy, breakfast as he pounded the matter of the purloined pawn ticket. He knew quite well that the police department would take an exceedingly dim view of Willie's action.

He was still undecided as he pushed his chair away from the table and went over to Blount's office to acquaint himself with the latest developments.

Willie Lightfoot was loitering in the corridor. His expression was that of a man lost completely in his own thoughts. Spooner knew better. A steady thrum of voices sounded from the office and Willie, he knew, was eavesdropping every syllable.

Spooner slid quietly into the room. Blount sat at his desk, and standing at his side was Bagle. Facing them was a short man of middle age with a dark face and a gleaming bald head.

Blount glanced up. "This," he announced, "is Mr. Grimes—Mary Harboard's attorney. This is Shelton Spooner, our detective."

Grimes acknowledged the introduction while Bagle sneered audibly at the last word in Blount's sentence. The district attorney said sharply:

"Let's waive the formalities. Now, Mr. Grimes, can you tell us anything more about this fellow?"

"Well," Grimes said, "as I have already told you, his name is Weldon. And he was desperately in love with Miss Harboard. She'd have no part of him.

He threatened her, but she laughed that off. So did I, when she told me. And I'll never forgive myself for it."

Bagle jotted something in a black notebook. "Can you give us a description?"

"Well, I only saw him once or twice, but I guess I can remember what he looks like. He was singularly tall. About six feet, four. A tremendous mop of blond hair, light complexion, and he wears glasses."

Bagle transcribed this data in his black book. "Shouldn't be hard to find a man like that," he observed. "Recall anything else about him?"

Grimes looked thoughtful. "Well, there are his hands. He's got stubby fingers and unmanicured, uneven nails."

There was a vague note of contempt in his tone as he spoke. Shelton Spooner glanced at him and knew why. Grimes's own hands were small, elegant and well kept. He gestured freely when speaking. It was apparent that the lawyer was inordinately proud of them.

"You've given us a first-rate description," said Bagle. "I'll send an alarm out at once."

"What about my client's effects?" asked Grimes. "I guess you've been through everything by now. May I take charge of her property?"

"Sure," said Bagle. "Thanks to your evidence, the case seems cut and dried. We'll have this Weldon within forty-eight hours!"

Grimes nodded and left the room.

"Mr. Spooner," Bagle said, "you may resume your routine duties. The police have this murder case well in hand."

Spooner looked at him for a long, thoughtful moment. Then he turned on his heel and marched from the room. In the hall, he bumped into Willie Lightfoot.

"Willie," he said, "here's five dollars. Go to New York and get that radio out of hock."

Willie beamed. "I thought you was going to turn the ticket over to the coppers."

"I've changed my mind," said Shelton Spooner. "Or, rather, Mr. Grimes has changed it for me."

Spooner spent the rest of the day lounging in his chair by the window

overlooking the swimming pool. Despite his outward air of lassitude, he was a disturbed man. He asked himself for perhaps the twentieth time, why on earth had he sent Willie to town with the pawn ticket?

True, he was working on something more than a hunch, but he had no reason to believe that he would get anywhere. Bagle certainly didn't like him, and if it was ever discovered that he had swiped the pawn ticket and dehooked the radio, he would be swimming in trouble.

He sighed, blowing the ash from the end of his cigarette onto his vest.

He had done a little nosing around that morning in an effort to learn the antecedents of the dead woman. He knew now that she was a professional photographer with a studio on East 32nd Street in New York City, that she was apparently well off, and that she possessed no near relations.

These facts, he reflected glumly, didn't add up to much when it came to solving a murder case.

IT WAS about four o'clock when Willie Lightfoot came into the room as quietly as a snake wearing gum shoes. In his hand he was carrying a leather-covered portable radio, which he set down on the table. He regarded it ruefully.

"I don't see how this is going to do us any good," he said. "It's just an ordinary radio. I looked it over very carefully on the train."

A sharp gust of wind came from the direction of the swimming pool. It smote Shelton Spooner's toupee and blew a wisp of dust from its moth-eaten core.

"Did you look inside the radio?" Spooner said.

Willie blinked at him. "Now, why would I want to look inside? I don't know nothing about the working of these machines."

"It's only an extension of your own theory," said Spooner. "You asked me why a woman of apparent wealth would hock a radio for five bucks. The obvious answer is that she was hiding something. On the same principle that crooks stash hot goods in checked suitcases."

Willie Lightfoot looked at Spooner admiringly.

"Godfrey!" he said. "That's smart, Shelton!"

He pried the back from the radio and peered inside. He uttered a sharp, cackling exclamation and pulled a small, white envelope from inside the portable.

Willie's fingers groped inside the envelope and withdrew a photographic negative. He uttered a guttural sound of triumph, and carried the negative to the window and held it up to the waning light.

"Shelton, it's a pitcher," he cried in shrill astonishment.

"A pitcher the woman took while she was being killed!"

"Sure," said Spooner. "Then after she was killed she got up, pawned the radio and came back to lie down until I found her."

Willie's nod indicated he appreciated the sarcastic logic. "But," he insisted, "I tell you it's a pitcher of her being killed."

Spooner took the negative away from him and examined it. It was none too clear, yet there was a woman lying on a floor with a man standing over her. There was a white ring about the woman's throat which could well be blood. Her features were unmistakably those of Mary Harboard.

Spooner would have given a great deal to have been able to see the man's face in the picture. But at the moment it had been shot, he had averted his head. He stood over the woman in a crouching position and his body had photographed excellently, but his face was turned in the opposite direction to the lens.

Shelton Spooner scratched his head. His toupee moved wearily with his fingers. He stared out at the dusk and the swimming pool for a long time. His brow was corrugated in thought.

"I don't figure it out at all, at all," said Willie Lightfoot. "That's a pitcher of her being killed, all right. But how could she have took it?"

"I don't know," said Spooner, "but the hunch I was working on is getting stronger and stronger." He paused for a moment, and then added, "You remember that bunch of skeleton keys you

bought a couple of years ago?"

"Sure. And you bawled me out for wasting money. Everybody knows detectives got to have pass-keys."

"Do we still have them?"

"Sure. In my desk in town." He brightened suddenly. "You mean we're going to use 'em. You mean we're going to break in somewhere, Shelton?"

"We're going to break in somewhere," said Spooner pettishly. "But don't be so darned enthusiastic about it!"

SHORTLY before midnight, one of Willie Lightfoot's bargain skeleton keys admitted him and Spooner to the studio on East 32nd Street which had been occupied by Mary Harboard. Willie looked like a happy and hopped-up housebreaker. Spooner resembled a burglar who is quite sure the cops will burst in on him before his task is done.

The studio was a large square room, littered with various props and equipment. A door on its left gave on to a small hall, which in turn led to the kitchen, bath and bedroom.

"Well," said Willie gayly, "what are we looking for?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Spooner. "But let's look, hope and pray."

Willie went to work on the three rooms off the hall. Spooner proceeded to frisk the studio, first going through the bulging photographic files.

He had looked at several hundred pictures before he came across the headless man. It was a clear, well-developed picture of a group at the beach. Mary Harboard was one of that group, and standing beside her was a man in bathing trunks. The extraordinary thing about him was that he had no head. It had been clipped neatly from the photograph.

Spooner looked at the print for a long time. A dozen thoughts struggled for dominance in his brain and became inextricably mixed up. At that point, Willie wandered in from the hall.

"I didn't find nothing," he said. "I went through a bunch of canceled checks, figuring she might have been paying big sums to someone. This Weldon, maybe. I thought that if we could prove that, we—"

"Canceled checks?" said Spooner suddenly. Then he added tensely, "Tell me, did you find any made out to Grimes?"

Willie shook his head.

"Are you certain?"

"Positive! Why should she make out checks to him?"

"He's her lawyer, isn't he? Did you ever hear of a lawyer who never sent a bill?"

As he spoke, Spooner was replacing the pictures. He left the print of the headless man until last. He studied it a long time, then finally put it back in the files.

"Look," said Willie excitedly, "I got a theory! Just when this dame is getting killed, a fellow comes along with a camera. He sees the murder through the window and he takes a shot of it. Instead of calling the coppers he figures he'll blackmail the murderer. But he wants to hide the negative so the killer can't take it away from him, so he plants it in that radio and hocks the radio. How's that?"

He looked at Spooner like a clever seal awaiting its rewarding fish.

"You may be closer than you know," said Spooner. "But is your theory flexible enough to provide that this guy who took the picture was in an airplane?"

"Airplane? Why?"

"Otherwise, how could he shoot a picture of a room on the eighth floor of the Verdant Hotel?"

"Oh," Willie said despondently, and pulled his pipe from his pocket.

"You've got good eyes," Spooner said. "Look up Grimes' address in the telephone book."

Willie named a lower Broadway address. He rubbed his hand in anticipation and said,

"Are we going to break in there, too, Shelton?"

"We're going to break in there, too," said Spooner sepulchrally. "And I hope you're still happy when you face the judge in the morning."

"You're crazy," said Willie. "They'll never catch us. We're a couple of pretty smart detectives."

It was almost four o'clock when they emerged from the subway into the deserted reaches of lower Broadway.

Again Willie's bargain keys proved effective. On the third try the lock turned and they entered the offices of Gregory Grimes.

"What are we looking for this time?" asked Willie.

"More checks," said Spooner. "I want to look through Grimes' canceled checks. Let's see if we can find them."

CHAPTER IV

A NEATLY WRAPPED-UP MURDER CASE



AFTER a ten-minute search, they found the checks bundled neatly in a wooden box behind a row of filing cabinets. Spooner rubbed the sleep from his eyes and went to work. When he had finished, he carefully replaced everything he had disturbed, stretched and yawned.

Some of Willie's enthusiasm had drained away. He yawned, too. He peered out the window toward the rising sun beyond the East River.

"Can we go to bed now, Shelton?" he asked.

"You can," said Spooner. "Go to your room and lie down. I've still got a day's work ahead of me. I'll call for you when I'm ready to go back to the hotel."

A footfall sounded in the hall outside. Spooner's heart thumped in his breast. A key was inserted in the lock. The door suddenly opened. A charwoman came in.

She was a wide woman, with a prominent jaw and an even more prominent posterior. She carried a bucket in one hand, a mop that looked rather like Shelton Spooner's toupee in the other.

"I didn't know there was anyone in here," she said in a voice loaded with suspicion.

"Ah, yes," said Spooner. "Been here all night, preparing a difficult brief. A very important case."

The charwoman softened a little. Willie Lightfoot said, "Yes, sir, a murder case!" Then he threw his head back and unleashed one of his more eerie cackles. The charwoman, her auditory system somewhat shaken, backed up.

Spooner seized this opportunity to es-

cape into the hall. Willie followed along after him. The woman was still staring at them as they disappeared around a corner of the corridor.

"Where you going to?" Willie said when they reached the street.

"To see a friend of mine," Spooner answered. "A police reporter. Then I'm going to spend some time in the Criminal Courts Building. You'd better go to bed."

Willie nodded.

"I might as well. But, by Godfrey, I wouldn't if they still had burlesque shows in this sissy town!"

Shelton Spooner completed his investigations late in the afternoon. He traveled uptown to his own furnished room, showered and changed his clothes. Then he lay down on his bed and took an unintended nap.

He slept for several hours. Thus it was some time after midnight when he and Willie Lightfoot returned to the Hotel Verdant.

Despite the lateness of the hour, there was a light burning in Blount's office. Spooner entered without knocking, Willie trailing along unobtrusively behind him. Blount sat at his desk, his usually pink cheeks haggard. Facing him and frowning over a cigar was Bagle.

"Great grief," Blount said to the district attorney, "you've got to do something!" He smote his desk indignantly. "That pompous hick police chief, Maynard, is free-loading on me to the tune of sixty dollars a day!"

Bagle took the cigar from his mouth to answer, but before he could speak Blount continued in outraged accents.

"He's commandeered Cabana Number Three. He's living in there with two of his men. Guarding the hotel, he says. Why, I can rent that place for fifty bucks per diem, without meals!"

"Take it easy," said Bagle. "You don't want another killing, do you?"

"I didn't want the first one," snapped Blount. "But can't you coppers do something? Why haven't you found this man Weldon?"

Bagle shrugged. "I don't know. There's a four-state alarm out and he's an easy guy to spot from the description. Heaven only knows why we haven't heard something!"

"I know," said Shelton Spooner modestly.

They both looked at him. "What the devil do you mean?" asked Bagle.

"I mean," said Spooner, "that I know why you've heard nothing of Weldon."

Bagle blinked. "Why?"

"Because he doesn't exist. He's a figment."

"Figment-pigment," growled Blount. "What are you talking about?"

"If Mr. Bagle will come to our cabana," said Spooner, "I'll place a neatly wrapped-up murder case in his lap. You, Blount, may go to bed and sleep easily."

A somewhat dubious Bagle followed Spooner and Willie across the well-kept lawn, past the cabana where Chief Maynard snored in free-loading luxury, to Spooner's quarters.

IN THE living room, Spooner sank into the padded chair by the open window. Willie leaned up against the wall and Bagle stood looking inquiringly at Shelton Spooner.

"First," said Spooner, "let me make a confession."

He related the facts of the purloined pawn ticket, the redeeming of the radio and the discovery of the negative. Then he took the negative from his pocket and handed it to Bagle.

Bagle took it and his face grew grim. "Withholding evidence," he said. "Obstructing justice. Do you know what's going to happen to you?"

"Nothing," said Shelton Spooner calmly. "Not after I've solved your murder case for you. It'd be very bad publicity if you indicted me after that. The papers might label it professional jealousy."

Bagle grunted. He took the negative from its envelope and handed it up to the light. Then he uttered a tremor as oath.

"It's a picture of the Harboard woman being killed! How could it have been taken?"

"Let's go back to Weldon," said Spooner. "It had been my intention to hand that ticket over to you—until I heard Grimes describe Weldon. Then I decided to keep it and find out why Grimes had told such a prodigious lie."

"Lie? How do you know he lied?"

"Suppose," said Spooner, "you wanted

to throw someone off the trail by a description. Naturally, you use opposites. That is, your details would be exactly the opposite of the facts. Grimes said Weldon was tall. Grimes is short. Weldon had thick hair. Grimes is bald. Weldon wore glasses. Grimes doesn't. And the pay-off was the hands."

"Hands?"

"Surely. Grimes has elegant hands, the hands of a violinist. He's very proud of them. So he added another opposite. He said Weldon's fingers were stubby, his nails were unmanicured and uneven. Now all those things put together don't describe anyone positively so much as they describe Grimes negatively."

"So?" said Bagle slowly.

"In addition to everything else, it's too pat a description for a guy Grimes said he'd only seen once or twice. I decided to investigate. Yesterday, using a pass-key, I examined the studio of Miss Harboard and searched Grimes' office."

"Hah!" said Bagle. "Unlawful entry."

"Unlawful entry," agreed Spooner blandly. "But before you sign the warrant, listen to what I found."

"I'm listening," said Bagle. "And it better be good."

Willie Lightfoot cackled. "How good can you get?" he asked. "We just busted a murder case open!"

As he uttered the last word, his old eyes narrowed. He cocked his left ear like a bird dog, as if he had heard something inaudible to the others.

"Among other things," said Spooner, "I found a photographic print of a man whose head had been neatly cut out of the picture."

"What of it?"

Shelton Spooner sighed. "It's simple enough. Here we have a negative of a man apparently murdering a woman. But his face doesn't show in that negative. It could be anyone. So a professional photographer cuts a head from another picture, superimposes it on the negative and fakes a picture which clearly shows the man's face."

Bagle thought this over and nodded his head slowly.

"Blackmail," he said.

"Blackmail, of course," said Spooner. "Mary Harboard was blackmailing Grimes."

Bagle frowned. "You need more proof."

"I've got it! Mary Harboard was Grimes' client. Yet among her canceled checks there was never one made out to him. Among *his* canceled checks there were several, totaling thousands of dollars, made out to her. Can you conceive of a lawyer who pays his client and never collects a fee himself?"

"I still don't get it," said Bagle. "How can she blackmail Grimes with a picture of him killing her. It's impossible! Moreover, that radio was hocked before she was killed, so how could it have been made?"

"That was another question with an obvious answer. Since it is impossible that the woman in the picture is Mary Harboard, the resemblance may only be explained by assuming the woman is a close relative, probably a sister." He paused, and added slowly, "Grimes was married to Ruth Harboard, Mary's sister. She died in an auto accident three years ago."

BAGLE frowned. "But if she died in an accident—"

"Wait," said Spooner. "I picked up a lot of facts today and I've filled in the holes with conjecture. At the time of Ruth's death, she and her husband lived in the country. One night, Mary calls on them. She drives up and approaches the house. The Grimes couple are having a tremendous fight in the living room as Mary approaches. And remember, Mary has her camera with her.

"As Mary hesitates outside the living-room window, Grimes suddenly grabs a knife and kills his wife. Almost instinctively, Mary shoots the picture. Then she is too frightened to enter the house. She runs back to her car and returns home.

"First, she considers calling the police, then she hesitates. She knows Grimes is a rich man, a playboy, who has often quarreled with Ruth about his extra-marital affairs. Perhaps she can take a better revenge than the law, and do herself some good, too. She can blackmail him. She can force him to live in constant terror of exposure. She waits to see what Grimes' next move is.

"The next day she finds out. She

reads that Ruth has been killed in an auto accident. Grimes, of course, has faked this. She develops her negative in order to show him a print. Then she sees that his face doesn't show. So she takes an old picture and makes a composite print in which Grimes' face shows clearly. And she makes him pay through the nose!"

There was a long silence in the room. Against the wall, Willie Lightfoot shifted uneasily. Again he cocked an ear in the direction of the window and a puzzled frown wrinkled his brow.

"And, of course, she's terrified that some day he'll find that negative and know he's been duped," Bagle said. "When she planned to come here for her vacation, she was afraid to leave it in her studio because Grimes might break in and find it. By the same token, she was afraid to bring it here. If he came, it is too easy to search a hotel room. So she hid it in the radio and pawned it."

"Right," said Spooner. "Grimes came here either to make another payment or have a showdown. They fought. He got crazy mad and killed her as he killed her sister."

Willie Lightfoot shifted uneasily along the wall, like an animal aware of some danger too high-pitched for human senses.

"The evidence," said Spooner, "is in her studio and Grimes' office. The canceled checks, the mutilated photograph, and you already have the negative. You should be able to make sense out of that."

"Easily," said Bagle, rubbing his hands. "I'll take the first train in the morning."

Shelton Spooner saw the automatic come over the edge of the window sill before he saw the hand that held it. Then a familiar figure suddenly materialized.

Grimes threw his leg across the sill and stood in the room.

Shelton Spooner closed his eyes and sighed wearily. Just as he thought he had rid himself of trouble it confronted him again, this time with a gun in its hand. Willie Lightfoot pushed himself against the wall and achieved the impossible by making himself more unobtrusive than ever. Bagle, pompous

and officious though he was, did not lack courage.

"Grimes," he said peremptorily, "put up that gun and consider yourself under arrest!"

Grimes' single word of reply cast serious reflection upon the Bagle ancestry. He turned to Spooner.

"You snooping gumshoe!" he said. "When the cleaning woman described who was in my office last night, I knew it was you two. I figured you were up to something and I drove up here tonight for a showdown."

"You're a little late," said Shelton Spooner.

"The devil I am! I was exactly in time! As I walked over here from my car I heard you talking, so I waited outside by the window and listened. You've got a beautiful theory, gumshoe. But you'll never be able to prove it's true."

"We have quite enough evidence to proceed," said Bagle.

"You won't have in the morning," snapped Grimes. "After I've incapacitated you mugs so you can't give the alarm, I'm going back to town—and I assure you there'll be no evidence at all tomorrow. There'll be no checks—either Mary's or mine. There'll be no photograph with a missing head. And I'll just take that negative right now, Bagle."

"No," said Bagle stoutly. "I'm an officer of the law. I—"

CHAPTER V

WILLIE'S HEARING AID



THE SENTENCE was interrupted by the sudden slashing motion of Grimes' gun barrel. It cracked with a sickening sound on the lawyer's skull. A stupid expression came over his face. His knees buckled and he fell.

As he did so, Grimes stooped over quickly and snatched the envelope containing the negative from his nerveless fingers.

"Now," said Grimes, facing Spooner. "You'll drag Bagle into the bathroom. You'll go in there yourselves. I'm going to tie you up and gag you. I want enough time to do what I'm going to do before

you can have the coppers stop me."

"Yu won't get away with it," said Spooner, in a tone which indicated that he thought Grimes had a very fair chance of getting away with it, indeed.

"The dickens I won't! With no canceled checks, with neither negative nor that headless print, all you have is a theory. I might serve thirty days for assaulting Bagle. But that's all. Now, get moving!"

There was a small crash in the room. Spooner started and Grimes jerked his head around.

Willie Lightfoot stood disconsolately staring down at his shattered hearing aid on the floor.

"Godfrey!" he said. "I dropped it. It's busted. I won't be able to hear a thing!"

"Never mind that thing," said Grimes. "Get going. Pick up Bagle. Hurry!"

Shelton Spooner crossed the room to the place where Bagle lay. As he passed Willie, he received a leering wink. Spooner bent over Bagle and said plaintively, "I can't lift him alone."

Grimes pointed his gun at Willie Lightfoot's stomach. "Come on. Help him. Get Bagle into the bathroom."

Willie leaned forward and cupped a hand around his ear.

"Hey?" he said. "How's that?"

Grimes lifted his voice. "Help your partner! Get into the bathroom with Bagle!"

"I can't hear you!" Willie shouted. "You'll have to talk louder!"

Now, it is a psychological fact that when one voice in a group is raised, all voices are raised. When a man leans forward and cups his ear, the tendency is for the speaker to automatically shout. Grimes did just that.

"The bathroom," he yelled. "Go to the bathroom. Take Bagle, you old fool, or I'll shoot you!"

Willie shook his head helplessly. He turned to Spooner.

"What's he saying, Shelton?" he questioned.

Spooner drew a deep breath and shouted at the top of his voice.

"He says for you to help drag Bagle to the bathroom or he'll shoot you!"

"Oh," said Willie Lightfoot. "No, I don't have to go to the bathroom, thank you."

GRIMES' face was livid. He put his lips against Willie's ear and roared like a bull in a slaughterhouse.

Shelton Spooner lifted his own voice and assured Willie with all the decibels he could command that he would be shot if he failed to carry out Grimes' orders.

The room was a madhouse when the door burst suddenly open and Chief Maynard and two of his men charged into the room.

"What's going on here?" Maynard bellowed. "What's all the yelling about? Who slugged Bagle?"

Grimes' only reply was the single, desperate shot he fired. The bullet lodged in the plaster of the wall as the policemen overpowered him.

Blount, clad in a cerise bathrobe and yellow slippers, wandered into the cabana.

"Great grief," he said, "the whole hotel is awake! The switchboard's flooded with complaints! What's happened?"

As Bagle and Grimes were taken from the room, Spooner explained the night's events to Maynard and Blount. When he had finished his recital, Blount

looked admiringly across the room at Willie.

"Well," he said, "it's lucky that the old guy is deaf as a post. And it's doubly lucky he broke his hearing aid when he did."

He slapped Spooner on the back as Maynard wrung the Spooner hand.

Blount lowered his voice to a confidential whisper.

"There'll be a bonus in this for you, Shelton. You can give a percentage of it to Willie."

Willie Lightfoot's voice rose high and shrill. "A percentage?" he cried. "Why, if it wasn't for me we'd all be locked up in the bathroom and Grimes would be a free man. I want half!"

Blount looked across the room in amazement. "I thought the old man was stone deaf."

"Not," said Shelton Spooner, "when you mention money, whisky or pin-up girls."

He grinned across the room at Willie and abstractedly scratched his head. His toupee moved toward his left ear and hung there like a piece of dead and hoary moss.



When a beautiful young girl suddenly dies of strychnine poisoning, it is only the first of a puzzling series of similar deaths which all lead to the—

KILLER IN A TOP HAT

in the true story of that name

By JACKSON HITE

AN AMAZING CASE FROM THE ARCHIVES OF SCOTLAND YARD

Coming Next Issue!

THE UNSEEN

Meager were the leads in the brutal slaying of Vivian Messiter, but Inspector Prothero made much of little!

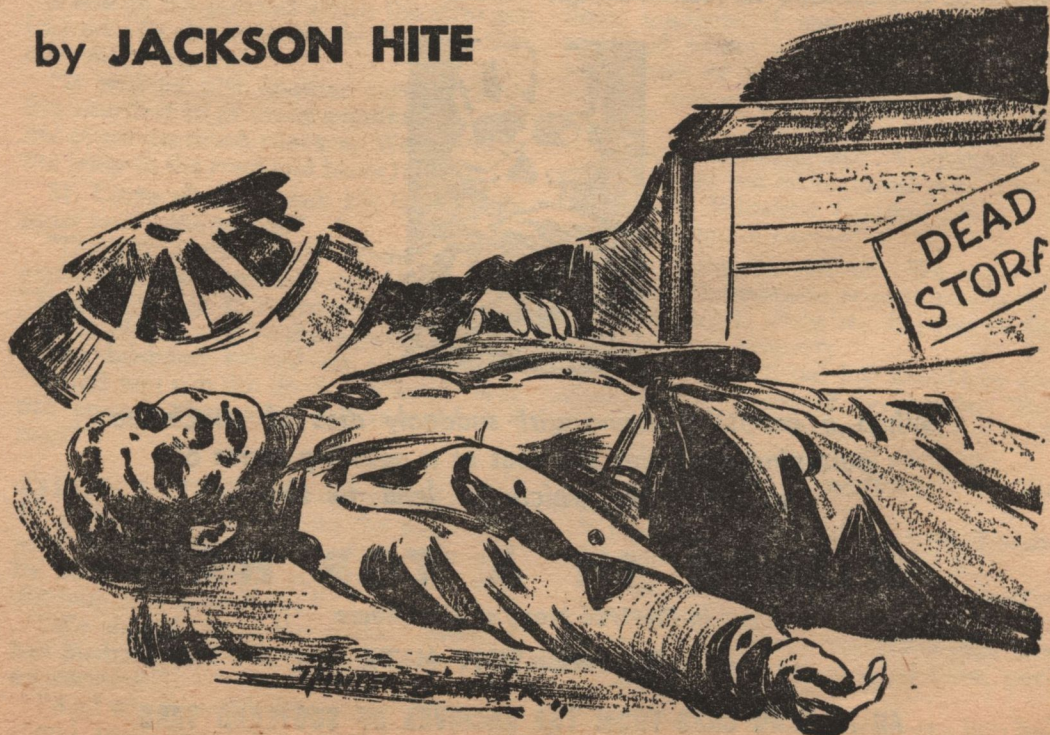
DOES imagination have any role in crime detection? On the surface it would appear not. Certainly Scotland Yard's great reputation has been built up not on imagination but on thoroughness of investigation, a meticulous attention to minor details, and a plodding tenacity that won't take no for an answer. This is one of the primary reasons for the Yard's outstanding ability to solve cases.

Yet, when you analyze these cases, you find that at some point during the investigation when everything seemed to have reached a dead end, somebody's brilliant imagination stimulated the men to try new and daring methods resulting

in solid achievements. By using their imagination the men of Scotland Yard have been able to discover hidden paths and new roads that quite often led to the gallows for the killer. This helps explain why Scotland Yard has solved cases where other departments working on the same case failed.

Typical of the Yard's work was its top-drawer sleuthing in the case of the murder of a man named Vivian Messiter. The killer had all the breaks in his favor. First of all the murder was not discovered until nine weeks after the crime, cooling off all trails. Then Scotland Yard wasn't called in until after local police had a go at it without making any

by **JACKSON HITE**



CLUES



Southampton police
inspected the body

FROM the ARCHIVES of SCOTLAND YARD

The mere mention of the words "Scotland Yard" conjures up a picture of a busy and efficient center of crime solution, highlighted by memories of great detectives and famous cases. It brings back to mind Sherlock Holmes and Baker Street, countless heroes of fact and fiction, enveloped in an aura of mystery and glamour. In this series of true stories about the Yard, we bring you the authentic facts—an actual inside glimpse into the workings of the organization, based on real cases—not legend!

headway. Yet with this discouraging outlook, the Yard was able to solve the case and find the killer in a few weeks, working with nothing more than an imagination that produced phantom clues.

Messiter Vanishes

It was at 7:30 on Saturday morning, October 30, 1928, when Vivian Messiter, branch manager of the Wolf's Head Oil Company in Southampton, England, left the rooming house on Carlton Road where he lived, for his office, a one-story warehouse building on nearby Grove Street. When the weekend passed without his returning, his landlord, a former police officer named Parrot, notified local authorities.

If Messiter had gone away he had departed without his luggage or a change of clothing. A constable went to the warehouse, which was a garage-type building. He found the gates leading into the yard were locked. He clambered over the fence and broke a small pane of glass on the side of the structure in order to peer into the building.

He saw a car parked inside and drums of oil piled about but nothing appeared to be amiss. The constable, with the traditional English horror of trespassing, did not enter. A routine inquiry was made for Messiter but since he was a mature man who could come and go as he pleased, no search was pressed for him.

Meanwhile the London office of the Wolf's Head Oil Company, an American concern, incidentally, sent letter after letter to Messiter, both to his lodging house and to the warehouse without receiving any reply. Finally, on January 10, 1929, the London office decided that Messiter must have left their employ and engaged a new manager to take over the Southampton branch.

He went to the warehouse and after finding it locked called on Parrot in the hope that Messiter left his key in his room. It was not there. The new branch manager decided to force open a rear door. Unfamiliar with the location of the light switches, he groped his way into the dark structure skirting the parked car and the drums of oil. He

stepped on something soft and bent for a closer examination. Seconds later he was out in the street shouting for help. He had stumbled across the badly decomposed body of Messiter.

Southampton police hurried to the garage. Three round holes were visible in the dead man's skull and so the first reports declared that Messiter had been shot.

The car in the garage belonged to the murdered man. Officers stepped on the starter and found that the battery was run down.

The ignition switch was on and the gas tank was empty. This led to the conclusion that the motor had been running at the time of the murder and the killer did not shut it off. The victim was wearing a pair of heavy leather motor-ing gloves that were stained with grease and oil.

Local authorities decided that Messiter had been shot as he was working on the car and the noise made by the racing motor covered the explosion of the shots and explained why nobody had heard the firing.

Police Advance Theories

No money was found in the victim's pockets and a valuable gold watch which Messiter usually wore was missing, but at the same time a gold ring and a gold locket were in his possession. If robbery was the motive, then the killer had taken only part of the loot. The keys to the garage were gone indicating that the murderer had calmly locked up the place after the shooting.

Sir Bernard Spilsbury, who was England's leading pathologist for the Home Office, performed an autopsy and tossed cold water on the shooting theory. He reported that Messiter had been murdered but the holes in the skull were not bullet wounds. They had been caused by a rounded instrument. Having made no progress up to that point local authorities decided the case was getting out of hand and asked Scotland Yard to take over.

Chief Inspector Prothero, one of the top men in the CID, was assigned to the investigation and left for the scene with Detective Sergeant Young. Southampton

police gave him the results of their inquiries.

They had checked thoroughly into the background of the murdered man and learned that he had lived in the United States and Canada for some time. A quiet man from a good family background, Messiter had kept to himself and minded his own business. Aside from being a chain smoker he possessed no exceptional habits either good or bad, and certainly nothing that would have led to his murder.

A search of his room turned up several letters written to him by men applying for a job as "traveler" in response to an ad he had placed for traveling oil salesmen, and a great deal of correspondence with a woman in the United States. Her letters were written in code. Southampton police had lost no time in checking on this angle with New York officers. Even though the American officials had little information about the woman, they succeeded in locating her.

She was a college professor and was stunned by the news of Messiter's death. She explained that she and Messiter had been in love for years and were waiting until he made good in his new post before getting married. She was certain there were no jealous suitors and their affair could have had no possible connection with the murder. Police were inclined to agree.

Detectives Trace Movements

The Southampton officers had traced Messiter's movements on October 30 and had located witnesses who saw the man enter the warehouse but nobody could be found who had seen him after that. It was reasonable to assume that he had been murdered that day.

The local police head shook his head sadly as he concluded his report. It was a case without clues he pointed out. He turned over to Prothero all the letters found in Messiter's room and two books that had been on the seat of the murdered man's car. One was an order book with all previous pages torn out and only the duplicate of the last order left in the book. Delivery on this one had been made the night before Messiter's death but had carried the October 30 date.

The other book was an ordinary composition book the kind school children use for home work. Messiter had used it as a record of commission payments he had made.

"That's everything we have," Prothero was told.

The Scotland Yard officer agreed readily enough that it was little with which to work. Local police told him they had searched the garage but he reasoned that it had been a perfunctory one because dust on the barrels in the jumbled interior had not been disturbed. Prothero turned to Sergeant Young.

"Let's get at it," he remarked, gesturing at the heavy drums.

For the next few days the two Scotland Yard men were busy, literally taking the garage apart. They shifted every barrel of oil, poked into every corner and crevice, and even went through the sawdust on the floor with fine-comb care.

Local officers kept a close watch on the activities of the Scotland Yard officers hoping to find out where they had gone wrong. In the oil soaked and grease stained sawdust on the floor near the car, Inspector Prothero picked up a small piece of paper which was so badly stained that the writing on it was illegible. It looked as if it had been on the floor for years. Instead of tossing it aside, he placed it carefully in an envelope. The watching men shrugged.

Another piece of paper was picked up in a small cluttered room that Messiter had used as an office. This piece was wadded into a small round ball, the way a person crumples up a piece of paper to discard it. Penciled on it was the notation, "gar—Sat—10:30 or 12." Prothero added this to his list. Again the observers were not impressed.

Finally a definite lead was uncovered to the discomfiture of the watching men. Wedged in a dark corner amid some drums of oil the searchers discovered a bloodstained hammer with a round ball end. On this several brown hairs were clinging. It looked as if it might be the murder weapon.

The hammer was a definite lead on which to work and the men of Scotland Yard went after it with their remarkable thoroughness. The hairs on the hammer were removed and then com-

pared with specimens taken from the body of the murdered man. Experts said they were identical in color and texture confirming that the hammer was the death weapon.

Several of the hairs were from Messiter's eyebrows. They showed that the killer had been facing the murdered man when he suddenly brought up the hammer. The weapon was shown to all Messiter's acquaintances but no one of them had ever seen the hammer in his possession and it did not belong to his car set. Fingerprint experts dusted the hammer with various colored powders, examined it under magnifying glasses and even tried iodine fuming without bringing up any recognizable prints.

Prothero flashed word of the hammer find to Scotland Yard and detectives armed with a detailed description of it and photographs of the death weapon began calling on manufacturers. They quickly learned that the hammer was a type used by automobile mechanics. Men were detailed to canvass all garages in Southampton and the countryside. They located a mechanic who identified it as his, but his story soon ended any hopes that the investigators had of a break in the case.

The mechanic said he had been busy working inside his shop when a man stepped to the door, picked up the hammer and shouted in, asking if he could borrow it for a "mo." The mechanic told him to go ahead without bothering to look up. Later he heard a car start up and the man never returned the borrowed hammer. The incident had occurred some months earlier. The mechanic could offer no description of the stranger.

Scotland Yard detectives checked thoroughly on the mechanic and gave him a clean bill of health. They could find no possible link between him and the murdered man. The hammer had petered out as a clue.

Inspector Prothero had gone over the same ground previously covered by Southampton police without discovering any new evidence or facts. Messiter's missing watch was found in a cistern in Southampton where it had been discarded by the killer. With the exception of finding the hammer, it appeared as if

the Southampton officers had done their job well. Scotland Yard seemed to be unable to do any more.

Prothero Weighs Evidence

Meanwhile Prothero studied the meager details he had as evidence. These included the bloodstained hammer which had proved valueless; the letters in code from the woman college professor in the United States, also valueless; the few business letters, the order book, and the composition book. Prothero packed up and left Southampton. A week later he returned and notified the local police that he knew the identity of the killer.

You, the reader, actually have the basic evidence that Prothero had. Admittedly everything had wound up at a dead end. Yet it was at this point that the Scotland Yard Inspector applied his imagination and opened up new avenues of investigation which led to the killer. Here is how he did it.

Prothero examined the order book found on the seat of Messiter's car. As mentioned previously, the duplicate copies of orders had been torn from the book. The Inspector counted the leaves and saw that nine duplicates were missing. The only duplicate in the book was dated October 30, the day of the murder and bore the name of S. Galton, as salesman.

Southampton police had noticed the significance of the date during their investigation and had questioned Galton. They had learned that the sale was made on October 29 and Galton paid the money to Messiter that night. The branch manager made the mistake of entering it as the 30th, the day of the murder. Galton's alibi for the day of the murder was upheld by unimpeachable witnesses. He was employed by a railroad and had just taken a part-time job with Messiter as salesman, working evenings only. He never had been to the warehouse and Messiter had gone to his home to interview him.

Prothero's own investigation showed all this to be true, but the Scotland Yard man was puzzled by the order book. He could not understand why Messiter ripped out the duplicate orders after payment and left one.

It was here that his imagination began to work. He wondered if the killer might not have torn out the duplicates and left the last one in because it was dated the day of the murder, thereby hoping to involve an innocent man. If the killer had torn out the duplicates, then he had a reason to do so, and this reason might have been his motive.

The fact that it was difficult to imagine any reason why a duplicate oil order could be a motive for murder did not stop Prothero from carrying his thoughts further. The duplicates were gone and the killer undoubtedly destroyed them. The Inspector's problem was to find out what might have been on those duplicate orders.

Most people would have stopped there, said it was impossible, and forgotten about it. But not Inspector Prothero. The order book contained a well worn piece of carbon paper. He knew that even the experts at Scotland Yard would be unable to do anything about it.

Prothero once more allowed his imagination to soar. He knew that scientific expeditions to the tombs of Egyptian Pharaohs had to decipher papyrus affected by the ages and he wondered if these experts could do anything with the well-worn piece of carbon paper. He took the carbon paper to the British Museum and consulted the experts there. They listened gravely to the strange request of the Scotland Yard man and agreed to see what they could do. They also took the illegible piece of oil-soaked paper.

Using techniques which they developed to unlock the riddle of ancient civilizations, the museum scientists managed to bring out one of the impressions from the piece of carbon paper. It was an order for oil delivered to the firm of "Cromers and Bartlett, Bold Street, Southampton." The officers checked. There was no such firm and no such street in Southampton. The order was signed with the initials, W.F.T.

The motive for the murder became clear to Prothero. Messiter had hired a salesman who collected commissions on fake orders. The branch manager must have discovered it and the salesman killed Messiter to avoid exposure.

The copy book contained no notations of any payments made to a salesman

with the W.F.T. initials but Prothero noticed a page was missing. Infra-red lamps brought up impressions on the following page which showed Messiter had recorded such payments.

Who was W.F.T.? The Chief Inspector did not know. He went through the letters to Messiter applying for the job as salesman and found one signed William F. Thomas. No address was given.

The museum experts also were able to decipher the writing on the oil-stained paper. It appeared to be part of a receipt and contained the name Horne. Prothero went to work on this lead and soon discovered a woman named Horne who ran a boarding house in Southampton. A boarder named Thomas had lived there at the time of the murder, moving away several days later. He had given a forwarding address in London but a check there showed no such building.

Gets Boarder's Description

Mrs. Horne was able to give a good description of the boarder. Inspector Prothero reasoned that the man's violent reaction to exposure indicated that he had a criminal record. A search of files turned up an ex-convict named Podmore whose description matched that of Thomas. Podmore was located in Winchester jail. He had been arrested in another part of England after the murder in connection with a car theft.

Podmore was identified as Thomas and further identified as having been seen in the warehouse with Messiter. The suspect admitted working for Messiter as an oil salesman but denied the killing.

Podmore was arrested charged with murder. During his trial the remarkable work of Inspector Prothero was brought to light. Handwriting experts were able to identify a photographed enlargement of the writing taken from the carbon paper as the prisoner's.

Although there wasn't a bit of direct evidence in the case and Podmore at no time would admit his guilt, the web of circumstantial evidence woven by Inspector Prothero proved overwhelming and the prisoner was found guilty. After his appeal was denied he was hanged, trapped by a phantom clue brought to reality by a brilliant imagination.

MAGIC MURDER

By BLAIR REED

Enoch Pawley felt the bite of the noose, but even after he was cold, death reached out from his coffin!

THE night they hanged Enoch Pawley at the State Penitentiary, I was there. I saw him die. It wasn't a pleasant sight. I felt both fascinated and sick, watching his hooded figure dangling there at the end of the rope, dangling, swaying, slowly revolving like some grotesque mannequin in a fashion show of hell.

Beside me, Clay Lambert, a reporter and my long-time friend who had got me a pass to witness the execution, looked at me quizzically. A rueful little smile was on his lips. "What's the matter, Greg? You look green around the gills."

"I am," I grimaced. "I don't feel so good. I think I need a drink."

He nodded shortly, grinning. "If your public could only see you now—the author of all those bloodthirsty novels."

The group of witnesses was rising to leave. We rose also. I could hear some



Blanche was lying dead on the floor



of the men trying to make nonchalant remarks, but their voices sounded strained. Perhaps it was my imagination.

I tried to keep my eyes off the corpse as we filed out.

Clay was shrugging. "Well," he said, "You wanted material. Here's the real McCoy."

I nodded, depressed. "Yes. I know. I guess you're used to it, Clay, but, well, I've never seen anybody die before."

We were walking along the bleak corridor now, our footsteps ringing on the stone floor.

Clay lighted a cigarette and inhaled audibly; it was like a sigh. "Used to it? Uh-uh. I've seen 'em dead all sorts of ways—mashed in cars, shot, burned, and drowned. You develop a kind of surface hardness, but inside it still gets you. I could use a drink myself."

A short while later, Clay had phoned the story in to his paper and we sat in a booth sipping rye highballs and listening to an Italian with a white silk shirt playing Tzigane on a violin. But I wasn't really listening—I was thinking of Enoch Pawley.

HIS trial for the murder of his housekeeper had been a national sensation. In some ways, it had been the weirdest, most spectacular case ever to reach the courts. Because almost in the beginning it was proved—and the gnarled, eccentric Enoch readily admitted—that he was a practitioner of the Black Arts. The newspapers went wild. Their flamboyant headlines screamed, MODERN "FAUST" MAY HAVE BEEN DRIVEN TO KILL BY MEPHISTO!

Overnight, from Hoboken to Seattle, the case shot to front pages. Top correspondents covered the trial; sob-sisters were flown in; and the nation, breathless, followed racy, melodramatic news accounts avidly from day to day.

Which was only natural. For the case was thoroughly unique and, in a macabre way, as bizarre as the creepiest tale of imagination.

The basic facts alone were strange. Enoch Pawley was a recluse who seldom left his ancient brownstone house on Courtlandt Place. Most of his business with the outside world had been handled for him by Bruce Carney, his estate at-

torney, and Blanche Stevens, his housekeeper for two years. Blanche was an attractive and efficient brown-haired woman, well-built and about 40. She was found dead and cold one morning by a friendly neighbor, who had dropped in to borrow some sugar.

When, at the neighbor's frantic summons, the police arrived, they discovered, one by one, the incredible facts that were soon to make such a fascinating array in the papers.

First, Blanche Stevens had been strangled with a twisted length of dried sheepgut. Second, several feet from her body, drawn on the rug with chalk and almost hidden behind an easy chair, there was a circle divided roughly into three parts.

Third, and far from least, the police found Enoch Pawley upstairs in a workroom that might have been an alchemist's nightmare from the middle ages. It was a large room stacked with old and esoteric books that gave forth a musty odor and bedizened with all the hellish materials of the Black Magician; human skulls, phials of strange, viscous liquids, scrawled imprecations, live frogs, chickens, black cats, and, driving home the blasphemy, profaned crucifixes and rosaries.

More familiar and prosaic facts followed. The front door, the neighbor said, had been unlocked—Blanche seldom locked it. Nothing in the room where Blanche was found had been disturbed except a purse, which lay open and ransacked beside her body. Enoch Pawley, confronted with the gruesome scene, vehemently denied any knowledge of her death; he said it must have been a burglar.

All this was brought out at the trial—and much more. The state, said the prosecution, intended to prove "beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the defendant, Enoch Pawley, did wilfully and with premeditated malice, cruelly murder his housekeeper, Blanche Stevens, by brutal strangulation."

The damning facts piled up. Blanche had made three bank deposits in the past two months of \$500 each. Enoch, whose fortune amounted to \$100,000, was, by a friendly professor's reluctant testimony, apprehensive about his younger brother, Charles. The younger brother was a

drunkard and a wastrel and Enoch had voiced the suspicion that if Charles ever found out about these experiments in black magic, he might try to have him, Enoch, committed to an asylum in order to get his money.

The prosecution's case was simple. Blanche had threatened to expose Enoch's "fiendish and evil" pursuit of black art to Charles unless she were paid blackmail. Enoch had made three payments, of \$500 each. Then, cornered and desperate and unable to see any other way out, Enoch had murdered her.

The bank deposits proved it; Exhibit A, the murder weapon, proved it (who else but a black magician would have dried sheepgut?); and the trisected chalk circle on the rug, a magician's emblem, proved it. To top all this off, the prosecution offered a clincher—a lipstick, presumably from the deceased's pocketbook, which had been found halfway up the stairs to Enoch's "temple of sinful magic."

Enoch, said the prosecution, had emptied the pocketbook in order to make the killing look like a burlar's work, but on his way upstairs he had dropped the lipstick.

Throughout the accusation, Enoch, thin, gnarled, slightly bent, looking older than his fifty-three years, sat impassive. His face was long and boney and his grey goatee contrasted sharply with his striking black hair, obviously dyed. Only his eyes showed signs of life; behind his thick-lensed glasses, they were brown to the point of blackness, they were alert, and, though sunken beneath shaggy grey brows, they smouldered with an inward fire.

I can see him now, somehow dignified and formidable through it all.

THERE were holes in the prosecution's theory and it was completely circumstantial. Enoch's lawyer, a young earnest man with a growing reputation in criminal cases, slugged at it. It would have to be proved, he said, that the money Blanche had deposited had come from Enoch. While the sheepgut was an unusual weapon, it would have to be proved that Enoch had used it as such. Anybody could have drawn the chalk circle precisely in order to implicate Enoch. And the lipstick meant nothing—Blanche could have

dropped it there herself the day before. It by no means represented proof of anything.

Witnesses were called, examined, and cross-examined. Blanche's hairdresser, Rosey Hanrahan, testified that Blanche had called old Enoch crazy and had said he was afraid his brother would find it out.

Bruce Carney, the attorney who handled Enoch's financial affairs, took the stand. He was a heavyset, blonde man with a solid jaw and pale blue eyes. Yes, he handled Enoch's estate. Yes, Enoch had withdrawn enough money to have paid out \$1500 to Blanche in the past two months, but that didn't mean anything because Enoch frequently drew large sums for equipment and materials.

Charles Pawley, Enoch's younger brother, was next. He was about 45, had a puffy face full of broken veins, and licked his lips constantly. He said his brother had always been queer and hot-tempered.

The defense lawyer couldn't shake any of them. According to the medical examiner's report, Blanche Stevens had been murdered between 8 and 10 of the night before her body was discovered. With this in mind, the defense asked each witness where he had been between those times. The hairdresser, Rosey, had been out with a boyfriend, who could prove it. Bruce Carney, the attorney, had been home with his wife. Charles Pawley, it developed, had been drunk in a nightclub before some fifty witnesses.

Things looked bad for the defense. You could see that the young attorney would have given an arm for a chance to delay, an opportunity to stall for time.

And then, finally, Enoch himself took the stand. His long, triangular face, as usual, was cold except for those thick-lensed dark eyes. His black hair was vivid against his yellowed face. The courtroom buzzed.

By now, the prosecutor, pleased with the trend of the testimony, was in top form. He practically damned Enoch by his own words.

"You admit you practice black magic?" It was a sneer.

"Yes. I have done research with it for a long time."

"Ah, now we call it research." The

prosecutor swept the jury with a mocking smile. Then, to Enoch, he snapped, "And isn't black magic designed for evil, for casting spells, even for *killing*? Answer yes or no!"

"Yes."

The defense objected, was overruled.

"Where, Mr. Pawley, exactly where were you between 8 and 10 on the night the deceased was murdered?"

"In my workroom. I spend most of my time there."

"Engaged in the absorbing study of evil spells?"

The defense objected. Sustained.

"Of black magic, then?"

"Yes."

"But you can't prove you were in the workroom?"

"No." Enoch was calm. His eyes roved the court.

"Isn't it possible, Mr. Pawley, isn't it possible you weren't in your workroom the whole time at all? Isn't it possible you were downstairs, filled with bloody revenge and violently strangling your housekeeper, Blanche Stevens?"

DEFENSE objected and was sustained, but the prosecution was satisfied.

"All right. Now you have said your evil practice of black magic was research. Would you explain that?"

"Of course. I desired first to prove to science that it exists, that there is such a thing. I desired secondly to show how such forces may be thwarted. All this was to be amply set forth in my book."

"Ah, in your book. Then you made notes of your experiments? You have a log or some sort of record?"

"Well—yes. I kept a record. I had many notes, but they seem to have disappeared. From my workroom." Enoch Pawley was frowning. Again his dark eyes searched the court.

"Into thin air, I suppose," sneered the prosecutor. "Mr. Pawley, isn't it a fact that you never kept any notes at all, that you didn't *mean* to write a book, that your black magic was not a research as you claim, but instead an insidious means to achieve your own evil ends?"

Again the defense objected and was sustained. But it was too late, as always, for the jury to miss the import of the question.

MR. prosecutor switched his attack.

"It has been testified on this stand that Blanche Stevens, the deceased, made three deposits of \$500 each within the past two months. Have you any idea where she got this money?"

"Yes. She got it from me."

Even the prosecutor hadn't expected that. He blinked. The courtroom became an uproar. The judge rapped hard for order. When things had quieted down, the prosecutor pounced.

"Then you admit you paid her blackmail?"

"No. It was not blackmail. It was payment for services."

"For services!" echoed the prosecutor, incredulously. Then his eyes narrowed with craft. "And would you be so kind as to tell this court the nature of—ah—these 'services' that were worth \$500 apiece?"

The courtroom tittered and the judge rapped his gavel again for order.

Enoch Pawley raised his eyebrows. His smouldering eyes were cynical. "If I told you, you wouldn't believe it. They were services in connection with my experiments."

"Describe these services—if you can in open court."

Enoch's thin shoulders barely raised in a shrug. "My research requires strange materials. One of these occasions required three hairs from a newly dead person. Blanche was resourceful. I merely gave her the money and somehow she got them. I don't know how."

The courtroom was still. People leaned forward in their seats.

"And the other two occasions?" The prosecutor made it plain by his tone that this was all a tissue of lies.

"One example should be enough," said Enoch.

"Why?" flashed the prosecutor. "Because your imagination isn't up to three? I insist that you answer the question."

As no sound came from Enoch, the judge leaned forward. "The defendant will answer the question," he said.

Enoch sat erect. Black hair, thick glasses, goatee—somehow there was a stature about him. "I think not," he said.

The judge's jaw stiffened. "Does the defendant realize he can be cited for contempt of court?"

Enoch Pawley, for the only time during the entire trial, smiled. "That," he said to the judge, "is a courtly levity, is it not? I am being railroaded toward a death sentence for murder. What additional sentence will 'contempt' carry?"

The spectators roared.

Reddening to the roots of his hair, the judge rapped his gavel and recessed court.

The following day the prosecutor made the mistake that gave the defense an opportunity to stall for time. He was trying to discredit Enoch's character.

"You don't have much family feeling, do you, Mr. Pawley?"

"If you mean for my brother," said Enoch, "no. Very little."

"Evidently not," snapped the prosecutor. "He is your only living relative and you have cut him off in your will without a cent. And for what? For an outsider. One who has had no more relation with you than that occasioned by business. That doesn't show much regard for your own flesh and blood, Mr. Pawley."

"Your facts," returned Enoch, "are not quite straight. It is true that I am leaving my brother nothing, but why should I? He is a drunkard; he would only waste any money he had. However, you have the rest of it wrong. My estate is being left to a foundation for occult research."

The prosecutor was triumphant. He would prove, he thundered, that Enoch was a baldfaced liar. Bruce Carney, Enoch's estate attorney, had been subpoenaed to court with the will. There was some argument between defense and prosecution about the admissibility of the document, but it was Enoch's will and he gave permission to have it read.

It was.

"... and in consideration," the clerk's voice intoned, "of his long and loyal service over many years, I, Enoch Pawley, being sound in mind and body, do herewith leave my full estate to my faithful friend and attorney, Bruce Carney."

The prosecutor presented the document to Enoch. "Is that your signature at the bottom?"

Enoch examined it. "Yes. Yes, that is my signature." He handed the will back to the prosecutor.

The defense attorney saw his chance at once. This made Carney vulnerable in a way.

BRUCE CARNEY was called to the stand. The defense practically grilled him, despite prosecution's persistent objections that Carney was not on trial here.

Mrs. Carney appeared in court, a small, neat, slightly grey-haired woman. She was willing to testify. She supported her husband's claim that he had been at home the entire evening of the murder. They had played cards, she said, listened to the radio, and finally retired.

Enoch was recalled to the stand and asked how he had come to make such a mistake about his own will. He made an amazing statement.

"There is little point in talking further," he said. "I have known for some time that I should die this year. I was told I should meet a violent end and that the work into which I had put my heart would never come to fruition. Considering the sedentary life I lived, I found it difficult to believe this. Indeed, I laughed at it. But now it is all clear. My notes have been stolen and my death is imminent. Someone, of course, is to blame for all this, but that is not a matter for the law's handling, even if that could be arranged. It is a personal affair. And I shall not rest until I come back from the dead to attend to it."

The defense attorney smote his forehead. It was plain he hadn't known Enoch would say anything like this. The effort at delay was ended.

The trial moved rapidly after that. The verdict was guilty and Enoch was sentenced to the gallows.

Now he was hanged. . . .

The gypsy violin music ended. I finished my highball and looked at Clay Lambert. "Clay," I said, "do you remember that chain he was wearing on his vest tonight? It was an odd thing, wasn't it? Couldn't have been real gold, it was too heavy."

"Still thinking of Pawley, eh?" Clay said. "Yeah, I remember the chain. I ought to—'ve done a feature on it for tomorrow's late edition. It's a voodoo charm and Enoch requested that it be buried with him."

"A voodoo charm?"

"Yeah. He got it from down New Orleans way from some voodoo witch doctor. I got a gander at it through inside connections while the trial was go-

ing on—they take everything away from prisoners, you know—and 'odd' is the word. The links look like some sort of knots. Not very valuable, though. It's made of brass, polished and lacquered. I wonder why he wanted it to be buried with him."

"Maybe to help him come back from the dead and settle that score he was talking about."

Clay shook his head. "He was a darb, all right. Really wacky." He summoned a waiter and ordered another drink for us.

I lit a cigarette and dug in the ashtray with the match thoughtfully. "I don't know, Clay. I just don't know. I've been thinking a lot about him since the trial. I don't believe old Enoch was so nutty as people think."

"Maybe not," Clay shrugged, "but what's the difference now?"

The waiter brought the drinks and we sipped at them.

I said, "Suppose he was innocent?"

"I doubt it," said Clay. "Too much against him."

"Circumstantial, all of it."

"Yeah—"

"Look, Clay, I've got a hunch. What do you say we nose around a little in this case?"

Clay's eyebrows went up. "Tonight? Are you loony?"

"No. Tomorrow will do. There are just too many things that don't click and I've got an idea that—"

"That he really was innocent," finished Clay. He took a swallow of his drink, squinting at me. "And if he was and if we find it out, I get a story that'll rock the country. Hmm. That's too damn good to be true. But keep talking."

I grinned. "Okay. Take it like this. Your job is to report facts. Mine, as a writer, is to play with ideas, turn them around and upside down to make them into a story. That's what I'm doing here. Now suppose old Enoch was innocent—the first thing to do is consider everything he said as truth. All right. Then he really did pay Blanche to get material for his experiments. That means he had confidence in her ability, in her sense. There's other evidence that she was no scatterbrain, such as her charging him \$500 per job. Of course, the queer stuff

he wanted was hard to get—like those three hairs from a person newly dead. But \$500 is a respectable amount of money.

AND if she realized, as we do, that this black magic is a lot of malarkey, she could just as well have got three hairs from a local barber and palmed them off on Enoch. But even if she was square with him and got the real thing, it would take brains to do it. The point is, any way you look at it, Blanche emerges as a pretty shrewd, ingenious gal. All right, so far?"

"Yeah," Clay admitted. "She'd have to be smart to get the stuff on the legit, and if she clipped the old boy she'd still have to have all her brains in place. Okay, then what?"

"Well, remember, our assumption here is that Enoch was innocent. That means somebody else murdered Blanche and deliberately framed him by leaving the sheepgut and that little trisected circle chalked on the rug. The question then is—why did somebody want her out of the way?"

"You mean she was knocked off just to frame Enoch?"

"Not exactly. In this theory, Enoch was framed, all right, but if that was the sole object, why not just murder Enoch and be done with it? The only answer to that is somebody wanted to get rid of them both."

"Not bad," said Clay with mock awe. "Do you do all that thinking to write a book?"

"I get lots of headaches," I said, "and let's knock off the sarcasm. Next question is a repeat. Why did somebody want to get rid of Blanche—along with Enoch?"

Clay winked. "I'm smart, too. She knew too much. Ask me anything."

"Hm. Okay, then. She knew too much about the murder. But how was that possible? And who stood to gain most from Enoch's death?"

Clay is a bright boy when he gets going. He swished his drink around in his glass and took a swallow. "She was in cahoots with him. I'm not forgetting the will business any more than you are. Enoch said he left his money to a foundation for occult research. That means he *thought* he did. And since his signature was on

the will, that in turn means there was either a very clever forgery or else wills were switched when the time came for signing. If Bruce Carney, his attorney, wanted to pull off a switch in order to make himself Enoch's heir, he'd probably need Blanche's help."

"Exactly," I agreed. "Because Enoch rarely left the house and the will would have to be taken there for his signing. Tricking Enoch into signing the wrong will wouldn't have been so hard. Remember, Enoch wore very thick glasses. His eyesight was probably lousy. Chances are that without those glasses he couldn't read. What happened was something like this.

"Carney lets Blanche know the day he is coming over with the two wills, one in favor of the foundation, one in favor of himself. That morning, Blanche hides Enoch's glasses and maybe tells him he has misplaced them. When Carney comes, he reads the genuine will, then presents the phoney for Enoch to sign, and Enoch, unable to see without his glasses, except perhaps blearily, signs. That's it.

"Now, Carney is Enoch's legal heir and all that remains is to knock the old boy off. Probably Carney and Blanche already have a plan for that. But Carney has thought way ahead. He doesn't intend to share the money with Blanche, he figures to kill two birds with one stone.

"He strangles her with the sheepgut he's swiped from the workroom along with Enoch's notes, leaves plenty of evidence to frame Enoch, and there you are. Taking the notes, too, was clever—that discredited Enoch in court."

"There I am where?" asked Clay cynically. "There's still no proof. And there's Carney's alibi—home with wife all evening. Yeah. Here I am. Uh-uh, Greg. It's nice and it's neat and it might just have happened that way. But what the hell! If you can't prove it, what good is it? You go on home and write a nice bloody book and forget all about it."

I finished my drink. "Clay, there are times when you try my soul. I was just—"

"Writers haven't got souls," declared Clay flatly.

"I know a newspaper that's got a heel—" I began.

But Clay groaned, "Don't! I can't stand

it. Peace at any price!"

"Fair enough. I was just going to tell you that I think there might be proof. Look at it this way. We both agree Blanche was no dummy. All right, put yourself in her place. You're a woman in partners with a man to commit first a swindle and then a murder. The way things are going to wind up, all the money is going to be legally in that partner's hands and there's no particular guarantee he'll split with you as promised. So what would you do to protect your interests?"

CLAY'S eyes narrowed, he rubbed his nose with a thoughtful thumb. "Greg," he murmured, "Greg, my boy—you are hotter than a burn on the devil's forefinger. I would write me a letter, telling the whole plot—going easy on my part of it, of course—and leave that little document with a dear friend. Then I would tell this lug, Carney, what the score might be if he didn't play his marbles the way it says in the book. Yeah, that is just what I'd do.

"But look—if Blanche Stevens did that, it still didn't stop Carney from killing her. Why? And where is the letter? It never showed up. Again, why? Maybe Carney found out where it was and gently retrieved it."

I nodded, frowning. "Maybe. That's a possibility. But there's another one. Suppose she writes the letter, leaves it with this friend, but before she can tell Carney what she has done, he kills her. That way the letter is still around somewhere and Carney doesn't know anything about it. And the letter hasn't come to light because—well, that is a stumper, but maybe whoever's got the letter doesn't know she's dead."

Clay gave a wry grimace. "With all the publicity that trial had? Uh-uh. He'd have to be either blind or on safari in the wilds of Africa."

I looked at him steadily. "Well, why not?"

"Africa? Are you kid—"

"No. Blind."

"Oh. We-ell. . . I dunno. Maybe, but it sounds far-fetched as hell."

"Maybe so. But we can't lose anything by checking on it. If there is a letter, I'm sure that no traceable friend of hers has it. The police are thorough. They're

certain to have checked all the friend angles. Anyway, we'll have a look in the morning, eh?"

"Not me." Clay shook his head. "Enoch's funeral at ten a.m.—another dying wish of his—quick burial. I got to cover it."

We made it for one in the afternoon and, paying our check, left the tavern. Outside, as we waited for a cab, Clay said, "You know, old Enoch must've tumbled to the deal when the phoney will came up. Before that, he was looking around as though he was trying to figure it all out, but after that will was read he made that screwy speech about revenge after death and shut right up."

I nodded, remembering. "Yeah, I think he knew then who was framing him. . . ."

The next day, I met Clay Lambert at Pastroni's and we had lunch together. "Did you cover Enoch's funeral?" I asked.

He nodded, his mouth full of spaghetti. "Yeh. Quite a mob."

"They bury the charm chain with him?"

Clay took a swallow of coffee. "You mean the voodoo item? Yeah. Funny thing! I was just thinking of that, too. It was there when they screwed down the coffin lid. Why?"

I shrugged.

"Curiosity."

Clay looked at me queerly.

After lunch we prowled Courtland Place. It was an old street with a parkway down the center. The ancient brownstone houses had a lugubrious aspect, leaning together like commiserating old women mourning the days of their youth. We strolled around the neighborhood somewhat aimlessly, peeking into store-windows, observing passersby.

"What sort of needle we looking for?" asked Clay plaintively. "This is one hell of a haystack."

"Well, a blind man, I guess," I shrugged. "Somebody she would be likely to have given the letter to. Somebody who maybe doesn't know she is dead and so hasn't come forward with the letter."

"If there *was* a letter," Clay reminded me.

"Yeah. If. But we're proceeding on the theory that there was and is. Remember?"

"I wish I didn't," said Clay. "My feet hurt and this sun's getting kinda hot, if you know what I mean."

We went into a drugstore and a laundry and stalled around making conversation dealing with blind people, but we got nowhere. We also tried a tavern, giving the bartender a story about looking for a cousin who was blind. The bartender told us the only people he ever saw who were blind usually left the tavern that way after too much bourbon. He was real funny.

Then Clay got an inspiration. "This neighbor who found Blanche's body," he said, "—how about talking to her?"

Mrs. Marlowe was a faded blonde with a taste for gin. She set us up to rickies and Clay rolled his eyes blissfully. We had no trouble getting her to talk. She was more than happy to tell us all she knew, and most of what she knew concerned this block, from one end to the other. Somewhere in all the gossip, the talk got around to horses, and it became clear that Mrs. Marlowe had a system. You went by the number of horses and your birthdate, or some such twaddle. Unfortunately, said Mrs. Marlowe wistfully, it didn't always work. . . . Now Blanche had had unbelievable luck, a winner nearly every other day and when—My brain had buzzed and I cut her off.

WE managed to get her bookie's address and make our departure, promising to put five on the nose on Snowball for her in the fifth.

As we strode along the street, Clay and I nodded at each other. We hadn't thought of that—a bookie. Not somebody who didn't know Blanche was dead, but somebody who did and still had a good reason for not coming forward. The bookie, understandably, wouldn't want to get tangled up with the police.

Several blocks away we entered a candy store and asked for "Manny". We were led into a back room. Manny had a desk in the corner; he also had a shirt with purple stripes and a yellow tie. There was a sheen of perspiration on his swarthy face and he was chewing a cigar.

"Third comin' up," he said. "Whacha want, gents?"

"We want to talk, Manny. About a lady and a letter." This was Clay.

I guess we both held our breath. If this wasn't it, we were stumped.

Manny's glittering dark eyes went from

Clay to me. He wet his lips. "Cops?" he asked.

"Uh-uh," said Clay. "Newspapers. You play ball, we play ball. It's friendly. We'll even send you new business."

"Yeah?" Manny looked as though he didn't quite believe it. "What makes you think—"

"Hunger," said Clay affably. "We do it for a living. Only this trip we *know*—all about it, Manny. You give and we'll forget where we got it. Otherwise, the cops might get very nosey about what you do for a living."

There was a little more sparring back and forth but in the end Manny went to his safe and got the letter. He was voluble with explanations. He didn't want to get mixed up in "no murder stuff" and he wasn't holding the letter for blackmail possibilities he wasn't that sort of Joe he was strictly from races and Jeez he sure hoped we'd keep it kinda quiet like we said. . . .

But Clay and I had the letter and it was all we could do to hold ourselves in. We promised Manny the moon with silken tassels and got out.

On the sidewalk, Clay handed me the envelope. "Here. You dreamed us into this, bless your little heart. The honor is yours. Open it before I bust a suspender!"

I opened it and read avidly.

To Whom It May Concern,

In case anything happens to me, this will give the lowdown on the whole thing. I really don't want to do what I am doing but Bruce Carney, 703 Strahan Bldg. has dug up some dirt on my past and is holding it over my head. I'm afraid of him. I haven't got much choice. What he is planning to do is murder Enoch Pawley the man I work for and. . .

It was all there and signed, Blanche L. Stevens.

Clay's eyes were tense. I guess he could already hear the presses rolling. "Pay dirt!" he breathed.

I nodded. "But not entirely. Carney's alibi is still in the way. It's a dead woman's letter against the word of two living people. How will that go in court?"

"Not so hot," frowned Clay, biting his lip. "We've got to break that alibi!"

"Any ideas? This thing is in your territory now."

"Yeah. . . Okay, let's get going. Wait.

First, a phone book to get her address."

We got it at a drugstore and then hopped a cab.

"What's the tactic, Clay?" I asked.

"Bull in a china shop—with accent on the bull. We're the law and we know the whole story. And blah blah blah. It'll come to me when I get there."

It did. Clay did the perfect take-off on a storybook detective. If Mrs. Carney, a little, greying woman with a firm chin, had been a little brighter and a little less nervous, she would have seen through him well enough to read a newspaper. But the way it was. . .

"... So getch'r things on, Mrs. Carney. We're booking you for perjury," Clay growled.

Mrs. Carney's eyes were round. "B—But I must call my husband! I've got to talk to him! I've got a right to talk to him first!"

"Lady, you ain't got no rights. You're a criminal, a liar, a perjurer. You're coming with us to headquarters and that's that. You oughta thank us. Maybe you don't know y'r old man's gotta hot little blonde on the side and is plannin' to knock you off, but that's the way it stacks up. So getch'r coat on and—"

Mrs. Carney blanched; her oval face was the color of dough. "Me?" she gasped, clutching her throat. "You mean he—"

Mrs. Carney broke; she just crumpled up into sobbing helplessness. It was cruel but we hustled her into our waiting cab before her emotion should cool off. She was weeping and confessing all the way to Police Headquarters.

TURNING her over to the police, we told our story. In ten minutes Clay and I were tearing along Main Ave. in a squad car jammed with cops and a detective lieutenant, the siren wailing like a banshee.

We squealed to a halt before the Strahan Building and the detective deployed his men to cover all exists. Then, the detective, two policemen, Clay and myself rode to the seventh floor in an elevator.

I was remembering Bruce Carney from the trial—a heavyset, blonde man with thin lips, square jaw, and pale blue eyes. I tried to picture his shock when we all walked in on him.

Interrupting my thoughts, the elevator

stopped and the four of us marched out. At 703, the detective motioned us to one side and, brandishing his gun, flung open the door. A frown came upon his face; his gun arm came slowly down. We all crowded into the office.

Bruce Carney sat slumped forward, his chin on his desk. His face was sick horror, the blue eyes wide with it, the mouth twisted into a grimace. He was dead.

But I had only a glance for him, my eyes, like Clay's, were riveted on an object lying upon the desk.

The lieutenant, who had approached the body, said wonderingly, "This is damn queer. There's not a mark on him." It was true. They never did find a mark on him, not even the post-mortem disclosed how he had died.

Clay and I weren't sure, either, for that matter, but that day, standing there looking at Bruce Carney's desk, we both had a spine-chilling idea. . .

For there, curled on that desk, its intricate knots glistening in the afternoon sun, lay the voodoo chain *that had been buried with the body of Enoch Pawley.*

THE LOCKED ROOM MYSTERY

An Amazing True Story of Crime

By SIMPSON M. RITTER



RAMON GARCIA was one of the most successful businessmen in Ciudad Real, Venezuela. In twenty-odd years he had amassed a fortune and more than one bitter enemy.

When Garcia was found dead in his study many were possible suspects but there was a total lack of evidence. Even the method of the crime was dubious.

Garcia, somewhat after dinner, had retired to his study and bolted the door. The room was on the second floor with a wide Spanish type window facing the garden. The sill was level with a seated man's head and reached upward to a few inches short of the ceiling.

Yet Garcia had been shot within the unenterable room from a distance of not more than two feet and at a downward angle of about 45 degrees.

Police under Detective Comandante Esteban Esquilar entered the room by ladder against the open window. They found nothing to suggest that the door had been forced or that anyone had climbed through the window or that anyone had been in hiding in the room prior to Garcia's entering it. The garden below was searched for footprints but there weren't any.

Detective Diego Sanchez found some peculiar markings that puzzled him—impressions in the earth about an inch and a half to two inches deep and of a generally roundish form. After a hasty conference with his superior the young

detective took off for the nearest library where he did some research.

Later, Comandante Esquilar and Detective Sanchez drove out to one of the great haciendas west of the city. They returned at midnight with an indignant prisoner, Don Jose Casteljalous, one of the richest men in the region and a business rival of the late Senor Ramon Garcia.

Comandante Esquilar let young Detective Sanchez do the questioning.

"Senor Casteljalous, at the library this afternoon I learned that you were brought up in the Landes region of southwestern France. You learned about sheep raising there. In fact, you worked as a sheepboy for a number of years."

"Yes."

"And you herded sheep in the semi-deserts in that area, walking on stilts so as not to sink too far into the sands and in order to see a considerable distance?"

Casteljalous turned white and made no answer.

"You still know how to use stilts. In fact you used them the other night, the tips wrapped in sheep skins, to reach the study window of Don Ramon who had beat you in a recent important sale. You reached in through the window and shot him. You were so high on the stilts you had to point your gun downward."

"No, no," cried the sheep man. "It's all a lie!"

"We found your stilts at your hacienda," pointed out the young detective. "Their impressions will match those we found in the Garcia garden. You might as well confess."

Casteljalous confessed. He was sentenced to death by a jury of his peers two months later.

The luggage slipped from the stranger's grasp and he fell to the floor



THE BLACK BAG

By CALVIN J. CLEMENTS

EARLY Sunday morning the body of Albert the baker's son was discovered, and this marked the fifth in a series of brutal murders committed near the village of Gion. Who but a maniac would sever and carry off each head—

Thirty thousand francs was the reward—dead or alive!

And Madame Corre of the King's Arms Inn fully appreciated the advantages of

possessing thirty thousand francs. "The Riviera," she confided to her husband late that night as they were closing the inn, "and I would be finished with serving tables, and would be the one served instead."

Monsieur Corre raised a weary gray head from the day's receipts he was totaling. "The Riviera when you get the reward," he agreed, "but at the present time I believe you should open the door."

Avarice and Evil Intent Walk Hand-in-Hand to Doom!

His wife adjusted the apron about her expansive figure, walked to the door and opened it. The man was tall and hatless, and thoroughly soaked from the rain that swept the outer darkness. He carried luggage, two bags—a large brown traveling bag that was quite common and another, small and black, and not so common, as Madame Corre was quick to notice.

The stranger seated himself at a table near the door, placed the bags on the floor beside him and ordered wine.

Madame Corre's eyes strayed toward the black bag. "Your preference, monsieur."

"Anything to warm. But quickly, I am in a hurry!"

On her way to the wine closet, Madame Corre paused a moment beside her husband who was still engrossed in his book-keeping. "Louis," she whispered, "look at the bag—the small black one."

Monsieur Corre glanced briefly across the room. "So?"

"The missing head," whispered his wife. "Note the odd shape of the bag."

The innkeeper stared in astonishment at his wife. "The reward is going to your head. Fetch the gentleman his wine."

When Madame Corre returned, bearing a tray, bottle and glass, she placed it on the table in front of the stranger and hurried back to her husband's side.

"It must be he," she said guardedly. "Who else would wander about on such a night? And there was no coach outside upon his arrival, so where could he have come from but out of the forest? Make him show us the contents of the bag. If he is innocent there will be no harm done and we will laugh over it. If he is the killer—think of the reward! Thirty thousand francs will be ours."

"It is a foolish idea!"

"The rifle on the wall. You will hold him with that while I search the bag."

"To search a stranger—"

"It will do no harm. Thirty thousand—*Mon Dieu*, I shake with the thought."

"Perhaps we should notify Monsieur Gonjon, the Chief of Police?"

"And half the reward? What a fool you are becoming . . . Ah, one glass of wine and he makes ready to leave."

MADAME Corre hurried across the room, a beguiling smile creasing her

chubby features. "Monsieur would care for more wine?"

"None. Thank you." The stranger rose and placed a coin on the table. Madame Corre threw a swift appealing glance at her husband. "Then a little supper, perhaps? Cold ham—a bit of hot gravy?"

"Again, thank you. But I must hurry off." The stranger bent to pick up his bags and immediately froze in that position when he saw, from across the room, a rifle being pointed, rather unsteadily, in his direction.

M. Corre, who was holding the rifle, failed to keep the nervousness from his voice. "The black bag, monsieur. You must show us the contents of the little bag."

The stranger, still poised in a stooped position, his hands gripping the bags, glanced sharply at Madame Corre, then back at the innkeeper. "Is this a nest of thieves?" he rasped.

M. Corre's face reddened with apology. "No, monsieur; but before you leave we must see the contents of the little bag."

"The bag contains my personal belongings. Nothing more!"

M. Corre's voice grew a shade firmer. "Your reluctance is hard to understand if the bag holds nothing of importance. Open it for our inspection."

The stranger abruptly straightened, a bag in each hand. "That," he declared, "is something I will not do!"

Perhaps it was his sudden movement, or perhaps his words, or perhaps the innkeeper's finger was overly nervous. Whatever the cause, the rifle in M. Corre's hands suddenly leaped upward and a reverberating crash rolled across the low-ceilinged room.

The luggage slipped from the stranger's grasp and a foolish expression spread across his face as he fell to the floor. Then the room was silent save for the quick splash of rain against window glass and the little sounds a man makes when he dies swiftly.

While the innkeeper stared in horror at the fallen man, his wife picked up the black bag.

"We will have to cut it open," she said, her fat fingers fumbling unsuccessfully with the clasp. "Bring a knife."

"I have killed him. I did not mean—"
"A knife. Quickly!"

"I am a murderer," said M. Corre dully.

"It is of no consequence. The reward stated dead or alive. A knife, so I may open this bag!"

"I hardly touched the trigger," muttered the innkeeper.

"Never mind that! This bag—ah, it frees itself!" Madame Corre placed the bag upon the table the stranger had occupied. 'Ghastly,' she murmured as she opened it slowly. "To carry a human head so. A maniac, surely—Louis come—Come quick!"

The innkeeper moved to his wife's side and peered into the bag. "May the saints protect us!" he whispered, and his fingers trembled as he drew forth a heavy wool sweater, then a pair of soft sole shoes. At the bottom of the bag was a leather purse.

"Gold coin," the innkeeper said sadly, as he felt the weight of the purse. "He was protecting his purse. His last thoughts were that we were robbing him."

Stunned for a moment by the turn of events, Madame Corre said nothing. Then her capable mind weighed the situation and she set to work. She bolted the door, drew the blinds at each window and extinguished all the lamps in the room save the one on the table at which the stranger had sat. As she lowered the flame on this one, she whispered:

"It will be just another corpse. With five murders in as many months, this will not cause too much concern. We will drag the body to the road and leave it there."

M. Corre slowly shook his head. "We must notify the police."

"Don't be such a fool!" Madame Corre replaced the sweater and shoes in the bag. "This purse, is it necessary to place it back? Would any be the wiser?"

Her husband turned on her in fury. "Would you rob the dead, madame? Is it not enough that we have murdered a man?"

RELUCTANTLY Madame Corre dropped the purse into the bag. "We must work quickly, now—the body and its belongings to the roadside. We will disclaim any knowledge."

"We should notify the police," insisted her husband. "It was nothing more than an accident."

"And who would believe you? Will you spend your remaining years in prison?"

No. With the body found by the side of the road it will be another death for the stupid police to puzzle over across the wine table!"

It was done quickly. Together they dragged the body to the road, leaving it in plain view, the innkeeper smoothing the sodden ground over which the body had trailed while his wife hurried to the inn to scour the bloodstains from the floor. It was near daybreak before they were satisfied no trace of the stranger's visit remained. And it was none too soon, for with the first dawnlight a sharp knock was heard on the door.

Madame Corre, after a warning glance to her husband who was visibly trembling, moved over to the door and opened it.

The police chief of Gion, Monsieur Gonjon, was a fat man with a red face and tiny mustache. He stepped into the room, nodded briefly to the innkeeper and his wife, then stood aside while two gangling youths entered, dragging unceremoniously by the heels the mud-caked body of the stranger.

The body deposited on the floor, the policeman fastened his dark eyes upon Madame Corre. "I am sorry to dirty your floor, madame. I see it has been well scrubbed recently, a compliment to the cleanliness of your inn, of course. The corpse makes you nervous, Monsieur Corre?"

"I—no—no, not at all. A sh-shock, of course. I am not accustomed to— You'll have wine, Monsieur Gonjon? You and your sons would care—"

"Accept my thanks, no. We were on our way to investigate reports of a prowler on the roads when we discovered this body on your property."

Madame Corre lifted her shoulders and extended the palms of her hands. "But that is impossible. It extends to the road, no further!" She broke off abruptly.

M. Gonjon lifted an inquiring brow. "Go on, madame."

"I mean that I saw no body when I gathered wood for the morning fire."

"Wood, madame? With the countryside a virtual bog from the rains? But no matter. To business. You have seen this man before? He has supped here, perhaps?"

"No, m'sieur. I have never seen him before. *Mon Dieu*, will there never be an

end to these murders! Louis, you recognize this person? No? You see, m'sieur, we do not know this person."

"Perhaps," said M. Gonjon dryly, "if you saw the features. Antoine, Andre, turn the deceased onto his back. Now, madame?"

"Never have I seen him and never do I forget a face. *Mon Dieu*, these murders—"

"Monsieur Corre?"

The innkeeper shook his head.

"You are both sure?"

They were. The policeman turned to his sons. "Antoine, Andre, you have heard the testimony and you will make note."

The boys nodded.

"Will that be all, m'sieur?" inquired Madame Corre. "We will not be disturbed further? So upsetting, these investigations—"

M. Gonjon nodded and rubbed his hands together. "You will not be bothered again, madame. But I fancy I shall be plagued by the many who will step forward and claim they are, in some strange

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manner, entitled to the reward."

"Reward?" said Madame Corre faintly.

"Pardon, madame. I'd forgotten you could not have known about the luggage we found in the possession of the deceased. It was the head of the unfortunate Albert. Wrapped in oilskin and carried in a bag—"

"Bag, m'sieur," said Madame Corre still more faintly.

"Forgive me again. The deceased carried two pieces of luggage, one black, the other brown and much larger. It was in this brown bag that we discovered the head. Apparently our former head hunter was murdered by thugs who were frightened off before they could search the luggage." M. Gonjon turned to his sons. "Well, Antoine, Andre—It will be the Riviera for us, eh, youngsters? A little vacation, free from the cares of our office."

The boys nodded and looked pleased.

"Thirty thousand francs," continued the policeman, "and picked up from the road. You are not well, madame?" He frowned at Mme Corre who was clenching and unclenching her hands.

"M'sieur—" she moaned.

"Yes?"

"M'sieur—I—Oh, m'sieur!"

"Come, woman, speak! Ah, perhaps we find mention of the reward disturbing?"

Suddenly M. Gonjon laughed, loudly, and slapped both his sons playfully on the back:

"Hear that, Antoine, Andre! The parade is about to start for those who believe they might share in our find once their imagination is set to work. What fantastic stories we shall be hearing in the next few days. It will be very comical listening to citizens explaining they killed a man and omitted reporting it to the police." M. Gonjon laughed again. "But enough. Come, boys, handle our precious burden with care! Good day, madam. Monsieur Corre."

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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 7)

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There's Always Hollywood

Speaking, as we were a few moments ago, about writers being indigenous to, or specializing in stories concerning certain localities, there is always Hollywood. When we speak of Hollywood and the movies, we quite naturally think of Robert Leslie Bellem, creator of that former "stunt" man—

What—you don't mean to tell us that you're leading up our two-fisted, wisecracking friend, Nick Ransom! That's just what we are folks, and that's just what we mean to do. For, featured next issue, is PUZZLE IN PERIL, a Nick Ransom novelet by Robert Leslie Bellem!

There wanders into Nick's office, one afternoon, a battle-scarred individual who looks as if he had wiped the resin off more canvases than the National Boxing Commission even knew existed. In spite of his battered countenance, the man has a cultured voice. Nick, however, looking the gentleman over, notices some suspicious-looking bulges in his clothing. Said bulges can only mean one thing—guns!

"The dukes, bub!" Nick snarls, whipping out his own .38. "Out with the dukes—and empty!"

Frisking the battle-scarred character, Nick not only finds one gun, but two. He also finds fifty thousand dollars in bills. When Nick protests, the man tells him to play down the surprise act. Isn't that the amount Nick asked for? When the private eye still demurs, the

[Turn page]

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SEND NO MONEY

ex-pug throws down a telegram on the desk Nick picks it up and reads:

MR JOE FIVE
DENVER, COLO:

BE IN MY OFFICE WITH FIFTY THOUSAND CASH
THREE O'CLOCK SHARP I GUARENTEE NO WEDDING
NO ENTANGLEMENTS

NICK RANSOM

Altogether, it's a strange story that Nick Ransom worms out of Mr. Joe Five. Incidentally, there are a couple of knock-down-and-drag-out fights between these ten-minute eggs, while the worming is going on. It seems that after his retirement from the ring, Joe Five scraped the bottom of the barrel in the mining game, out there in Denver—then he had struck it rich. His wealth however, had come to him too late to save the life of his wife, who died at the birth of Joe's son.

Strictly Gold-Digger

It was this son, named Eddie, that old Joe was concerned with now. For the young man, now grown up, has changed his name to Eddie Blair and is here in Hollywood, ekeing out a mere existence as an "extra" in the movies. Nothing unusual in that, of course, except that young Eddie had become enamored of one Candy Callahan, whom Nick knows as a peaches-and-cream extra and bit player, and Old Joe ought to be proud about the whole business. That, however, is not the way Joe Five heard it. A certain Mrs. Edith Murdock has told him the gal is a no-good little adventuress and strictly gold-digger from the word go.

Throughout the entire tale, Ransom can't seem to reconcile himself to one fact. The telegram is timed at 3:00 from Denver. That was the time when Joe Five walked in the

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door! While Ransom is trying to figure the whole thing out, his phone rings.

It is Candy's panic-stricken voice. "Someone is going to murder me!" she shrieks. Then there is a bloodcurdling gurgie and a man's metallic laughter spoken into the transmitter—then silence!

Nick is wondering whether this is a movie scenario, a radio serial or what have you. But he realizes the seriousness of it all however, when he finds out that he is destined never to look upon the living face of Joe Five again!

Folks, let's warn you in advance, that here's a Nick Ransom from an entirely new angle—not that any of the old boy's wisecracks will be missing, or any of those scintillating Hollywood situations that we've come to look forward to reading about.

There will be our usual galaxy of short stories too, friends, to round out a tip-top

[Turn page]

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OUR MAIL BOX

THERE'S something fascinating about those "faraway places with strange-sounding names" as the song has it. So when we get a letter from the other side of the Big Pond, we always like to print it—and here goes:

Cheerio! Here's a Britisher saying "Thanks" for **THRILLING DETECTIVE** and a greeting for fellow readers everywhere. I am a veteran of 1914-1918. I have seen life in all its color and maybe there will be adventure On The Other Side. Meanwhile I read my magazines—U. S. ones by first preference, with **THRILLING DETECTIVE** heading the list. I drink my tea, have a cigarette or maybe a cigar, and keep cheerful. Thanks a million for some mighty good stories.
—Ernest Graves, Eversholt St., Euston, London, N.W. England.

Thanks to you, old chap. And here's another letter—from the Windy City, and with just a bit of a gripe:

On the whole, I like your stories. I don't have to ponder too much about psychological prob-

lems. It's just straight entertainment. Watch out for those set phrases—we used to call 'em bromides in the old days. Now I believe we've gone fancy and refer to them as "clichés." You know—like "he licked dry lips" or "he dropped like a pole-axed steer." What is a pole-axed steer? I'll bet the average author hasn't the least idea. Your magazine doesn't offend any more than most of the others, so perhaps I "had better stood in bed."—Jerry Grunewald, Chicago, Ill.

Much obliged Jerry—at least you have a keen sense of humor. We know exactly what you mean.

And thanks, everybody, for your many fine comments about the magazine. We wish we could print them all—but we'll quote from many more of them in the near future, and always remember we're grateful for every communication. Every letter or postcard received is carefully read and deeply appreciated, and we'd like to hear from as many of you as possible. The more letters, the better the magazine—for your opinions guide us in planning future issues.

So—keep those letters streaming along in, folks! And kindly address them to the Editor, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Happy reading to you all and see you next issue!

—THE EDITOR.

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